



Internalizing emotions: Self-determination as an antecedent of emotional intelligence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2013

Received in revised form 14 January 2014

Accepted 25 January 2014

Available online 21 February 2014

Keywords:

Self-determination

Emotional intelligence

Psychological well-being

ABSTRACT

An extensive body of literature indicates that people differ in the extent to which they attend to, process, and regulate emotions. The present research sought to build on this knowledge by examining whether general self-determination (GSD) could account for individual variation in emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological well-being (PWB). A simple and multiple mediation model using bootstrap analyses tested these relationships in a sample of students (Study 1, $N = 283$) and workers (Study 2, $N = 265$). Results supported the hypothesized mediating role of EI in the relationship between GSD and PWB across both studies. When the inter-related facets of EI were considered separately, indirect effects emerged for mood regulation/optimism and social skills across both studies as well as for utilization of emotions, albeit negatively, in Study 2. Our findings support and extend past work on the antecedents of EI and have important implications for human functioning across a variety of settings.

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1. Introduction

A wealth of scientific evidence indicates that people vary in the extent to which they use emotion-related information in their day to day lives. Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2000) refer to this capacity as emotional intelligence (EI) which they formally define as “the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and in others” (p. 396). To these authors, EI is therefore a set of abilities and should be assessed with maximum performance measures much like traditional intelligence tests (e.g., Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002; Petrides, 2011; Petrides & Furnham, 2000a). A distinct but complementary conceptualization of this construct (Schutte, Malouff, & Bhullar, 2009) defines EI as a set self-perceptions, dispositions, and motivations that are affective in nature and that share some common variance with major personality traits (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007). Unlike the ability-model, this trait model of EI captures the inherent subjectivity underlying one's emotional experience and should therefore be assessed via self-report measures (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000a; Petrides & Furnham, 2000b; Schutte et al., 1998).

Notwithstanding these divergent operationalizations, EI has emerged as a viable and important construct in the literature evidenced by the accumulation of handbooks, book chapters, review papers, and meta-analyses on the subject. For instance, those who score high on measures of EI perform better at work (e.g., O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011) and in school (e.g., Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004); they also report more positive relationships (e.g., Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007) and better physical health (e.g. Costa, Petrides, & Tillmann, 2014). However, it's the enhancement of emotional health and well-being wherein lies the construct's greatest potentiality and interest. For instance, EI is negatively related to several indices of psychopathology (Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008) such as personality disorders (Petrides, Pérez-González, et al., 2007) and anxiety disorders (Summerfeldt, Kloosterman, Antony, McCabe, & Parker, 2011) as well as self-harm (Mikolajczak, Petrides, & Hurry, 2009) and externalizing behaviors in adolescents (Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010). In non-clinical samples, EI correlates positively with a variety of well-being indices such as life satisfaction, happiness, optimism, self-esteem, and decreased negative affect (for reviews see Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Petrides, 2011) with a meta-analytic correlation of .34 (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010).

But why do some people attend to, process, and regulate their emotions with greater ease than others? In other words, what accounts for the individual variation in EI? Consistent with the trait-

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model of EI (e.g., Petrides, Pita, et al., 2007), higher-order personality factors are purported to shape people's affective self-perceptions. For instance, trait EI mediated the relationship between each of the Big Five personality traits and self-reported mental health and well-being (e.g., Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009). Other research suggests that trait EI may stem from dispositional differences in quality of attention. Schutte and Malouff (2011) observed that the relationship between mindfulness and various indicators of subjective well-being (i.e., positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction) were mediated by trait EI. Significant indirect effects for a specific subcomponent of EI, namely mood regulation have also been documented. For example, Kämpfe and Mitte (2010) observed that mood repair accounted for the relationship between extraversion and life satisfaction as well as between extraversion and happiness. Other research found cognitive reappraisal of emotion to partially explain the relationship between secure attachment and well-being (Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012). Together, these findings suggest that the ability to perceive and manage one's emotions is partly due to stable individual differences such as one's personality, attachment style (i.e., secure attachment), and mindfulness. In the present research, we investigated self-determination as a plausible antecedent of EI that contributes to psychological well-being (Bhullar, Schutte, & Malouff, 2013).

