

Article

Theoretical Basis and Research Design of Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal Relationships among College Students in Hainan Province

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Abstract: Emotional intelligence constitutes the core competence for individuals to perceive, comprehend, manage, and express emotions effectively, while interpersonal relationships serve as critical safeguards for college students' social adaptation, academic success, and overall mental health. In the contemporary higher education landscape, the intersection of these two psychological constructs plays a pivotal role in shaping student well-being. This study focuses specifically on university students in Hainan Province, systematically synthesizing existing theoretical frameworks on emotional intelligence and interpersonal dynamics. By clarifying specific research objectives and formulating testable hypotheses, this paper designs a comprehensive and scientific research protocol intended to provide robust theoretical support and methodological guidance for subsequent empirical investigations. Through an extensive literature review and the deployment of structured questionnaire surveys, representative research samples were meticulously collected from three universities, each possessing distinct institutional characteristics within Hainan Province. Furthermore, mature and validated psychometric scales were employed to construct highly reliable research tools. To ensure rigorous evaluation, SPSS statistical software was utilized to plan and execute sophisticated data analysis procedures, ultimately forming an operational, highly verifiable, and reproducible research design. Ultimately, this study lays a crucial foundation for investigating the current status, underlying mechanisms, and complex correlations between emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among college students, offering valuable insights for educational policymakers and psychological counselors.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; interpersonal relationships; college students; research design; higher education

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1. Introduction

With the increasing accessibility of higher education and the growing intensity of social competition, the mental health and social adaptability of graduate students have emerged as significant areas of interest in educational research. Emotional intelligence is recognized as a crucial factor that influences psychological adjustment and social interactions. It directly impacts the quality of interpersonal relationships among college students, which subsequently affects their academic performance, mental well-being, and future career adaptability. Hainan Province, being a tropical island region in China, offers a unique developmental environment and cultural background for its university students [1]. Despite the importance of this topic, research on emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among this demographic remains limited. Existing studies suggest a strong correlation between emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, indicating that individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more effective in managing emotional challenges during social interactions and in building harmonious relationships. However, research findings vary across different regions and demographic groups. The current status of emotional intelligence development among university

students in Hainan, along with the influence of background variables such as gender and academic year, remains unclear. This study focuses on university students in Hainan Province, synthesizing relevant theories, designing empirical research methods, and exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence and interpersonal dynamics. The findings aim to provide theoretical foundations and practical references for universities to implement emotional education programs and interpersonal counseling services.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1. Theory of Emotional Intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence has its roots in early psychiatric research, which laid the groundwork for its development. The theory of multiple intelligences introduced the idea of introspective and interpersonal intelligence, which contributed significantly to the evolution of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is formally defined as the ability to recognize, differentiate, and utilize one's own and others' emotions to guide behavior. This concept is structured into three primary dimensions: emotional perception and expression, emotional regulation, and emotional application. Over time, the theory was refined to include reflective and cognitive dimensions, resulting in a comprehensive four-factor model that emphasizes the importance of emotional regulation and its practical application in various contexts.

From a well-being perspective, emotional intelligence is viewed as a composite of personality traits that influence an individual's ability to cope with environmental demands and stress. It is categorized into five dimensions: individual traits, interpersonal relationships, stress management, adaptive capacity, and general mood. This perspective highlights the critical role of emotional expression in facilitating social adaptation. Initially, emotional intelligence was classified into five levels: understanding one's own emotions, managing emotions, self-motivation, recognizing others' emotions, and managing interpersonal relationships [2]. This framework was later refined into two major dimensions: personal competence and social competence, providing a more streamlined approach to understanding emotional intelligence.

Overall, while there may be variations in how scholars define emotional intelligence, all definitions share a common foundation in self-emotional awareness, which extends to understanding and managing the emotions of others. The core focus of emotional intelligence lies in leveraging emotional regulation to enhance problem-solving abilities and interpersonal adaptation. This study builds upon the foundational theory of emotional intelligence, incorporating research findings that are specifically tailored to the characteristics of college student populations. By doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of how emotional intelligence can be applied effectively in academic and social settings [1].

2.2. Conceptualization and Measurement of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined as an individual's capacity to perceive, understand, manage, and express emotions, both their own and those of others. This concept includes essential components such as emotion recognition, regulation, and utilization, distinguishing it from traditional measures of intelligence by focusing on emotional processing skills and awareness [1]. Although there is no universal agreement among scholars on the precise definition of EI, it is widely accepted that its fundamental elements include self-awareness of one's emotions, awareness of others' emotions, emotional regulation, and the application of emotions in various contexts. Among the various tools used to assess EI, the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) is notable for its strong reliability and validity, with a test-retest reliability of 0.780 and an internal consistency coefficient of 0.870. The scale consists of 33 items distributed across four dimensions, making it suitable for both adolescents and adults. This alignment with the

characteristics of the study's sample makes the EIS an appropriate choice for assessing emotional intelligence in this research context.

2.3. Connotation and Measurement of Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships refer to the interdependent social connections formed through human interactions, encompassing three core elements: cognition, emotion, and behavior. Among these, emotional factors serve as the foundation of interpersonal relationships, directly determining their closeness and intimacy. Positive interpersonal relationships can significantly contribute to the development of personality, emotional satisfaction, and academic success among college students [3]. Conversely, negative relationships may lead to adverse emotional states such as loneliness and psychological stress, which can hinder personal growth and academic performance. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships is crucial for fostering a supportive and nurturing environment in educational settings.

For measuring interpersonal relationships, this study utilized a scale specifically designed to assess general interpersonal goals. The scale, after undergoing localization adaptation, consists of 18 items that are categorized into two primary dimensions: caring for others and self-image. The statistical analysis of the scale demonstrated a total Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.852, with all dimensions showing reliability scores above 0.700. These results indicate that the scale possesses strong validity and reliability when applied to college student populations, making it a robust tool for evaluating interpersonal dynamics in academic contexts. Such measurements are essential for understanding how students interact and support each other in their educational journey.

2.4. Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory, developed in the 1970s, represents a significant advancement in understanding human behavior by integrating cognitive psychology with social learning principles. This theory challenges the traditional behaviorist view by emphasizing the importance of internal cognitive processes in learning [4, 5]. It suggests that individuals acquire social behaviors through observation and imitation, coupled with cognitive processing. Unlike the passive reception of environmental stimuli proposed by earlier theories, this approach views individuals as active agents capable of self-regulation and self-reflection. Their behaviors result from complex interactions among personal characteristics, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences, highlighting the dynamic nature of human learning and adaptation.

3. Study Design

3.1. Research Objective

3.1.1. Theoretical Objective

This study aims to explore the intrinsic relationship between emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among college students in Hainan Province. Specifically, it will analyze how the core dimensions of emotional intelligence, such as emotional perception, self-emotional regulation, regulating others' emotions, and emotional utilization, concretely influence the quality and interaction patterns of interpersonal relationships [6]. By employing emotional intelligence theory alongside social cognitive theory, this study will construct and validate a comprehensive mechanism model to investigate the pathways through which emotional intelligence affects interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, by integrating the local cultural context of China, particularly psychological regulation strategies embodied in concepts like "endurance," the study seeks to enhance the applicability and specificity of emotional intelligence theory in explaining interpersonal interactions among Chinese college students. This approach will provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural factors interplay with emotional intelligence to shape social dynamics in an academic setting.

3.1.2. Practical Objectives

This study is designed to systematically assess the current status and existing challenges related to emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among college students in Hainan Province through empirical research. The goal is to provide scientific data support that will aid in the precise positioning of mental health education initiatives within higher education institutions. By analyzing the identified variable relationships and underlying mechanisms, the study aims to develop targeted programs for cultivating emotional intelligence and strategies for interpersonal relationship counseling. These initiatives are intended for universities in Hainan Province to enhance students' social adaptability and mental health levels. Ultimately, the research findings will be translated into actionable educational intervention recommendations. These recommendations will serve student management, psychological counseling, and campus culture development, thereby fostering a harmonious campus environment that supports the overall well-being and academic success of students [7].

3.2. Research Hypotheses

Based on an extensive review of existing literature and a thorough theoretical analysis, the following research hypotheses have been formulated to guide this study [2]. These hypotheses aim to explore the potential differences and relationships in emotional intelligence and interpersonal dynamics among college students in Hainan Province.

