Chapter 11

Emotional Intelligence, Relationship Quality, and Partner Selection

James J. Casey
Yale University

James Garrett
Columbia University

Marc A. Brackett and Susan Rivers
Yale University

For over a century, researchers have been trying to understand whether people favor similarity in sexual partners, and what determines satisfaction in sexual relationships (Galton, 1869; Mowrer, 1935). Emotions are at the very core of human interaction and relationships; thus, it is no surprise that relationship researchers have begun to investigate the role of the emotion-related skills that comprise emotional intelligence (EI; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Accumulating evidence suggests that EI, which includes the abilities to perceive emotion, use emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotion, and manage emotion, is important for both relationship satisfaction and partner selection (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005; Brackett et al., 2006; Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Carton, Kessler, & Pape, 1999; Fitness, 2001a).

We argue that EI allows for easier navigation through the emotionally intense situations that characterize romantic relationships. Indeed, members of couples in which both partners score high on a performance test of EI tend to be happier and more satisfied with their relationships.
than members of couples in which both partners score low (Brackett et al., 2005, 2006). In examining how each of these emotion abilities is relevant to romantic relationships, we explore the ways in which EI is related closely to Mating Intelligence (MI; Geher, Miller, & Murphy, this volume). MI refers to the abilities to understand a potential mate’s emotional expressions, intentions, and preferences and to modulate and express one’s own emotions effectively during courtship. For example, the ability to perceive facial and verbal cues of sexual interest in a potential mate are crucial aspects of both EI and MI. Likewise, EI and MI both would promote the ability to exhibit attractive emotions (happiness, confidence, kindness) and to suppress displays of unattractive emotions (irritability, shame, envy) during courtship. Similarly, the ability to assess people’s emotional sincerity would be important in distinguishing whether flattery during courtship is honest or empty—whether “I love you” means “I want a life of monogamous bliss and babies with you” or “I want to sexually exploit you tonight.”

In this chapter, we use the theory of EI (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) as a guiding framework to examine emotion-related skills in mating. First, we discuss the theory of EI and its measurement. We review Mayer and Salovey’s four-part theory of EI and briefly present their performance-based measure of EI, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT, 2002). Second, we review the link between EI and sexual relationship quality and satisfaction. Here, we examine studies measuring EI in couples and its relation to intimacy and conflict. Third, we present research on the role that EI may play in partner selection, and whether couple similarity in EI is due to initial assortative mating or trait convergence during a relationship. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research on the interface between mating, intelligence, and emotions in short-term and long-term sexual relationships. This final section also considers how future MI research can be informed by existing EI research.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The Ability Model of EI

In Western society, emotions have long been seen as disruptive to rational thought and biasing accurate cognitive assessments of the environment (Damasio, 1994). This belief has roots as early as Ancient Greece (Aeschylus, 458 BCE/1984). In more recent centuries, emotions are believed to be adaptive, serving important roles in motivation, learning, decision-making, and social communication, and conveying information about people’s thoughts, intentions, and behaviors (e.g., Darwin, 1872; Ekman, 1973; Keltner & Haidt, 2001). For example, anger, which generally occurs when a goal is obstructed, inc... These physiological re... to the cause of the ang... tion. From an EI persp... ons own; rather, emc... effectiveness in day-to... Tomkins (1962), “Rea... out reason would be bl...

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goal is obstructed, increases heart rate and produces faster movement. These physiological responses enable one to react quickly and powerfully to the cause of the anger. EI is consistent with this functional view of emotion. From an EI perspective, neither emotion nor rationality is sufficient on its own; rather, emotion and rationality together allow for the greatest effectiveness in day-to-day life (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). In the words of Tomkins (1962), “Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind” (p. 112).

The term “emotional intelligence” was introduced in 1990. Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) initial analysis of the literature regarding emotion-related skills led them to define EI as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). Since then, Mayer and Salovey (1997) have refined the term, and now define EI with a four-part model including the abilities to: (1) perceive emotion; (2) use emotion to facilitate cognitive processes and adaptive action; (3) understand emotion and emotional information; and (4) regulate or manage emotions in oneself and others. Unlike general intelligence (e.g., analytical reasoning ability), which is most often associated with “cold” cognitive processes, EI operates through “hot” cognitive-emotional processes that concern things of personal, social, and often evolutionary importance (Abelson, 1963; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). What follows is a brief summary of the four emotion-related skills that comprise EI; more detailed presentations can be found elsewhere (e.g., Brackett & Salovey, 2004; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004).

