

Trait Emotional Intelligence and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis

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This meta-analysis of six studies involving a total of 603 participants found a significant association ($r = .32$) between trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction. The association between the emotional intelligence of an individual and his or her self-reported romantic relationship satisfaction was significant, as was the relationship between an individual's emotional intelligence and the partner's level of satisfaction with the relationship. The association between trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction provides a foundation for future research, such as intervention studies aimed at increasing emotional intelligence in couples in order to increase romantic relationship satisfaction.

High levels of satisfaction with romantic relationships are associated with important outcomes, including greater relationship stability and lower rates of relationship dissolution (Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and higher levels of well-being and mental and physical health (Prigerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 1999). Personality characteristics of romantic partners may contribute to their level of satisfaction with the relationship. This effect can occur in various ways. Personality characteristics could affect how one views the relationship, lead to specific choices of partner, lead to specific relationship-relevant behavior, and lead, through modeling of behavior, to specific behavior by the partner. Studies have examined associations between personality characteristics and relationship satisfaction by correlating the characteristics with satisfaction in two different ways: within the same individual (some characteristic and satisfaction as rated by the same person) and between partners

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(some characteristic in one partner and satisfaction reported by the other partner).

The most studied personality characteristics in connection with relationship satisfaction are the Five-Factor Model characteristics. Heller, Watson, and Iles (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of self-rated Five-Factor Model characteristics and self-rated marital satisfaction and found that all five characteristics had significant correlations, with higher emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion and openness associated with greater marital satisfaction at .26, .24, .22, .14, and .08 respectively. In a meta-analysis of studies focused on Five-Factor personality characteristics of one partner and the relationship satisfaction of the other partner, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, and Rooke (2010) found that higher emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness in one partner were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction in the other partner, at .22, .15, .12, .06, and .03 respectively. All the correlations were statistically significant, except for openness.

Researchers have also examined the association between the trait of emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction in several studies. This body of research has not yet been the subject of a meta-analytic analysis.

Emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008) describes adaptive emotional functioning as an individual-difference characteristic in emotion processing. Emotional intelligence is comprised of emotional competencies (including perception, understanding, managing and harnessing emotions effectively) that group together and that involve processing or using emotion in adaptive ways. Perception of emotion involves accurately recognizing emotions in the self and others. Understanding emotion refers to knowledge of the causes of emotional experience in the self and others. Managing emotions consists of being able to effectively regulate emotions in the self and others. Harnessing emotions involves using emotions to achieve goals, such as in solving problems.

Mayer et al. (2008) suggested that emotional intelligence is a latent ability similar to cognitive intelligence. The ability conceptualization implies that emotional intelligence consists of functions that may or may not manifest themselves in everyday life. Other theorists and researchers have pointed out that emotional intelligence can also be defined and measured as trait (or typical) functioning (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005), and a substantial amount of research has operationalized emotional intelligence as a trait.

High levels of trait emotional intelligence are related to numerous positive intrapersonal and interpersonal positive outcomes (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004). Correlates of high emotion intelligence include good health (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin (2010) and high-quality performance at work (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawyer, & Story, 2010).

A number of studies have examined the association between trait emotional intelligence and a specific aspect of interpersonal relationships: satisfaction in romantic relationships. Conceptually one would expect an association between emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction. Better perception, understanding, managing, and harnessing of emotions in the self may lead individuals to do better in and be more satisfied with various realms of life, including romantic relationships. Individuals who have better understanding of others' emotions in conjunction with insight into their own emotions may enter relationships with more compatible partners. Emotional competencies may make it more likely that individuals with these competencies establish pleasant and mutually satisfying relationships because of their ability to understand and manage their own emotions and their ability to perceive, understand, and help regulate their relationship partner's emotions. Some of these competencies may be observed and acquired by relationship partners, leading to further increases in relationship satisfaction.

The present study used meta-analysis to estimate the overall degree of association between trait emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction across previously completed studies. We included both within-person correlations and between-partner correlations and examined the within-between difference as a potential moderator.

METHOD

Literature Search

We searched PsychINFO for the key terms emotional intelligence, emotional competence, marital satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Figure 1 shows the process of the search. As a supplement, we also searched Google Scholar, but we found no relevant articles there that we did not find in PsychINFO. We (a) read the titles of articles and proceeded to abstracts and finally the whole article of those that appeared relevant and were in English, (b) read the introduction of relevant articles closely to determine whether they cited any other potentially relevant articles, and (c) focused on articles that reported a correlation between emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction. We wrote to authors of relevant articles and asked for information about unpublished studies of the association between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction, and we posted a request on an electronic mailing list focused on emotions for information on the topic on an emotional intelligence, but we did not obtain any additional studies from the last two methods.

We included in the meta-analysis English-language articles that met three criteria. They had to report level of association between emotional intelligence and romantic-relationship satisfaction, use measures with published evidence of validity, and provide the necessary statistical information,

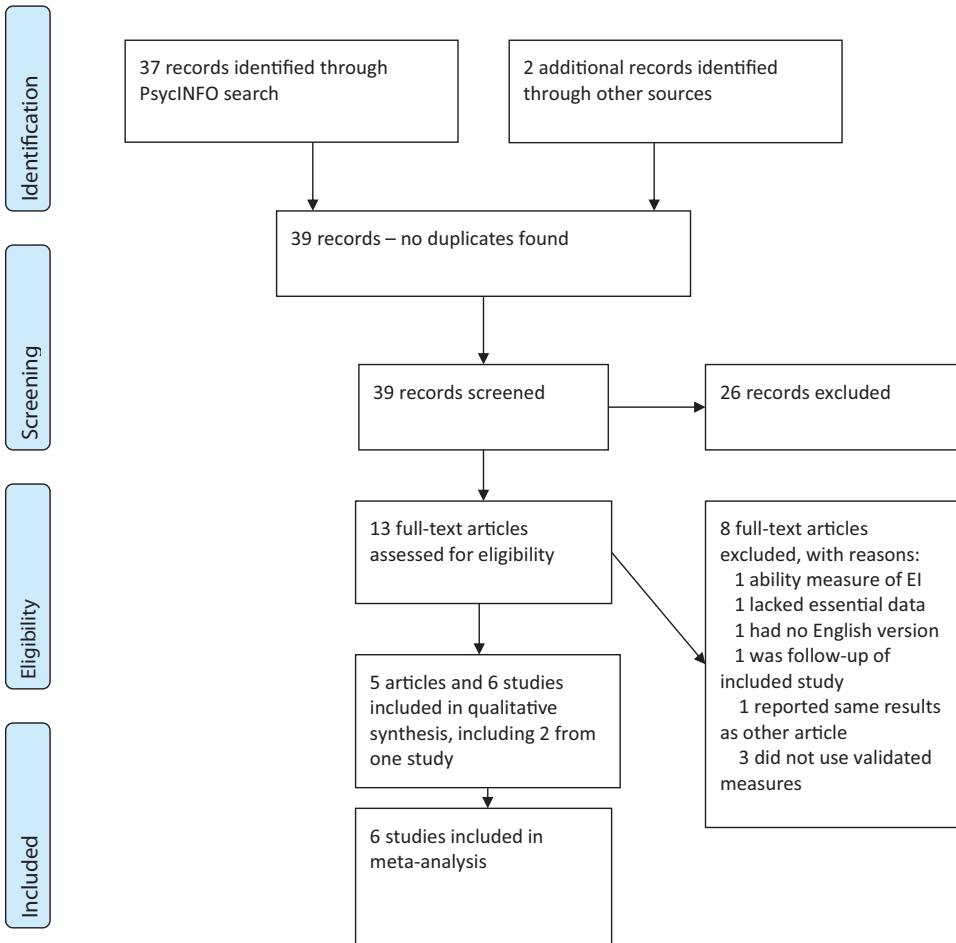


FIGURE 1 PRISMA 2009 flow diagram. Format from Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & The PRISMA Group. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *PLoS Med*, 6(6), e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097. (color figure available online)

including r and N . One study report (Schroder-Abe & Schutz, 2011) lacked r s, so we contacted the lead author and obtained the information.

The included studies used one of the following previously validated measures of emotional intelligence: Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Haggerty, Cooper, Golden, & Dornheim, 1998); Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Petrides & Furnham, 2006); Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (Wong & Law, 2002). The included studies used one of the following previously validated measures of relationship satisfaction: Dyadic Adjustment Scale, original (Spanier, 1976) or revised (Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995); Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (Lock & Wallace, 1959); Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988);

Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000).

We excluded three studies that used unvalidated measures (Lavalekar, Kulkarni, & Pranita, 2010; Ortese & Tor-Anyin, 2008; Pandey & Anand, 2010). We excluded studies that examined another characteristic of romantic relationships, such as love (Zeidner & Kaluda, 2008) and satisfaction with marital communications (Ghanbari-Panah, Shariff, & Koochak-Entezar, 2011), that might be related to romantic relationship satisfaction but was not satisfaction per se. We excluded these studies to maintain a focus on romantic relationship satisfaction. One study of trait emotional intelligence included a longitudinal analysis that lost nearly half of its participants before the final assessment (Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008), but reported the cross-sectional data with all participants (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008). We included the cross-sectional analysis, but not the longitudinal analysis. We found only one study relating ability emotional intelligence to romantic relationship satisfaction (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005). Because there are theoretical differences between ability and trait emotional intelligence (Schutte & Malouff, in press) and practical differences in how they are assessed (a test of maximum performance vs. self-ratings of typical performance), we confined the meta-analysis to the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction.

