

2009

## The role of emotional intelligence and personality in moral reasoning

V Sagar Athota

*University of Notre Dame Australia, sathota@nd.edu.au*

Peter J. O'connor

*University of Notre Dame Australia, poconnor3@nd.edu.au*

C Jackson

*University of New South Wales*

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### Recommended Citation

**Athota, V. S., O'Connor, P. J., & Jackson, C. (2009). The role of emotional intelligence and personality in moral reasoning. In R. E. Hicks (ed.), *Personality and individual differences: Current directions*. Bowen Hills, QLD, Australian Academic Press.**

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The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Personality in Moral Reasoning

V. S. Athota,  
University of New South Wales  
Australia

Peter J. O'Connor  
The University of Notre Dame Australia  
Australia

C.Jackson  
University of New South Wales  
Australia

Word Count: 2933

Key words: *Emotional Intelligence, Moral Reasoning, personality,*

Abstract

## Morals and Emotional Intelligence

In this study we investigated the potential role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in Moral Reasoning (MR). A sample of 131 undergraduate students completed a battery of psychological tests, which included measures of Emotional Intelligence, Moral Reasoning and the Big Five dimensions of personality. Results demonstrated support for a proposed model of the relationship between Emotional Intelligence, personality and Moral Reasoning. Specifically, Emotional Intelligence was found to be a significant predictor of four of the Big Five personality dimensions (Extraversion, Openness, Neuroticism, Agreeableness), which in turn were significant predictors of Moral Reasoning. These results have important implications in regards to our current understanding of the relationships between Emotional Intelligence, Moral Reasoning and personality. We emphasize the need to incorporate the constructs of Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning into a broader, explanatory personality framework.

### The Role of Emotional Intelligence and personality in Moral Judgment

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationships between Emotional Intelligence, personality and Moral Reasoning. In the following literature review, we outline relevant existing research focusing on these constructs, and also highlight conceptual links between them. Emotional Intelligence can be defined as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotion knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Salovey & Mayer, 1995, p.5). Thus, in this research we conceptualize Emotional Intelligence as an ability as opposed to a dispositional trait.

Substantial research has been conducted on the various relationships between personality traits and Emotional Intelligence. All of the Big Five personality traits (Agreeableness, Openness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Conscientiousness) have been found to correlate at least moderately with Emotional Intelligence (McCrae, 2000). In particular, Emotional Intelligence measures have generally been found to have at least moderate significant correlations with Extraversion (positive direction) and Neuroticism (negative direction), and smaller significant positive correlations with openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Matthews et al., 2006). Conceptually, such relationships make sense as both personality and Emotional Intelligence are comprised of both cognitive and emotional components (see, Mayer and Salovey, 1995; also see Shulman & Hemenover 2006). Indeed, it can be argued that Emotional Intelligence, which is conceptualized as ability, influences the development of personality. Regardless

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of the direction however, it is clear that a relationship exists between Emotional Intelligence and personality.

There have been different views expressed about the moral dimension of Emotional Intelligence in the work of influential EI researchers. Specifically, Goleman (1995) suggests that there is a moral dimension to Emotional Intelligence, whereas Mayer and Cobb (2000) argue that there is not. Consistent with Goleman, (1995), we argue that there is considerable conceptual overlap between the two constructs. As mentioned previously, Emotional Intelligence involves the *ability* to perceive and regulate emotions. Similarly, Moral Reasoning is defined as the *ability* to “frame socio-moral problems using one’s standards and values in order to judge the proper course of action” (Rest, 1979; p.198). Thus, while Emotional Intelligence involves using one’s understanding of emotions (both of self and other) to guide decision making, Moral Reasoning involves using one’s standards and values to guide decision making. Theoretically, it follows that one’s ‘standards and values’ will depend largely on one’s ability to accurately perceive both their own and others emotion, and regulate their own emotions effectively. Overall however, there has been little empirical research investigating how Emotional Intelligence affects Moral Reasoning.

