Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **3** (2010), 136–139.
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COMMENTARIES

Trait Emotional Intelligence Theory

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The overarching aims of this commentary are to address a number of issues arising from Cherniss' target article (Cherniss, 2010) and to highlight the theory of trait emotional intelligence (*trait EI* or *trait emotional self-efficacy*).

Models of EI

In addition to trait EI, Cherniss identifies three other EI models whose main limitations must be succinctly mentioned, not least because they provided the impetus for the development of the trait EI model. Bar-On's (1997) model is predicated on the problematic assumption that emotional intelligence (or "ability" or "competence" or "skill" or "potential"—terms that appear to be used interchangeably in his writings) can be validly assessed through self-report questions of the type "It is easy for me to understand my emotions." Psychometrically, as pointed out in Petrides and Furnham (2001), this is not a viable position because such self-report questions can only be tapping into self-perceptions rather than into abilities or competencies. This poses a fundamental threat to the validity of this model, far more serious than the pervasive faking problem noted by several authors (e.g., Grubb & McDaniel, 2008). Goleman's (1995) model is difficult to evaluate scientifically because of its reliance on imprecise terminology, anecdotal evidence, and unsubstantiated claims. In fairness, it must be acknowledged that this was not intended as a scientific publication and it may, therefore, be inappropriate to evaluate it from such a perspective.

Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model requires more elaboration because Cherniss singled it out as the one that best represents EI. Cherniss' reasoning for advocating this model can be summarized as follows: If we choose to endorse Salovey and Mayer's EI definition, then Mayer and Salovey's EI model is the one that fits this definition best. It is impossible to disagree with a truism, even an empirically unfounded one, but it is worth making a crucial point about the nature of scientific definitions, which are fundamentally different from dictionary definitions.

In science, especially psychological science, constructs are defined operationally (Bridgman, 1927) rather than by means of dictionary definitions. To the lay person, Salovey and Mayer's (1990) definition of 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" sounds clear and plausible, as does Thorndike's (1920) definition of social intelligence as "the ability to understand men and women, boys and girls—to act wisely in human relations" and numerous other definitions of new intelligences (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, spiritual, financial). These are all highly intuitive and appealing

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2010.01213.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

dictionary definitions, but they are not construct operationalizations. The possibility to group or differentiate psychological theories or constructs on the basis of dictionary definitions, as Cherniss suggests, does not arise because such definitions are severed from the underlying operationalizations and, therefore, are of limited scientific utility.

For those readers wishing to explore the conceptual flaws in the notion of EI as a hitherto undiscovered cognitive ability, the following references provide but a glimpse: Brody (2004); Eysenck (1998); Freudenthaler and Neubauer (2007); Keele and Bell (2008); O'Sullivan and Ekman (2004); Ortony, Revelle, and Zinbarg (2007); Rossen, Kranzler, and Algina (2008); and Wilhelm (2005). These publications describe in some detail the obstacles that arise from ignoring the inherently subjective nature of emotions. Emotional experience cannot be artificially objectified in order to be made amenable to genuine IQ-style testing.

Trait EI

Trait EI is defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies and measured via the trait emotional intelligence questionnaire (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Table 1 presents the domain of trait EI (in adult samples), which clearly lies outside the taxonomy of human cognitive ability (Carroll, 1993). There should be no doubt that this operational definition is antithetical to Bar-On's, Goleman's, and Salovey and Mayer's definitions, instruments, and models. Consequently, it cannot be meaningfully grouped with any of them, least of all under a competence label. Indeed, it is unclear how such a label can be applied to any of the models discussed in Cherniss (2010) because they all encompass salient intrapersonal components. How are we to obtain *competence* judgments concerning a typically developed individual's intrapersonal emotional "abilities" when that individual is the only person with direct access to the information that is necessary for making such a judgment?

Trait EI is the only operational definition in the field that recognizes the inherent subjectivity of emotional experience. That the trait EI facets are personality traits, as opposed to competencies or mental abilities or facilitators, is also corroborated by research revealing that the same genes that are implicated in the development of individual differences in the Big Five personality traits are also implicated in the development

Table 1. *The Domain of Trait Emotional Intelligence*

Facets	High scorers view themselves as . . .
Adaptability	flexible and willing to adapt to new conditions
Assertiveness	forthright, frank, and willing to stand up for their rights
Emotion expression	capable of communicating their feelings to others
Emotion management (others)	capable of influencing other people's feelings
Emotional perception (self and others)	clear about their own and other people's feelings
Emotion regulation	capable of controlling their emotions
Impulsiveness (low)	reflective and less likely to give in to their urges
Relationships	capable of maintaining fulfilling personal relationships
Self-esteem	successful and self-confident
Self-motivation	driven and unlikely to give up in the face of adversity
Social awareness	accomplished networkers with superior social skills
Stress management	capable of withstanding pressure and regulating stress
Trait empathy	capable of taking someone else's perspective
Trait happiness	cheerful and satisfied with their lives
Trait optimism	confident and likely to "look on the bright side" of life

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2010.01213.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of individual differences in trait EI (Vernon, Villani, Schermer, & Petrides, 2008).

Trait EI theory connects the EI construct to mainstream research on differential psychology and has been used as the main reference framework in areas as diverse as nursing (Quoidbach & Hansenne, 2009), psychoneuroendocrinology (Mikolajczak, Roy, Luminet, Fillee, & de Timary, 2007), relationships (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008), behavioral genetics (Vernon, Petrides, Bratko, & Schermer, 2008), and work (Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009), among many others.

Trait EI does not assume that there is some archetypal "emotionally intelligent" individual whom all leaders, managers, and employees should strive to emulate in order to succeed. Emotions are known to distort human judgment and decision making (Shafir & LeBoeuf, 2002) as well as basic reasoning processes (Oaksford, Morris, Grainger, & Williams, 1996). Emotion-based thinking tends to be intuitive and automatic, with low scientific rigor and low detail in judgment, in contrast with a more consciously analytic, low in emotional valence, thinking (Croskerry & Norman, 2008). Certain emotion profiles will be advantageous in some contexts but not in others. For example, being reserved and nonsupportive are not marks of emotional dimness, but personality traits that happen to be more adaptive than sociability and emotional expression in, say, research contexts (Rushton, Murray, & Paunonen, 1983). Assessment in the field of EI will not be dramatically different from assessment in the field of personality, in which individuals' profiles have to be matched to specific job descriptions, with different job descriptions calling for different personality profiles (Pervin, 1968). It follows that no magic profile of the "emotionally intelligent" individual who will excel in all aspects of worklife exists.

Succinctly stated, trait EI theory has several advantages relative to other approaches. First, it acknowledges the subjective nature of emotional experience (Robinson & Clore, 2002), thus circumventing a series of problems plaguing other models. Second, it integrates the construct into mainstream theories of differential psychology rather than treating it as a novel entity detached from accumulated scientific knowledge. Third, it is not tied to specific proprietary tests, but rather it is general and provides a platform for the interpretation of data from any questionnaire of EI or related constructs. Fourth, it is readily extendable into cognate areas (e.g., social intelligence) rather than restricted to a single idiosyncratic model.

Trait EI theory enjoys widespread empirical support and consistently replicated findings from numerous studies that are theoretically driven, methodologically sophisticated, and independently conducted. For those who might be interested in obtaining more information about trait EI theory and its family of measures, all of which are available free of charge for academic research, the latest developments can be accessed through the research program's Web site at www.psychometriclab.com.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2010.01213.x Published online by Cambridge University Press