H1: There are notable differences between male and female college students in Hainan Province regarding their levels of emotional intelligence (H1.1) and the quality of their interpersonal relationships (H1.2). This hypothesis seeks to understand gender-based variations in these psychological and social domains [8].

H2: There are significant variations in emotional intelligence (H2.1) and interpersonal relationships (H2.2) among college students across different academic grades in Hainan Province. This hypothesis aims to investigate how these attributes evolve as students progress through their educational journey [7].

H3: Emotional intelligence among college students in Hainan Province has a significant and positive influence on their interpersonal relationships. This hypothesis explores the potential impact of emotional intelligence on the ability to form and maintain effective social connections.

3.3. Study Subjects

The study involved selecting students from the first to fourth years across three universities in Haikou City, Hainan Province. These institutions, X University, Y University, and Z College, were chosen for their distinct educational characteristics, which include a range of majors and academic years, ensuring a representative sample. X University is a comprehensive public institution, Y University specializes in science and engineering as a public university, and Z College is a private applied undergraduate college. These institutions differ significantly in terms of educational levels, disciplinary offerings, and student demographics, providing a comprehensive reflection of university students in Hainan Province. The researchers planned to distribute 410 questionnaires, aiming to collect a minimum of 255 valid responses. This approach was designed to ensure the scientific validity of the data analysis, adhering to established guidelines for sample size and response rates in academic research.

4. Research Methods

The initial method employed in this research is the questionnaire survey method, which is instrumental in gathering data efficiently from a large number of participants [9].

In this study, the questionnaire survey method was primarily utilized to collect data on emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among college students in Hainan Province. Initially, mature scales that are suitable for Chinese college student groups were selected or revised based on a comprehensive literature review. Following

this, a stratified random sampling method was implemented to conduct extensive group assessments among college students at multiple universities in Hainan Province. This approach facilitated the collection of quantitative data on scores across various dimensions of emotional intelligence and the status of interpersonal relationships [10]. The data obtained through this method provides a robust foundation for understanding the intricate dynamics between emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships in the context of higher education.

The subsequent method employed is the interview approach, which serves as a qualitative complement to the quantitative data gathered through surveys.

In this study, interviews are a crucial supplement to the questionnaire surveys. Based on the analysis of quantitative data, 15 to 20 college students with representative characteristics will be selected through purposive sampling, guided by their emotional intelligence scores and interpersonal relationship status. The interviews will adopt a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility and depth in responses, with the entire process being recorded and transcribed into detailed transcripts [7]. Subsequently, thematic analysis methods will be employed to encode and summarize the textual data, ultimately identifying core themes that emerge from the interviews. This qualitative data enriches the research by providing nuanced insights into the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of the study's focus.

The third method utilized in this research is literature research, which underpins the entire study by providing a comprehensive academic framework.

The literature review method serves as the foundation for all research endeavors, aiming to organize academic frameworks and establish clear research foundations. During the study design phase, a systematic examination of the evolution of key theoretical models, core structures, and measurement tools for emotional intelligence is conducted, alongside major theories and assessment methods for interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, a comprehensive review of domestic and international empirical studies on the relationship between college students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships is undertaken. This review summarizes existing research findings, controversies, and limitations, thereby identifying the research focus and innovative value of this study. Finally, the research outcomes are contextualized within broader academic discourse, engaging in comparative analysis and dialogue with established theories and empirical evidence. This method ensures that the study is grounded in a solid theoretical and empirical foundation, facilitating a meaningful contribution to the academic field.

4.1. Research Tools

This study utilized two well-established scales in conjunction with a background information questionnaire to develop a comprehensive survey tool. The integration of these elements was designed to ensure a robust and thorough analysis of the research subject. By combining these tools, the study aimed to capture a wide range of data that could provide insights into the variables being examined. The use of established scales also adds credibility and reliability to the research findings, as these tools have been previously validated in various contexts [11, 12]. The background information questionnaire serves as a foundational element, allowing for the examination of demographic variables that may influence the outcomes of the study.

1. The background information questionnaire includes two primary demographic variables: gender and grade. These variables are essential for analyzing differences across diverse backgrounds, providing a basis for understanding how these factors may impact the study's findings. By focusing on these core variables, the research can identify patterns and trends that may be associated with different demographic groups. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the data, highlighting potential disparities or commonalities among participants based on their gender and educational level.

