



Emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in Chinese university students: The mediating role of self-esteem and social support

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ABSTRACT

This study examined both the mediation effects of social support and self-esteem for the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in late adolescence. The participants were 489 Chinese college students with an age range of 17–23 years. Data were collected by using the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Path analysis showed that social support and self-esteem fully mediated the relationship between trait EI and life satisfaction in late adolescence. Moreover, a multi-group analysis indicated that the males with high social support are more likely to gain greater life satisfaction than the female counterparts. Implications for future research and limitations of the present findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the past ten years, emotional intelligence (EI) has received much attention in the psychological literature and beyond (e.g., Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003). There are two different conceptualizations of EI – i.e., trait EI and ability EI – in the research literature. Trait EI has been conceptualized as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions which locates at the lower-levels of personality hierarchies (as measured through self-report measures) (Petrides et al., 2007). Ability EI has been defined as a cognitive ability which concerns one's actual ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions in the self and others (as measured through maximum performance tests). Previous studies found very low correlations between these two measures (e.g., Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005), indicating that trait EI and ability EI are two distinctive constructs. The present study focused on trait EI and used a self-report questionnaire to assess the construct.

1.1. Trait EI and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction, which reflects an individual's evaluation of his or her life as a whole (Diener & Diener, 1995), is one of the most examined variables which are associated with trait EI. Individuals with higher emotional abilities are thought to possess a greater

capacity to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions in the self and others which facilitates a greater sense of subjective well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). A substantial body of research provides evidence for the incremental validity of trait EI as a predictor of life satisfaction; most noteworthy are those that control for covariates such as demographic characteristics, the “Big-Five” personality, trait affectivity, or social support (e.g., Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kong & Zhao, 2011, 2012; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2002; Saklofske et al., 2003).

1.2. Trait EI, social support, self-esteem and life satisfaction

Although the research literature is clear that trait EI is associated with life satisfaction, far less is known about the mechanisms or processes underlying this relationship. What potential mediating variables can account for the association between trait EI and life satisfaction? Although some ideas have been put forward in the research literature (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012), not much research has tested this key question empirically.

A likely candidate to mediate the association between trait EI and life satisfaction is social support. Some theorists have asserted that emotional abilities contribute to acquire social skills, and thus to enhance both quality of relationships and the availability of social support, which in turn lead to a richer sense of subjective well-being (Salovey et al., 2000). Some evidence supports the hypothesis. For instance, people with high trait EI are likely to perceive greater social support (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick,

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2008; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007). In addition, research has shown that people who perceive much social support from others report greater life satisfaction (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kong & You, 2011; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007). Recently, some researchers have verified the hypothesis. They found that social support acted as a partial mediator of the relationship between trait EI and life satisfaction (Kong et al., 2012).

In a similar way, self-esteem might be hypothesized to mediate the association between EI and life satisfaction. Self-esteem refers to an individual's general sense of his or her value or worth (Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003). On the one hand, self-esteem has been found to be associated with life satisfaction, and it is one of the most examined predictor variables of life satisfaction besides demographic characteristics, social relationships, and personality (Kong & You, 2011; Zhang & Leung, 2002). On the other hand, those with high trait EI scores have a propensity to perceive a greater sense of his or her value or worth (i.e., higher self-esteem) (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Dong, Urista, & Gundrum, 2008). Thus, trait EI is likely to be associated with greater life satisfaction by means of the greater sense of self-esteem.

1.3. The current study

The purpose of this study is to examine the concurrent mediating effects of social support and self-esteem between trait EI and life satisfaction through the structural equation modeling (SEM). Considering the studies which have shown the relationships of EI with life satisfaction (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Palmer et al., 2002; Saklofske et al., 2003), social support (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Mikolajczak, Luminet, Leroy, & Roy, 2007; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007), and self-esteem (e.g., Ciarrochi et al., 2000, 2001; Dong et al., 2008), it was predicted in this study that social support and self-esteem might play a mediating role in the trait EI-life satisfaction relationship. On the other hand, an important limitation in the EI literature is that the majority of the studies were conducted within Western countries. Testing these findings in an Asian culture would provide meaningful evidence for the external validity.

In summary, the present study tested the mediating effects of social support and self-esteem on the trait EI- life satisfaction relationship in a sample of Chinese university students. Based on the previous studies, we proposed two possible hypotheses: (1) EI significantly predicted life satisfaction. (2) Social support and self-esteem mediated the association between trait EI and life satisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Four hundred and eighty-nine undergraduates from mainland China volunteered to take part in the study (mean age = 20.81 - years, standard deviation = 1.23 years, age range = 18–23 years). In the sample, 281 were females and 208 were males.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional intelligence

Self-perceived emotional competency was assessed by a Chinese version of the self-report Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS, Wong & Law, 2002), which consists of 16 brief statements. The scale includes four dimensions: Regulation of Emotion (ROE), Self Emotion Appraisals (SEA), Others' Emotion Appraisals

(OEA), and Use of Emotion (UOE). A sample item from the ROE is "I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions." A sample item from the SEA is "I always know whether or not I am happy." A sample item from the OEA is "I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others." A sample item from the UOE is "I always tell myself I am a competent person." Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The WLEIS has good reliability and validity (e.g., Kong et al., 2012; Shi & Wang, 2007). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the four subscales were: SEA: .76; ROE: .80; OEA: .83; UOE: .76. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for all 16 items was .89.

2.2.2. Social support

To assess perceived social support in participants, we administered the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), consisting of 12 items. The scale assesses three sources of support; Significant Other, Family and Friends, for example, "My family really tries to help me", "I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows", and "There is a special person who is around when I am in need". Each item is answered on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The MSPSS has good reliability and validity (e.g., Kong et al., 2012). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the three subscales were: Significant Other: .85; Family: .86; and Friends: .89. The scale had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .93.

2.2.3. Self-esteem

Self-esteem was accessed by the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), which is a 10-item self-report measure of global self-esteem. Each item is answered on a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. It includes items such as, "I am able to do things as well as most other people." and "I take a positive attitude toward myself". The scores can range from 10 (low level of self-esteem) to 40 (high level of self-esteem). The RSES has good levels of reliability and validity (Kong & You, 2011; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the RSES was .83.

2.2.4. Life satisfaction

To assess life satisfaction in participants we administered the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) consisting of five items. Participants are instructed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement using a 5-point Likert type scale. It includes items such as, "I am satisfied with my life" and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal". The SWLS has good reliability and validity (Kong & You, 2011; Kong et al., 2012). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SWLS was .80.

Demographic information was also collected including age, gender and major information. All the questionnaires employed in this study were in Chinese language.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were instructed to complete a questionnaire survey consisting of the WLEIS, RSES, MSPSS and SWLS in the classroom environment. The participants did not place their names on the measures and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. It took approximately 20 min for the students to complete all the instruments.

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