

Real Events and Real Emotions: Improving Measurement of Emotional Awareness
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Abstract

The Personal Emotions Questionnaire (PEQ; Barchard, 2001) asks respondents to remember times when they felt angry, sad, scared, and happy. Most respondents are able to recall relevant situations, and can describe how they felt in vivid detail. No scoring key for the PEQ has yet been devised. How can responses be scored so that higher scores reflect greater Emotional Awareness? This study explored the usefulness of using scoring keys that were designed for the most commonly used measure of Emotional Awareness in adults – the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin 1990). The LEAS and PEQ are quite different, however. The PEQ asks respondents to recall how they felt in real situations, whereas the LEAS asks respondents to imagine what they would feel in hypothetical scenarios. Some respondents might have difficulty imagining themselves in scenarios that they have never experienced. One possible advantage of the PEQ is that respondents are describing how they felt in situations they have actually lived through, and thus may be a more direct measure of Emotional Awareness. However, the different format of the PEQ may mean that the LEAS scoring strategy is ineffective when applied to the PEQ. We examine nine different scoring methods, each of which works quite well with LEAS responses. A total of 735 undergraduates completed the PEQ and the LEAS. All nine PEQ scores had weak correlations with the LEAS. These results indicate that when the PEQ is scored using methods designed for the LEAS, it does not measure the same construct as the LEAS. Given the vibrancy and detail of the PEQ responses, it seems like a promising measure of Emotional Awareness. Future research should therefore explore new methods of scoring the PEQ that have been designed specifically for this test.

Introduction

Emotional Awareness is the ability to recognize and describe emotions in the self and others (Lane & Schwartz, 1987). There are six levels of Emotional Awareness (Lane & Swartz, 1987): no awareness, bodily sensations, action tendencies, single emotions, blends of emotions, and combinations of blends of emotions. Higher levels of emotional awareness are associated with a better sense of well-being (Ciarrochi, Caputi, & Mayer, 2003) and with fewer psychological problems (Berthoz, Ouhayoun, Parage, Kirzenbaum, Bourgey, & Allilaire, 2000; Bydlowski, Corcos, Jeammet, Paterniti, Berthoz, Laurier, et al., 2005; Donges, Kersting, Dannlowski, Lalee-Mentzel, Arolt, & Suslow, 2005; Frewen, Lane, Neufeld, Densmore, Stevens, & Lanius, 2008; Jouanne, Edell & Carton, 2005; Levine, Marziali, & Hood, 1997; Subic-Wrana, Bruder, Thomas, Gaus, Merkle, & Köhle, 2002).

The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin 1990) is the most commonly used measure of Emotional Awareness. It includes 20 hypothetical scenarios that were designed to induce happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. Respondents are asked to describe how they would feel in each of these hypothetical scenarios. There is another person mentioned in each scenario, and respondents are also asked to describe how that person might feel. A variety of studies have demonstrated the reliability and validity of the LEAS (Ciarrochi, Caputi, & Mayer, 2003; Lane & Pollermann, 2002; Lane et al., 1990; Lane & Swartz, 1987; Simson, Martin, Schafer, Franz & Janssen, 2006; Subic-Wrana, Bruder, Thomas, Lane, & Köhle, 2005).

The hypothetical scenarios that are used on the LEAS might cause difficulties for some respondents. Some respondents might state that they have never been in a certain situation or that they cannot imagine themselves in that situation. Perhaps the other person who is mentioned in the scenario is not someone who exists, such as a boyfriend, girlfriend or coworker. When the people themselves are hypothetical, respondents may have a hard time imagining what that person would feel. Some respondents might state that different people would feel differently in that scenario. Thus, to provide clear, detailed answers to the LEAS items, respondents must draw upon their ability to imagine themselves and others in hypothetical scenarios, in addition to their ability to describe how they and others would feel.

Nemiah and Snifeos (1970) noted that patients with psychosomatic disorders often have difficulty describing their emotions and often have an impaired fantasy life. They named this condition “Alexithymia,” which means “lack of words for feelings”. Therefore, the ability to imagine oneself in a hypothetical scenario might be positively correlated with the ability to describe one’s emotional experiences. However, one self-report measure of Alexithymia, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor; 1994), includes subscales to measure Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking (the tendency to describe external events, rather than internal cognitions and feelings), but does not include a scale to measure an impaired fantasy life. The authors included items that measured lack of fantasy life in their initial item pool, but those items did not survive initial item screening, and thus do not appear to be a central part of Alexithymia itself. Thus, it may be useful to measure Emotional Awareness without requiring the ability to imagine oneself in hypothetical scenarios. To that end, the Personal Emotions Questionnaire (Barchard, 2001) was developed.

The Personal Emotions Questionnaire (PEQ; Barchard, 2001) is an open-ended test that asks people to remember a recent situation during which they felt angry, sad, scared, or happy. Respondents briefly describe what happened, and then answer several questions about how they felt and how they knew that they felt that way. A scoring method has not yet been devised for the PEQ. The purpose of the current study is to try to find a way of scoring the PEQ so that higher scores reflect higher Emotional Awareness. We scored the PEQ using a computerized scoring program called Program for Open-Ended Scoring (POES; Leaf & Barchard, 2009a), which was originally designed to score the LEAS. We used computerized scoring because it is much faster than hand scoring, and thus allowed us to explore the validity of several different scoring methods. For each of nine different scoring methods, we correlated the PEQ scores with the scores from the LEAS.

Method

Participants

A total of 735 (262 male, 473 female) undergraduate students participated in the study for course credit. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65 (mean 20.62, standard deviation 5.20). Participants identified themselves as 61.1% White, 11.4% Asian, 10.9% Hispanic, 7.8% Black, .4% Native American, and 8.4% other.

Measures

Personal Emotions Questionnaire

The Personal Emotions Questionnaire (PEQ; Barchard, 2001) is an open-ended test. Respondents are asked to recall a situation within the last few months when they felt angry, sad, scared, or happy. Then the participant is asked to describe what happened, how they knew what they were feeling, how the emotion made them feel inside, and what they did when they felt the emotion. One page is devoted to each of the four emotions they recall.

The goal of this study is to find a method of scoring the PEQ so that higher scores represent greater levels of Emotional Awareness. Therefore, the PEQ was scored nine different ways, using Program for Open-Ended Scoring (POES; Leaf & Barchard, 2009a). POES scores a response in two steps. First, each word or phrase is given a value, based upon a designated Wordlist. For this study, we used LEAS Wordlist 2.3 (Barchard, 2009). Second, POES calculates scores for each respondent. In this study, we used nine different POES scoring methods: AllSum, Highest-4, 334, 3345, AllSum-Highest4, AllSum-Highest8, AllSum-Highest12, AllSum-Highest16 and AllSum-AllinOne. Refer to the POES User Manual (Leaf & Barchard, 2009b) for details on each of these scoring methods.

Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale

The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane & Schwartz, 1987) is a 20-item open-ended test designed to measure the depth and breadth of one’s knowledge of emotion words. Each item contains a scenario that was designed to evoke a particular emotion: anger, fear, happiness, or sadness. Respondents are asked to describe how they would feel in that scenario and how the other person in that scenario would feel.

Responses are scored in four steps (Lane et al., 1990). First, the scorer identifies words that indicate emotional reactions. Second, the scorer determines the appropriate score for each of those words. Word scores range from 0 to 3. Non-emotion words (I would think they were wrong) receive a score of 0. Physical reactions (I would feel tired) receive a score of 1. Action tendencies (I would cry) and general emotions (I would feel bad) receive a score of 2. Specific emotions (I would feel happy) receive a score of 3. Third, the scorer calculates separate scores for the emotions attributed to the self (the self score) and the emotions attributed to the other person in the scenario (the other score). Fourth, the item score is calculated from the self and other scores. The total score on the test is calculated as the sum of the item scores, across the 20 items. The higher the participant’s score, the greater their ability to recognize and describe emotions in the self and in others.

Procedure

Each participant completed the LEAS and the PEQ as part of a larger study. Participants completed two 90-minute testing sessions, one week apart. Measures were administered by trained research assistants.

Results

All nine of the PEQ scores had weak correlations with LEAS hand-scoring. The largest correlation was for the AllSum-AllinOne scoring method, which had a correlation of .23. See Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations between the Nine PEQ Scoring Methods and the LEAS

PEQ Scoring Method	Correlation with LEAS
AllSum	.22**
Highest-4	.20**
334	.12**
3345	.12**
Highest4-AllinOne	.04
Highest8-AllinOne	.12**
Highest12-AllinOne	.18**
Highest16-AllinOne	.21**
AllSum-AllinOne	.23**

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The Personal Emotions Questionnaire (PEQ) is a new measure of Emotional Awareness – the ability to identify and describe one's emotions. The purpose of this study was to identify a scoring system in which higher scores on the PEQ indicate higher levels of Emotional Awareness. We examined nine different ways of scoring the PEQ. All nine scoring methods resulted in weak correlations with the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS), the most commonly used measure of Emotional Awareness in adults. Although several of these scoring methods work well when used with LEAS data, they did not result in scores that measure Emotional Awareness when applied to data from the PEQ.

There are two possible reasons for the low correlations. First, it might be that the PEQ and the LEAS tap into different constructs or only partially overlapping constructs. The LEAS requires respondents to imagine themselves in hypothetical situations, whereas the PEQ only requires respondents to remember situations that have actually happened to them. It could be that the PEQ taps into Emotional Awareness more directly, whereas the LEAS requires both Emotion Awareness and imagination. Future research should determine if the LEAS requires a skill that is not required by the PEQ, and should also determine if just one or both of these skills are required for psychological health and well-being. If both skills are required, the LEAS may be a better predictor of mental health. If only Emotional Awareness is required, the PEQ may be a better predictor. This could also have implications for therapeutic treatments, which could attempt to increase one or both of these skills.

Second, the low correlations between the various PEQ scores and the LEAS could be because we have not yet found the best method for scoring the PEQ. It might be that the LEAS and the PEQ tap exactly the same ability, but different scoring systems are needed in order to tap that ability. A new scoring system should be developed for the PEQ, by considering how different levels of Emotional Awareness would be demonstrated on this measure. The PEQ elicits vibrant descriptions of genuine emotions, which are qualitatively different from responses to hypothetical situations. The scoring key will need to reflect the kinds of responses that are given on the PEQ. We anticipate that the best scoring key will not be based solely on the emotions words used (the way LEAS scoring does), but will instead incorporate all of the information given in the responses.

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