Hospitality service employees' coping styles: The role of emotional intelligence, two basic personality traits, and socio-demographic factors

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and three coping strategies (task-, emotion-, and avoidance-oriented coping) using an adult, hospitality industry population specifically in hotel and restaurant work environments. The hierarchical regression indicates that EI is by far the most dominant predictor of task coping among all selected explanatory variables; EI does not have much influence on emotion coping after the entry of two basic personality traits (neuroticism and extraversion); and EI is significantly related to avoidance coping encompassing distraction and social diversion. In addition, this study reveals the role played by age and work experience in individual coping efforts and a high possibility of female workers as a task-oriented coper in hospitality work settings.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI), which originates from social intelligence (Thorndike, 1920) has begun to be studied relatively recently and has received massive attention in the individual differences field. Despite debates between the personality model and the ability model of EI, management scholars in favor of EI argue the utility of EI in the work place. Recent management studies suggest that individual employee's EI is positively related to his/her job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Day and Carroll, 2004; Higgs, 2004; Lopes et al., 2006; Sy et al., 2006; Wong and Law, 2002) and that leader EI contributes to the financial performance of the company (Boyatzis, 2006) and followers' satisfaction and behaviors (Sy et al., 2006; Wong and Law, 2002). In the similar vein, hospitality literature shows that managerial EI leads to team satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and business profit in the restaurant operation (Langhorn, 2004).

Besides the work-related performance, the critical area where EI can make a noteworthy contribution involves individual health behaviors and stress (Fernandez-Berrocal and Extremera, 2006). Using the information from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health in the U.S. (Office of Applied Studies, 2007), Pizam (2008) reports that foodservice employees have the second highest inci-

dence of depressive episodes in all job categories and female foodservice workers' depression is so severe that their depression rate ranks first among all female full-time workers in the nation. Several recent studies also note the high level of stress for hospitality employees in the other parts of the world due to frequent face-to-face customer contacts and long working hours (Faulkner and Patiar, 1997; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007; Pienaar and Willemse, 2008). Literature has shown that coping is a mediator between antecedent stressful events and outcomes such as anxiety, depression, psychological distress, and somatic complaints (Billings and Moos, 1981, 1984; Coyne et al., 1981; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). Therefore, it is imperative for hospitality employees to have adaptive coping skills to remain psychologically healthy and productive at work. Some evidence exists that EI may influence the choice of coping methods that individuals make under stressful circumstances (Baker and Berenbaum, 2007; Salovey et al., 2002). Although EI has emerged as an important individual variable that may protect people against stress, to date few studies have analyzed this issue. Moreover, due to the necessity of the proper coping skills in hospitality environments, coping behaviors of hospitality workers require in-depth research.

To fill this gap, this study investigates the relationship between trait EI and coping responses using hotel and restaurant employees. To detect the incremental predictive validity of trait EI, two basic personality traits, namely extraversion and neuroticism, are incorporated into the proposed coping model. This way the unique role of trait EI in coping can be attested along with the basic personality factors. Second, the researchers of this study are interested in the effect of key socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age, education, position, and job experience, on trait EI and coping. There are

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limited findings on this fundamental query in hospitality academia whereas the information is abundant in other disciplines (Brackett et al., 2004; Ciarrochi et al., 2000; Endler and Parker, 1994; Mayer et al., 1999; Feifel and Strack, 1989).

The reminder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the theoretical background of EI and coping to formulate a series of study hypotheses; Section 3 describes the data collection procedure and instruments; statistical test results and major findings are discussed in Sections 4 and 5, respectively; Section 6 provides summary and future research directions; and Section 7 concludes the paper with managerial implications for hospitality operators.

2. Literature and hypotheses

2.1. Nature of EI and scales

The nature of EI is unsettled with two different views: ability vs. disposition. Salovey and Mayer (1990) who first introduced the term of EI shaped the ability-based model. The authors define EI as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (p. 189). They used three categories with ten facets to describe the scope of EI: appraisal and expression of emotion (verbal emotion in the self, non-verbal emotion in the self, non-verbal perception of emotion in others, and empathy); regulation of emotion (regulation of emotion in the self and regulation of emotion in others); and utilization of emotion (flexible planning, creative thinking, redirected attention, and motivation). Mayer and Salovey (1997) substantially refined the initial definition of EI with focus on more cognitive characteristics and developed a four-branch model. According to the four-branch model, EI is involved in the capacity to perceive emotions, use emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions, and manage them; and is measured through problems in the content of correctness similar to the conventional intelligence test.

