Awareness of Emotionally Competent Responding in Work Contexts and Its Relationship with Personal Traits and Well-Being

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Abstract

The study tested young adults' emotional intelligence in behaviorally responding to *problematic interpersonal events at work* (PIEW) and its relationship to traits (e.g., alexithymia level, job involvement) and well-being. Results showed that PIEW responses were explained by 3 factorial dimensions: Empathy (EMP), Minimizing, Aggressing and Devaluing attitude (MAD), and, correlated with it, Superficial attitude (SUA), differently endorsed by sex and age groups. Dimension preferences showed significant associations with participants' traits and well-being, as hypothesized - e.g., EMP positively related to job satisfaction, reappraisal, seeking social support, and felt positive affect; MAD was instead related positively to alexithymia, avoidant coping, and emotional loneliness, and negatively to emotion and social awareness, agreeableness, and health. The study has implications for counseling as regards how people approach and respond to problematic interpersonal events at work, and why.

1. Introduction and hypotheses

To contribute to a better understanding of career starters' emotional intelligence (EI) in responding to *problematic* and/or conflicting *interpersonal events at work* (PIEW), the current study focused on a set of PIEW scenarios, each associated with behavioral-response items to be rated for their adequacy, that were created with the aim of constructing a measure that would enable the assessment of EI-related dimensions of behavioral responding taking into account the literature on the EI constructs, including some of its limitations. More specifically, the debate on EI in recent years has underlined the need for measures unbiased by typical self-report issues (e.g., socially

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desirable responding, inability to report one's own behavior), and that can be scored using either expert- or consensus-scoring (e.g., for a recent review Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). The study, furthermore, tested the hypothesis that emotionally-competent PIEW responding is associated on the one hand with personal traits, both (a) dispositional ones (e.g., high agreeableness, low alexithymia, preference for appropriate coping and emotion-regulation strategies) and (b) specifically related to the work-context (e.g., higher job involvement and satisfaction and work-related emotional competencies), and on the other hand with higher, more positive levels of psycho-social well-being, as assessed by various indexes, i.e., felt affect, and subjective perceptions of loneliness, life satisfaction and health (see Measures below). The study - part of a larger project - addresses these issues with a sample of Italian young adults, mostly *career starters*. Participants completed personal traits and well-being measures, and rated the adequacy of sixty responses associated with 18 PIEW scenarios as part of an EI training procedure (see Measures).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants were young adults (N = 431, men 26%) who lived in the North of Italy, had completed 13 years of education (26%) or had a first-level (39%) or second-level degree (36%) - many were or had been enrolled at the University of Padova. Most participants (78%; recruited in a variety of in/formal ways; see Zammuner, 2010 for an overview) had (had) a temporary or tenure full- or part-time job, in a variety of organizational sectors (in nursing, teaching, commerce, industry, etc.), with a mean employed-status length of 36,1 months (*sd* 44,32). Participants' mean age was 25,47 (*sd* 3,36; range 18-34); for analysis purposes three age groups were later formed (18-23: 29%; 24-26: 40%; 27-34: 31%). All participants (a subsample of a larger experimental-condition group) took part in a training (either a long one or a short one) after their traits and well-being variables were assessed. The sample size varied somewhat according to which PIEW measure was considered in which analysis (e.g., mean scores on all PIEW measures were available for a subsample of 398 participants; see Measures and Results for details). Data were collected entirely online over an extended time period. Individual feedback on assessment test outcomes with reference to benchmark norms was provided as soon as participants completed post-test assessment.

