



The relationship of emotional intelligence with task and contextual performance: More than it meets the linear eye



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ABSTRACT

The relationship of emotional intelligence (EI) with job performance was investigated in 188 individuals working as expatriates. Job performance was considered in terms of task and contextual performance - helping (OCB-H) and voice (OCB-V) organizational citizenship behaviours - and was assessed by line managers. In line with expectations, most identified relationships were of quadratic U-shaped form. Specifically, all three relationships of the global EI construct, and eight out of the 11 identified relationships of its four facets, were of U-shape. That included the relationships of all four EI facets with task performance, and the relationships of two dimensions, self-emotional appraisal (SEA) and regulation of emotion (ROE) with OCB-H and with OCB-V. The findings illustrate the link of global EI and its facets with contextual performance apart from task performance that has been the primary focus of research thus far. The findings also suggest that although those with the highest scores on EI receive the strongest job performance ratings those who are most disadvantaged in terms of job performance are not the lowest EI scorers but rather those who find themselves near the middle of the EI scores continuum.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) has attracted considerable attention in the past quarter of a century (e.g., Petrides et al., 2016). According to Mayer and Salovey's (1997) conceptualization, EI is a multi-faceted construct that reflects the capacity of an individual to (a) understand one's own emotions along with expressing these in a natural way (self-emotional appraisal or SEA), (b) discern and accurately appraise the emotions of others (other's emotional appraisal or OEA), (c) manage or regulate one's own emotions so he/she is not overwhelmed by emotional arousal (regulation of emotion or ROE); and (d) utilize one's emotions in order to achieve valued outcomes including personal growth (use of emotion or UOE) (also Salovey & Mayer, 1990, but also Petrides et al., 2016). In the present work we adopt the trait perspective of EI (also referred to as "emotional self-efficacy", Petrides & Furnham, 2001) that views the construct as reflective of the way individuals perceive and evaluate their own emotional abilities (Petrides, 2011; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007) and acknowledges the subjective nature of the emotional experience (De Raad, 2005; Petrides, 2011).

A substantial amount of empirical research has linked EI with job performance (Joseph, Jin, Newman, & O'Boyle, 2015; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). The importance of job performance needs not be stressed. Work is a significant aspect of life for

most individuals, and successes or failures in the work domain, such as performing well or poorly, have serious spillover effects on personal outcomes such as psychological health and family life (e.g., Winefield, Boyd, & Winefield, 2014).

However, despite its enlightening character the knowledge we have accumulated on the link is not yet exhaustive: (1) the relationship of EI with job performance, and in fact all other assumed and tested outcomes of EI, has so far been presumed to be linear. It is conceivable, however, that the direction of the relationship is not constant across the spectrum of EI scores, meaning a non-linear relationship. If this is the case then our current understanding of the nature of the relationship and its magnitude may be compromised (e.g., Jorm & Christensen, 2004; Vasilopoulos, Cucina, & Hunter, 2007); (2) as noted by O'Boyle et al. (2011) in their meta-analytic review, extant research has nearly exclusively focused on task performance or in-role behaviours (i.e., how well the individual performs on tasks and roles that are formally part of the job, Borman & Motowidlo, 1997), and has paid only scant attention at contextual performance or organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs). OCBs reflect behaviours that are not formally part of the job but they nevertheless contribute to the success of the unit or the organization (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Organ, 1997) and they compose an equally important aspect of job performance (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). The situation has not been noticeably improved in the five years that elapsed since O'Boyle et al.'s remark; (3) most empirical research thus far has been confined to testing hypotheses for the higher-order factor or global EI only. This, however, may

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obscure the development of a nuanced picture because the facets of EI may demonstrate differential relationships with outcomes (Greenidge, Devonish, & Alleyne, 2014; Petrides et al., 2016).

In light of these three limitations of extant research, the present work investigated from a non-linear quadratic perspective the relationship of global EI and its facets with job performance, viewed in terms of both task performance and OCBs. We considered OCBs in terms of helping and voice behaviours (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Helping OCBs (OCB-H) refer to acts of support for others (e.g., offering to assist, co-operating even if personally inconvenient, going out of one's way to help), while voice OCBs (OCB-V) refer to making innovating suggestions for improvement or modifications of existing practices and procedures. Due to their promotive nature (i.e., facilitative, constructive, encouraging) helping and voice OCBs are instrumental to improvement and accomplishment (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), which makes them of key importance.

1.1. Hypotheses development

As noted, there is substantial empirical work that attests to an overall positive relationship between global EI and job performance. Along with task performance, which has already been the subject of a respectable number of studies (Joseph et al., 2015; O'Boyle et al., 2011), we expect that high levels of EI will also relate to OCBs. The reason is that helping and voice OCBs are manifested via prosocial behaviours such as helping others, volunteering, and making constructive suggestions. Domain characteristics of EI include amongst others empathy, optimism, positive mood, assertiveness and capacity to adopt different perspectives (De Raad, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Petrides et al., 2016) that should render those with high EI scores more likely to engage in such behaviours.

