



Affective mediators of the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in young adults

Feng Kong^{a,*}, Jingjing Zhao^b

^a State Key Laboratory of Cognitive Neuroscience and Learning, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

^b School of Psychology, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the affective mediators of the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in young adults and the widespread or limited affective mediators between the different groups in demographic factors, e.g., gender, students and non-students, family conditions. Six hundred and twenty participants completed the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale. Results using structural equation modeling showed that both positive affect and negative affect acted as mediators of the relationship between trait EI and life satisfaction and the indirect effect of trait EI on life satisfaction via positive affect was stronger than that via negative affect. Moreover, multi-group analyses found that the paths did not differ by gender and family conditions, but positive affect was more strongly associated with students' life satisfaction, compared to non-students. Implications and limitations of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, much attention has been paid to Emotional Intelligence (EI) in the academic literature (e.g., Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003; Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008). Petrides et al. (2007) proposed two different conceptualization of EI, i.e., trait EI and ability EI. Ability EI refers to one's ability to perceive, understand, use and regulate emotions in self and others. Trait EI, by contrast, is conceptualized as a trait which refers to a constellation of behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions located at the lower-levels of personality hierarchies. Trait EI is measured through self-report inventories, whereas ability EI is measured through performance-based tests. The current study focuses on the second conceptualization of EI.

1.1. Trait EI and life satisfaction

There is a great deal of research investigating the relationship between trait EI and life satisfaction, which is the cognitive component of subjective well-being. Individuals with higher EI scores are thought to be more capable of perceiving and reasoning around emotion, which enhances their well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999). There is accumu-

lating evidence in support of the incremental validity of EI measures as a predictor of life satisfaction, whether based on the ability or the trait approach, even after controlling for other variables such as the "Big-Five" personality, demographic characteristics, affect balance, self-esteem, social support (e.g., Extremera & Fernández-Berrocá, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012a, 2012b; Koydemir, Şimşek, Schütz, & Tipandjan, in press; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2002; Petrides et al., 2007; Saklofske et al., 2003; Schutte & Malouff, 2011).

1.2. EI, positive affect and negative affect

It is generally agreed that trait EI is negatively associated with negative affect, and positively associated with positive affect (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008; Mikolajczak, Luminet, Leroy, & Roy, 2007; Koydemir et al., in press; Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quidbach, 2008; Schutte & Malouff, 2011; Shi & Wang, 2007). Yet, most of past studies found very weak or non-significant links between ability EI and affect indicators, such as stress, anxiety, depression (e.g., Davis & Humphrey, 2012; Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005; Zeidner & Olnick-Shemesh, 2010). Accordingly, the very weak links of maximum performance measures with measures of affect indicated that individuals might be incapable of translating their emotional knowledge into practice. In view of the problems of maximum performance measures, this study adopted a self-report measure of EI (Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002) to examine the association among trait EI and affect.

* Corresponding authors. Tel.: +86 18010177164 (F. Kong).

E-mail addresses: kongfeng87@126.com (F. Kong), zhaojingjing_31@126.com (J. Zhao).

1.3. EI, positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction

What possible mediating processes can account for the beneficial effects of trait EI on life satisfaction? Some theorists have claimed that emotional abilities contribute to experience less negative emotions (e.g., social anxiety) and more positive emotions, which in turn lead to higher satisfaction with life (e.g., Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012). Some evidence support the hypothesis. For example, Gignac (2006) who used structural equation modeling (SEM) showed that the specific indirect effect of trait EI on life satisfaction via positive affect was significant, while the significant indirect effect via negative affect was not found. Kafetsios and Zampetakis (2008) using the same techniques showed that positive and negative affect at work acted as mediators of the relationship between EI and job satisfaction. These results indicated that individuals with higher EI scores tended to experience less negative affect and more positive affect, which led to an increase in job satisfaction. However, in these two studies, there may be some methodological problems. First, Kafetsios and Zampetakis (2008) only tested the total indirect effect via positive and negative affect, but not the specific indirect effects. Preacher and Hayes (2008) asserted that significance of the total indirect effect was not a necessary precondition for significant specific indirect effects in multiple mediator models. Second, the results of Gignac (2006) were obtained in a very small sample ($N = 107$), which might result in a non-significant mediating effect of negative affect. Barrett (2007) asserted that SEM analyses based upon samples of less than 200 should simply be rejected outright for publication unless the population is itself small or restricted in size.