2.2. Measures

This study collected measures related to (i) PIEW items, (ii) personal traits, including work-relevant ones (e.g., job involvement), and (iii) well-being indexes - see Table 1 for mean (sub)scale ratings and alpha values.
PIEW items and their development. The PIEW scenarios and items were originally developed by Zammuner & Kafetsios (2005) within a European research project conducted with young adults (e.g., Kafetsios & Zammuner, 2005; Kafetsios, Maridaki-Kassotaki, Zammuner, Zampetakis & Vouzas, 2009). In the present study, the PIEW scenarios - rated by participants in three consecutive sessions - were part of a training program called *Tremints (Training Emotional and Interpersonal Skills* (e.g., Zammuner & Arduini, 2012; Zammuner, Dionisio, *et al*, 2013; Verzeletti, Agnoli, Zammuner, *et al*, 2012), adapted and further developed from Zammuner & Kafetsios (2005). The program incorporates elements pertaining to various aspects of EI information processing skills and strategies and both instructional and first-person affective/experiential components, with the aim of increasing emotion awareness, a core element of EI skills (Boyatzis, 1996; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000). PIEW development involved a content analysis of the EI literature, also in relation to work settings, identifying salient concepts and event types. The results then guided the construction of the PIEW scenarios and related response items. Common to all scenarios is a focus on emotional responding and on self *versus* others' feelings, viewpoints, needs. That is, PIEW items deal with EI-relevant themes or abilities, i.e., recognizing and dealing with one's own and others' emotions, and, at a higher-level, using emotions in problem solving (e.g., Mayer et al., 2008). Each PIEW scenario focuses (by shortly describing it) on a specific (typical) work event in which *person P* faces a problematic situation involving *agent A* - a peer, or higher-rank person (e.g., P's boss) or a subordinate (if P is the boss or a leader). The following exemplify the gist of depicted problematic events: A tells P that her work badly needs to be improved; P perceives that A, a colleague friend, is depressed because she did not get a deserved promotion; A tells P about a hot discussion she had with her boss and P sees that claims on both sides were justified. Each scenario lists three to four behavioral responses, to be evaluated for their context-based adequacy ("*appropriateness"*, i.e., extent to which they are

suitable for the situation) on a 0-5 scale (0 = totally inappropriate, 5 = definitely appropriate). The following exemplify the gist of response items: Pay attention and understand other's viewpoint/situation, empathize with other's emotions and help her manage her emotions and/or re-appraise the situation, *versus* ignore, minimize, have a superficial or judgmental approach to the emotion-eliciting event; recognize own emotions (and their causes) and regulate them if necessary, including 'thought behaviors' such as re-appraising the situation, *versus* let disruptive emotions take control, ignore alternative event appraisals, etc. Participants rated 60 items associated with 18 PIEW scenarios - 10 to 22% of item-ratings were missing for participants who did not complete all three PIEW sessions.

Table 1. Mean scores and zero-order correlations of PIEW Factors F1, F2 and F3 with Traits and Well-being

	Mean	*sd*	*Alpha*	F1	F2 Traits	F3
Emotion labor	1,82	0,92	.74	-,040	,203**	,279**
Job involvement	2,21	0,98	.88	,133*	,082	,081
Job satisfaction	3,46	1,00	.81	,168**	-,125*	-,088
ECI-Self awareness	2,94	0,46	.73	,049	-,150**	-,025
ECI-Self management	2,59	0,42	.81	-,025	-,107*	,030
ECI-Social awareness	3,01	0,50	.79	,178**	-,242**	-,063
ECI-Relationship Management	2,60	0,50	.87	,066	-,112*	,006
Emotion awareness	3,14	0,76	.73	,048	-,218**	-,128*
ERQ-Cognitive reappraisal	3,78	1,14	.81	,218**	,025	,096
ERQ-Expressive suppression	2,11	1,20	.73	-,131*	,149**	,198**
TAS-Diff._Identify feelings	1,88	0,72	.83	-,060	,245**	,196**
TAS-Diff_Communicate feelings	**2,43**	0,93	.79	-,065	,168**	,163**
TAS-External oriented	1,93	0,54	.69	-,242**	,255**	,218**
COPE-Social support	2,77	0,54	.88	,266**	-,018	-,042
COPE-Avoidance	1,49	0,58	.81	,005	,287**	,280**
COPE-Positive attitude	2,68	0,29	.74	,183**	-,025	,044
COPE-Problem oriented	2,95	0,42	.85	,135**	-,129*	-,036
COPE-Transcending attitude	2,42	0,48	.79	,017	,010	-,006
P-Emotional Stability	4,44	0,75	.83	-,024	-,123*	-,066
P-Agreeableness	5,45	0,59	.80	,112	-,229**	-,212**
					Well-Being	
Positive affect	3,43	0,89	.80	,132*	-,080	,013
Negative affect	2,25	0,91	.80	,007	,058	,032
Life satisfaction	2,81	1,04	.86	,127*	-,069	,018
Emotional loneliness	1,48	1,12	.86	-,045	,133*	,089
Social loneliness	2,36	1,07	.90	-,152**	,051	,017
GHQ-12 Health	0,73	0,27	.85	,010	-,116*	-,047

Legend

F1 EMP, F2 MAD, F3 SUA. Correlations and means based on N = 365 (except Emotional Stability and Agreableness N = 300); *alpha* based on total sample. Social loneliness and GHQ scores have been reversed. Correlation: ** p < .01, * p < .05.

