

# Does emotional intelligence depend on gender? The socialization of emotional competencies in men and women and its implications

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## Abstract

This article attempts to justify gender differences found for the main factors that comprise emotional intelligence from the standpoint of the Mayer and Salovey Skill Model (1997). In order to do so, we carry out a review of the different emotional socialization patterns used by parents on the basis of their children's gender and look into their impact on the differential development of emotional competencies, comparing these with the findings of research conducted in the field of Emotional Intelligence. Results from this review and their implications are discussed, as well as necessary lines for future research.

**Keywords:** emotional competencies, gender, socialization, emotional intelligence.

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## Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es tratar de justificar las diferencias de género encontradas en los principales factores que integran la Inteligencia Emocional, desde la perspectiva del Modelo de Habilidad de Mayer y Salovey (1997). Para ello, realizamos una revisión sobre las diferentes pautas de socialización emocional que utilizan los padres en función del género de sus hijos y de qué modo repercuten en el desarrollo diferencial de las competencias emocionales, haciendo una comparación entre éstas y los resultados de las investigaciones en el campo de la Inteligencia Emocional. Se discuten los resultados obtenidos a través de la citada revisión, sus implicaciones, así como las necesarias futuras líneas de investigación al respecto.

**Palabras Clave:** competencias emocionales, género, socialización, inteligencia emocional.

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## **1. Socialization of Emotional Competencies.**

The stereotype of women being the more “emotional” sex survives to this day (Grewal & Salovey, 2006). We all are familiar with the image of a sensitive woman that easily feels emotions and expresses her feelings, although her behavior may at times be perceived as irascible and unstable as a result. We are also familiar with comments about the excessive importance and thought women place on things that happen to them, as well as the need to reflect on their own emotions and those of others. We will attempt to look into the truth and the myths behind this kind of affirmation, as well as their possible causes and implications by reviewing existing studies on this topic.

The relationship between the female sex and emotional competencies are closely linked since childhood (Feldman Barret, Lane, Sechrest & Schwartz, 2000; Garaigordobil & Galdeano, 2006; Sunew, 2004) due to a socialization that is in closer touch with feelings and their nuances (Candela, Barberá, Ramos, & Sarrió, 2001).

It has been affirmed that women tend to be more emotionally expressive than men, that they understand emotions better and that they have a greater ability as regards certain interpersonal skills. Women, for instance, recognize other people's emotions better, are more perceptive and have greater empathy (Aquino, 2003; Argyle, 1990; Hargie, Saunders, & Dickson, 1995; Lafferty, 2004; Tapia & Marsh II, 2006; Trobst, Collins, & Embree, 1994). In addition, some evidence exists that certain areas of the brain dedicated to processing emotions could be larger in women than in men (Baron-Cohen, 2003, 2005; Gur, Gunning-Dixon, Bilkner & Gur, 2002) and that there is a difference in cerebral activity based on sex (Jaušovec & Jaušovec, 2005).

If we are to seek out these differences, we have to go back to childhood, the time when these competencies are shaped. Different studies show the different emotional worlds in which girls and boys grow up, highlighting sexual differences in socialization and emotional teaching.

One of the most commonly used socialization tools are stories. The terms that appear most regularly in them are affective terms, followed by cognitive terms and references to

wishes (Rabazo & Moreno, 2006). When parents read stories to their small children, they tend to use more emotionally charged words with girls than with boys. Parents tend to talk more about emotions with their girls and than with their boys. Mothers chat about emotional aspects and use more emotional terms than fathers and, when they play with their children, they express a wider spectrum of emotions when playing with girls. They are also more detailed with girls when describing an emotional state. Both fathers and mothers use an emotional discourse more with girls than with boys when discussing sad events. In addition, the father/mother – daughter relationship situates emotional experiences within a more interpersonal context than the father/mother – son relationship (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Brody & Hall, 1993; Dunn, 1990; Fivush, 1991, 1998; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000).

Furthermore, the fact that girls develop verbal skills earlier than boys means they are more skilled at articulating their feelings and have greater expertise in the use of words. This enables them to have a larger, richer range of verbal resources at their disposal that can replace emotional reactions like physical fights. Hence, girls have more information about the emotional world and therefore speak more about emotional aspects and use more emotional terms than boys. For their part, boys that do not receive any kind of education to help them verbalize their feelings can show a total lack of awareness about their own emotional states and those of other people (Brody & Hall, 1993; Fivush et al., 2000).

Concerning emotional expression, Elaine Scharfe (2000) found that maternal expressivity and the child's gender are associated with individual differences in the boy's/girl's expressivity and that such differences remain stable over time. Mothers showed themselves to be more expressive towards girls than boys and, when the children were three years old, mothers reported more positive affection in girls and more negative affection in boys. Nonetheless, it has been verified that boys tend to be able to speak clearly about emotional states and have an interest in them when they come from families in which the mother and boy hold conversations about emotional states (Dunn, 1990).

This inequality in emotional education leads to the development of very different skills. Girls become adept at reading both verbal and non-verbal emotional indicators, as well as expressing and communicating their feelings, showing their superiority in the ability, among others, to capture feelings reflected in someone's face, in the tone of voice and in other

non-verbal messages. Men, on the contrary, are socialized since they were children to avoid expressing their emotions. Male competitiveness, homophobia, avoiding vulnerability and openness, and the lack of appropriate role models have all been highlighted as obstacles that prevent men from expressing themselves emotionally. Boys therefore specialize in minimizing any emotions linked to vulnerability, guilt, fear and pain (Brody & Hall, 1993; Hall, 1978, 1984; Lewis, 1978; McClure, 2000; Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979).

Zeman and Garber (1996) stated that young boys expressed sadness and anger more often than older boys. They also showed that girls expressed sadness and affliction more often than boys. Although both mothers and fathers were perceived by boys and girls as capable of accepting expressions of affliction, mothers were seen to be more open to such expressions. Older boys perceived their fathers as less able to accept a range of emotions than younger boys (see also Zeman & Shipman, 1996).

Hence, although there is no manifest difference in the facial expressivity of boys and girls to start off with, it has been seen that boys become less and less expressive throughout primary school. Just the opposite happens with girls. These results coincide with women's greater ability to feel a wide range of emotions with more intensity and variability than men (Brody & Hall, 1993).

Eisler and Blalock (1991) pointed out that, although men logically manifested emotions, these were of a different kind from those expressed by women and, additionally, they did so to a lesser degree when they did manifest them. Women express more intimate details about their feelings and express emotions like sadness and happiness more. However, the topic being talked about attenuates the differences (Hill & Stull, 1987). Grossman and Wood (1993), on the contrary, stated that there were no differences in the kind of self-reported emotion by women and men but that there were indeed differences in their intensity. Feldman, Barret, Robin, Pietromonaco and Eyssell (1998) attempted to determine whether differences in women's emotionality when compared to men could be related to the social context. They found that this kind of variable did not predict differences in emotional expression. Nonetheless, they considered that situations of intimacy did indeed elicit such differences.

As regards other essential emotional competencies, like regulating emotions, significant differences have also been confirmed as regards the context (Saarni, 1984). Cole (1986)

found that girls smiled more than boys when faced with a disappointing prize and were more sensitive to the social context. Girls tended to smile within this context and not to smile in a non-social context. In order to interpret these results, we could base ourselves on Davis' hypotheses (1995) on the greater motivation girls have to regulate their emotional expressions and, we might add, to be aware of and express them, due to differential gender learning from an early age.

Another differential aspect that should be highlighted concerning the socialization of emotional skills is to be found in the teaching of problem-solving skills by parents, where a high correlation with social and emotional competencies has been found, especially among boys. Possibly depending on the socio-cultural environment, parents are more likely to teach boys problem-solving skills and to teach them to girls only when there is a clear lack of such competencies (Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002). As a matter of fact, Trobst et al. (1994) already found how women seek social support focused on emotions as a strategy to deal with problems to a greater extent than men, while the strategies men use are focused more on solving the problem.