At the core of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) lays a motivational perspective of the self which is endowed with integrative capacities toward increasing organization and coherence (Ryan, 1993). The expression of this coalescence is reflected in the degree of perceived autonomy or self-determination underlying the regulation of action. For instance, behaviors which are initiated out of inherent interest and enjoyment for their own sake (intrinsic regulation) are experienced as the most self-determined followed by reasons to act in accordance with one's deepest values (integrated regulation), and then by personal identification with the activity (identified regulation). However, not all behaviors are experienced as authentic and freely chosen; many are initiated out of pressure and obligation to bolster or protect one's sense of self-worth (introjected regulation), to comply with external demands (external regulation) or without any intention (amotivation). These behaviors are experienced as controlling and coercive because the underlying self operates in a fragmented and compartmentalized manner. These six styles of behavior regulation can be combined into a single index, whereby higher scores reflect greater self-determination which is linked to healthier functioning and well-being (e.g., see Deci & Ryan, 2008 for a review).

The integrative capacity for effective and adaptive self-regulation of action is also reflected in the manner with which one meets their moment to moment experiences. According to Hodgins and Knee (2002), greater self-determination endows a person with more openness and less defensiveness toward potentially threatening and difficult events. For instance, when primed with self-determination, people report less desire to escape and engage in fewer self-serving attributions in response to failure (Hodgins, Yacko, & Gottlieb, 2006). Autonomously-oriented individuals also exhibit better emotional regulation and integration of negative affect after viewing a traumatic film clip (Weinstein & Hodgins, 2009) and retrospectively recalling negative life events and identities (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011). However, little is known on the skills utilized by those with greater self-determination which promote effective assimilation of emotionally-laden experiences into a more unified and cohesive self. We propose that these skills are attributed in part to the inter-related abilities of EI.

The objective of the present research was to investigate individual variation in EI by examining the determining role of self-determination which was assessed at the dispositional or general level indicative of a more enduring motivational orientation toward the environment (Guay, Mageau, & Vallerand, 2003). To this end,

the inter-related abilities of EI were hypothesized to mediate the relationship between general self-determination (GSD) and psychological well-being (PWB). These relationships were initially tested with a sample of undergraduate students (Study 1) and then replicated with a sample of working adults (Study 2).

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 283 undergraduate students of which the majority were female ($n = 226$) took part voluntarily in this two-phase study ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.95$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.75$). Participants were recruited from a campus subject pool and received course credit in exchange for their participation. Measures of GSD and EI were completed at the beginning of the semester (Phase 1) while a measure of PWB was completed three months later (Phase 2).

2.1.2. Measures

GSD was assessed with the 18-item General Motivation Scale (GMS; Guay et al., 2003). The six subtypes of motivation proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985) are each represented by three items. Respondents rated the extent to which each item (e.g., "...because I like making interesting discoveries"; intrinsic regulation) corresponded to their reasons as to "why they do things in general" on a scale from 1 (*does not correspond to my reasons at all*) to 7 (*corresponds exactly to my reasons*). Internal consistency estimates ranged from .68 to .84 across subscales. Mean subscale ratings were combined to form a GSD index whereby higher scores indicate greater GSD: $+3 * (\text{intrinsic}) + 2 * (\text{integrated}) + 1 * (\text{identified}) - 1 * (\text{introjected}) - 2 * (\text{external}) - 3 * (\text{amotivation})$. Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was .81.

EI was measured using the Assessing Emotions Scale (AES; Schutte et al., 1998) where responses were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). As to its structure, some suggest the existence of a single global EI factor (e.g., Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002) while others propose the existence of four sub-factors (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000a; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003). Cognizant of this debate, EI was represented by a global EI factor derived by averaging scores across all 33 items as well as by four sub-factors derived by averaging scores across each subscale's respective items. The subscales were derived from the work of Petrides and Furnham (2000a). Internal consistency estimates ranged from .72 to .84 across subscales ($\alpha = .91$ for the entire scale).

PWB was assessed using Ryff's (1989) short form Scales of Psychological well-being (SPWB) which tap six different facets of positive psychological functioning. Responses were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and then averaged across all 18 items to represent PWB ($\alpha = .84$).

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. As predicted, positive relationships emerged between GSD, EI, and PWB. On the bivariate level, age did not correlate with any variable. However, gender differences did emerge for certain facets of EI with women scoring higher than men on 'appraisal of emotions' and 'social skills'. Regardless of these observations, both gender and age were controlled for in subsequent analyses for theoretical reasons (e.g., Mavroveli et al., 2007; Petrides & Furnham, 2000b).

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