

Social Relationships Mediate the Relation Between Emotional Intelligence and Meaning in Life

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Emotional intelligence has been consistently associated with higher quality social relationships (Rivers, Brackett, Salovey, & Mayer, 2007). Social relationships have been deemed a vital source of meaning and purpose in life (DeBats, 1999; Kraus, 2007; Settersten, 2002). This study examined the role of meaningful social relationships in the association between emotional intelligence and meaning in life. Participants (N = 50) completed the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002), the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP; Wong, 1998), and the Purpose in Life test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Results indicated that the relation between emotion management (branch 4 of emotional intelligence) and meaning in life was mediated by the quality of social relationships.

Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to accurately perceive emotions and emotional content, to use emotions to facilitate intellectual processing, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to regulate and manage emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Research has suggested a relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; David, 2002). Emotional intelligence was related to five dimensions of Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being measure, including the "purpose in life" dimension, which focuses on an individual's sense of direction and meaning in life (Brackett & Mayer, 2003).

A specific branch of emotional intelligence, emotion management (branch 4), may be especially important for constructs like meaning and purpose in life. This branch of emotional intelligence has been described as "the conscious regulation of emotions to enhance emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p.14). Emotion literature corroborates the proposed benefits of emotion management and regulation, demonstrating that the use of positive emotional states can act as a buffer against stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) and can lead to psychological resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

The present research attempts to elucidate the potential relationship between emotional intelligence and meaning in life by introducing a third variable: social relationships. Quality social relationships may play an important role in this link, given their strong correlations with emotional intelligence (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005) and meaning in life (DeBats, 1999; Krause, 2007; Setterson, 2002). Consequently, it is necessary to delineate the role of emotional intelligence in social relationships and subsequently the role of social relationships in a meaningful and purposeful life.

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The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Social Relationships

The ability of emotional intelligence has been consistently and unequivocally related to many aspects of social interaction. There is basic information-processing evidence, both neurological and behavioral, that emotional intelligence is related to successful social exchange reasoning (Reis et al., 2007). This type of social reasoning involves the reciprocal understanding between individuals when mutually beneficial goods or services are exchanged (Reis et al.). Research examining interpersonal relationships demonstrated that in men, lower emotional intelligence scores predicted destructive responses (e.g., engagement in a heated argument or complete avoidance) to both relationship conflict (e.g., a disagreement with a friend) and to reports of positive events (e.g., a friend shares his/her good news; Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). Additionally, men scoring high in emotional intelligence were judged to be more socially engaging and competent (Brackett et al., 2006) and to have more positive relations with friends (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004), while men scoring low in emotional intelligence were found to have more negative relations with friends (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004).

More specific links have appeared between various measures of social relationships and the *managing emotions* subscale (branch 4) of emotional intelligence (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lopes et al., 2004; Yip & Martin, 2006). Of the four branches of emotional intelligence, this branch consists of the most advanced, integrated emotional processes (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Higher scores on the managing emotions subscale—with its emphasis on moderating negative emotion and enhancing positive emotion in interpersonal situations—are thought to be more indicative of quality social relationships than any other branch of emotional intelligence (Lopes et al., 2004). Specifically, the managing emotions subscale was positively correlated with measures of conflict management, emotional support, the initiation of relationships, and overall interpersonal competence (Yip & Martin, 2006). In further work, the managing emotion subscale was positively correlated with participants' self-reports of positive interactions with two friends (Lopes et al., 2004). This study also found that participants' emotion management score was positively correlated with a friend's ratings of their positive interactions and their tendency to provide emotional support.

The Role of Social Relationships in a Meaningful and Purposeful Life

The aforementioned research demonstrates emotional intelligence's role in social relationships. Social rela-

tionships, while not the sole factor, are considered a prominent source of meaning and purpose in individuals' lives (Pohlmann, Gruss, & Joraschky, 2006; Simpson & Tran, 2006; Wong, 1998). Numerous studies have provided evidence that intimate personal relationships are among the most frequently-cited source of meaning in life—across age, gender, and culture (DeBats, 1999; Kraus, 2007; Pohlmann, Gruss, & Joraschky, 2006; Settersten, 2002). These types of relationships include romantic relationships, family relationships, and relationships with close friends (Setterson, 2002). Although not as prevalent in extant literature, an individual's broader social relations with her or his surrounding community can also provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Bar-Tur & Prager, 1996; Bar-Tur & Savaya, 2001; Wong, 1998). These relationships are often operationally defined as “community service-altruism” (Bar-Tur & Prager, 1996), “communal activity” (Bar-Tur & Savaya, 2001), and “community relationships” (Wong, 1998).