It therefore seems that, when comparing men and women, women tend to show greater knowledge about emotional experiences, provide more complex and differentiated descriptions about emotions and use a broader emotional vocabulary (Adams et al., 1995; Feldman Barret et al., 2000; Fivush et al., 2000). These results could reflect gender differences regarding the availability or efficacy of knowledge about emotions, access to emotional knowledge and the motivation to use emotional knowledge, or all three simultaneously.

Despite the review of the literature set out above, it is highly likely that these stereotypes today vary from the norm (Baron-Cohen, 2005). Sex roles are currently undergoing change and androgynous behavior has increased across generations (Guastello & Guastello, 2003).

## **2. Gender Differences Concerning Emotional Intelligence**

In the recent field of research on Emotional Intelligence (EI), where the above-mentioned emotional competencies are closely linked to this construct, gender differences have also been detected in childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Harrod & Scheer, 2005;

Houtmeyers, 2002; Santesso, Reker, Schmidt & Segalowitz, 2006; Young, 2006). IE was re-defined in 1997 as, *“the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth”* (Mayer & Salovey 1997, p. 10).

These authors stress the importance of this set of cognitive skills for a proper adjustment to the environment, a very similar approach to the definitions of classical intelligence (Sternberg & Kauffman, 1998). Combining emotions with cognition would lead to a better day-to-day adaptation and conflict resolution by using not only our intellectual capacities but also the additional information provided by our moods (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000). They therefore refer to Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the set of skills that allow us to use emotions to adapt, in other words, to perceive, understand and regulate our moods and to use emotional information to improve cognitive processes (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008).

Concerning gender differences in EI, controversy is served as currently such differences can be discovered or not depending on the kind of assessment tool used, either self-report or performance measures. On the one hand, scales or self-report measures refer to the information that the subject provides us concerning the perception they have on their own EI or that of another person by responding to a series of key questions made up of short verbal enunciations, through which the person estimates his/her levels for specific emotional skills. On the other, performance measures or ability tests are like traditional cognitive performance or intelligence tests, in which subjects are asked to resolve specific emotional problems and their response is subsequently compared to preset objective scoring criteria (Mayer, 2001; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 1999).

The findings of studies that have used self-report measures (Bar-On's EQ-i, 1997; Schutte et al.'s SREIT, 1998 its versions; Salovey et al.'s TMMS-48, 1995 and its versions, etc.) have been very disparate. In some cases, no clear significant differences in self-reported emotional intelligence have been found among men and women (Aquino, 2003; Bar-On, 1997; Bar-On, Brown, Kirkcaldy & Thome, 2000; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Rivers et al., 2006; Brown & Schutte, 2006; Dawda & Hart, 2000; Depape et al., 2006; Devi & Rayulu, 2005; Jinfu & Xicoyan, 2004; Lumley et al., 2005; Palomera, 2005; Schutte et al.,



1998; Tiwari & Srivastava, 2004), while in others women turn out to be more skillful at directing and handling their own and other people's emotions. At times, just the opposite happens. Women turn out to be better at Emotional Attention and Empathy, while men are better at Regulating Emotions (Austin, Evans, Goldwater & Potter, 2005; Bindu & Thomas, 2006; Brackett, Warner & Bosco, 2005; Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004; Goldenberg, Matheson, & Mantler, 2006; Harrod & Scheer, 2005; Pandey & Tripathi, 2004; Silveri, Tzilos, Pimentel & Yurgelun-Todd, 2004; Van Rooy, Alonso, & Viswesvaran, 2005). This lack of uniformity in the results could be due to the sample's socio-demographic characteristics or the kind of tool used. This is linked to the different skills comprising the construct, which depend on the theoretical model being dealt with.

