Emotional Intelligence in Panic Disorder

Intelligenza emotiva nel disturbo di panico

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SUMMARY. Panic attacks are psychopathological phenomena with a strong emotional activation that often induces subsequent anticipatory anxiety and phobic avoidance. Impairment in emotional processing in patients with Panic Disorder (PD) has been hypothesized. Emotional Intelligence (EI) involves the individual abilities to perceive, understand and manage emotions in order to cope with changes in internal and external environment. We examined EI in 42 patients with PD and Agoraphobia compared to 49 healthy controls and investigated if clinical severity of Agoraphobia is related to EI performance. We assessed EI by Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test and Agoraphobia by Mobility Inventory for Agoraphobia. Patients with PD and Agoraphobia showed lower Strategic EI ability than healthy controls, in both Understanding and Managing emotion abilities, and a general propensity to attribute negative emotional valence to different stimuli. These preliminary results suggest that impaired mechanisms of understanding and integrating emotions may be involved in the phenomenology of PD. These features might be the target of psychological interventions in PD. On the contrary, Emotional Intelligence did not appear to affect the clinical severity of Agoraphobia.

KEY WORDS: panic disorder, emotional intelligence, emotion, intelligence, anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Panic attacks are common psychopathological phenomena with a strong emotional activation that seems to come out of the blue and often induce subsequent anticipatory anxiety and phobic avoidance (1). Thus, emotions might play a relevant role both in triggering phenomena and in development of full-blown Panic Disorder (PD). Some studies suggested an impairment in emotional processing in patients with PD; they
showed difficulty in labelling emotions, over-control of emotional experience leading to an emotional suppression habit in their daily lives and withdrawal of emotional expression (2).

Strategies of emotional control might have an adaptive function for subjects who experience panic attacks. Patients might become conditioned to associate emotional experiences with the early signals of a panic attack and thus developing biases in managing emotions. These findings are also in line with cognitive theories that indicate an important role of a cognitive-emotional deficit in the pathogenesis of PD; at least some panic attacks might occur as result of an enduring tendency to misinterpret bodily sensations, even those related to emotional experiences, as a sign of imminent catastrophe such as a heart attack. Experiential and emotional avoidance might decrease the possibility to experience physical sensations and to have a panic attack, with a selective bias towards somatic aspects of emotions (3,4). An emotional-cognitive failure might also influence the development of anticipatory anxiety and phobic avoidance in patients with PD (5-7).

Although there is a general agreement that disturbances in emotion processing might play a role in Anxiety Disorders, research in this area is conceptually and methodologically difficult. One particularly influential framework is Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory (8-10). EI integrates several aspects related to emotions, focusing on the abilities of coping with changes in internal and external environment, and involves the individual ability to perceive, understand and manage own and other’s emotions. EI assesses individual emotional processes, adding information to traditional measures of general intellectual ability, personality traits, and self-report measures of emotional competence (11,12). Higher EI scores are associated with higher levels of adaptive functioning across a variety of domains, including health-related outcomes (10), while lower scores are correlated with poorer outcomes including illegal drug and alcohol use, deviant behavior, and poor social interactions (11,12). Among Anxiety Disorders, assessment of EI has been applied in two studies in patients with Generalized Social Phobia (GSP) (13) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (14) showing significant differences of their emotional processes from healthy controls. Patients with GAD showed higher Perception of emotions (Experiential EI) and lower efficiency in Understanding and Managing emotions (Strategic EI) than healthy controls, with excessive worry, insufficient modulation, and search of reassurances as repetitive triggers of emotional bias vicious cycles. Patients with GSP showed lower Experiential and Strategic EI than both healthy controls and patients with GAD, probably linked to their minor attention to emotional activity with reduced flexibility in environmental interactions, reduced memory of triggering situations and interpretation bias in social situations; according to this findings, severity of social anxiety was negatively correlated with Experiential EI scores (13).

On these bases, better understanding the emotional processes in subjects with Anxiety Disorders might contribute to clarify underlying mechanisms of the disorders. To our knowledge, EI has never been examined in patients with PD.

The current exploratory study was designed to address two hypotheses:
1. Patients have poorer EI performance than healthy controls.
2. EI is associated with clinical severity of Agoraphobia, conceived as an emotional response to panic attacks.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Sample**

We consecutively recruited 51 patients with Panic Disorder, with and without Agoraphobia and 49 healthy controls. Patients were recruited at the outpatients facility of the Anxiety Disorders Clinical and Research Unit at San Raffaele Turro Hospital, Milan, and healthy controls from the staff of the hospital and by word of mouth within general population. All subjects were diagnosed for current and past mental disorders according to DSM IV-TR (15) by a psychiatrist with a clinical interview and the administration of the standardized interview for psychiatric diagnoses MINI-Plus (16).

Criteria to inclusion in the study were: age between 18-65 years; current diagnosis of PD with or without Agoraphobia according to DSM-IV-TR (15); absence of any lifetime psychiatric disorder and sporadic panic attacks for healthy subjects. Exclusion criteria were: previous or present psychological treatments and psychotropic medication in the last 2 weeks.

After inclusion in the study, subjects were tested by a resident psychologist, in standardized settings, with the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Scale (MSCEIT) (9), administered to both patients and controls, and with the Mobility Inventory for Agoraphobia (MIA) (17) administered to patients only.

Nine out of the 51 patients recruited had PD without Agoraphobia and 42 patients had PD with Agoraphobia. Due to the small number of patients with Panic Disorder without Agoraphobia, we decided to exclude them from the analysis.
RESULTS

Sociodemographic variables and MIA scores descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 and observed and adjusted (for covariates) means for MSCEIT scales are shown in Table 2.

EI scales scores in patients with PD and AGO and healthy controls

As a result of preliminary analyses, we included age and years of education as covariates but not gender in the final ANOVA models.
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MSCEIT scale scores considered as dependent variable were the Total EI scale, the two EI Quotient (Experiential EI, Strategical EI), the four branches scale of the two EI Quotients (Perceiving emotion, Facilitating thought with emotion, Understanding emotion, Managing emotion) and the Positive/Negative Bias scale.

Patients with PD and Agoraphobia showed significant lower scores than healthy controls for Strategical EI Quotient (F=11.85; p<0.001), its two branches Understanding emotion (F=5.82; p<0.05) and Managing emotion (F=6.76; p<0.05) scales and the Positive/Negative Bias scale (F=9.48; p<0.01; Table 2).

Association between agoraphobic symptoms severity and EI

We performed correlations between the MIA scores (Avoidance Alone Condition and Avoidance Accompanied Condition) and the MSCEIT scores considered in the previous analyses (see above). None of the correlations resulted significant (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

This is the first study investigating EI in PD, thus our results should be considered preliminary. We found that
patients with PD and Agoraphobia have lower Strategic EI ability than healthy controls, in both Understanding and Managing emotion abilities, whereas, contrary to our hypothesis, severity of Agoraphobia did not correlate with EI scores.

These preliminary findings of our study should be confirmed in larger samples: future studies could investigate the possible influence of EI performance on the different clinical aspects of the phenomenology of PD, such as severity of panic attacks, anticipatory anxiety, catastrophic cognitions or the course of the disorder over time. Since two previous studies found differences in EI in patients with GSP (13) and GAD (14) compared to controls, future studies should also clarify the specificity of these features among different Anxiety Disorders. Finally, our exploratory study does not allow understanding whether the poor EI abilities in patients with PD might be the result of modifications following the onset of PD or might be a risk factor for the disorder and further studies could investigate this issue.

Strategic EI is indexed by questions related to emotional semantic knowledge, such as how an individual might feel in a particular situation or how an individual might behave following a particular emotional situation, and it is thought to involve the ability to reason about emotions and their management. Moreover, it is considered an index of higher-level, conscious processing of emotions. Our finding of low levels of Understanding emotion ability in patients with PD might be the expression of their tendency to smooth feared somatic and emotional sensations, that could result, over time, in a decrease of their comprehension of inner feelings with an emotional bias vicious cycle. This parallels previous findings of high levels of Alexithymia in patients with PD and suggestions of emotional suppression strategies and maladaptive efforts to control emotions as part of the phenomenology of PD and anxiety disorders (18-21). Managing emotions plays a relevant role in coping with daily demands and in being more effective in personal and social life; when complex and uncertain decisions need to be taken, emotional states influence the selection of the appropriate actions (19). Low levels of Managing emotions in patients with PD might be the expression of an inability to integrate emotions in planning successful behavioral strategies in personal and social realms. Thus, low overall Strategic EI might influence several aspects of PD, such as anticipatory anxiety, catastrophic cognitions and social, relational and working disability levels, that often cause marked distress and impair-
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detect this possible relationship. However, at least some patients with PD with agoraphobia may compensate their automatic processing deficits with other biased and consciously controlled strategies, not directly linked to Strategic EI abilities, leading to agoraphobic avoidance as the best adaptive way of coping with panic attacks (2,28,29). Future direct comparisons between patients with PD with and without agoraphobia are warranted to clarify if EI might have an actual influence on agoraphobic behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

Compared to healthy controls, patients with PD showed poorer Strategic Emotional Intelligence, in both Understanding and Managing emotion abilities, and a general propensity to attribute negative emotional valence to different stimuli. These characteristics might influence the features of the disorder and could be the target of psychological interventions in PD. On the contrary, EI did not appear to directly affect the clinical severity of agoraphobia.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY