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Emotional intelligence and job satisfaction: Testing the mediatory role of positive and negative affect at work

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Abstract

The study tested the extent to which positive and negative affect at work mediate personality effects (Emotional Intelligence) on job satisfaction. Participants were 523 educators who completed the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, a version of the Job Affect Scale and the General Index of Job Satisfaction. Results using structural equation modelling indicated that positive and negative affect at work substantially mediate the relationship between EI and job satisfaction with positive affect exerting a stronger influence. In males, affect at work fully mediated the EI effect on job satisfaction. Among the four EI dimensions, use of emotion and emotion regulation were significant independent predictors of affect at work. The results confirm expectations deriving from Affective Events Theory regarding the role of work affectivity as an interface between personality and work attitudes and extend the literature on EI effects in organizational settings.

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1. Introduction

In the context of the emerging ‘affective revolution’ in social and organizational psychology (Barsade & Gibson, 2007) Emotional intelligence (EI) is proposed as an important predictor of

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key organizational outcomes including job satisfaction (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004). There is accumulating evidence that EI abilities and traits influence job satisfaction (e.g., Carmeli, 2003; Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006) but to our knowledge, there is no study testing the extent to which affective components of the work experience may mediate such a connection. Theories of emotion in organizations (i.e., Affective Events Theory, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) suggest that affective states at work are key vehicles of personality and organizational influences on job satisfaction and performance. Moreover, it has been pointed out that there is little research examining dispositional factors of job satisfaction (especially affect-related; Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000). Emotional intelligence thus can constitute a link between trait level affectivity, work affect and job satisfaction and the present study tested such a model using a structural equations modeling approach.

1.1. Defining EI

At a theoretical level EI reflects the extent to which a person attends to, processes, and acts upon information of an emotional nature intra-personally and inter-personally. However, there are ensuing debates at the operational level mainly, that have led to two distinct approaches: the ability and trait Emotional Intelligence. The ability approach uses maximum performance measures such as the Mayer, Salovey & Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002) to assess individual differences in the interface of emotion with cognitive processes (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Trait EI on the other hand incorporates EI abilities within a more general framework of individual self-perceived emotionality and emotion efficacy (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Nevertheless, some trait EI approaches and corresponding measures (e.g., EQi, Bar-On, 1997) diverge from the conceptualization of EI described in the beginning of this section in that they focus on individual differences in adaptation to environmental demands.

1.2. EI and job satisfaction

There are several reasons why workers' EI may influence job satisfaction. Interpersonally, emotion awareness and regulatory processes associated with EI are expected to benefit peoples' social relationships hence affecting the experience of emotion and stress at work. Intrapersonally, use of emotion and being aware of one's own emotions can lead to regulating stress and negative emotion so that one can perform better at work.

Research that has empirically examined relationships between EI and job satisfaction has returned mixed findings. A number of studies have observed weak to modest relationships between trait EI measures (i.e., EQi, Carmeli, 2003; Kafetsios & Loumakou, 2007; a Greek trait EI scale, Vacola, Tsaousis, & Nikolaou, 2003) and job satisfaction. A recent study of food service workers and their managers (Sy et al., 2006) observed a positive association between an ability based EI scale (Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002) and job satisfaction in employees and their managers. Finally, a study of a group of managers Lopes, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, and Salovey (2006) found links between EI abilities and affective proxies of job satisfaction measured via self and supervisor reports.

Like in Sy et al.'s (2006) study we used a self-report measure of EI (WLEIS) that conceptually subscribes to the ability approach and has shown to have good discriminant and predictive

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