Though empirical work with the facets of EI is not abundant, there is sufficient reason for expecting that scores on all EI facets are associated with ratings in both task performance and OCBs. To illustrate, understanding and acknowledging one's own emotions (SEA) should enable dealing better with frustration (Carmeli & Josman, 2009), and should facilitate prosocial actions due to the generated positive emotions (Tsai, 2009); hence, enabling avid engagement in formally prescribed tasks or contributions beyond the formal job description. Similarly, ability to discern and accurately appraise the emotions of others (OEA) renders the person caring and altruistic (De Raad, 2005; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), thus more prone to engage in contributory behaviours within or outside prescribed roles. Regulation of emotion (ROE) turns individuals more prone to accept help and advice from others (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010), meaning learning faster to improve performance, but also potentially reciprocating the actions of others, hence, engagement in OCBs. Finally, all four dimensions of EI are linked with positive affective states in general (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008; Petrides & Furnham, 2001) and at work (Yang & Lee, 2015) in particular, which are causal antecedents to task performance and OCBs (e.g., Riketta, 2008; Tsai, Chen, & Liu, 2007).

1.2. Quadratic relationships

As seen, there is well-founded expectation that both global EI and its facets are linked with task performance and OCBs. Beyond this, however, there are reasons to believe that the nature of the relationship varies according to the point of the EI continuum one finds him/herself. EI is a trait that lies at the lower levels of personality hierarchies, such as the Big Five or the Great Three, and comprises scattered aspects of these (De Raad, 2005; Petrides et al., 2007). Recent thinking and empirical evidence suggests that quadratic rather than linear equations may often provide more accurate descriptions of the relationship between personality traits and important work outcomes (e.g., Bozionelos, 2017; Chang, Wang, Liang, & Liang, 2014; Grant, 2013; Lin, Liang, Chang, & Liang, 2015; Vasilopoulos et al., 2007). A quadratic, and especially U-shaped,

relationship is also in line with theory of trait EI, which derives that low scores on EI are not de facto associated with poorer outcomes (Petrides, 2011; see also Petrides, Vernon, Aitken Schermer, & Veselka, 2011).

Here we contemplate that higher EI scores are not associated with greater job performance ratings across the whole EI continuum. In particular, we ponder that in the range of low EI scores the relationship with job performance will be negative: that is movement away from the mean EI score and towards the low end of the trait distribution will be accompanied by increases in job performance. This suggests a U-shaped curve. The reason for expecting such a relationship is that absence of particular domain characteristics of EI may provide a performance advantage over presence of these in medium or medium-low degrees. To illustrate, individuals who lack social awareness and sociability, key features of EI (De Raad, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2001), may be able to engage without interruption on the performance of their tasks, and hence achieve better task performance than their counterparts who possess mediocre levels of these features. Furthermore, very low impulse and emotional control, which also represent low poles of EI characteristics (Petrides et al., 2016), may bring increased creativity and faster decision-making that at cases can offer performance advantages (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Shanine, 2013; White & Shah, 2011). In the same line, very low levels of particular EI characteristics may lead to higher probability of engaging in OCBs because of decreased concern with social conventions that may inhibit such behaviours. For example, engagement in OCB-V requires making comments, suggestions and observations that may be challenging existing practices and may not be to the liking of others (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Absence of EI characteristics such as empathy, social awareness, emotional perception and impulse control may therefore facilitate such behaviours. Indeed, EI is negatively associated with social desirability (Petrides et al., 2007), which should render the individual less constrained by the desire to be liked by others when expressing his/her own views. Similarly, low emotional and impulse control and low assertiveness, which find themselves in the low pole of EI (Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Petrides et al., 2016), could increase the probability of spontaneous engagement in helping behaviours (Halbesleben et al., 2013). Hence, the following hypotheses were posed:

Hypothesis 1. Quadratic U-shaped curves will describe the relationship of global EI with task performance (H1a), OCB-H (H1b) and OCB-V (H1c) more accurately than linear equations; while the overall linear trend of the relationships will be positive (H1d, H1e, H1f).

Hypothesis 2. U-shaped curves will describe the relationship of SEA (H2a), OEA (H2b), ROE (H2c) and UOE (H2d) with task performance more accurately than linear equations; while the overall linear trends will be positive (H2e, H2f, H2g, H2h, respectively).

Hypothesis 3. U-shaped curves will describe the relationship of SEA (H3a), OEA (H3b), ROE (H3c) and UOE (H3d) with helping organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB-H) more accurately than linear equations; while the overall linear trends will be positive (H3e, H3f, H3g, H3h, respectively).

Hypothesis 4. U-shaped curves will describe the relationship of SEA (H4a), OEA (H4b), ROE (H4c) and UOE (H4d) with voice organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB-V) more accurately than linear equations; while the overall linear trends will be positive (H3e, H3f, H3g, H3h, respectively).

2. Method

2.1. Setting and participants

Participants were 188 (48 women and 140 men) full-time expatriate employees in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Fourteen companies in

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