When the "Trait-Meta Mood Scale-48" (TMMS-48) and its versions are used (Salovey et al., 1995; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004), the differences found tend towards women placing greater attention on their emotions than men. In other cases, women are perceived to be more skillful at not only dealing with their emotions but also understanding them, while men are more skillful at controlling impulses and tolerating stress (Fernández-Berrocal, Alcaide & Ramos, 1999; Fernández-Berrocal & Extremera, 2003; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004; Palomera, 2005; Palomera, Gil-Olarte & Brackett, 2006; Sánchez, Fernández-Berrocal, Montañés & Latorre, 2008b; Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial & Johnsen, 2003).

Nonetheless, when performance indicators like the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) or the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) are used, clear significant differences in EI are seen with a predominance for women when compared to men (Brackett, 2001; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004; Brackett, Rivers et al., 2006; Brackett et al., 2005; Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000a; Day & Carroll, 2004; Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal & Salovey, 2006; Goldenberg et al., 2006; Kafetsios, 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lumley et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 1999; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002; Palmer, Gignac, Manocha, & Stough, 2005; Young, 2006). Gender differences that appear from childhood concerning emotional competencies are thus corroborated.

Studies which have focused on gender differences on the basis of self-reported EI and EI measures through performance tests reveal significant results on how men self-report a higher EI than they subsequently perform, whereas just the opposite happens with women.

Women self-report a lower EI than they show to have in performance tests (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett et al., 2006; Lumley et al., 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2000a). All this makes us suppose that women underestimate themselves and men overestimate themselves as regards their emotional skills. A recent study using the TMMS-24 (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004) showed how fathers have a lower level of Repair than they self-reported and mothers have a higher level of Attention and Clarity (Sánchez, 2007) than they self-reported.

There were similar findings regarding I.Q. measured through self-reported and performance tests. Men estimated their I.Q. to be above their actual performance in most studies and just the opposite happened with women (Furnham & Bunclark, 2006; Furnham & Petrides, 2004).

### **3. Discussion, Conclusions and Implications**

From what has been mentioned above we can conclude the following. Gender differences in EI can be glimpsed from infancy due to the differential teaching given to boys and girls. Some authors like Guastello and Guastello (2003) have put forward another possible explanation for gender differences in EI having to do with the effect of generations. It would explain why these differences are being reduced in new generations due to the influence of culture and education. This hypothesis was corroborated by them using the self-report measure put forward by Schutte, et al. (1998), the SREI, when they found significant differences among parents, but not their children.

Despite the evidence indicating that women generally have a higher EI index than men, their self-perception tends to be lower than that of men. Linked to the foregoing, we should highlight the results of the study conducted by Sánchez et al., (2008a), in which the EI self-reported by mothers as regards the Attention factor was predicted to 9% by the perception the father and the children had of them. A possible explanation for these phenomena could be related to the threat that the stereotype of women could have on their perception. It is perhaps a more vulnerable stereotype than the findings of the performance tests really show. As a matter of fact, some studies have shown the impact the sexual stereotype has on anxiety levels in a specific situation (Osborne, 2006).

If we were to add to these results the body of work showing a relationship between low self-reported EI levels with worse mental health, measured through depression, anxiety and emotional adjustment scales (Fernández-Berrocal, Alcaide, Extremera, & Pizarro, 2006; Fernández-Berrocal, Salovey, Vera, Extremera, & Ramos, 2005; Latorre & Montañés, 2004; Liao et al., 2003; Salovey et al., 2002; Sánchez, Montañés, Latorre & Fernández-Berrocal; 2006; Williams, Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera, Ramos-Díaz & Joiner, 2004), as well as the worse mental health indices women tend to have for these disorders (Caro Gabalda, 2001; Montero et al., 2004; World Health Organization, 2008), it suggests the need for further research on this topic. A greater number of studies on the family are required to discover the existing relationship between perceived EI and real EI among parents and children, as well as the weight perceptive, socio-cultural (stereotypes), evolutionary and/or generational factors have on both the differential development of IE skills and on the perception of these same skills.

Conducting research on these kinds of relationships would have important repercussions not only on the description and explanation of an individual's emotional development but also on the psycho-educational intervention on an individual's emotional balance as well as that of the family as a whole, with the resulting indirect incidence it would have on different spheres of society.

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