1.4. The present study

Based on the above limitations, on the one hand, the aim of the current study is to examine the mediating effects of both positive and negative effect on the link between trait EI and life satisfaction in a large sample of Chinese adults ($N = 620$), and determine which mediator variable plays a more important role in the association via the methods comparing specific indirect effects in multiple mediator models. On the other hand, based on the studies that adopt a based-trait approach, when controlling for demographic variables, such as age, gender, people with high trait EI scores still tend to have high levels of life satisfaction (e.g., Extremera & Fernández-Berrocá, 2005; Gannon & Ranzijn, 2005). However, it is unclear whether the affective mediators of the relationship between EI and life satisfaction differ between the groups in demographics. This study used SEM techniques to test the group differences in affective mediators of the association between EI and life satisfaction between the groups in demographics, e.g., gender, students and non-students, family conditions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Six hundred and twenty native Chinese speaking undergraduates from mainland China volunteered to take part in the study (mean age = 23.83 years, standard deviation = 2.93 years, age range = 18–29 years). In the sample, 314 were females and 306 were males; 311 were rural and 309 were urban; 353 were students and 267 were non-students. The majority of non-students had completed university, college or post-graduate studies (72.7%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional intelligence

We used the self-report Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS, Wong & Law, 2002) consisting of four dimensions. The

Self-Emotion Appraisal (SEA) dimension assesses an individual's self-perceived ability to understand their emotions. The Use of Emotion (UOE) dimension concerns the self-perceived tendency to motivate oneself to enhance performance. The Others' Emotion Appraisal (OEA) dimension assesses a person's tendency to be able to perceive other peoples' emotions. The Regulation of Emotion (ROE) dimension concerns individuals' perceived ability to regulate their own emotions. The WLEIS has good psychometric properties (Kong et al., 2012a,b; Shi & Wang, 2007). Coefficients alphas for the four elements were: SEA: .78; OEA: .87; ROE: .87; UOE: .73. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for all 16 items was .89.

2.2.2. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) consists of five items. Each item is answered on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. It includes items such as, "I am satisfied with my life" and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal". Items are summed to form a general score of life satisfaction. The scale has been proved to have good validity and reliability in Chinese populations (Kong & You, in press). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SWLS was .82.

2.2.3. Positive affect and negative affect

To assess positive affect and negative affect in participants we administered a version of the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008). The scale consists of a 14 word list describing two different affect states. The list consists of eight negative affect labels (i.e., sad, anger, unpleasant, guilt, shame, worry, stress, and jealousy) and six positive affect labels (i.e., pleasant, happy, cheerful, pride, gratitude, and love). Participants are instructed to indicate the extent to which they generally feel each affect using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = very slightly or not at all to 7 = very much. Separate negative affect and positive affect scores are calculated with higher scores indicating more of that affect. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the positive affect and negative affect subscales were .85 and .85, respectively.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire survey consisting of the WLEIS, SWLS and PANAS. The hyperlink to the questionnaire study was distributed through online forums (e.g. <http://www.psych.org.cn>; <http://www.xlzx.com>). Participants needed "click" on the hyperlink which took them to the consent page. Only those who completed the consent form were taken to the questionnaires. This method has been used successfully by other studies collecting data online (e.g., Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011; Drake, Sheffield, & Shingler, 2011; Kong et al., 2012a; Meyerson & Tryon, 2003). Meyerson and Tryon (2003) demonstrated that data collection through the web is (1) reliable, (2) valid, (3) reasonably representative, (4) cost effective, and (5) efficient.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis strategy

We used the two-step procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to analyze the mediation effects. The measurement model was first tested to assess the extent to which each of the latent variables was represented by its indicators. If the measurement model was accepted, then the structural model using the maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 17.0 program was tested. In order to control for inflated measurement errors due to multiple items for

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