One difference between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning is their levels of specificity. Emotional Intelligence tends to refer to a generalized ability to regulate one’s emotions, which theoretically influences most of our behaviours at some level. Emotional Intelligence is best thought of as a generalized *distal* ability. Moral Reasoning on the other hand is only relevant to specific situations (e.g. moral dilemma’s)

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and is best regarded as a specific *proximal* ability. We argue therefore argue that Emotional Intelligence has a distal influence on Moral Reasoning.

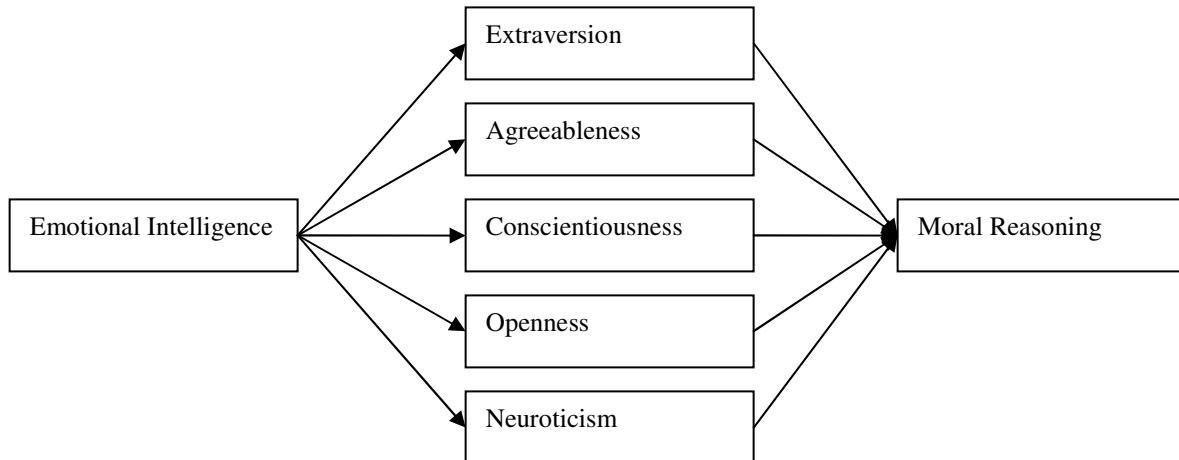
Some research has also focused on the relationship between personality and Moral Reasoning (e.g. Mudrack 2006). For example, Curtis, Billingslea and Wilson (1998) found significant associations between Moral Maturity and the two traits empathy (similar to agreeableness) and socialization (extraversion). Conceptually, this relationship also makes sense; the Big Five personality dimensions which represent the primary behavioral and cognitive dimensions upon which people differ, should predict specific behavioural and cognitive strategies people engage in when faced with moral dilemmas. There is however, a lack of informative research in this area.

As noted above, the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and personality is well established, and there has also been some research on the relationship between personality and Moral Reasoning. There has been little research on the various relationships between Emotional Intelligence, personality and Moral Reasoning. The purpose of this paper is to test a model of the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning, where personality traits are modeled as mediators. Thus it is hypothesized that Emotional Intelligence is an indirect predictor of Moral Reasoning via personality. The specific model test in this paper is illustrated in figure 1.

Within this model, a number of specific hypotheses are examined. First, consistent with previous research on personality and Emotional Intelligence, it is hypothesized that self-reported EI and Big-Five personality factors positively correlate with each other. Specifically, Emotional Intelligence is modeled as a precursor to personality factors, as it represents an *ability* (Salovey & Mayer, 1995) which is different

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to personality, but likely influences personality development. Second, it is hypothesized the Big Five personality dimensions will significantly predict Moral Reasoning. Third, it is hypothesized that EI will significantly predict Moral Reasoning, via its effect on personality.



