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Social support and emotional intelligence as predictors of subjective well-being ☆

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Abstract

This study examined the predictive value of social support (SS) and emotional intelligence (EI), and their interaction effects, on subjective well-being (SWB) beyond variance already explained by personality and sociodemographic variables. Participants were 267 adults (196 female) who anonymously completed measures of satisfaction with life, positive and negative affect, social support, emotional intelligence, personality and social desirability. Exploratory hierarchical multiple regression analyses showed that SS and EI, and their interaction effects, significantly predicted SWB, and explained 44%, 50%, and 50% of the variance in SWL, positive affect (PA), and negative affect (NA) respectively. At step-two SS predicted NA and SWL, at step-three EI predicted PA and SWL, and at step-four one interaction effect was significant (SS: Significant Other × EI for PA). This study elucidates the predictive value of SS, EI and their interaction on SWB, and provides the first published insight into a possible conditional relationship between SS and SWB with regard to EI, suggesting that SS may not always be *necessary* for SWB. Implications are discussed, highlighting that the relationship between SS, EI and SWB is more complex than previous literature suggests.

Keywords: Subjective well-being; Social support; Source of support; Emotional intelligence; Personality; Happiness

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1. Introduction

Research exploring happiness and its predictors is important because it illuminates factors that foster optimal psychological functioning. Happiness is often operationalised in empirical investigations as subjective well-being (SWB) comprising of three components: positive affect (PA); negative affect (NA); and satisfaction with life (SWL) (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). Personality and sociodemographic variables consistently explain significant variance in SWB. For example, Gannon and Ranzijn (2005) found that personality accounted for 34% of unique variance in SWB, a result that supports earlier literature (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Between 8% and 20% of significant variance in SWB has also been explained by sociodemographic variables including age, income, relationship status, gender and education (Argyle, 2001; Diener et al., 1999). The present study examines social support (SS) and emotional intelligence (EI) as potential predictors of SWB beyond personality and sociodemographic variables (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007).

There is general consensus that SS is positively related to SWB (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984). Some even suggest that SS is *necessary* for SWB (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Oishi, 2005; Diener & Seligman, 2002). SS is thought to promote well-being by influencing emotions, cognitions and behaviours in a way that promotes positive affect (Cohen et al., 2000). Numerous studies provide evidence for the positive relationship between SS and SWB; most noteworthy are those that control covariates such as personality (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Cooper, Okamura, & Gurka, 1992; Bal, Crombez, Van Oost, & Debourdeaudhuij, 2003; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Lu & Lin, 1998; Skok, Harvey, & Reddihough, 2006). Although the evidence is plentiful, these findings are limited because most of the studies have measured only one component of SWB: SWL, or PA, or NA. An assessment of SWB from both affective and cognitive perspectives is important, as each of these components may be differentially influenced (Chamberlain, 1988). Another limitation is the lack of studies considering source and perceptions of SS relating to SWB. Source of support, (e.g., from Significant Others, Partner, Family or Friends), is emerging as an important measure of SS (Arkar, Sari, & Fidaner, 2004; Dahlem, Zimet, & Walker, 1991; Gutierrez-Dona & Gutierrez-Dona, 2005; Winefield, Winefield, & Tiggemann, 1992). Perceived SS, as opposed to number of supports and received support, is also important (Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006; Reis & Collins, 2000; Wills & Shinar, 2000; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

EI has been theoretically associated with both SWB and SS (Bar-On, 2005; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999) and has been flagged as "worth investigating" (Diener et al., 1999, p. 294). People with higher EI are thought to possess a greater capacity to perceive and reason around emotion which facilitates greater positive affect (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey et al., 1999). Although there is some controversy regarding EI's discriminant validity, much research also supports EI's utility (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Ciarrochi, Deane, & Anderson, 2002; Gannon & Ranzijn, 2005; Schutte et al., 1998) and evidence is emerging which indicates that EI can be taught and developed (Reshmi, 2006; Slaski & Cartwright, 2002).

Although limited, there are a few studies that have explored the predictive value of EI on differential components of SWB, mostly SWL, where EI has been found to be a significant positive predictor (Austin et al., 2005; Bar-On, 2005; Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006; Ciarrochi et al., 2000; Gan-