



# Why are people high in emotional intelligence happier? They make the most of their positive emotions



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## ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the role of positive emotion regulation as a potential mechanism for linking trait emotional intelligence (EI) and subjective well-being (SWB). We examined whether the savouring and dampening of positive emotions mediate the relationship between trait EI and the two components of SWB: life satisfaction and subjective happiness. A sample of 254 participants completed measures of trait EI, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and the typical use of savouring and dampening strategies. Analyses indicated that trait EI was positively correlated with the two components of SWB and savouring strategies, and negatively correlated with dampening strategies. Furthermore, savouring strategies were positively related to life satisfaction and subjective happiness, whereas dampening strategies were negatively related to life satisfaction and subjective happiness. Notably, path analyses indicated that the savouring and dampening of positive emotions partially mediated the relationship between EI and both life satisfaction and subjective happiness. The findings corroborate an important role of trait EI in promoting SWB and suggest that part of its beneficial effect reveals itself through positive emotion regulation.

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## 1. Introduction

The growing recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) has led to a significant upsurge in research in this area. There are two predominant conceptualizations of EI: ability models (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and trait models (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Ability EI captures individuals' ability to perceive, use, understand and regulate emotion in oneself and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), whereas trait EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) relates to people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities (Petrides, 2011). Ability EI is measured by performance tests relating to maximum performance, whereas trait EI is assessed by self-report inventories referring to typical performance. This study focuses on trait EI and, therefore, uses a self-report questionnaire to assess the construct.

### 1.1. Trait EI and subjective well-being

An increasing number of studies demonstrate that trait EI is essential for various aspects of healthy adaptation, ranging from affective functioning to social relations (Petrides, 2011; Petrides et al., 2016). One of the issues that has greatly attracted researchers in recent years is the

role of trait EI in determining individuals' subjective well-being (SWB) which refers to how people experience the quality of their lives (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). It is claimed that the ability to perceive, express, understand and manage emotions plays a crucial role in promoting SWB (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012). Indeed, recent meta-analyses demonstrate that people high in trait EI report higher SWB than their low in trait EI counterparts (Andrei, Siegling, Aloe, Baldaro, & Petrides, 2016; Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2016). Moreover, a substantial body of research provides evidence for the incremental validity of trait EI in predicting SWB, beyond demographics and the Big Five personality traits, indicating the unique contribution of trait EI in explaining people's experience of the quality of life (e.g., Andrei et al., 2016; Gardner & Qualter, 2010; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007). Nevertheless, although considerable research has been devoted to providing evidence for the relationship between trait EI and SWB, rather less attention has been paid to the mechanisms or processes underlying this relationship.

Some authors have already shown that the trait EI–SWB relationship is mediated by affective processes. Specifically, results show that EI fosters the occurrence of positive emotions and decreases the frequency of negative emotions, which in turn lead to a higher sense of SWB (Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2016). Results demonstrate that both positive and negative emotions mediate the relationship between EI and life satisfaction (LS), and this effect is observed regardless of whether EI is measured through self-report questionnaires (Kong & Zhao, 2013) or

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through performance-based tests (Extremera & Rey, 2016). Research also suggests that positive emotions play a slightly more prominent role in the link between trait EI and LS than negative emotions (e.g., Gignac, 2006; Kong & Zhao, 2013), which is quite understandable given that positive emotions have the power to undo the effect of negative emotions (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000) and that by broadening thought–action repertoires they help to build consequential physical, psychological and social resources (Fredrickson, 2013).

People, however, are not just passive recipients of positive emotions but, to some extent, they are able to modulate their experience of emotions by employing various emotion regulation strategies during emotional episodes (Kashdan, Young, & Machell, 2015). Thus, whereas previous research highlighted the role of positive emotions in the trait EI–SWB relationship, the current study aims to complement this earlier work by focusing on the role of positive emotions regulation as a potential explanatory mechanism for the link between trait EI and SWB.

### 1.2. Trait EI, positive emotion regulation and subjective well-being

Emotion regulation (ER) refers to the strategies that people use to influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience or express them (Gross, 1998). In recent years, research on ER has developed rapidly (Gross, 2015). Most studies hitherto have focused on the regulation of negative emotions, but interest in positive ER is constantly growing (e.g., Bryant, Chadwick, & Kluwe, 2011; Goodall, 2015; Parrott, 1993; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003; see Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015 for a review). Theoretical models suggest that positive emotions, just like negative emotions, can be upregulated (increased) and downregulated (decreased) (Bryant et al., 2011; Gross, 1998). Upregulation or savouring refers to maintaining (prolonging) or enhancing (increasing) positive emotions in order to magnify their effect (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007), whereas downregulation or dampening involves stifling (decreasing) the effect of positive emotions (Wood et al., 2003).

Accordingly, Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak (2010) distinguished four broad types of savouring strategies: behavioural display (expressing positive emotions with non-verbal behaviours such as laughing), focusing attention on the present moment (deliberately directing attention to the present positive situation and pleasant experience), capitalizing (sharing and celebrating the positive event with others), and positive mental time travelling (remembering or imagining positive events). Dampening strategies are represented by emotional suppression (suppressing expression of positive emotions), fault-finding (seeking out negative aspects of positive situations or thinking that things could have been better), inattention (thinking of matters or engaging in activities unrelated to the current positive event), and negative mental time travelling (engaging in negative reminiscence on the causes of a positive event with an emphasis on external attribution or anticipation of negative consequences of a positive situation) (Quoidbach, Berry, et al., 2010).

Compared to the abundant research on EI and negative ER (see Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015 for a meta-analysis), research on the impact of EI on positive ER is extremely sparse. There is preliminary empirical support for the separate pathways from trait EI to positive ER, and from positive ER to SWB. Nelis, Quoidbach, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak (2011) reported a positive correlation between trait EI and adaptive regulation of positive emotions, which was defined as greater use of savouring strategies and less frequent use of dampening strategies. Furthermore, Quoidbach, Berry, et al. (2010) demonstrated that the greater use of savouring strategies was positively related to self-reported positive affect and LS; in contrast, the greater use of dampening strategies was negatively related to positive affect and LS. The foregoing studies provide evidence of significant separate associations between trait EI and positive ER on the one hand, and positive ER and SWB on the other. Although they suggest that trait EI might

be related to a sense of greater SWB through the greater use of savouring strategies and the lesser use of dampening strategies, this conclusion cannot be drawn yet: first, both studies are cross-sectional, which poses the problem of shared mood covariance. Second, the mediation model has never been tested.

### 1.3. The current study

The present study pursues two goals. The first is to check whether the links evidenced by Nelis et al. (2011) and Quoidbach, Berry, et al. (2010) can be replicated when measures are taken a week apart and in a country where the general level of well-being is lower (Belgian people's level of life satisfaction is above average whereas that of Polish people is below average; OECD, 2015). The second and most important goal is to examine whether the previously demonstrated link between trait EI and SWB could be at least partially explained by an indirect path from trait EI through positive ER (i.e., savouring and dampening strategies) to SWB. We predicted that trait EI would promote greater use of savouring strategies and lesser use of dampening strategies, which would in turn lead to greater SWB. As SWB includes both cognitive and emotional components (Diener et al., 2003), the most commonly studied components of SWB are LS (Diener et al., 2003) and subjective happiness (SH) (Lyubomirsky, 2001). LS refers to the result of people's cognitive evaluations of their lives, both about the past and the present (Diener et al., 2003; Pavot & Diener, 2008), whereas SH refers to a global and subjective evaluation of whether one is a happy or an unhappy person (Lyubomirsky, 2001; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Accordingly, LS can be considered a more cognitive aspect of SWB, whereas SH reflects a rather emotional aspect of SWB. Both LS and SH conceptualize well-being as the subjective experience of positive affect and happiness and, therefore, they represent a hedonic (versus eudaimonic) perspective on well-being (McMahan & Estes, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

We aim to contribute to the literature by investigating the mediating effects of savouring and dampening strategies on the links between trait EI and the two aspects of SWB. We propose the following hypothesis: trait EI is positively related to SWB (both LS and SH) and savouring strategies, and negatively related to dampening strategies (H1); savouring strategies and dampening strategies mediate the relationship between trait EI and LS (H2), and between trait EI and SH (H3).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 254 (54.7% females) undergraduate students from the University of Gdańsk (Poland) participated voluntarily in this study (mean age = 31.98 years; SD = 6.50, age range = 18–44 years).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Trait emotional intelligence

Trait EI was measured using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue-SF, Petrides & Furnham, 2006; Polish version by Szczygieł, Jasielska, & Wytykowska, 2015). The TEIQue-SF is derived from the full form of the TEIQue (see Petrides, 2011, for a comprehensive description of the factors and subscales) and comprises 30 items rated on a seven-point scale ranging from one ('completely disagree') to seven ('completely agree'). Given that the TEIQue-SF contains six items referring to well-being, we have excluded them from the current study in order to avoid shared content covariance with well-being measures.

#### 2.2.2. Subjective well-being

Two facets of overall subjective well-being were assessed: a predominantly cognition-based rating of life satisfaction was obtained

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