*Figure 1.* A model of the relationships between Emotional Intelligence, Personality and Moral Reasoning.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants comprised 131 psychology students from the University of Wollongong who volunteered to take part in this study. Fifty-four participants (41.22%) were male and 77 (58.79%) were female (2 people did not indicate their gender). Participants' ages ranged from 17-73, with mean age 22.63 years and  $SD = 7.86$  years.

### *Measures*

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*The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP)* (Goldberg et al., 2006).

Participants completed the IPIP, a 50-item scale targeting the Big-Five personality factors. The scale has 10 items assessing each of the dimensions of Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). The items are based on one's behaviors and reactions answered on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 'Very Accurate' to 5 'Very Inaccurate'. Sixteen items are reverse-scored.

Goldberg (1999) points out that there has been only one comparative validity study conducted on the psychometric properties of the IPIP scale. Goldberg (2006) (cited on the IPIP website) reported the following alpha reliability for the IPIP scale: Extroversion, .87; Agreeableness, .82; Conscientiousness, .79; Neuroticism, .86; and Openness to Experience, .84. According to Goldberg (1999) the scores on these scales have relatively high reliability and also have convergent validity with other measures of personality.

*Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SREIT)* Schutte, et al., (1998) wrote the SREIT based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) early model of EI. It was used as a self-report measure of Emotional Intelligence scored on a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly disagree). This 33-item scale was developed to assess participants' ability to perceive, understand, regulate and express emotions. According to Bracket and Mayer (2003) the SREIT has good internal consistency and test-retest reliability

*Machiavellian IV scale (Mach IV)* (Christie & Geis, 1970). The MACH-IV Scale, developed by Christie (1970b), was classified into the three categories: Interpersonal Tactics, Cynical View of Human Nature, and Disregard for Conventional Morality. In this study, people who score high on MACH IV were regarded as having high levels of Moral Reasoning. The Mach IV is made up of 20 items, 10 indicating high Moral



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Reasoning and 10 indicating the opposite (low Moral Reasoning). The items reflect ways of thinking and opinions about people and things. Participants were requested to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 5-point scale. In the MACH IV, 'tactics' are defined as the nature of an individual's interpersonal tactics, 'views' are defined as the views of human nature and 'morality' is regarded as the abstract or generalized morality. Subscales were summed to give a total score of 'Moral Reasoning' in this study.

## Procedure

The scales containing the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP), the Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SREIT), the Machiavellian IV scale (Mach IV) were administered to participants. The participants were tested individually. The participants were asked to read the instructions carefully before proceeding with the survey. They were given about 30 minutes to complete the survey. Biographic data were also collected from the participants at the beginning of the session. Participants were thanked for their participation and given a debriefing.

## Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics along with the alpha reliabilities for the Moral Reasoning scale, Emotional Intelligence scale, and the five factors of personality. Table 2 shows the correlations between intelligence, Moral Reasoning, personality and moral judgement variables.

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Table 1

*Mean, standard deviations and alpha for Emotional Intelligence, Moral Reasoning, personality and moral judgment variables (N = 131)*

	Mean	SD	Alpha	EI	E	A	C	N	O
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	133.29	12.44	0.89						
Extraversion (E)	32.94	7.13	0.88	0.35**					
Agreeableness (A)	40.83	5.41	0.81	0.42**	0.30**				
Conscientiousness (C)	34.56	5.83	0.76	0.01	-0.05	0.01			
Neuroticism	30.00	8.05	0.89	0.47**	0.41**	0.07	0.05		
Openness (O)	36.38	5.44	0.79	0.33**	0.26**	0.22*	0.15	0.20*	
Moral Reasoning (MR)	56.7	8.65	0.75	0.23**	0.28**	0.41**	-0.11	0.21*	-0.08

\*\*Indicates significance at the  $p < 0.01$  level; \*Indicates significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level

