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## Positive emotions, emotional intelligence, and successful experiential learning

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the role that positive emotions and emotional intelligence play in experiential learning. Students' field practicum journals were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Program (LIWC) and a measure of emotional intelligence was obtained using the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). Positive emotion words were robustly associated with almost all dimensions of supervisors' ratings of students' performance, but showed weak associations with students' ratings of perceived benefits associated with their practicum experiences. Overall EI scores were correlated with several of the supervisor rating items and the Facilitating Thought and Managing Emotions subscales of the EI were robustly correlated with many of the student rating items. This study thus yielded a more differentiated view of the role of positive emotions and emotional intelligence in adaptive functioning and underscored the importance of using multiple informants to assess a complex construct such as successful experiential learning.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, an impressive body of research has shown that both positive emotions and emotional intelligence are associated with multiple successful outcomes in the domains of mental health, social relationships, and work (for reviews see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). In spite of the fact that both emotion variables have garnered a great deal of attention in the field and have many areas of theoretical and empirical overlap, surprisingly little research has explored how they are interrelated and jointly contribute to adaptive functioning. This study explores the role that both positive emotions and emotional intelligence play in successful experiential learning.

#### 1.1. Positive emotions

For many decades, theories of emotions focused on how negative emotions help us cope with immediate threats by narrowing our thought-action patterns. However, with the formulation of the “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), increasing attention has been devoted to elucidating the role of positive emotions in adaptive functioning. According to this theory, positive emotions do not merely reflect momentary happiness or satisfaction, but more importantly serve the evolutionary adaptive function of widening a person's scope of attention and cognition as well as expanding the array of possible behaviors.

The broadened mindset associated with positive emotions facilitates creative and flexible thinking as well as effective problem-solving and coping skills. Overtime, the benefits associated with the broadened mindset compound and build durable psychological and social resources that the person can draw on to deal with various life challenges.

In support of the broaden and build theory of positive emotions, studies have found that individuals who are induced to feel positive emotions exhibit wider visual search patterns as well as more flexible mindsets and also report higher levels of feelings of self-other overlap (for recent review see Kok, Catalino, & Fredrickson, 2008). Several studies have also shown that positive emotions undo or buffer the deleterious effects of negative emotions and thereby contribute to psychological resilience and flourishing (e.g., Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009). A large scale review of longitudinal and experimental studies has also revealed that positive emotions often precedes and predicts positive outcomes in the domains of mental health, social relationships, and work and are not simply the result of positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

#### 1.2. Emotional intelligence

According to the emotional intelligence (EI) theory, emotions provide us with vital information for making sense of our inner experiences and navigating our social environment. Thus, individuals who are receptive to internal and external cues of emotion, engage in sophisticated information processing about their own and others' emotion experiences, and use the information as a guide to their thought and behavior are more likely to exhibit

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adaptive functioning in both the intrapersonal and interpersonal realms (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

In support of the foregoing view, an impressive body of research has found that EI is associated with various measures of intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning (for review see Mayer et al., 2008). For example, studies show that emotional intelligence is positively correlated with measures of well-being and negatively correlated with measures of deviant behaviors (e.g., Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004). Various dimensions of EI have also been associated with self-reports of interpersonal sensitivity and positive relations with others as well as peer and observer ratings of social competence (e.g., Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006; Lopes, Salovey, Cote, & Beers, 2005). Perhaps most important, emotional intelligence has been associated with some important real world outcomes. Many studies have reported robust relations between EI and various measures of work performance, including supervisors' ratings of productivity, personal integrity, and leadership (Mayer et al., 2008). Other studies have shown that EI is associated with higher retention rates, academic success, and positive coping among college students (e.g., Austin, Saklofske, & Mastoras, 2010; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004).

