



Social support mediates the impact of emotional intelligence on mental distress and life satisfaction in Chinese young adults

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the pivotal role of social support and emotional intelligence (EI) in mental distress and life satisfaction in a sample of Chinese young adults was investigated. The participants were 678 Chinese adults with an age range of 18–35 years. Data were collected by using the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the General Health Questionnaire. Path analysis showed that social support partially mediated the relationship between EI and life satisfaction as well as that between EI and mental distress. Furthermore, a multi-group analysis found that the males with high EI scores are more likely to gain greater social support from others than the female counterparts. Implications for future research and limitations of the present findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, emotional intelligence (EI) has received much attention in the psychological literature and beyond. Different researchers have distinctive visions of how to conceptualize and assess EI. Two different conceptualizations of EI – i.e., Trait EI and Ability EI – coexist in the literature. Ability EI has been conceptualized as a cognitive ability concerning one's actual ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions in the self and others (as measured through maximum performance tests). Trait EI is defined as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions located at the lower-levels of personality hierarchies (as measured through self-report measures) (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). In fact, trait EI and ability EI are two different constructs conceptually, methodologically, and empirically. Past studies found very low correlations between these two measures (e.g., Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005). The present study focuses on the second conceptualization of EI and used a self-report measure to assess EI.

1.1. EI and mental distress

There is a substantial body of research investigating the relationship between EI and mental distress. Many studies have found that those with higher EI scores might prevent development of maladaptive emotional states associated with mood and anxiety disorders (e.g., Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley, 2011; Davis &

Humphrey, 2012; Mikolajczak, Luminet, Leroy, & Roy, 2007; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007; Salguero, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2012; Shi & Wang, 2007). A broad association between EI and mental health is confirmed by meta-analyses (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007). For instance, Martins et al. (2010) found that mental distress had a stronger association with EI (–.36) than physical distress (–.27).

1.2. EI and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction, which can be defined as the cognitive component of subjective well-being is another most examined variable which is related to high EI. People with higher EI are thought to possess a greater capacity to perceive and reason around emotion which facilitates greater subjective well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Numerous studies provide evidence for the incremental validity of EI as a predictor of life satisfaction; most noteworthy are those that control covariates such as the “Big-Five” personality, affectivity, demographic characteristics, or social relationships (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2002; Petrides et al., 2007; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003).

1.3. EI, social support and well-being

Whereas the literature is clear that EI is related to life satisfaction and mental distress, far less is known about the mechanisms involved. What potential mediating processes can explain the buffering/beneficial effects of EI on these two indicators of well-being?

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Some theorists have asserted that emotional abilities contribute to the acquisition of social competence, 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 and personal satisfaction with their social condition (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000). There is some evidence in support of the hypothesis. For example, people with good emotional abilities are likely to have more positive social relationships and fewer negative social relationships (e.g., Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003); those with high EI scores have a propensity to perceive greater social support (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007) and to report higher satisfaction with relationships (Schröder-Abe & Schütz, 2011). In addition, research has documented that people who perceive strong social networks and good social support report less mental distress and higher subjective well-being (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Kong & You, 2011; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007). Thus, emotional intelligence is likely to be associated with greater life satisfaction and less mental distress by means of the experience of greater social networks.

1.4. The current study

The aim of this study is to test the pivotal role of social support and EI in predicting mental distress and life satisfaction through the structural equation modeling (SEM). Considering the studies which have shown the relationships of EI with mental distress (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2011; Petrides et al., 2007; Shi & Wang, 2007), life satisfaction (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocá, 2005; Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Palmer et al., 2002; Saklofske et al., 2003), and social support (e.g., Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008; Mikolajczak et al., 2007; Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007), it was predicted in this study that social support might play a mediating role in EI-mental distress and life satisfaction relationships. That is to say, as EI increase, life satisfaction will increase and mental distress will decrease, and that social support will have an indirect role in this increase or decrease. On the other hand, a noteworthy deficiency in the EI and social support literature is that the majority of the studies were conducted within Western countries. Testing the mediation model in an Asian culture, especially in Chinese culture would provide meaningful evidence for the external validity. As a collectivistic country, Chinese might place more emphasis on social relationships with others than the Western countries, so satisfaction with social relationships is more crucial in predicting well-being.

In summary, the present study tested the mediation effect of social support on the EI-mental distress and life satisfaction relationships in a sample of Chinese young adults. First, we conducted analyses to replicate the impact of EI on life satisfaction and mental distress. We hypothesized that social support significantly predicted life satisfaction and mental distress. Second, we conducted mediation analyses to examine the mediating role of EI in the EI-mental distress and life satisfaction relationships. We hypothesized that social support mediated the link between EI and life satisfaction as well as that between EI and mental distress.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Six hundred and seventy-eight native Chinese speaking young adults from mainland China volunteered to take part in the study (mean age = 24.79 years, standard deviation = 5.99 years, age range = 18–35 years). In the sample, 354 were females and 324 were males.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional intelligence

Self-perceived emotional competency was measured using a Chinese version of the self-report Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS, Wong & Law, 2002), which consists of 16 brief statements. The scale consists of four dimensions that are consistent with Mayer and Salovey's (1997) definition of EI: Self Emotion Appraisals (SEA), Others' Emotion Appraisals (OEA), Regulation of Emotion (ROE), and Use of Emotion (UOE). It includes items such as, "I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others." and "I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions." Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The EIS elicits a global EI score with higher scores indicating greater EI. The WLEIS has good psychometric properties (Shi & Wang, 2007; Wong & Law, 2002). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the four subscales were: SEA: .79; ROE: .87; OEA: .88; UOE: .75. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for all 16 items was .89.

2.2.2. Social support

Social support was accessed by the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The MSPSS consists of 12 items relating to perceived SS, 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. Three separate scores can be calculated for the sources of support; Significant Other, Family and Friends. Higher scores indicate greater perceived social support. In this study, the scale was internally consistent and had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .91.

2.2.3. Mental distress

Mental distress in participants was measured by a Chinese version of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Lai & Chan, 2002). The GHQ-12 includes six questions that are positively worded (for example, 'Have you recently been able to enjoy your normal day to day activities?') and six that are negatively worded (for example, 'Have you recently been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?'). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 4 = much more than usual). A global distress score was computed by adding ratings on the 12 items with reverse coding of relevant items. Scores range from 12 to 48, with higher scores indicative of greater distress. In this study, the scale was internally consistent and had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .87.

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 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 psychometric properties (Diener et al., 1985). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SWLS was 0.82.

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

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire survey consisting of the WLEIS, SWLS, GHQ and MSPSS. The hyperlink to the

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