Investigating the link between trait emotional intelligence, career indecision, and self-perceived employability: The role of career adaptability ☆

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ABSTRACT

Trait emotional intelligence (TEI) is emerging as a useful and promising individual difference in predicting vocational behavior (e.g., Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014). Little is yet known about the underlying processes that may lead TEI to associate with career related outcomes. This study investigates the role of career adaptability in mediating the association between TEI and career decision-making difficulties and self-perceived employability, in a sample of Swiss university students ($N = 400$). The results of a series of path analysis in which we controlled for intelligence, sex and personality showed that career adaptability fully mediated the effect of TEI on self-perceived employability and career decision-making difficulties, in particular the subscales of lack of information and inconsistent information. Our findings shed light on the role of regulatory processes in shaping the effects of TEI on career-related outcomes.

1. Introduction

Our contemporary globalized world involves managing increasingly uncertain professional trajectories (Guichard, 2015), and career uncertainty is known to be associated with higher anxiety (Fuqua, Seaworth, & Newman, 1987). In this context, a better understanding of one's emotional experience has been found to play an important role in career-related issues (e.g., Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014). However, little is still known about the affective components that may impact the process of career exploration and career development.

The aim of this study is to understand the pathway through which emotional self-perceptions representing the affective aspects of personality, i.e., trait emotional intelligence (TEI; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007), may affect career related outcomes, such as career indecision and self-perceived employability. TEI, defined as the emotional traits that reflect self-perceptions regarding one's ability to deal with emotions, is associated with important career related outcomes including career indecision, career indecisiveness and career decision-making self-efficacy (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014), with self-perceived employability (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2015), and in predicting career

success (De Haro García & Castejón Costa, 2014).

The path through which TEI and career indecision and self-perceived employability are related, however, remains unexplored in the literature, with no study to our knowledge yet investigating the mediating paths between these variables. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) posits that the relationship between dispositions and career choice is not direct, but mediated by internal processes, such as self-efficacy. Similarly, Rossier (2015) highlights the role of regulatory processes, including career adaptability, in mediating the relationship between individual dispositions and career behaviors. Interestingly, regulatory processes have a strong adaptive function in allowing dispositions to fit the characteristics of the environment.

1.1. Career adaptability, career indecision and self-perceived employability as career-related outcomes

Studies indicate the potential for TEI to have an indirect effect on career indecision and self-perceived employability through career adaptability (Coetzee & Harry, 2014; Harry, 2017). Career adaptability

refers to a set of personal resources that help individuals manage career transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Some studies have highlighted the association between career adaptability and career decision-making difficulties (e.g., Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015). A recent meta-analysis (Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017) showed career adaptability to be significantly associated with employability. Of note, no studies explored the possible mediator effect of career adaptability on the relationship between TEI and career related outcomes. We posit that the psychosocial resources of career adaptability may account for the effect of trait emotional intelligence on career-related outcomes.

To explore the mediating role of career adaptability we chose two career-related constructs to capture the more negative and more positive aspects of transition to employment: career decision-making difficulties (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996), more generally termed career indecision, and self-perceived employability. Previous work has primarily emphasized the cognitive aspects of career indecision (e.g., Gati & Tal, 2008). Some authors have also identified its affective aspect: Betz and Sterling (1993) found that chronic career indecisiveness was strongly correlated with fear of commitment to a decision, an affective disposition. Saka and Gati (2007) found emotional and personality-related factor affecting severe career decision-making difficulties.

Self-perceived employability is defined as the characteristics needed to secure a job that corresponds to one's interests and goals (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Indeed, self-perceived employability appears to be related to higher job satisfaction, higher work engagement (Ngo, Liu, & Cheung, 2017), and higher perceived marketability (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011). Overall, both career indecision and self-perceived employability capture fundamental aspects of career-related outcomes, and may help elucidate the role of TEI and career adaptability in contributing to career development.

