



Emotional expression and implications for occupational stress; an application of the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i)

R. Bar-On^a, J.M. Brown^b, B.D. Kirkcaldy^{c,*}, E.P. Thomé^d

^aCenter for the Interdisciplinary Research of Emotions, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK

^cInternational Centre for the Study of Occupational and Mental Health, Haydnstr. 61, 40593, Düsseldorf, Germany

^dTechnical College, Fachschule für Sozial- und Heilpädagogik, Düsseldorf-Gerresheim, Germany

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Abstract

The concept of emotional intelligence was examined in relation to the latitude permitted for emotional expressiveness and adaptation to occupational culture in three groups of helping professionals: police officers, child care workers, and educators in mental health care. A total of 167 individuals were administered the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i). There were no differences in the primary scales measuring various aspects of emotional intelligence between the two groups of care workers. There were differences between a combined care worker grouping and the police officers with the latter seeming more emotionally adaptable than the former. Whilst there were some overall gender differences, there were no gender by occupation interactions. There were also differences in terms of three higher order factors of the EQ-i with police officers achieving higher scores on positive affect and emotional stability than the care workers. Results are discussed in the light of differences in occupational cultures and methodological considerations. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Bruce.Kirkcaldy@t-online.de (B.D. Kirkcaldy).

1. Introduction

This paper describes an application of a measure of emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 1997a,b) to the study of occupational stress. Marsella (1994, p. 164) suggests that stress involves an emotional reaction, especially a reaction involving the negative emotional states. This represents an expansion to investigative approaches of occupational stress. Briner (1996) argues expansions are necessary if questions are to be asked about the processes producing negative emotions and individuals' experiences of psychological distress as well as implicating work environments or situations as contributory factors of such distress.

Individuals' access to their feelings, the labelling of those feelings and use by them to guide behaviour were conceptualised by Gardner (1983) in terms of personal intelligences (comprised of "intrapersonal intelligence" and "interpersonal intelligence"). These notions were theoretical forerunners to the concepts of emotional literacy and emotional intelligence. Steiner (1984, p. 165) suggested that "to be emotionally literate we need to know both what it is that we are feeling and what the cause of our feelings are" Steiner further argued that emotional literacy is embedded in culture and is learned. Salovey and Mayer (1989/90) expand upon Gardner's work and defined emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive and express, assimilate, understand and manage emotions. Bar-On's (1997a,b) model of "noncognitive intelligence" appears to be the most comprehensive and inclusive conceptualisation of this construct. Noncognitive intelligence is defined as an array of emotional, personal, and social abilities and skills that influence an individual's ability to cope effectively with environmental demands and pressures. The key factors involved in this model include *intrapersonal capacity* (the ability to be aware and understand oneself, one's emotions and to express one's feelings and ideas), *interpersonal skills* (the ability to be aware of, understand and to appreciate others' feelings as well as to establish and maintain mutually satisfying and responsible relationships with others), *adaptability* (the ability to verify one's feelings with objective external cues and accurately size up the immediate situation, flexibly to alter one's feelings and thoughts with changing situations, and to solve personal and interpersonal problems), *stress management strategies* (the ability to cope with stress and to control strong emotions), and *motivational and general mood factors* (the ability to be optimistic, to enjoy oneself and others, and to feel and express positive feelings).

The relevance of these conceptualisations for the present paper is based on Barley and Knight's (1992) proposition that beliefs about emotional expressiveness are specific to particular occupational cultures. Callan (1989) states that an organisation's culture is that "web of ideas, symbols, values and beliefs about the world which its members hold in common and with reference to which experience is given meaning and value". Callan further suggests that occupational cultures provide both the rules which govern appropriate behaviour and theories of causation such as defining the circumstances for offering blame or praise for success or failure. Training and on the job experience socialises new members into their respective occupational cultures in such a way so as to define the latitude of acceptance of emotional expression which might expect to vary according to the underlying ethos of a particular work settings.

The three groups which are the focus of the present study namely police, child care workers and mental health educators, share some similarities but they are also distinctive.

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