Perception of emotion is the ability to discern emotions in oneself and others (i.e., facial expressions, tone of voice), as well as in human artifacts such as stories, music, and works of art. People who are aware of their own and others’ emotions gain a lot of information about themselves and those around them, as emotions are highly indicative of people’s perceptions, judgments, motivations, and intentions. In contrast, those who do not recognize their own and others’ emotions don’t have access to this useful information. The accurate perception of emotion is the foundation of EI; without this ability, one cannot use the other three EI skills effectively (Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002).

Use of emotion involves the ability to evoke and generate task-relevant emotions in oneself and in others in order to focus attention, enhance cognitive processes, and improve memory. This skill is based on the knowledge that different emotions promote different cognitive styles that may be better suited to different tasks. Happiness, for example, fosters creativity and more optimistic thinking, while sadness leads to more pessimistic and detail-oriented thinking (Fredrickson, 1998; Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1992). Thus, each of these emotions may be useful in certain circumstances. Proficiency in this use-of-emotion domain depends on the...
ability to generate different emotions in different contexts in order to improve the effectiveness of thought or behavior (Salovey et al., 2002).

Understanding of emotion concerns insight into the causes and consequences of emotions, such as understanding that people typically feel sadness after experiencing some loss and feel happiness after experiencing some gain. This skill also involves understanding how emotions blend together and change over time in given situations. For example, if a source of frustration is not removed, the frustration is likely to turn to anger, and eventually to fury. In addition, understanding emotion includes the size of one’s emotional vocabulary. Someone with a large emotional vocabulary, for example, would probably be able to define “elation” and distinguish it from “love.” Having a large emotional vocabulary lets one articulate one’s emotions clearly.

Management of emotion refers to the ability to adaptively regulate one’s own emotions and those of others in the service of achieving behavioral goals. Research shows that some emotion-management techniques work better than others (see Thayer, Newman, & McCain, 1994). Thus, this skill involves both knowing the most effective emotion-management techniques for a given situation, and having the expertise to execute them appropriately (Salovey et al., 2002). Adaptive emotion management does not necessarily entail ignoring or suppressing emotion. Even “negative” emotions such as sadness, anger, and guilt can have positive fitness payoffs in certain contexts. Displays of intense grief, for example, may signal to others that the grieving person needs company to help build new social bonds or strengthen existing ones as he or she has lost someone dear, as well as social support to work through the situation.

Measuring EI as a Set of Abilities

There are two general methods used to measure EI: self-report inventories and performance tests. Self-report inventories ask participants to rate themselves on several dimensions of EI, and often on several unrelated qualities such as optimism and motivation, as well (Bar-On, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Schutte et al., 1998). Those that measure abilities other than the four we discuss in this paper—perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding emotion, and managing emotion—generally do so because they are operating under a different model of EI. There are several problems with self-report inventories: most importantly, they correlate poorly with performance measures of EI and correlate highly with existing measures of established indices of personality (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, in press; see also Brackett & Geher, 2006).

Performance measures assess EI with tasks that require participants to solve emotion-laden problems. The predominant performance measure of EI is the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT;
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Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2002). On the MSCEIT, some answers are objectively better than others. Correct answers are determined by reference to normative or expert samples. Consensus scores reflect the proportion of people in the normative sample (over 5,000 people from North America) who endorsed each MSCEIT test item alternative. Expert norms were obtained from a sample of twenty-one members of the International Society for Research on Emotions (ISRE). The reliability, validity, and other psychometric properties of the MSCEIT have been established by multiple studies (Brackett & Salovey, 2004; Mayer et al., 2004; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002).

