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# Does emotional intelligence moderate the relationship between mental health and job performance? An exploratory study

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## KEYWORDS

Emotional intelligence;  
Mental health;  
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**Summary** Hitherto, scholars have examined the direct effects of emotional intelligence on health-related outcomes or performance. Yet, attempts to explore any interactive effects of emotional intelligence on these variables are conspicuous by their absence. Using a multi-source design (i.e., team members and supervisors,  $n = 57$ , total  $N = 137$ ) and instruments with different scoring protocols (i.e., ability and self-reported data), findings from a UK public sector questionnaire survey suggest that emotional intelligence only partly moderates the relationship between mental health and some – but not all – aspects of job performance. Implications for management theory and practice are discussed.

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## Introduction

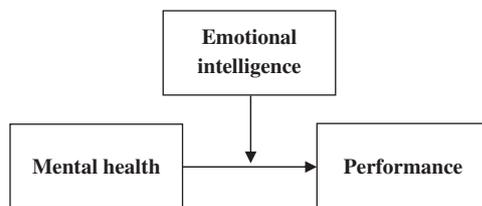
To date scholars have examined the direct effects of emotional intelligence on health-related outcomes (Bastian, Burns, & Nettelbeck, 2005; Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005; Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010) or performance (Blickle et al., 2009; Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story et al., 2011). Emotional intelligence has been succinctly defined as the ability "to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought" (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008, p. 518). However, no empirical work has been undertaken to date to examine the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between health outcomes

and performance. Since the "identification of important moderators of relations between predictors and outcomes indicates the maturity and sophistication of a field of inquiry" (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004, p. 116), the aim of this study is to explore the interactive effects of emotional intelligence on mental health and performance (see Figure 1).

The pursuit of this aim is germane for one significant reason. That is, emotional intelligence researchers have consistently overlooked that individuals and organizations may not, of necessity, converge on the same objectives (cf. Schein, 1968). Some scholars have interpreted this along the following question: Does "the individual benefit from high EI (emotional intelligence) or... the organization?" (Lindebaum, 2009, p. 230, italics added). However, rather than envisaging such a dichotomous view, a meaningful extension would be to consider the very real necessity to reconcile individual interests (e.g., good mental health) and organizational benefits (e.g., high performance). After

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**Figure 1** Model highlighting the interactive effect of emotional intelligence on mental health and performance.

all, individuals are more likely to perform well over longer periods of time if they are in good mental health (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2008). It is thus pertinent to explore whether individuals use emotional intelligence to safeguard their mental health *and* perform well. In other words, is mental health associated with performance also in interaction with high emotional intelligence?

For the sake of clarity, the following definitions of mental health and performance are adopted, respectively. While health has also been defined in terms of its physical, social functioning, or role functioning components (see Gross & Muñoz, 1995; Ware, 1987, for reviews), a specific focus upon mental health is more relevant for this study. This is attributed to a mounting concern over increased mental health problems in the working population (WHO, 2002). Thus, mental health is defined as being able “to work creatively and productively... to feel comfortable when alone, usually be developing a rich and fulfilling inner life” (Gross & Muñoz, 1995, p. 155). This also implies a feeling of integration and self-cohesion, which may contribute to resilience and can help prevent drifting into destructive relationships (Gross & Muñoz, 1995). In this respect, the personality trait of neuroticism offers an appropriate theoretical lens through which to study mental health in the present context. It is characterized by “a broad dimension of individual differences in the tendency to experience negative, distressing emotions and to possess associated behavioral and cognitive traits” (Costa & McCrae, 1987, p. 301). Myriad empirical studies show that neuroticism is related to poorer mental health, including negative affect (Bagby & Rector, 1998; Hull, Tedlie, & Lehn, 1995), anxiety, (Gershuny, Sher, Rossy, & Bishop, 2000), and a dispositional factor for depression (Petersen, Bottonari, Alpert, Fava, & Nierenberg, 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

In terms of performance at work, how individuals perform habitually refers to the degree to which they help organizations reach their goals. Yet, studies have shown that performance should be further distinguished into task as well as contextual performance (see Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). Specifically, task performance is defined as “proficiency in job-specific tasks”, whereas contextual performance is defined as “a set of interpersonal and volitional behaviors that support the social and motivational context in which organizational work is accomplished” (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996, p. 525).

<sup>1</sup> Of course, not being neurotic does not entail good mental health a priori. After all, someone may lack neurotic tendencies, but still be in poor mental health due to another condition, such as bipolar personality disorders.

Although these findings must be regarded as preliminary for reasons detailed later, they will be intrinsically relevant to scholars and practitioners in the field of management due to their longstanding interest in health issues and how they can affect individual performance at work (e.g., Walsh, 2011).

## Emotional intelligence

In the recent years, theoretical developments in ability emotional intelligence research have advanced considerably (Fiori, 2009; Joseph & Newman, 2010; Lindebaum, 2012; Mayer, Roberts, et al., 2008; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). Whilst some have centered on broader conceptualizations of emotional intelligence, especially the four-branch ability model by Mayer and co-workers (Mayer, Roberts, et al., 2008; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), others have theorized around narrower sampling domains (Blickle et al., 2009; Schmidt-Atzert & Bühner, 2002) to reflect closely the conceptual bedrock of emotional intelligence theory. Therefore, following the definition of emotional intelligence offered above, this conceptualization sets ability emotional intelligence theory clearly apart from what has come to be known as trait emotional intelligence theory, which is concerned with “emotion-related dispositions and self-perceptions” (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007, p. 273). This theorizing typically refers to preferred or typical ways of behavior (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Zampetakis, Beldekos, & Moustakis, 2009).

This study follows the narrower conceptualization of ability emotional intelligence for several reasons. First, a narrower focus implies a better fit with the intelligence domain, as the ability to understand emotions is most closely related to cognitive ability (Kluemper, DeGroot, & Choi, in press). Second, ability emotional intelligence implies the ability to tap into intra-psychic experiences and to configure mental processes at maximum capacity (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). This ability to configure mental processes may be critical in environments where potentially opposing objectives have to be reconciled, such as considerations for one’s mental health and performance imperatives.

## Emotional intelligence as a moderator between mental health and performance

Previous theoretical debates have identified that potential beneficiaries of high emotional intelligence are rarely distinguished, and that it may be necessary to examine whether emotional intelligence is either related to individual health *or* performance (Lindebaum, 2009). Underlying this is the view that organizations and individuals often do not converge on the same objectives (Schein, 1968), which is particularly relevant when the pursuit of individual benefits (e.g., enjoying good mental health) or organizational interests (e.g., individual performance) can be diametrically opposed (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011). However, an extension of this thinking is to argue that emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between mental health and performance (i.e., an interactive as opposed to direct effect exists). To explicate this, this study assumes that emotional intelligence is a resource that can be used to ob-

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