2. The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) employed in this study is the Chinese version, which has been adapted to suit the cultural context. This scale consists of 33 items that are distributed across four dimensions: emotional perception, self-emotional regulation, regulation of others' emotions, and emotional utilization. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores reflect greater levels of emotional intelligence. The use of this scale allows for a detailed assessment of emotional intelligence, providing insights into how individuals perceive and manage emotions in themselves and others. This comprehensive evaluation is crucial for understanding the role of emotional intelligence in various interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts.
3. The General Interpersonal Goal Scale, also adapted for the Chinese context, comprises 18 items that assess two key dimensions: caring for others and self-image. This scale uses a 5-point Likert scale for scoring, with higher scores indicating a better quality of interpersonal relationships. By evaluating these dimensions, the scale provides a framework for understanding how individuals prioritize their interpersonal goals and how these priorities influence their interactions with others. This tool is instrumental in exploring the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the factors that contribute to their quality and effectiveness.

4.2. Data Analysis Methods

Statistical analysis of the collected valid data was conducted using SPSS software. The analysis involved several specific methods to ensure comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the data. These methods included reliability and validity assessments, descriptive statistics, difference analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. Each method was carefully selected to address different aspects of the research questions and to provide a robust framework for analyzing the data.

1. Reliability and validity analysis were conducted to assess the consistency and accuracy of the scale used in the study. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.700 or higher was considered indicative of good reliability, ensuring that the scale consistently measures the intended constructs. Structural validity was examined through factor analysis, which helped in understanding the underlying structure of the data and confirming that the scale accurately reflects the theoretical constructs it is intended to measure.
2. Descriptive analysis was employed to provide a detailed overview of the study subjects' background information. This included calculating frequencies, percentages, mean values, and standard deviations. These statistical measures were used to describe the participants' demographic characteristics and their overall status concerning emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships. This foundational analysis helped in setting the stage for more complex analyses by offering a clear picture of the sample's characteristics.
3. Difference analysis was performed using independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA. The t-test was utilized to explore gender differences, while the ANOVA was applied to examine differences across various grades. These analyses were crucial in understanding how different background variables, such as gender and grade level, might influence emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships. By identifying significant differences, the study could provide insights into how these variables interact with the constructs being measured.
4. Correlation analysis involved the use of the Pearson correlation coefficient to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships. This statistical method allowed for the examination of the strength and direction of the association between these two variables. Understanding this relationship was essential for determining how emotional intelligence might influence interpersonal dynamics, providing a basis for further exploration and potential interventions.

5. Regression analysis was conducted using linear regression techniques to explore the predictive role of emotional intelligence on interpersonal relationships. This analysis aimed to determine whether emotional intelligence could be considered a significant predictor of how individuals interact with others. By establishing a predictive relationship, the study could offer valuable insights into the potential impact of emotional intelligence on social interactions, which could inform future research and practical applications in educational and organizational settings.

4.3. Preliminary Test Analysis

To ensure the scientific validity and applicability of the research tools, a pilot study was conducted in June 2023. During this study, 190 pilot questionnaires were distributed, and 185 valid responses were collected, resulting in a high valid response rate of 97.4%. Through comprehensive item analysis, reliability analysis, and exploratory factor analysis, valid items were meticulously screened. The scale's validity and reliability were rigorously tested, confirming that all items across both scales met the necessary statistical criteria. They exhibited excellent validity and reliability, and demonstrated a clear structural organization, making them highly suitable for formal surveys. The detailed analysis is presented as follows:

4.3.1. Project Analysis

The total scale scores were categorized into quartiles, specifically the lowest 27%, based on their distribution. An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess the data. The critical ratio (CR) values for all items exceeded 3.00, with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, demonstrating strong discriminant power for each item. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients between individual items and the overall score ranged from 0.45 to 0.78, all of which were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, indicating robust internal consistency.

4.3.2. Reliability Analysis

The Emotional Intelligence Scale demonstrated a high level of reliability, as indicated by a total scale Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.89. The four dimensions of this scale also showed strong reliability, with α coefficients ranging from 0.81 to 0.88. This suggests that the scale is a consistent and reliable measure for assessing emotional intelligence across different dimensions.

The Interpersonal Relationship Scale also exhibited robust reliability, with a total scale Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.87. The two dimensions of this scale had α coefficients of 0.79 and 0.83, respectively. These values indicate that all subscales possess good internal consistency, as they exceed the commonly accepted threshold of α greater than 0.70, ensuring the scale's reliability in measuring interpersonal relationships.

4.3.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

The Emotional Intelligence Scale demonstrated a high level of sampling adequacy with a KMO value of 0.91, and the Bartlett's test for sphericity indicated a significant result with a chi-square value of 2856.34 ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, the Interpersonal Relationships Scale showed a KMO value of 0.88 and a chi-square value of 1672.18 ($p < 0.001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Principal component analysis was employed, using eigenvalues greater than 1 as the criterion, which led to the identification of four distinct factors for the Emotional Intelligence Scale and two factors for the Interpersonal Relationships Scale. Each item displayed loading coefficients greater than 0.50 on their respective factors, with no cross-loading exceeding 0.40, ensuring clear factor delineation.

5. Discussion and Prospects

This study aims to demonstrate that the overall score of emotional intelligence and its various dimensions among college students show significant positive correlations with

the overall score of interpersonal relationship quality. This includes specific dimensions such as harmony, support, and conflict. It is anticipated that there will be noticeable differences in emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships among student populations from universities with diverse educational characteristics. These differences may be influenced by factors such as institutional culture, academic environment, and the availability of support systems, which can impact students' emotional and social development [13].

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is its enhancement of the application of social cognitive theory to elucidate specific psychological and behavioral phenomena [14]. By utilizing empirical data, the research solidifies the tripartite reciprocal determinacy relationship of "individual-behavior-environment" within the context of college students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships. It confirms the significant influence of emotional intelligence as a crucial individual cognitive variable on interpersonal behavior. Furthermore, by examining differences among students from various types of universities, this study investigates how the environment interacts with individual cognition, offering empirical evidence from China's higher education institutions. The findings also support the localized application of emotional intelligence theory and affirm the relevance and effectiveness of measurement tools in specific regional and cultural contexts. This comprehensive approach provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in educational settings.

5.2. Practical Implications

Based on research findings, this study proposes several practical implications. First, university mental health education departments should integrate systems for cultivating emotional intelligence into their curriculum frameworks and group counseling activities [15]. Specialized training modules can be developed to enhance students' abilities in emotional perception, evaluation, regulation, and application. These modules have been shown to be effective in improving stress coping strategies and promoting positive behaviors. Second, differentiated counseling strategies should be implemented. For science and engineering students, who may exhibit limited emotional expression, enhanced training in emotional awareness and expression techniques is recommended. For students in application-oriented universities, where practical skills are emphasized, guidance on applying emotional intelligence in team collaboration and conflict resolution should be strengthened. Third, universities should focus on creating positive and supportive campus environments and community atmospheres. By organizing diverse club activities, peer support programs, and leadership training, students can gain authentic platforms to practice emotional intelligence skills and improve interpersonal relationships. Fourth, student affairs professionals should incorporate emotional intelligence development as a key indicator for assessing mental health and social adaptation capabilities. Early identification and personalized interventions for students with low emotional intelligence levels are essential to prevent potential interpersonal conflicts and psychological issues.

5.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study presents several limitations that guide future research directions. Firstly, the sample was confined to three universities in Haikou City, which limits its representativeness. Consequently, conclusions should be generalized with caution to other regions in Hainan Province or nationwide [11]. Future research should aim to expand the sampling scope to include more cities and counties, as well as a variety of university types. Additionally, conducting interprovincial comparisons could help validate the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the data collection primarily relied on self-report scales, which may be prone to common method biases, such as social

desirability effects. To enhance data objectivity and validity, future studies should incorporate multi-source data. Thirdly, there is a need for further exploration of other mediating and moderating variables within the social cognitive theory framework. Furthermore, applied intervention studies could be conducted to develop and evaluate a university interpersonal relationship enhancement program. This program would integrate social cognitive theory with emotional intelligence training based on the research findings, thereby validating its effectiveness and translating theoretical insights into practical educational applications.

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