The MSCEIT measures EI using two separate tasks for each of the four domains. Perception of emotion is measured by having respondents rate the emotions present in (a) photographs of people’s faces and (b) landscapes and abstract pictures. Use of emotion is measured by having respondents (a) call up emotions in themselves in order to recognize unusual sensory descriptions of emotions (such as “cool” or “purple”) and (b) report how useful various emotions would be while completing certain tasks. Understanding of emotion is measured by having respondents (a) recognize how simple emotions combine to form more complex emotions and (b) select the emotion that is most likely to occur when another emotion becomes stronger or weaker. Finally, management of emotion is measured by having respondents read emotionally provocative vignettes and then rate the effectiveness of different emotion-regulation strategies in (a) private situations and (b) interpersonal situations (Mayer et al., 2002).

Emotional Intelligence and Relationship Quality and Satisfaction

There is some evidence that emotional competencies are related to satisfaction in sexual relationships. For example, couples who experienced positive emotions together and who were emotionally stable reported more satisfying relationships (Gottman, 1982; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Russell & Wells, 1994). Two initial studies suggest that EI is related to relationship quality and satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2005, 2006). In these studies, relationship quality was operationalized as the extent to which one feels: (1) that one’s partner provides social support; (2) that one is “positive, important, and secure” in the relationship; and (3) that the relationship is not conflicted or ambivalent (see Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). Relationship satisfaction was measured with a scale adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and included items such as “The conditions of my relationship are excellent.” In both studies, couples in which both partners scored high on the MSCEIT reported greater relationship satisfaction and relationship quality.

How EI contributes to relationship quality and satisfaction is still unknown. The four branches of EI (perceiving, using, understanding, and
managing emotions) may simply add up to promote good relationships, or they may contribute in different ways to relationship quality and satisfaction. For example, perceiving emotion may help individuals to accurately interpret the nonverbal emotion cues conveyed by their partners. Using emotion to facilitate thought could allow individuals to generate the emotions their partners feel in order to “put themselves in their shoes.” Understanding emotion may help individuals to clearly articulate their feelings and predict their partners’ emotions in a given situation. Finally, managing emotions could help individuals resolve conflicts while maintaining the emotional well-being of their partners and themselves. In the next section we review literature supporting the view that each domain of EI contributes to relationship satisfaction. As only two studies have examined the relationship between EI, as measured by the MSCEIT, and relationship satisfaction, we instead look at studies that measure the relationship between several EI-related abilities and relationships and infer the potential influence of EI from them.

Perception of Emotion

Accurate perception of emotion appears to be related to relationship quality and satisfaction. Among college students, self-rated relationship quality was positively correlated with their ability to detect happiness, sadness, anger, and fear in photographs of strangers’ faces and in audio recordings of people speaking (Carton et al., 1999). Similarly, among married couples, self-rated ability to identify and communicate one’s own emotions was related to relationship satisfaction and security; conversely, partners of individuals who reported difficulty in identifying and communicating their emotions reported lower relationship satisfaction (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005). While promising, these results should be interpreted with care, as Cordova et al. used self-ratings rather than objective measures to assess emotion-identification abilities. People whose skill in a certain domain is below average often greatly overestimate their skill in that domain, perhaps because the knowledge necessary to be above average also is necessary to accurately judge one’s ability (Dunning, Johnson, Ehringer, & Kruger, 2003). This is particularly true in the domain of EI (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006).

The link between perception of emotion and relationship satisfaction may be complex and reciprocal. It may be that accurate emotion perception promotes satisfaction or that satisfaction makes accurate emotion perception more bearable. For example, Kahn (1970) asked satisfied and unsatisfied married couples to interpret the emotional meaning underlying ambiguous statements. Husbands and wives in the study read innocuous sentences (e.g., “Didn’t we have chicken a few nights ago?”) in one of three ways: as an expression of irritation (i.e., “The same meal again?”),

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curiosity (i.e., ‘I can’t remember what we had; can you?’), or elation (i.e., ‘I love chicken and am excited we’re having it again!’). Before beginning, each participant reported which of the three meanings they were most and least likely to express in their relationship; the researchers used this information to make each participant express an equal number of positively endorsed, negatively endorsed, and neutrally endorsed interpretations. Spouses in satisfied relationships could better select which meaning their partners were trying to convey. Those in unsatisfied relationships could not.

In another study, 21 married couples were videotaped while interacting (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981). The couples then were tested for their ability to send and receive nonverbal emotion-laden messages during the interaction. The better the husbands could “read” their wives’ emotions from nonverbal cues, the happier both partners were with their relationship. To determine if the wives in the unsatisfied couples were just poor senders of emotion cues, Gottman and Porterfield (1981) recruited a second group of couples to watch the videotaped interactions and rate the nonverbal cues. The men in this second group were much better at understanding the emotional cues of the videotaped women than their own husbands were. There are at least three possible explanations for this. First, it may be that husbands low in EI dismiss their wives as overly emotional, ignore their nonverbal cues, and thereby create relationship problems (Rubin, 1978). Second, relationship problems may lead husbands to withdraw emotionally from marriages, reducing their emotion-reading ability and motivation (Kahn, 1970). Or third, husbands with generally low mate value may also have low EI, and be unsatisfying to their wives for other reasons.

Use of Emotion to Facilitate Thinking

Little research has been done on the ability to use emotion to facilitate useful styles of thought in sexual relationships. Many psychologists, however, have studied more domain-general influences of emotion on cognition. We can make some educated guesses from these studies about how relationship satisfaction may be influenced by each partner’s ability to generate emotions that promote adaptive styles of reasoning, judgment, and decision-making.

Depending on the domain, task, and emotion, emotions can increase or decrease the ability to think clearly, quickly, and adaptively. The induction of positive emotion sometimes makes people better at decision-making, in domains ranging from medical diagnosis to car-purchasing (Isen, 2001). On the other hand, somber, somewhat depressed affect can promote careful analytical thinking and more accurate, risk-averse decision-making (Ambady & Gray, 2002; Clore et al., 2001; Forgas, 1998;
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Gasper, 2004; Schwarz & Bless, 1991). For example, Forgas (1998) found that sad-induced participants were less likely to commit the fundamental attribution error, that is, that they more accurately judged how much influence external-situational and internal-dispositional factors had on someone’s behavior, while subjects who felt neutral emotions or happiness tended to overemphasize internal-dispositional factors. These differences in decision-making occur in part because happiness promotes “top-down” processing (for example, basing judgments on scripts and stereotypes) and attention to the big picture, while sadness promotes “bottom-up” processing (basing judgments on new, immediately relevant information) and attention to details (see Gasper, 2004). The intensity of the emotions in question affects cognition, as well. Gasper (2004) found that stronger emotions reduced response time in certain emotion-specific tasks: the sadder participants were, the more quickly they responded to small details in a pattern-matching exercise; the happier participants were, the more quickly they responded to broader differences. Such emotion-cognition interactions are especially important in sexual relationships, which often require joint decisions and may result in disagreements. Spiro (1983) found that 88% of 179 couples had recently disagreed over a major household purchase, such as a piece of furniture. EI may reduce the severity and frequency of such disagreements by helping each partner understand how the other person’s decision-making style may be influenced by their current general mood or specific emotions. EI also may help couples coordinate adaptive shifts in mood and emotion during a joint decision process, so they can examine their options from different viewpoints, using different cognitive styles.

Emotions also affect the memories that people retrieve when they think of someone or something. Happiness generates more positive memories than negative ones, and anger and sadness generate more negative memories. Forgas and Bower (1987) induced either a positive or a negative emotion in 52 undergraduates by giving them a very high or a very low score on a fake test. The students then read descriptions of four characters, each of whom had twenty positive characteristics and twenty negative characteristics. The students who felt induced positive emotion remembered more positive characteristics than negative characteristics, while the induced negative emotion group remembered more negative characteristics than positive characteristics. This phenomenon of mood-congruent memory helps explain why irritated and angry people in close relationships have such ease remembering their partner’s bad traits, errors, and betrayals, and such difficulty remembering their good traits. (The phrase, “Why did I ever marry him?” comes to mind.) In this situation, the emotionally intelligent person who understands mood-congruent memory effects may pause, take a few deep breaths, and think of something to feel happier.

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**Understanding of Emotion**

The third branch of EI, understanding of emotion, includes one’s ability to consciously recognize and verbally articulate one’s own emotions so the emotions can be discussed openly. Such open communication of emotions is important in relationships. Couples who are satisfied with their relationships are more likely to communicate in a “contactful” style, that is, to speak directly about their emotions with their partners (Cieslak, 1986). A critical aspect of such open emotional communication is one’s emotional vocabulary—having the words and concepts to describe emotions with precision and nuance (like Henry James, rather than Homer Simpson).

Emotional clarity, the ability to recognize, acknowledge, categorize, understand, and reason about one’s own emotions, is related closely to understanding emotion. For example, Fitness (2001b) showed that emotional clarity was related to partners’ ability to forgive each other after a transgression (such as an infidelity). Ninety married and 70 divorced men and women described an offense in their marriage and whether it was forgiven. Participants also took the Trait Meta Mood Scale, a self-report measure of one’s attention to feelings, clarity of feelings, and ability to repair bad moods (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). High emotional clarity was related to likelihood of forgiveness, no matter how happy each partner had been before the offense, how grave the offense was, or how hurt they had been by the offense. Emotional clarity may have helped wronged individuals understand both the sincerity of their partners’ apologies and their own long-term interests in continuing the relationship. Emotional clarity was also related to marital happiness in this study, perhaps due to higher forgiveness rates, higher mutual understanding of emotions, or other factors. As emotional clarity is tested with a self-report measure, however, the results of this study should be interpreted with some caution; self-reports often do not reflect actual behavior (see Brackett et al., in press).

**Management of Emotion**

There is substantial evidence that the fourth domain of EI, management of emotion, is related to relationship quality. The inhibition of potentially harmful emotional behaviors (insulting, ranting, ignoring) is essential in defusing potentially explosive situations. One study of 123 couples showed that those who responded constructively to a negative situation (e.g., averting a potential argument by talking calmly and listening to the other’s point
of view) felt greater relationship satisfaction than couples that responded destructively to such situations (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). Constructive behaviors are acts that validate one’s partner, such as talking out problems, acknowledging and validating a partner’s feelings, and offering emotional support. Destructive behaviors, on the other hand, dismiss or reject a partner’s concerns, emotions, and interests, perhaps by belittling or by ‘stonewalling’ (silently refusing to acknowledge a problem). If a partner does not help enough with household chores, for example, a destructive reaction might be to call the partner a “lazy sexist idiot,” or to beat him senseless with a mop. This would probably hurt the other’s feelings, damage the relationship, and fail to solve the problem. A more effective way of managing one’s emotions in the same situation would be to stop, acknowledge one’s anger, and inhibit an angry destructive response. This may mean anticipating the harmful effects of verbal or physical abuse and planning to talk through the issue calmly later that evening.

Being open to different emotions, another aspect of emotion management, also appears to be important to relationship satisfaction. Inhibiting destructive behaviors and remaining open to different emotions are not contradictory goals, as destructive actions and not the emotions themselves are to be inhibited. Indeed, anger can motivate a couple to discuss and solve a problem in their relationship; the trick is to channel the emotion to this purpose without letting it lead to petty or mean behavior. If one inhibits the anger itself instead of remaining open to it, the problem will probably be unresolved and the bottled-up anger may build. A self-report study of 238 married couples found that individuals who ignored or stifled emotions felt less relationship satisfaction, while couples who expressed positive and negative emotions constructively reported greater relationship satisfaction (Feeney, 1999). Adaptive emotion management in relationships requires much more than the blanket inhibition of emotions. Indeed, couples in emotionally expressive marriages tend to report greater relationship satisfaction (Huston & Houts, 1998).

Emotionally Intelligent Mating

The old saying, “Birds of a feather flock together” rings true for almost all human traits. Human beings tend to be similar to their long-term partners. Recent research suggests that intra-couple concordance, that is, similarity between partners, may occur with EI just as it does with age, religiosity, attitudes, verbal intelligence, political orientation, personality, and values (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford 1997; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Watson et al., 2004). This may be because everyone tries to attract the highest-quality partner they can, such that in a competitive mating market with mutual mate choice, everyone tends to form relationships with partners of similar mate value—an explanation of intra-couple concordance called “assortative mating.”

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Assortative Mating

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tive mating.” Assortative mating may occur at the level of specific trait matching (such that very bright people only marry very bright people), or at the level of overall mate value (such that very bright people sometimes marry very beautiful or very rich but rather stupid people). Alternatively, people in long-term committed relationships may be alike because they “converge,” becoming more similar over time as they live together and mutually adapt.

Some evidence suggests that intra-couple concordance occurs for EI, but may be modified by relationship length. For example, Brackett et al. (2006) found a significant correlation in EI ($r = .38$) between partners in 100 long-term couples from an English community sample. Another study found lower partner similarity in EI for couples in earlier stages of their relationships (Brackett et al., 2005). Thus, consistent with previous research on showing that married couples are more likely than dating couples to engage in assortative mating with regard to other individual characteristics (Keller, Thiessen, & Young, 1996), individuals may be more likely to select mates based on EI similarity in long-term rather than in short-term relationships. Selecting a mate using EI may be especially important given that serious emotional crises are more likely to arise in long-term relationships (due to both their greater longevity and their more frequent association with children, mortgages, career trade-offs, in-laws, and other major stressors). As the importance of emotion-related skills becomes recognized, high-EI individuals may come to appreciate the benefits of a partner with similarly high EI and relationships with EI-disparate partners may end earlier than relationships with EI-similar partners.

**Assortative Mating**

Intra-couple EI concordance may be explained by what evolutionary psychologists refer to as “assortative mating for maximum affordable mate value” (Buss, 1985). In other words, individuals may try to form relationships with the most valuable mate—one that is the most attractive, intelligent and virtuous mate who is willing to be part of the relationship (Buss, 1985; Woolbright, Greene, & Rapp, 1990). Certain traits, especially high conscientiousness, emotional stability, and physical attractiveness, tend to be desired in a mate, regardless of one’s own characteristics (Botwin et al., 1997; Figueredo et al., 2004). Although many desire maximally conscientious, stable, and beautiful mates, few people are desirable enough themselves to attract such a super-mate. In a competitive mating market with mutual mate choice, everyone ends up with the best mate they can “afford,” given their own mate value.

According to this perspective, EI may be concordant within couples not because low-EI people actually prefer low-EI mates, but because high-EI people are attracted to each other, form relationships, and reject
low-EI mates. This leaves those with lower-EI no choice but to mate with each other.

This hypothesis could apply to each of the four EI skills, since they are all desirable in relationships. It would be useful to mate with someone who could perceive emotions well, because such a mate could, for example, detect the early signs of sadness and quickly comfort a sad partner or child. Using emotions to facilitate thought would allow one partner to feel the emotions the other partner was feeling, thereby putting himself in his partner’s emotional shoes, which would help him understand his partner’s thinking and behavior better. Understanding emotions well would help partners foresee how their emotions might progress in a tense situation, so they could avoid arguments and reach more constructive solutions. Managing emotions well would help individuals inhibit their own aggression or moodiness and help them promote positive emotions and good moods in their partners. Because all of these skills are important to successful romantic relationships, it seems advantageous to select the most emotionally intelligent partners possible. In doing so, people mate with partners whose emotional abilities are similar to their own.

Mate choice for EI seems likely given that EI could so powerfully promote good long-term relationships with efficient social coordination and joint parenting. According to evolutionary psychologists, human females generally value long-term relationships more than males do (Buss, 1998). Because EI is related to relationship satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2005, 2006), and satisfying relationships tend to last longer and are more valuable to women, women may have evolved to prefer high-EI partners even more than men do. High EI partners may also offer survival benefits: satisfying relationships provide social support that can promote physical and psychological well-being, buffer individuals from stress, and inhibit the progression of some diseases (Uchino, 2004; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Leserman et al., 2000; Wills, 1997).

People may prefer mates with high EI because high EI may (unconsciously) reveal good genetic quality that could be passed along to offspring. If EI is correlated at the phenotypic level with important heritable cognitive traits (such as general intelligence), personality traits (such as emotional stability), and mental health, then EI may also be genetically correlated with these traits. That is, it may depend on overlapping sets of genes. If so, then EI can function as an indicator of general genetic quality. For example, many heritable mental disorders (such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar, autism, anxiety disorders, and psychopathy) tend to reduce all four components of EI (emotion perception, understanding, management, and thought-facilitation). Therefore, high EI could act as a sort of neurogenetic warrant that reliably advertises mental health, and freedom from these disorders.

