Title: Trait Emotional Intensity Predicts Better Performance at Identifying Positive Features of the Environment But Worse Performance on Negative Features

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Given that human nature and social situations are complex, it seems plausible that there might be some functional benefit to any personality trait. Emotions highlight features of the environment and are useful for personal and interpersonal functioning (Keltner & Kring, 1998). A personality trait that highlights one’s emotional reaction to the environment might be adaptive and could potentially lead to the development of emotional skills. Recent data collected in our lab has shown that emotional intensity is a dispositional quality that promotes adaptive responding, resulting in beneficial personal and interpersonal outcomes.

The present study sought to investigate the effect of emotional intensity on the ability to correctly identify the pleasantness of various pictures normed across multiple samples. At issue is whether being a person whose emotions are typically intense is beneficial or detrimental. Most people see extreme emotional reactions as troublesome. Psychological research also supports this view (eg., Larsen & Diener, 1987; Barlow, 1991). Recent studies conducted in our lab, however, showed that emotional intensity was related to the ability to accurately identify emotion, manage emotion, and understand the complexity of emotion. The present study seeks to investigate whether there might be some benefit to emotional intensity.

Pictures selected from the International Affective Picture System (1999) were separated into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative, based on the norms for mean pleasantness ratings. Intensity was computed as the mean of two intensity scales. Among the 69 participants, high emotional intensity predicted lower accuracy at rating the pleasantness of the negative pictures as compared to the norms. In contrast, high emotional intensity predicted greater accuracy at correctly identifying the pleasantness of the positive pictures. Thus, in a positive environment emotional intensity might provide some functional benefit.