The model illustrated in figure 1 was tested using path analysis (Amos version 17). Standardised estimates for hypothesized relationships between Emotional Intelligence, Personality and Moral Reasoning are included in table 2. As can be seen in this table, strong support was received for hypotheses 1 and 3. Specifically, Emotional Intelligence was found to significantly predict 4 of the Big 5 personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Openness). Three of the Big 5 personality traits (Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Openness) were found to significantly, uniquely predict Moral Reasoning. Parametric bootstrapping was used to test the hypothesis that Emotional Intelligence indirectly predicts Moral Reasoning via personality (See Kline, 1998 for a discussion on indirect effects). Consistent with this hypothesis the indirect effect of Emotional Intelligence on Moral Reasoning was

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significant (Beta = 0.23,  $p = 0.002$ ). This indicates that individuals with high levels of Emotional Intelligence tend to have high levels of Moral Reasoning.

Table 2

*Parameter estimates and levels of significance for the proposed relationships between Emotional Intelligence, Personality and Moral Reasoning. Only significant coefficients are reported.*

From	To				
	Extraversion	A	N	O	Moral Reasoning
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.35**	0.42**	0.47**	0.32**	
Agreeableness (A)					0.40**
Neuroticism (N)					0.17*
Openness (O)					0.23**

\*\*Indicates significance at the  $p < 0.01$  level; \*Indicates significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level

## Discussion

The study described in this paper provides the first attempt to test and explain the various relationships between Emotional Intelligence, the Big Five Dimensions of personality, and Moral Reasoning. A model of the relationship between these variables was tested, and it was hypothesized that Emotional Intelligence would predict personality traits, and that these personality traits would then predict Moral Reasoning. Importantly, it was hypothesized that Emotional Intelligence would indirectly predict Moral Reasoning, via its relationship with personality traits. All three hypotheses were supported.

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Consistent with McCrae (2000) and Matthews (2006) we found a strong relationship between personality and Emotional Intelligence. In contrast to such authors however, we do not interpret this relationship to indicate that Emotional Intelligence is simply an aspect of personality, or even synonymous with personality (Shulman & Hemenover 2006). Instead we argue that since Emotional Intelligence represents an ability, rather than a disposition, it influences the development of adult personality, and can therefore be modeled as a distal precursor to personality. This line of reasoning is consistent with explanatory models of personality which view surface dimensions of personality having a distal basis in emotional control (e.g. Cloninger, Svrakic & Przybeck, 1993).

Only limited research has explored the relationship between Moral Reasoning and Personality, and one aim of this study was to add to this research. In this study, we found that several dimensions of personality were significant, direct predictors of Moral Reasoning. Specifically, Agreeableness, Neuroticism and Openness were found to be positive, unique predictors of Moral Reasoning. Agreeableness was the strongest predictor of Moral Reasoning. This relationship makes conceptual sense; those with high levels of empathy and concern for others, are more likely to thoroughly approach situations where Moral Reasoning is required.

As discussed earlier, the literature provides conflicting views about the relationships between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning. Goleman's (1995) understanding of the moral view of Emotional Intelligence is different to Mayer and Pizzaro's (2000) moral view of Emotional Intelligence. Mayer and Pizzarro's (2000). In this paper, consistent with Goleman (1995), we suggested that there is a relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning. Specifically, we suggested that

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personality traits (in combination) mediate the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning. Our results are consistent with this suggestion.

It is very timely to expand the scholarship in relation to Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning. Based on the established importance of the ethical connection between Emotional Intelligence and Moral Reasoning, further investigation can be done in the areas of stem cell research, health care settings, the leadership arena, and cross-cultural and academic settings. The present moral failures in corporate organizations, academic institutions and other organizational settings, challenge us to do more research about why this occurs. The clear importance between Moral Reasoning and Emotional Intelligence is now crucial, this research can result in meaningful interventions among business leaders, students, cross-cultural settings and other related fields, to study whether interventions improve Moral Reasoning and Emotional Intelligence.

A limitation of this study is that, having tested our proposition among university students, the results of this study may not generalize to other subject groups. A further limitation of this research is the cross-sectional nature of the design. Future research should attempt to replicate our findings using a longitudinal design.

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