Convergence

Another possible explanation is that the partners spend so much time together. Convergence does not require people to be more similar in self-esteem or in terms of positive and negative affect. It does, however, require people to be more similar in terms of facial expressions (Caro & Keith, 2003), as well as in terms of the skills they have learned (Bove, Sobal, & Rausal, 2002). These skills are not necessarily the same as those required for romantic relationships (Linehan, 2003).

Separation of Low-

A final hypothesis is that high-EI scores lead to separation. Couples who care about positive interactions often remain together—so does the importance of EI. For example, a low-EI partner may be even more important for less satisfying, sho
Convergence

Another possible explanation for intra-couple EI concordance is convergence: perhaps partners become more similar in EI abilities because they spend so much time together and learn from each other (Schooley, 1936). Convergence does not seem to occur for basic personality traits (Caspi, Herbener, & Ozer, 1992), but it does seem to explain why partners become more similar in self-esteem, dependency, attachment style, and the strength of positive and negative emotions felt when talking about good days and bad days, respectively (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003; Melamed, 1994; Schafer & Keith, 2002). Convergence also seems to affect more malleable traits such as eating patterns, alcohol consumption, and social activity (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003; Price & Vendenberg, 1980). At least some EI skills are malleable. For example, the ability to read emotions from facial expressions can be improved with training (Grinspan, Hemphill, & Nowicki, 2003), as can one’s verbal understanding of emotion (Pons, Harris, & Doudin, 2002). Perhaps the strongest evidence that EI skills can be learned is the success of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). A core element of DBT is emotion-regulation-skills training, which includes identification and labeling of emotions, increasing tolerance of negative affect, effective emotional expression, and behavioral management of high-stress conflict (Linehan, Cochran, & Kehrer, 2001). Insofar as long-term sexual relationships constitute a sort of never-ending mutual DBT, partners may learn EI skills from each other, and may converge in overall EI.

Separation of Low-EI Pairs

A final hypothesis regarding intra-couple EI concordance is that higher average EI scores lead to longer-lasting relationships, and that as the low-EI couples separate, a bias toward the long-lasting high-EI couples develops. Couples who can manage their emotions and who evoke more frequent positive interactions may stay together, whereas relationships full of anger, yelling, and fighting may not last. This may explain why there is a marginally stronger intra-couple EI correlation in long-term than in short-term relationships (Brackett et al., 2005, 2006). In other words, a type of “natural selection” may occur, such that high-EI couples are more likely to stay together—a sort of “survival of the fittest relationship.”

The importance of average EI plays out in the selection of one’s partner. For example, a low-EI person could benefit from seeking a high-EI partner. This would yield higher relationship satisfaction and longevity, and, if convergence applies, an increase in one’s own EI. However, high-EI people may be even more aware (being high-EI) that low-EI partners make for less satisfying, shorter relationships. So, high-EI people may avoid...
low-EI mates even more strongly than low-EI people are attracted to high-EI mates. Recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of a partner’s EI level may help in selecting the optimal partner.

Implications for Mating Intelligence

Not surprisingly, EI and MI overlap in some ways. All four branches of EI (i.e., the perception, use, understanding, and management of emotion) are useful for finding a sexual partner and forming a relationship. Because the skills involved in EI and MI are related, even the tests for these abilities are similar. Geher’s method of measuring MI is modeled after the performance measure of EI, the MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2002). For example, males taking the MI test are asked to identify which of three personal ads was written by the man who was rated the best potential husband by the most women. Unlike self-report instruments, performance tests have objectively correct and incorrect answers, thereby allowing for more precise and accurate measurement. Moreover, people tend not to be accurate at reporting their EI (Brackett et al., in press). Self-reports of mating intelligence also are likely to be fairly inaccurate and biased; most individuals rate their own sense of humor and creativity (major components of MI) as above average.