Coding

One researcher coded the relevant articles and another one checked the coding. The two coders settled any disagreement by consensus.

Statistical Analyses

Because almost all the articles provided r as the measure of association, we used r for effect sizes. Using statistical methods suggested by Lipsey and Wilson (2001), we applied inverse variance weighting to effect sizes ($w = 1/SE$) and used Fisher's transformation of r (zr) in analyses, with the r and CI values back-transformed from zr values. We conducted homogeneity analyses using the Q statistic and Higgins' I^2 (percentage heterogeneity). We checked effect sizes for univariate outliers (criterion $z = 3.30$, $p = .001$), finding none. To be conservative, we employed random effects models, rather than fixed effects models, for our analyses.

Many of the studies reported several relevant results, e.g., r for both measures from the same person, as well r for emotional intelligence from one partner and relationship satisfaction from the other. Also, most studies provided separate r s relating to the emotional intelligence of men and women. To determine a meta-analytic effect size, while maintaining

independence of findings using the same sample, we calculated for each study an average effect size across all relevant *rs*. We also used this average effect size to test for moderation by percent of participants who were married. To test for moderators, such as men compared to women, associated with multiple effects sizes for each study, we treated each analysis as if it were a different study. This method, while inconsistent with the assumption of independence of findings, was the only way to evaluate these moderators. We considered this last group of analyses exploratory only.

Smith and colleagues (2008) and Schroder-Abe and Schutz (2011) introduced a new type of statistical analysis to the line of research by using a type of structural equation modeling called actor-partner independence modeling (APIM). This approach eliminates the statistical-assumption problem of the non-independence of partner scores and thereby tends to lead to larger *p* values, when, as typical in couples research, scores of the partners correlate positively. However, failing to meet the assumption of independence has no effect on *r* values showing the relationship between two variables, such as partner emotional intelligence and one's own relationship satisfaction. We did not attempt to use APIM results because most studies did not use the method.

RESULTS

The search for relevant studies identified five articles, with a total of six relevant studies. Table 1 shows the key characteristics for every relevant analysis in the studies. Table 2 shows the average effect size for each study across all relevant results of the study. The overall effect size, across a total of 603 participants in six studies, was statistically significant, $r = .32$ (95% CI .22, .41), with Owen's Fail-Safe *N* of 13, given a criterion for overall *r* of .10. Homogeneity analysis showed moderate heterogeneity among effect sizes, $Q(5) = 7.70$, $p = .174$, Higgins' $I^2 = .35$.

To assess percentage of married participants as a moderator, we used a regression analog (Lipsey & Wilson, 2000) to determine the association between percent married and average effect size in each study. The result was $r(4) = .57$, $p = .08$, indicating a nonsignificant trend in the direction of a positive association. Table 3 shows the results of remaining moderator analyses. There was little difference between different levels of sample sex (male vs. female) but a higher effect size for studies with both male and female participants. However, there were only two effect sizes for mixed gender studies. The moderator analysis for source of correlation showed that effect sizes based on data with the same source were significantly higher than effect sizes based on different sources for emotional intelligence and relationship quality.

TABLE 1 Key Characteristics of Studies in Meta-Analysis

Author	<i>N</i>	Data source	Sample	<i>r</i>	<i>SE</i>
Foran et al. (2012)	104	Different	men EI	.28	.10
Foran et al. (2012)	104	Different	women EI	.32	.10
Foran et al. (2012)	104	Same	women EI	.46	.10
Foran et al. (2012)	104	Same	men EI	.39	.10
Joshi & Thingujam (2009)	109	Same	men and women	.45	.10
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 1	191	Different	men EI	.30	.07
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 1	191	Different	women EI	.17	.07
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 1	191	Same	men EI	.37	.07
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 1	191	Same	women EI	.19	.07
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 2	80	Different	men EI	.14	.11
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 2	80	Different	women EI	.24	.11
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 2	80	Same	men EI	.18	.11
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 2	80	Same	women EI	.33	.11
Schutte et al. (2001) - Study 6	37	Same	men and women	.51	.17
Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi (2008)	82	Different	men EI	.10	.11
Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi (2008)	82	Different	women EI	.14	.11
Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi (2008)	82	Same	men EI	.35	.11
Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi (2008)	82	Same	women EI	.18	.11

Note. EI = Emotional Intelligence. Schroeder-Abe provided us with the *r* values for the two studies of Schroder-Abe and Schutz (2011).

DISCUSSION

The results showed a significant, medium meta-analytic association ($r = .32$) between trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction. The finding of a significant meta-analytic relationship between trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction is consistent with the theoretical view that emotional intelligence leads to better life outcomes,

TABLE 2 Effect Sizes of Studies in the Meta-Analysis

Author	Country	Married %	EI measure	Relation satisfaction scale	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>SE</i>
Foran et al. (2012)	USA	85	Assessing Emotions	DAS	104	.36	.10
Joshi & Thingujam (2009)	India	100	Assessing Emotions	Revised DAS	109	.45	.10
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 1	Germany	12	Wong Law	RAS	191	.26	.07
Schroder-Abe & Schutz (2011) - Study 2	Germany	39	Wong Law	RAS	80	.22	.11
Schutte et al. (2001) - Study 6	USA	100	Assessing Emotions	Locke-Wallace	37	.51	.17
Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi (2008)	Australia	82	Trait Emotional Intell Questionnaire	PRQC	82	.19	.11

Note. EI = Emotional Intelligence; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale; Locke-Wallace = Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale; PRQC = Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory.

and it adds to prior findings of a meta-analytic association between trait emotional intelligence and another important characteristics, such as health status (Martins et al., 2010) and quality of work performance (O'Boyle et al., 2010). However, the present correlational findings do not show causation. The association between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction,

TABLE 3 Moderator Analysis by Effect Size Showing Effect Sizes Within Moderator Level and Homogeneity Analysis

Measure	<i>k</i>	<i>r</i>	CI _{95%}		<i>p</i>	Homogeneity Analysis			Higgins' <i>I</i> ²
			Lower	Upper		<i>Q</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	
Sample sex $Q_{\text{between}}(2) = 5.91, p = .052, \text{Higgins' } I^2 = .66$									
Men	8	.28	.21	.35	<.001	7.04	7	.425	.01
Women	8	.25	.18	.32	<.001	7.85	7	.346	.11
Both	2	.47	.31	.60	<.001	0.13	1	.714	<.01
Source of correlation $Q_{\text{between}}(1) = 5.33, p = .021, \text{Higgins' } I^2 = .81$									
Same source for all data	10	.33	.27	.40	<.001	11.49	9	.244	.22
Different source for EI and RQ	8	.22	.15	.29	<.001	4.26	7	.749	<.01

Note. *k* = number of effect sizes; EI = Emotional Intelligence; RQ = Relationship Quality.

if it is causal in the direction of emotional intelligence leading to greater relationship satisfaction, could be the result of various forces. Better perception, understanding, managing and harnessing of emotions in the self may lead individuals to do better in and be more satisfied with romantic relationships. For instance, (1) higher levels of self-management of emotions may lead to more relationship satisfaction; (2) better understanding of others' emotions in conjunction with insight into one's own emotions may lead individuals to enter relationships with more compatible partners; (3) higher levels of emotionally competent behavior may make it more likely that individuals will establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships; and (4) some of these emotionally skilled behaviors may be observed and acquired by relationship partners, leading to further increases in relationship satisfaction.

Ancillary results of two studies give insight into specific aspects of how emotional intelligence might contribute to relationship satisfaction. For example, in a conflict-focused study by Schroder-Abe and Schutz (2011), level of taking the perspective of the other partner mediated the correlation between emotional intelligence and state relationship satisfaction. Further, Smith, Heaven, and Ciarrochi (2008) found that partner emotional intelligence was related to more constructive communication patterns.

The results may have implications for couples counseling. If emotional intelligence contributes to better interactions between partners, training couples in emotional skills may help to improve relationships. Recent studies have shown that it is possible to increase state emotional intelligence with training (Crombie, Lombard, & Noakes, 2011; Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2011; Reuben, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2009; Wing, Schutte, & Byrne, 2006), and one quasi-experimental study showed that emotional-intelligence training led to improved close relationships (Nelis et al., 2011).

The present results are consistent with the results of three studies excluded from the meta-analysis because they used unvalidated measures of emotional intelligence (Lavalekar, Kulkarni, & Pranita, 2010; Ortese & Tor-Anyin, 2008; Pandey & Anand, 2010). These three studies also showed significant relationships between measures characterized as assessing emotional intelligence and romantic-relationship satisfaction.

The current results are consistent with findings showing a significant association between emotional intelligence and two constructs logically related to romantic-relationship satisfaction: love (Zeidner & Kaluda, 2008) and satisfaction with marital communications (Ghanbari-Panah et al., 2011). The results are also consistent with within-partner correlations found by Smith, Ciarrochi, and Heaven (2008) between emotional intelligence and longitudinal change in relationship satisfaction over the following year. However, that study found no significant between-partner predictions over time. The meta-analytic results are also consistent with a correlation between emotional intelligence and state relationship satisfaction following a discussion by couples about a matter of conflict (Schroder-Abe & Schutz, 2011).

The one published study relating *ability* emotional intelligence to romantic relationship satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2005) did not show the same pattern of results as the meta-analytic results of the relationship between *trait* emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction. Across four analyses, the study of ability emotional intelligence found *rs* ranging from $-.06$ to $.21$. The difference between the results of that study of ability emotional intelligence and the results of the meta-analytic findings regarding the relationship of trait emotional intelligence and romantic relationship satisfaction might be due to underlying differences between ability and trait emotional intelligence or might be due to factors associated with the nature of the Brackett sample, such as their young age (mean of 20) and dating status. It could be that emotional intelligence matters more in longer-term, committed relationships.

The effect size for within-partner (same source) associations (.33) was significantly higher than the effect size for between-partner (different source) associations (.22). This difference might reflect inflated correlations due to same-source response biases or similarity of perspective in responding. Alternatively, if emotional intelligence contributes to relationship satisfaction, the difference might indicate that emotional intelligence contributes more to a relationship by effects on ability to choose and retain a good partner than by other paths. We consider both within and between correlations important because they both are consistent with a model of emotional intelligence contributing to relationship satisfaction by helping individuals make a good partner selection; by leading to good relationship behavior, which in turn sets a model for the partner; and by contributing to a positive view of the relationship.

The *within-partner* effect size was higher than any within-partner effect size of Big 5 characteristics found in a meta-analysis of Big 5 characteristics and romantic-relationship satisfaction (Heller et al., 2004). The *between-partner* effect size was higher than any between-partners effect size of Big 5 characteristics found in another meta-analysis of Big 5 characteristics and romantic-relationship satisfaction (Malouff et al., 2010), except for equaling that of neuroticism. The results of this comparison of meta-analytic analyses on emotion intelligence and the Big 5 are consistent with the single-study findings of Joshi and Thingujam (2009) that trait emotional intelligence added significantly to Big 5 characteristics in accounting for variance in between-partner relationship satisfaction.

The meta-analysis lacked sufficient power to draw conclusions regarding the importance of marital status. However, there was a strong nonsignificant trend in favor of samples with higher percentages of married participants to show higher effect sizes.

The associations between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction were essentially the same for men and women. Hence, the association seems to apply about equally across sexes.

Although the meta-analysis had a limitation in the low number of studies included, six, the number of studies was adequate to show a consistent pattern of association in diverse studies completed by different research teams with separate samples from a total of four countries, including Australia, Germany, India, and the United States. That diversity of measures, researchers, and samples helps increase the generalizability of the findings.

We used r values of non-independent analyses for an effect size in some moderator analyses, with the result that the confidence interval of the meta-analytic r may be somewhat smaller than appropriate. Our use of the random effects analysis model, which is more conservative than the fixed effects model, may compensate to some extent for this problem.

Smith et al. (2008) and Schroder-Abe and Schutz (2011) introduced a new type of statistical analysis to the line of research by using a type of structural equation modeling called actor-partner independence modeling (APIM). Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) described in a straightforward manner how to use the method. This method eliminates the statistical-assumption problem of the non-independence of partner scores and thereby tends to lead to larger p values, when, as typical in couples research, scores of the partners correlate positively. However, failing to meet the assumption of independence has no effect on r values showing the relationship between two variables, such as partner emotional intelligence and one's own relationship satisfaction. Future research could use APIM.

In the future, researchers could examine factors that help explain the association between emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction. Such factors might include previously unexplored possible moderators such as length of the relationship. The studies might also examine potential mediators, such as choice of partner, level of positive and negative affect, and specific interpersonal behaviors. Future research might examine whether individuals high in emotional intelligence have partners or are more attracted to potential partners high in various other characteristics. Researchers might also determine whether the emotional intelligence of couples predicts other relationship outcomes, such as relationship dissolution, and whether emotional-intelligence training leads to improved romantic-relationship satisfaction and related outcomes.

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*An asterisk denotes a study included in the meta-analysis.

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