Traits were assessed using the following Likert-type self-report scales, previously validated with Italian samples (e.g., Zammuner, 2012a, 2012b; see also Zammuner & Galli, 2005a, and references thereof and below). A subset of the measures focused on work-related traits. A 10-item single-factor *Job involvement* scale (Kanungo, 1982), rated on 6-points (*disagree-agree*) assessed identification with one's own job. *Job satisfaction* was assessed by a 4-item scale (adapted from Brayfield & Rothe, 1951) rated on 6-points (*disagree-agree*). *Emotion labor, i.e.,* frequency of regulation of emotion expression at work (surface acting) was assessed by a 5-item scale, rated on 5-points (*never-always*). The 72-item *Emotional Competence Inventory* (ECI, self-version, Boyatzis et al., 2000; e.g., Kafetsios, Zammuner, Zorzi & Lanciano, 2011, for its Italian validation with career-starters), rated on 5-points (*never-always*, plus a *don't know* option) assessed 18 competencies clustering in 4 groups (see Table 1). Another subset of scales assessed personal dispositions. *Awareness of felt emotions was measured by a 10-item scale* (Zammuner, 2012b*)*, rated on 6-points (*true* to *false for me*). Alexithymia was assessed by the TAS-20 **(**Toronto Alexithymia Scale**;** Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1992) measuring, on 5-points (*disagree-agree)* three components (see Table 1). *Emotion regulation* was assessed with the Emotion regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003), composed of the Cognitive reappraisal and Expressive suppression subscales, validated in Italian (Balzarotti et al., 2010). Five *coping strategies* were assessed with the 60-item COPE *(*Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Sica, Magni et al. 2008) rated on 4-points (*never* to *most of the times*). The personality dimensions of Emotional stability and Agreableness

were assessed by two 20-item subscales of the BFA – Big Five Adjectives (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Steca, 2002), rated on 7-points (*not at all-very much*).

Psychosocial well-being was assessed with reference to four constructs, measured by self-report scales that included six subscales in total. Participants' scores were averaged over each subscale (and reversed when necessary to be coherent with the scale name, e.g., health rather than illness scores). A 14-item *Positive and Negative Affect scale* (PNA; Zammuner & Galli, 2005a) asked participants to report the frequency (on 6 points, *never* to *very often*) with which they felt each emotion in the last 15 days. Global self-perception of quality of life was assessed using the 5-item *Life satisfaction scale* (LSS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; e.g., Zammuner & Galli, 2005a, 2005b) rated on 6-points (*false of myself* to *true of myself*). The *General health questionnaire* (GHQ-12 items; Goldberg et al., 1997; Politi, Piccinelli & Wilkinson, 1994) evaluated participants' perception (on 6-points, *not at all* to *much*) of their health, assessing their ability to carry out daily activities and cope with everyday problems. Responses, were later recoded into 0-1 scores. An 11-item *Loneliness* scale (de Jong Gierveld, 1987; Zammuner, 2008) assessed perceived Emotional and Social loneliness (on 6-points, *false* to *true of myself*).

2.3. Statistical Analyses

Factor analyses were performed on PIEW items, and descriptive and reliability analyses performed on all (sub) scales. Zero-order correlation analyses assessed the association between PIEW (sub)scales and personal traits and well-being. Group differences were tested by means of repeated measures ANOVAs and post-hoc tests.

