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Connections between emotional intelligence and workplace flourishing

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ABSTRACT

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence may be a foundation for workplace flourishing. Responses from 319 working adults recruited from the United States and Australia showed that higher emotional intelligence was significantly related to better mental health, more work engagement, more satisfaction with social support in the workplace, and more perceived power in the workplace. Mediation path models indicated that more satisfaction with social support in the workplace and more perceived power in the workplace linked greater emotional intelligence to indicators of flourishing.

1. Introduction

1.1. Emotional intelligence in the workplace

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence is a useful construct in workplace research (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Cherniss, 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Schlaerth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013). Emotional intelligence describes and operationalizes adaptive emotional functioning. Perception, understanding, and managing emotions effectively in the self and others are described as core competencies in most operationalizations of emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 2000; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004, 2008). These competencies are central both in the ability conceptualisation of emotional intelligence (e.g., Mayer et al., 2004, 2008) and the trait, or typical functioning, conceptualisation of emotional intelligence (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Emotional intelligence is generally assessed through performance tests in the ability approach (Mayer et al., 2004, 2008) and through self- or other-report in the trait approach (Petrides & Furnham, 2001).

Higher levels of emotional intelligence are associated with a variety of general positive intrapersonal outcomes (Schutte & Malouff, 2013a). These outcomes include greater subjective well-being assessed through indices such as positive affect and life satisfaction (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2011) and better mental health (Martins, Ramalho, & Marin, 2010; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007). Higher levels of emotional intelligence are also associated with a variety of interpersonal outcomes, including more cooperative behaviour (Schutte et al., 2001), better interpersonal relationships (Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003), and more relationship satisfaction (Lopes et al., 2003; Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014). Individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to perceive having more social support and are more satisfied with their social support (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008).

Meta-analyses combining the results of many studies indicate that in the workplace more emotionally intelligent employees show better work performance (O'Boyle et al., 2011) and especially tend to perform better in high emotional labour work (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Further, meta-analytic results indicate that more emotionally intelligent employees tend to show superior leadership (Harms & Credé, 2010), including more constructive conflict management (Schlaerth et al., 2013).

Individuals with higher emotional intelligence may have both a greater sense of power in their work environment and perceive their work environment as more supportive (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck, & Manz, 2012). For example, individuals with higher emotional intelligence have a greater sense of control over their work and both higher emotional intelligence and greater sense of control are associated with better mental health (Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009). Employees with higher emotional intelligence build more social capital (Chun, Litzky, Sosik, Bechtold, & Godshalk, 2010), which may result in more satisfaction with social support.

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1.2. Positive psychology theory applied to work: workplace flourishing

Seligman (2012) described positive psychology theory as focusing on "the study of positive emotion, of engagement, of meaning, of positive accomplishment, and of good relationships" (p. 70). An aim of the positive psychology approach is to promote 'flourishing' or optimal functioning in individuals and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman, 2012). As Diener (2009) pointed out, much positive psychology research has focused on the individual, but some research has examined the individual in the context of institutions and groups. The application of positive psychology theory integrating the individual and institutions has largely focused on school settings (Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004) and workplaces (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Macdonald, Burke, & Stewart, 2012).

The positive psychology approach to understanding workplace related flourishing shows promise (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) and is one of the newest theories to be applied to work (Ashleigh & Mansi, 2012). This approach encompasses both a management-focused emphasis on enhanced employee engagement and productivity as resulting from optimal conditions as well as an employee-focused emphasis on personal well-being resulting from optimal conditions (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). The positive psychology approach focuses on recognizing and fostering positive organisational behaviour and individual strengths and the reciprocal nature of workplace conditions and individual strengths. Examples of employee strengths that have been found to be beneficial include self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, positive emotions, transformational leadership ability (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Fullagar & Kelloway, 2012), and emotional intelligence (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011; Schlaerth et al., 2013). Practical applications in the workplace are increasingly building on theoretical frameworks and research findings generated by the positive psychology approach (Ashleigh & Mansi, 2012).

