

## Emotional intelligence in early adulthood: empirical findings and implications<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2024.5317>

IJMSSSR 2024

VOLUME 6

ISSUE 6 NOVEMBER – DECEMBER

ISSN: 2582 - 0265

**Abstract:** This current study presents empirical findings on emotional intelligence in early adulthood. Previous research suggests that emotional intelligence does not develop during early childhood and is not heritable; rather, it appears to increase with age. Older adults, despite facing greater emotional challenges, often report higher subjective well-being and exhibit better emotional regulation compared to younger individuals. This study specifically examines respondents in early adulthood, from 20 to 40, with a sample of 183 university students from Sofia, Plovdiv and Burgas, situated in Bulgaria. Participants were divided into two age groups: those under 29 and those over 29. A questionnaire adapted for Bulgarian contexts by Dr. Antonina Kardasheva, based on Konstantinos Petrides' model of emotional intelligence, was employed to measure EI as a personality trait. The questionnaire assesses four components: well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability. Results indicate significant differences in emotional intelligence factors across age groups, with a strong correlation identified between emotional intelligence, gender, and the chosen field of study. These findings support the hypothesis that emotional intelligence may increase with age and highlight the importance of considering demographic factors when examining emotional intelligence.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, early maturity, middle maturity

### Introduction

Emotions occupy a significant role in determining a person's activities and behaviors personally and professionally. By the last decade of the 20th century, a theory emerged that unified emotions and cognition: emotional intelligence. For about two decades, the problem of emotional intelligence has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in various fields and has been actively developed. Not surprisingly, this construct has been identified as one of the key so-called "soft" skills in the last five years, leading to strong competitiveness and career achievement. Overachievers who have achieved significant professional success possess a high level of emotional intelligence development (Tsvetkova, 2019). Emotional intelligence defines an individual's ability to sense, control, and manage their own and others' emotions. This phenomenon is defined as an ability by Mayer and Salovey (1993) and as a mixture of skills and traits (Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Schutte et al., 2002).

Emotional intelligence as an adaptive competence is likely to change in light of life experiences (Matthews et al., 2002). A number of studies have shown a positive change or increase in emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a basic ability that can be developed (Emmerling & Goleman, 2003) and learned (Goleman, 1998) at all ages, as most theories of this phenomenon indicate. Emotional intelligence does not develop in infancy, nor is it inherited. It is believed that with age one becomes more socially and emotionally intelligent (Bar-On, 2006). A child gets his initial knowledge about emotions from his relationship with his parents. Emotional attachment is one of the leading, warmth-filled and supportive relationships that emerges in early childhood. It is through attachment to the loved one that children acquire their first knowledge of human relationships (Tagareva K., 2012). In the process of development, people feel the need to build stable emotional relationships: placed in a common living space with strangers within a few days, they can create lasting bonds with each other. This proves that man as a social being is fully motivated to seek the company of his peers, to bond with them (Ianakiev, Y., 2014).

<sup>1</sup> The publication is part of the project funded by the National Science Fund SP23-PF-009 "Integration of Innovative Behavioral Models for Psychosocial Support and Quality of Life," led by Prof. Dr. Mayiana Mitevaska.

There are three main models of emotional intelligence, John Mayer and Peter Salovey's ability model, Daniel Goleman's mixed model, and K. V. Petrides' trait model. Mayer, Salovey, and their colleagues define emotional intelligence as the cognitive ability to perceive, evaluate, understand, express, and manage one's own and others' emotions. For this reason, researchers have focused on measuring maximal performance through the use of task-based tests. Furthermore, emotional intelligence is viewed as a learnable ability rather than an innate characteristic. Bar-On and Goleman's mixed models (Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1995) define emotional intelligence as both an ability and a personality trait, i.e., they emphasize a range of abilities and skills. The focus is on typical manifestations and self-assessment questionnaires are used as instruments (Kewalramani, Agrawal & Rastogi 2015). According to trait models (such as that of Adrian Furnham and Constantine Petrides), the phenomenon of emotional intelligence is a combination of an individual's emotionally intense subjective perceptions and beliefs about the stability of the qualities through which they manage their emotions (Kardasheva, 2012; Kewalramani, Agrawal & Rastogi 2015).

Man passes through different age periods in his life. And each period is expressed by a characteristic that is manifested through experience and learning. Understanding the different levels of emotional intelligence and its nature at different ages is necessary. The present study is an attempt to find out the emotional intelligence of different age groups and to find out the differences in the components of emotional intelligence - well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability among these groups based on Petrides and Furnham's trait model. Their questionnaire was standardized for Bulgarian conditions by Dr. Antonina Kardasheva. The age groups are early maturity - between 20 and 29 years and middle maturity - between 30 and 40 years.

The factors of emotional intelligence in the present study are well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability. High scores on the well-being item indicate an overall sense of satisfaction and joy, which range from past successes to future expectations. High scores on the self-control factor are interpreted as good control over impulses and desires. Emotionality expresses the level of differentiation and expression of emotions as well as maintaining good relationships with significant others in the circle. Sociability focuses on social contacts and influence. The focus is on the person acting in various social situations rather than in personal relationships with family and friends.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Subjects, procedure and statistical treatment

The study was conducted with 183 participants aged between 20 and 40 years. All of them were studying in undergraduate programmes at three Bulgarian universities in Sofia, Plovdiv and Burgas. The respondents from Sofia were studying technical subjects, while the respondents from Plovdiv and Burgas were studying humanities. Participants were divided into two groups- 20 years to 29 years (early maturity) and 29 years to 40 years (middle maturity). The study was based on the results obtained from a completed Petrides self-assessment questionnaire, adapted into Bulgarian by Dr. Antonina Kardasheva. The components of the questionnaire are well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability. The main aim of the study is to analyze the dynamics of emotional intelligence factors according to the trait model at different ages, as well as the influence of gender and locality. For this purpose, the SPSS-21 instrument was used.

### 2.2 Toolkit

The Petrides Questionnaire for the Measurement of Emotional Intelligence as a Personality Trait (TEIQue SF), short version, contains 30 statements, with response options on a seven-point scale from 1, corresponding to completely disagree, to 7, corresponding to completely agree. Emotional intelligence as a trait characteristic can be defined as a set of emotional perceptions assessed by questionnaires and rating scales (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Thus debated, emotional intelligence is associated with a person's perceptions of his or her internal world.

## 3. Results

By demographic indicators- age, gender and location - the data are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Percentage distribution by age, sex and location**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Up to 29 years	125	68,3
Over 29 years	58	31,7

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Men	60	32,8
Women	123	67,2

Location	Frequency	Percentage
Sofia	67	36,6
Plovdiv	67	36,6
Burgas	49	26,8

As it is clear from the table, the number of persons under 29 years of age is more than twice as many as the group over 29 years. Women also outnumbered men by gender. Regarding the place of study, the number of respondents is equal in Sofia and Plovdiv, while in Burgas there are 18 less.

The results of the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 Descriptive statistics**

Emotional intelligence	N	M	SD
Prosperity	183	5,17	1,50
Audience	183	4,44	1,02
Emotionality	183	4,96	1,09
Self-Control	183	4,41	1,10

As can be seen from the above table, there is a higher mean value of the well-being component. A stronger sense of well-being indicates that the individuals surveyed find life enjoyable and are satisfied overall. This result indicates that they have a relatively positive view of themselves, are well disposed to most things and probably believe that their lives will settle down well.

The analysis of responses comparing emotional intelligence and age are presented in Table 3.

**Tab. 3 Differences in components of emotional intelligence and age**

Emotional intelligence	Age	M	SD	F	p
Prosperity	Up to 29 years	5,29	1,44	2,460	,180
	Over 29 years	4,91	1,59		
Audience	Up to 29 years	4,51	1,01	1,980	,600
	Over 29 years	4,28	1,04		
Emotionality	Up to 29 years	5,00	1,00	0,480	0,500
	Over 29 years	4,88	1,25		
Self-Control	Up to 29 years	4,38	1,17	,836	,365
	Over 29 years	4,52	0,09		

Respondents are divided into two groups - up to 29 years, where early maturity falls, and over 29 years, where middle maturity falls. According to a youth law adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament in 2012, "youth will officially be people between the ages of 15 and 29" (<https://www.mediapool.bg/zakon-slaga-vazrastova-granitsa-ot-29-godini-za-mladezhite-news188999.html>). From the table, it can be seen that there are no significant differences of the components of emotional intelligence in the group up to 29 years and over 29 years. On the factors of well-being, emotionality and sociability, there is a slightly higher mean compared to the over 29 group. A possible interpretation is that individuals in early adulthood are more socially active, experience more intense emotions, and have a greater need to form close relationships with others in their circle. On the self-control factor, a slightly higher mean was reported for respondents over 29 years of age, indicating the development of the individual's mastery and control skills in a variety of situations.

The responses of the respondents regarding the correlation of emotional intelligence and gender are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4 Differences of emotional intelligence components and gender**

Emotional intelligence	Gender	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Prosperity	Men	60	5,28	1,52	,448	,504
	Women	123	5,11	1,49		
Audience	Men	60	4,48	1,07	,084	,772
	Women	123	4,42	0,99		
Emotionality	Men	60	4,64	0,98	8,446	<b>0,004</b>
	Women	123	5,13	1,10		
Self-Control	Men	60	4,63	1,05	3,218	<b>0,050</b>
	Women	123	4,31	1,12		

From the presented table, it is clearly seen that females have higher mean values on the emotionality factor ( $p=0.004$ ; at  $p<0.05$ ) and males have higher mean values on the self-control factor ( $p=0.050$ ; at  $p<0.05$ ). These two items of emotional intelligence were highly significant. This result reveals that women experience different emotions more strongly and have a greater need for close relationships, while men are somewhat better in managing and controlling external stressful situations and in not being susceptible to stress. Similar findings have been reported by other studies (Mořira Mikolajczak and Olivier Luminet, 2007).

The results of the comparison of emotional intelligence against settlement are plotted in Table 5.

**Table 5 Differences of emotional intelligence components by place**

Emotional intelligence	Location	N	Mean	SD	F	p
Emotional intelligence	Sofia	67	4.60	0.96	.120	.887
	Plovdiv	67	4.81	0.97		
	Burgas	49	4.80	0.93		
Prosperity	Sofia	67	5.16	1.45	.347	.707
	Plovdiv	67	5.28	1.47		
	Burgas	49	5.04	1.63		
Audience	Sofia	67	4.51	1.04	.409	.665
	Plovdiv	67	4.46	1.06		

	Burgas	49	4.34	0.96		
Emotionality	Sofia	67	4.70	1.10	3.605	0.029
	Plovdiv	67	5.07	1.07		
	Burgas	49	5.21	1.03		
Self-Control	Sofia	67	4.53	1.08	.524	.593
	Plovdiv	67	4.34	1.22		
	Burgas	49	4.38	0.95		

The analysis of these results shows that the factor of emotionality has the highest degree of significance compared to the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Burgas ( $p=0.029$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). This may be due to the fact that the subjects in Sofia study technical specialties, while the subjects in Plovdiv and Burgas study in the humanities. The results of the respondents in Plovdiv and Burgas are higher than the results of the respondents in Sofia. This distinguishes the individuals committed to the humanities field with a more pronounced emotionality and sensitivity, as opposed to individuals who are technically oriented.

**Conclusion.** The present study provides valuable results regarding the development of emotional intelligence and its components in the periods of early and middle adulthood. Important correlations are reported between emotional intelligence and gender, as well as between emotional intelligence and the chosen scientific field of study. The findings are important to guide the situation and it is worth including more individuals from more localities, universities and specialties when planning future research.

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