Although there are many conceptual similarities between EI and MI, and between their respective measures, they probably differ in their relation to couple satisfaction and intra-couple concordance. Current research shows that the most satisfied long-term couples, for example, are those in which both partners have high EI, while the least satisfied couples are those in which both partners have low EI; couples with one partner high and one partner low in EI have satisfaction between the extremes (Brackett et al., 2006). The high-EI partner’s abilities to empathize and manage emotions can somewhat compensate for the other partner’s EI deficit. In terms of MI, however, it may be better for partners to have very similar levels (even both low) than to have a mismatched pair. A relationship between a mating-genius and a mating-moron may be quite unstable: the high-MI partner will lose interest in the low-MI partner, and could easily attract other potential mates. If the partners have about equal MI, though, they will be able to maintain the others’ interest to a similar extent. This benefit of MI-similarity and the potential risks of MI-dissimilarity make intra-couple concordance seem even more likely for MI than it is for EI.

CONCLUSION

To date, only two studies have examined EI skills in couples using the MSCEIT. In one study with undergraduates in new relationships, couples with one high-EI partner reported relationship quality as high as couples with two high-EI partners. However, in a longer-term relationship, couples with two high-EI partners scored higher on couple EI than couples with only one high-EI partner. More research is needed to investigate the role of EI in couples with different EI levels.

The specific need for further investigation in the domain of relationship quality using more diverse samples, and more research on the role of EI in couples with different EI levels.

The possible understudied domain of relationship quality using more diverse samples, and more research on the role of EI in couples with different EI levels.
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with two high-EI partners (Brackett et al., 2005). These results suggest a 

reshold effect for EI, that is, that some minimum level of EI in one part-

er allows for optimal EI-moderated relationship quality for both partners. 

ever, in a second study with couples in their mid-20s who were in 

nger-term relationships, EI showed an additive effect, such that couples 

ith two high-EI partners reported higher relationship satisfaction than 

couples with one high-EI partner, who in turn reported higher satisfac-

tion than couples with two low-EI partners (Brackett et al., 2006). Thus, 

EI seems to become more valued and more related to satisfaction in longer-

term relationships.

More research is needed to examine the link between EI and relation-

ship quality using additional performance measures of EI and couples 

rom more diverse populations. The EI of older couples, non-Caucasian 

couples, and homosexual couples, for example, has been examined less 

han that of young, white, heterosexual couples. Studying the EI of these 

populations with performance measures and other means (e.g., experi-

ments manipulating each partner’s emotions) would give a broader view 

of the role of EI in relationships.

The specific mechanisms of EI-moderated relationship satisfaction 

eed further investigation as well. Research is needed to clarify how dif-

erent components of EI correlate with relationship satisfaction and dura-

tion. Although all four branches of EI seem to influence relationship sati-

faction, some may be more important in relationships than others. The 

ifferences between EI and MI in relationship satisfaction also need fur-

ther research. Perhaps MI is important mostly early in courtship (fuelling 

ital sexual attraction) and EI is important mostly later in long-term rela-

tionships (sustaining efficient cooperation, managing conflict, and increas-

ng relationship length and quality). Or perhaps MI and EI both play 

portant and inter-related roles at every stage of human sexual relation-

ships. The link between relationship satisfaction and partner similarity in 

EI and MI, too, should be investigated further. High EI may matter more 

an similar EI, while the opposite may be true of MI.

The possible reasons underlying partner similarity in EI also is an 

nderstudied domain. Individuals within couples correlate positively on 

their EI scores, but it remains unclear what proportion of this pattern is 

e due to assortative mating (individual preferences for maximum EI in part-

ers), relationship selection effects (longer-lasting relationships when cou-

les have similar EI scores), or EI convergence effects. Longitudinal 

ies of couples could better distinguish assortative mating from 

ationship selection and convergence effects. For example, studies of 

ewlyweds would be informative, since such couples have already chosen 

their mate and survived initial courtship, but may not have been together 

ong enough for their EL to have converged. Behavior genetics research 

on the heritabilities of EI and MI and whether they are genetically corre-
lated with general intelligence, personality traits, mental health, and each other would inform research on partner similarity, as well. The malleability and learnability of EI and MI also need further investigation: to what extent are they stable, recalcitrant traits versus teachable skills? If partner similarity and discrepancy affect relationship quality and satisfaction, as seems to be the case, research in these areas will improve our understanding of what makes for a good relationship.

REFERENCES


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