The individual difference characteristic of emotional intelligence, which has become a central concept in the positive psychology approach to the workplace, may be a platform for the development of intra-personal and interpersonal workplace characteristics such as perception of power and satisfaction with social support, which in turn bolster workplace flourishing. Emotional intelligence is embedded in environmental and social contexts (Schutte, in press) and thus falls into the positive psychology conceptualisation of the individual in the context of institutions and groups (Diener, 2009).

Better perception, understanding, and regulation of emotion, core components of emotional intelligence, may facilitate employees' mastery of workplace events and reactions to events, encouraging a greater sense of power. Better perception, understanding, and regulation of emotion may also lead to better interpersonal work relationships and thus to more satisfaction with the social support offered by the workplace. The competencies comprising emotional intelligence may directly facilitate workplace flourishing and may also indirectly impact workplace flourishing through encouraging development of other qualities such as perception of power and workplace satisfaction that may in turn further encourage workplace flourishing.

1.3. Sense of control and power in the workplace

The issue of power and control in the workplace has garnered much research attention. Power in the workplace has often been defined in terms of social power more generally (French & Raven, 1959). Social power is defined as the measure of influence an individual is able to assert over other people or outcomes (French & Raven, 1959). It is the *capacity* to influence others that is of importance. Thus an individual's power may only be understood in relation to another individual or group of individuals (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). A sense of control may be defined in terms of employees' decision-making ability and sense of autonomy in their work (Cho, Laschinger, & Wong, 2006); the authority individuals have over their own work tasks. Research indicates that when people feel a sense of control in their job they are more engaged in their work, more committed to the organization, and less likely to experience negative outcomes such as burnout, physical illness, job turnover, absenteeism, and diminished organizational commitment (Cho et al., 2006; Inoue et al., 2013; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

1.4. Social support in the workplace

Social support may be defined as "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient" (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 13). There are many potential stressors to be found in the workplace, from normal everyday hassles through to more serious disturbances such as bullying or harassment. The literature generally supports the contention that social support buffers stress and positively influences well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Shirey, 2004). A review (Shirey, 2004) examining social support and well-being in the nursing profession concluded that social support in the workplace has an effect on outcomes such as burnout, absenteeism, job satisfaction, and overall work engagement. Shirey (2004) found that the presence of a support network initially and the quality of the support offered is more important than the size of the network.

Social support may be regarded as a form of social capital in the workplace. Social capital is defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Support from colleagues and supervisors can act as buffers against negative outcomes in the workplace (e.g., burnout) because it reduces the burden on the individual's personal resources. Colleagues can provide support not only with work-related problems; they can also offer "an ear" to listen when other troubles arise in the workplace. Support from supervisors and/or management may take the form of direct, instrumental assistance with job task problems and advice. Additionally, a positive relationship with supervisors may result in fewer job demands (Luchman & González-Morales, 2013), reducing an individual's feeling of being overwhelmed by work tasks.

1.5. Aims of the research

Emotional intelligence has become one of the most applied individual difference positive psychology constructs in the workplace (Brackett et al., 2011; Cherniss, 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Schlaerth et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence may facilitate the development of various adaptive intra- and interpersonal qualities in many realms of life (Schutte & Malouff, 2013a), and these adaptive qualities may, in part, account for the connection between greater emotional intelligence and flourishing.

The present study examined whether emotional intelligence might be a foundation for workplace flourishing. Good mental health of employees and the person–organization interaction quality of employee work engagement were used as markers of flourishing. As well as examining the direct relationships between employee emotional intelligence and these markers of flourishing, the study investigated whether emotional intelligence might be a foundation for other qualities that facilitate workplace flourishing. The study examined one such interpersonal factor, satisfaction with social support at work, and one intrapersonal factor,