3. Results.

The underlying structure of PIEW items (*n* 60) was investigated through principal factor analysis with Varimax rotation. The solution of a first exploratory analysis - with number of factors defined by eigenvalues - included 14 factors, the first three of which, with high eigenvalues (> 2.77), explained altogether 36,60% of the variance and were interpretable in terms of EI constructs - each of the remaining factors were instead not clearly interpretable, formed by one-two items only, and explained an additional 2% of the variance at most. As a 3-factor solution seemed the most appropriate, a second analysis was performed. Inspection of communalities and factor loadings led to the exclusion of 9 items that were bi-factorial or showed low communality. The remaining 51 items (M 2,22, *sd* 1,37; range 0,19 to 4,69; 12 items had a mean < 1,00; 13 more items ranged from 1,00 to 1,50) were included in the final principal-axis 3-factor analysis with Varimax rotation (N = 333 participants). The data appropriateness for the analysis was shown by the item correlation matrix (with several correlations above .40), the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (.88) and by Bartlett' test of sphericity (7351, df = 1275, P < .000). The obtained rotated solution showed, for each factor, high loadings on that factor and low ones on the others (range F1 0,74 to 0,48; F2 0,69 to 0,41; F3 0,66 to 0,35), with acceptable item communalities (values had an overall mean of 0,39; range 0,15 to 0,62). The three factors explained 39,13% of the total variance. Factors were labeled and characterized as follows: F1-Empathy (EMP; 19 items, standardized alpha .918, 15,92% variance, mean item rating 3,78, *sd* ,81), an emotionally-competent response type, F2-Minimizing, Aggressing and Devaluing attitude (MAD; 17 items, alpha .884, 12,87% variance, mean item rating 0,87, *sd* ,62), and F3-Superficial attitude (SUA) 15 items, alpha .844, variance 10,34%, mean item rating 1,78, *sd* ,76). The latter two emotionally-incompetent factors were highly correlated (*r* = ,609**, controlling for gender). A theory-driven factor analysis of the items (*n* 19) that expert scoring indicated as the most emotionally intelligent responses for each scenario showed that this EI-factor, explaining 39% of the variance, completely overlapped with the EMP factor (*r* 1,00), thus lending further support to the obtained solution. Finally, the 51 mean item-ratings by the smaller sample (N = 333) correlated *r* = ,998** with those of the total sample (N = 436). In sum, results indicated that, generally, participants were emotionally competent in their PIEW responding, judging empathy-oriented behaviors (EMP) as much more adequate than responses indicating a devaluation of the other, aggressive attitudes, superficial approach to the situation, and so forth - i.e., the MAD and SUA factors. Both sex and age obtained significant multivariate effects in a repeated-measure analysis of variance, with the PIEW factors as within-subject measures (Sex $F_{2, 391}$ 4,10*, Age $F_{4, 784}$ 4,77**); their interaction was not significant. Univariate analyses showed that women endorsed empathic responses more than men, whereas men judged MAD responses more adequate than women (EMP $3,61_M$ (*sd* ,76) and $3,83_F$ (*sd* ,82), $F_{1, 434}$ 6,66*; MAD $1,01_M$ (*sd* ,76) and $0,83_F$ (*sd* ,60), $F_{1, 434}$ 7,61**); SUA ratings did not differ by sex. Age groups differed for their emotionally-inadequate MAD and SUA responses, judged as inadequate by the oldest participants (MAD 0,72 *sd*

,54; SUA 1,67 *sd* ,74) more than by the younger or youngest ones (18-23 yrs: MAD 1,01 *sd* ,63; SUA 1,97 *sd* ,70; 24-26 yrs.: MAD 0,89 *sd* ,66). Traits and well-being scores (see Table 1 for means) showed that participants, on the whole, reported they enjoyed their work (i.e., little emotion labor, high job satisfaction, some job involvement) and felt emotionally interpersonally competent at it (ECI scales) at least to some extent. Moreover, they reported positive emotion-related traits (emotion awareness, cognitive reappraisal, use of positive coping strategies (especially problem-oriented and social support), and emotional stability and agreeableness) more than negative ones (alexithymia, expressive suppression, avoidance). Congruently, participants reported more positive than negative affect, a medium life-satisfaction level, low emotional and social loneliness, and good health. Traits and well-being variables were on the whole significantly correlated (to a modest degree) with PIEW factors (see Table 1), in the hypothesized direction. Most notably, empathy-oriented behaviors (EMP) were positively associated with job satisfaction, social awareness, cognitive reappraisal, and positive coping strategies (social support especially), whereas MAD and SUA endorsement were mostly negatively associated with positive traits such as agreeableness, emotional, self and social awareness, and positively associated with negative traits such as emotion labor, expressive suppression, the alexithymia dimensions. Finally, a positive well-being constellation was associated with EMP, whereas greater endorsement of MAD responses was associated with lesser well-being. The 'superficial approach' attitude on the whole was not related to well-being differences. In conclusion, the study offers preliminary experimental evidence for the validity of the PIEW scales and for their utility in assessing levels of emotional competence, and their relationship with traits and well-being - to be further tested using more adequate statistical analyses (e.g., mediation and regression) in studies whose method allows for causal path inferences (e.g., longitudinal ones). The study has clear implications for counseling as regards how people approach and respond to problematic interpersonal events at work, and why

Acknowledgements

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