### 1.3. *Experiential learning*

Over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous growth in service-based experiential learning courses at universities across the country. A substantial body of research shows that these courses are associated with a host of positive intrapersonal as well as interpersonal outcomes including moral development, leadership skills, and appreciation of diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Both positive emotions and emotional intelligence are likely to play a central role in successful experiential learning for several reasons. First, as the foregoing literature has shown, both emotion variables are associated with adaptive intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning, which are likely to facilitate the experiential learning process. Second, positive emotions and emotional intelligence are both likely to serve as valuable psychological and social resources for coping with the various challenges associated with each of the developmental stages of the internship experience (Sweitzer & King, 2008). Finally, positive emotions and emotional intelligence may also contribute to successful experiential learning by fostering reflection (Kok et al., 2008; Mayer et al., 2002), which has been identified as "one of the core process variables" (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. xii) involved in successful experiential learning. Given that by definition, emotional intelligence involves information processing with respect to the affective system, it is particularly likely to be strongly associated with deeper processing of experiences and higher levels of integrative thinking.

### 1.4. *Present study*

The major goal of the study was to examine the associations between positive emotions and emotional intelligence with supervisors' ratings of students' performance and students' ratings of perceived personal and professional benefits associated with their practicum experiences. A subsidiary goal of this study was to examine whether emotional intelligence mediates the relations between positive emotions and successful experiential learning or vice versa. As Tugade and Fredrickson (2001) have observed, individuals who make intelligent use of their emotions may be more adept at harnessing positive emotions and conversely individuals who frequently experience positive emotions may learn to make more intelligent use of their emotions. Thus, positive emotions and emotional intelligence may reciprocally influence one another. Another possibility is that high levels of emotional intelligence may serve as a protective factor against low levels of positive

emotions or that conversely high levels of emotional intelligence would serve as a protective factor against low levels of positive emotions and, therefore, that these two emotion variables may interact with one another in predicting successful experiential learning.

Given that previous research has found that self-report measures of emotions and emotional intelligence tend to be highly correlated with one another undoubtedly due in part to shared method variance, special attention was given to selecting measures of emotions and EI that utilized different methodologies and had good discriminant validity. In this study, measures of emotions were obtained by analyzing students' field practicum journals using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Program (LIWC, Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2007), which is a well-validated content-analysis program. Emotional Intelligence was assessed using the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT 2.0, Mayer et al., 2002), which is the most widely used performance based measure of emotional intelligence.

A previous study on experiential learning (Abe, 2009) found that students' use of positive emotion words showed robust associations with almost all dimensions of supervisors' evaluation. However, both word count and negative emotion words were not associated with supervisors' ratings, indicating that merely how much students write and the extent to which they process their negative emotion experiences is not predictive of supervisors' perceptions of their performance.

This study extends the previous study on experiential learning (Abe, 2009) in several important ways. First, this study included a measure of emotional intelligence in addition to emotion words, which enabled one to examine the relative contribution of the two sets of variables in predicting successful experiential learning. Second, successful experiential learning was assessed not only using supervisors' ratings of students' performance, but also students' ratings of perceived benefits associated with their practicum experiences. Third, this study used an expanded version of the supervisors' rating scale, which included additional items that assessed higher levels of integrative thinking.

According to the literature on experiential learning, learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, and action, whereby reflecting on experiences leads to enhanced understanding and enhanced understanding leads to more effective action. Even though positive emotions and emotional intelligence are likely to play an important role during all phases of the learning cycle, positive emotions is likely to facilitate experiential learning mainly by expanding a person's thought-action repertoire, whereas emotional intelligence is likely to facilitate experiential learning mainly by fostering reflective abilities. This study, therefore, predicted that positive emotions may be more robustly associated with supervisors' ratings of students' performance, whereas the EI dimensions may be more robustly associated with students' ratings of perceived personal and professional benefits associated with their practicum experiences. Even though students' use of negative emotion words was not associated with supervisors' ratings of performance in the previous study (Abe, 2009), it was included in this study because it is possible that the narrowed focus associated with negative emotions may help students more carefully process (Forgas, 2006) their practicum experiences and thereby contribute to their perceptions of benefits associated with their internship.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. *Participants and procedure*

The participants in this study were 65 students who were enrolled in an undergraduate mental health specialization program

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