1.2. Personality, intelligence and sex

The Big Five personality traits have been shown to associate with TEI (Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003) and with career adaptability, especially conscientiousness (Rudolph et al., 2017). Although previous studies have established no significant effects of fluid intelligence on career decision (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2014), this variable logically could affect career adaptability. Sex also may impact TEI (Petrides, Furnham, & Martin, 2004), although previous studies have shown no effects of sex on career adaptability (Rudolph et al., 2017).

1.3. The present study

Based on the framework delineated above, the present study examined the indirect effect of TEI on career indecision making difficulties and self-perceived employability through career adaptability, controlling for personality traits, fluid intelligence, and sex. The strong association between career indecision and emotional intelligence is widely acknowledged in the literature, although no study to our knowledge has looked at the process that may explain this association. Furthermore, self-perceived employability is a key element for career development and success that has not been much studied in relation to TEI. We hypothesized that career adaptability would fully mediate the relationship between TEI and career indecision, including its 3 subscales (H1) and between TEI and self-perceived employability (H2).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited 400 participants (46% female), ranging in age from 17 to 48 (*Mean* = 21.39 and *SD* = 3.27) from several universities in the Lausanne area (Switzerland) through the university subject-pool. Participants were bachelor (69,8%) and master or advance studies students (30,2%) in various disciplines. They gave written consent to participate in the study and were compensated for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF)

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (Cooper & Petrides, 2010) is a 30-item self-report questionnaire that measures TEI using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'. Cronbach reliability for the total score in the current sample was 0.83.

2.2.2. Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS)

The Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) includes 24 items equally divided into 4 subscales measuring resources of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Participants rate how strongly they have developed these resources on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'I don't have this ability', to 5 = 'I have a very strong ability'. We employed the total score for the analysis as the literature shows that the 4 subscales load into a single second-order factor (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Cronbach reliability for the total score in the current sample was 0.91.

2.2.3. Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ)

The Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (Gati et al., 1996) includes 34 items, but in this study only 32 were used due to a technical problem with the administration of items 27 and 29, which were part of the 'inconsistent information' subscale. The two missing items did not seem to significantly affect the subscale score and reliability. We employed the total score and the scores of the three subscales (lack of readiness, lack of information, inconsistent information) in the statistical analysis. The Likert scale ranges from 1 = 'Does not describe me' to 9 = 'Describes me well'. Cronbach reliability in the current sample for the total score was 0.92, 0.61 for lack of readiness, 0.93 for lack of information, and 0.83 for inconsistent information.

2.2.4. Self-Perceived Employability Scale (SPES)

The Self-Perceived Employability Scale for university students (Rothwell, Jewell, & Hardie, 2009) is a 16-item scale used to evaluate expectations and self-perceptions of employability in university students. An example item is: "The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for". The Likert scale ranges from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'. Cronbach reliability in this sample for the total score was 0.87.

2.2.5. Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (RPM)

Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1938) were used to assess cognitive abilities, especially to evaluate fluid intelligence. The test is composed of five sets (A to E) of 12 multiple-choice, progressively more difficult items (60 total). The test administration was time-limited to 20 min. Cronbach reliability of the total score in the current sample was 0.88.

2.2.6. Brief HEXACO Inventory (BHI)

The Brief HEXACO Inventory is a 24-item questionnaire that assesses six personality dimensions: Honesty, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness (De Vries, 2013). The HEXACO model is an acknowledged measure of personality that proved to be a valid and reliable indicator of the major personality traits (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2009). The brief version of the questionnaire showed adequate levels of test-retest reliability and high convergence with the longer HEXACO measure (De Vries, 2013). Participants respond to self-reflective items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Alpha reliabilities of the dimensions in the brief version of the questionnaire range from 0.43 and 0.72 (De Vries, 2013). The Honesty scale was not included in the analytic model as we did not have any hypothesis regarding its relationship with TEI.