Ironically, Salovey and Mayer's (1990) early concept of EI led to a disposition-based EI model partly because in their original model, the authors included factors such as empathy, planning, and motivation that are linked to personality domains rather than abilities or skills. Petrides and Furnham (2003), who are supportive of trait EI, define EI as "a constellation of behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions concerning one's ability to recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information" (p. 278). In other words, as a disposition, EI is a stable individual characteristic, which can be measured through a self-report questionnaire akin to other personality scales.

While only one type of the ability EI measure (Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test Version 2.0; Mayer et al., 2002) exists, several dispositional EI measures are available. The following trait EI measures appear most often in refereed academic journals: the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i; Bar-On, 1997), the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey et al., 1995); the Schutte Self Report EI Inventory (Schutte et al., 1998); the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides and Furnham, 2003); and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong and Law, 2002). Because of the various definitions and poorly validated earlier measures of EI, there have been criticisms regarding EI as an elusive construct (Davies et al., 1998). However, Ciarrochi et al. (2000) argued all these different views tend to be complementary rather than contradictory, acknowledging the unique value of each different EI measure. In addition, results of the recent meta-analysis encompassing ability and trait EI measures (Van Rooy and Viswesvaran,

2004) demonstrated that EI has the incremental validity over the Big Five personality factors and can be a valuable predictor of performance. Similarly, reviewing a number of disposition-based EI scales, Tett et al. (2005) pointed out that trait EI is distinct from other personality domains and is not very susceptible to socially desirable responding.

2.2. EI and socio-demographic variables

Speaking of the relationship between EI and socio-demographic variables, gender is the most frequently studied variable of all. It is commonly believed that women are more competent than men in the emotional sphere. The ability EI studies demonstrated higher EI ratings for women in total EI and most sub-domains of EI (Brackett et al., 2004; Ciarrochi et al., 2000; Extremera et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 1999). However, the results of self-reported, trait EI measures have been mixed. Researchers who used EQ-i did not find a significant gender difference in overall EI, but did report gender differences in composite scales or subscales. Specifically, men showed higher intrapersonal scores (e.g., self-regard, assertiveness, and independence) and/or better stress management (stress tolerance and impulse control) and women showed higher interpersonal scores (empathy, interpersonal relationship, and social responsibility) (Bar-On et al., 2000; Dawda and Hart, 2000; Gerits et al., 2004). Schutte's original or modified version of EI scales found higher EI ratings for women (Besharat, 2007; Schutte et al., 1998); and at times discovered no gender difference (Petrides and Furnham, 2000). Brackett et al. (2006) cautioned the use of self-reported, trait EI as a proxy measure of emotional intelligence because people may not have a preconceived notion about their EI. Gender itself can be a problematic issue as well due to the fact that women tend to underestimate their abilities and men usually overestimate their abilities in achievement settings (Brackett et al., 2006). However, Petrides and Furnham (2000) expressed people have some insight into their own EI skills. By giving more weight on Petrides and Furnham's notion, it is hypothesized that female hospitality employees are likely to perceive themselves as having higher EI skills than male counterparts.

The next often discussed socio-demographic variables are age and experience. One of the important characteristics of intelligence is that it develops over time; therefore EI must increase with age and experience to be considered as true intelligence (Mayer et al., 1999). After comparing EI scores of the adolescent group to the adult group, Mayer et al. (1999) presented that adults have higher emotional ability than adolescents. However, other studies did not report the same findings: EI was not significantly related to age or the length of work experience (Augusto Landa et al., 2008; Cote and Miners, 2006). Although previous research is not always supportive of the developmental criterion of EI, it seems plausible to expect a positive relationship between EI and age and job experience because a greater amount of experience and older age obviously can offer more opportunities to learn about one's own and others' emotions.

The relation of EI to the job position has not been studied to a great extent. The hospitality industry is known as a people business. In the people business, EI is likely to be required at work. Strong performers are often promoted to managerial positions and the hospitality literature evidently shows a higher level of professional efficacy for managers (Kim et al., 2007, 2009). Therefore, managers are likely to exhibit higher EI skills than non-managers. EI researchers believe EI is teachable (Brackett and Salovey, 2006). However, the current form of education focuses on enhancing cognitive abilities rather than emotional skills. Consequently, no significant relationship is expected between education and EI. Based on the literature review and our own rationale, the following hypothesis is put forward: