

The moderator role of emotional intelligence in the association between neuroticism and aggression

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INTRODUCTION

Neuroticism has been proposed as a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor that is relevant to psychological disorders and it has been found to predict higher levels of aggression (Miller & Lynam, 2011). From the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002), personality traits inform schemas that people use to interpret events in their social lives and influence the emotional response to them. People with high neuroticism would perceive experiences as more troubling than they really are, increasing their negative emotional response and choosing maladaptive ways of coping, like aggression.

On the other hand, recent studies have linked Emotional Intelligence (EI) with lower levels of aggression suggesting that the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions would be a protective factor of aggression, mainly in the case of physical aggression (see García-Sancho, Salguero & Fernández-Berrocal, 2014, for a review).

EI is, both theoretically and empirically, different from personality. Moreover, from the GAM, whereas personality traits (like neuroticism) is possible to influence the emotions responses people have in social contexts, EI is possible to influence the way that these emotions are processed. In this sense, it would be hypothesised that individuals with high neuroticism could be less likely to engage in aggressive behaviour if they also have higher levels of EI. In this study, we aimed to test this hypothesis examining the moderator role of EI in the association between neuroticism and physical aggression.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest

	1	2	3
1. Neuroticism			
2. EI	-0.61	--	
3. Physical Aggression	0.24**	-0.22**	--
M(SD)	0.36(.11)	100(14.31)	1.8(0.59)

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Regression results for the moderating effect of Neuroticism and EI on Physical Aggression

	R^2	F	β
Physical Aggression			
Step 1	0.04	27.35	
Sex			-0.20**
Step 2	0.13	49.19	
Sex			-0.28**
Neuroticism			0.31**
Step 3	0.15	39.96	
Sex			-0.25**
Neuroticism			0.29**
EI			-0.16**
Step 4	0.16	31.16	
Sex			-0.25**
Neuroticism			.30**
EI			-0.16**
Neuroticism*EI			-0.07*

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

RESULTS

Whereas neuroticism was positive and significant related with physical aggression, people with higher levels of EI informed use less aggressive behaviours. As expected, no significant relations were found between EI and neuroticism (see Table 1).

To examine the potential moderating effect of gender on the relationship between EI and aggression, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses following recommendations by Aiken and West (1991) and controlling for sex. Results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, a significant effect of the neuroticism x EI interaction was found. To illustrate and corroborate this interaction we followed the procedures outlined by Hayes and Matthes (2009). As Fig. 1 shows, individuals with high levels of neuroticism reported a more frequent use of aggressive behaviour mainly if they had lower levels of EI.

METHOD

> Participants

Participants were 655 undergraduate students (76.3% women) aged between 19 and 60 years old ($M = 22.48$, $S.D. = 5.06$).

> Instruments

Big-Five Inventory (BFI-44; Benet-Martínez & John, 1998). The BFI-44 is a 44-item Likert scale of five points that assesses the big five personality factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness). In this study we used the Neuroticism subscale, which has shown good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2003). The MSCEIT is a maximum performance test that assesses EI abilities through the performance on 8 different emotional tasks. The test contains 114 items and evaluates the four branches of Mayer and Salovey's (1997): emotional perception, use, understand and manage. Split-half reliability for total MSCEIT in this study was 0.66.

Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992). The AQ is a self-report questionnaire that assess two aggressive behaviour subscales: physical aggression (9 items) and verbal aggression (5 items). Each item is rated on a scale from one to five. In this study we used only the physical aggression subscale, that shows an adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$).

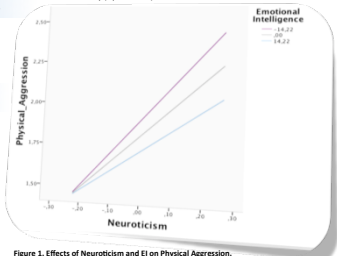


Figure 1. Effects of Neuroticism and EI on Physical Aggression.

DISCUSSION

Neuroticism and EI have been shown to be two different (and not interrelated) variables relevant to explain aggression. From the GAM, these variables could have different roles in predicting aggression. Whereas neuroticism is possible to influence the emotional response people have in social contexts (e.g., more negative and intense emotions), EI is possible to influence the way in which these emotions are managed. In this sense, EI may participate in processes of appraisal and decision-making, bringing to bear abilities to understand emotions as well as regulation strategies that together can reduce negative affect, facilitating a choice to behave non-aggressively.

Although individuals high in neuroticism had a higher tendency to use aggression, this effect can be modulated by their EI abilities, as our results shown. Because EI can be trained, our results open up new avenues for the design of interventions targeted to reduce aggression in people with high neuroticism.