Goals and Hypotheses

The primary goal of this research was to examine the role of social relationships in the relation between emotional intelligence (specifically the emotion management branch) and meaning in life. Emotional intelligence was measured with the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2002). Two instruments were used to measure meaning in life: the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP; Wong, 1998) and the Purpose in Life test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). The PMP measures overall meaning in life and also has 7 subscales that each measure a specific source of meaning. Two of the subscales were of primary interest in this research because of their focus on social relationships. The *intimacy* subscale indicates the amount of meaning derived from romantic partners and close friends and family. The *relationship* subscale employs a broader approach, evaluating meaning in life through general community relations and more expansive peer networks. The PIL served as the primary meaning in life measure and was also used to validate the newer, less thoroughly researched PMP (Schulenberg, 2004).

The following hypotheses were proposed:

1. The PMP and PIL total scores will be positively correlated.
2. The relationship scales (relation and intimacy) of the PMP will be positively correlated (given that the scales are significantly correlated, a composite social relationships variable will be calculated).
3. The social relationships variable will mediate the

relation between emotion management (MSCEIT branch 4) and meaning in life (PIL). Several criteria will be met to satisfy this: (a) Emotion management will be related to meaning in life; (b) emotion management will be related to social relationships; (c) controlling for emotion management, social relationships will be related to meaning in life.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses were recruited for participation via the online research database Sona Systems. Participants consisted of 50 students (14 men; 36 women) ranging in age from 18 years to 24 years ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 1.25$). All participants received course extra credit.

Measures

Personal Meaning Profile. The Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) is a 57-item, self-report measure of personal meaning that employs a 1–7 Likert scale (Wong, 1998). The PMP yields an overall score and is also composed of 7 subscales (*achievement, fair-treatment, intimacy, relationship, religion, self-acceptance, self-transcendence*), each of which measures a prominent source of personal meaning. Although participants completed each of the 7 subscales, the intimacy and relationship subscales were of primary interest in this study as they indicate quality of both intimate and community relations. For example, the intimacy subscale asks questions like “I have a loving relationship with someone in my life,” while the relationship subscale asks questions like “I feel a sense of belonging with my community.” For each question, participants marked a 1 if the statement did not apply at all to them and a 7 if the statement applied exactly to them. The intimacy and relationship subscales were related, thus a composite score was calculated to indicate overall quality of social relationships, where higher scores indicated greater quality. This score was created for the current study to more adequately reflect the variable of interest, social relationships by combining both intimate relationships and community relationships. The composite score was calculated by summing the scores from both subscales and dividing by two.

Purpose in Life Test. The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) is a three-part questionnaire designed to measure the amount of meaning a person has discovered in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Part A is composed of 20 items, each using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. Questions in this part begin with statements like, “My life is...” A Likert scale then follows each statement. One end of the scale contains a negative response (*boiling and dull*) while the opposite end contains a positive

response (*fulfilling and worthwhile*). A total score was calculated, with higher scores representing more purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Schulenberg, 2004). Parts B and C are intended for clinical use and were not employed in this study.

Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test.

The ability of emotional intelligence was measured with the online version of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2002). The MSCEIT is a 141-item questionnaire which offers a total score and four branch scores: perception of emotion, use of emotion to facilitate thought, understanding of emotion, and management of emotion. Each of these branches is measured by two tasks. The fourth branch, managing emotions, was of primary interest in the current study and is measured by presenting respondents with multiple scenarios and asking them to identify (a) the most adaptive way to handle their feelings and (b) the feelings of others (Mayer et al., 2002).

MSCEIT scores can be based on expert or consensus scoring methods. In expert scoring, if the respondent answers “C–ashamed” and 55% of the expert sample (comprised of 21 internationally renowned emotion researchers) answer “C–ashamed,” then the person receives a raw score of .55 for that question. Consensus scoring follows the same principle, except that answers are based on replies from a normative sample of over 5,000 respondents. The present study used expert scoring because experts have been deemed more reliable judges of emotion (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). Correlations between expert and consensus scoring methods have been quite high, usually above .90 (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001, 2003).

Procedure

Participants reported individually to the research office where a research assistant met them. They were greeted and their course information was collected so their extra credit could be processed. Participants then completed a consent form, the computerized MSCEIT, the PMP, and the PIL one at a time in a research cubicle. The MSCEIT and PMP tasks were counterbalanced using a Latin-square design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). A test administrator was available outside the cubicle to answer questions for each participant as necessary. Participants were instructed to alert the test administrator upon completion of each questionnaire. The administrator then explained the next questionnaire, asked if there were questions, and left the cubicle. This procedure continued until all questionnaires had been completed.

Results

Complete data were available for 48 participants (14 men, 34 women). Two outliers with significantly low MSCEIT scores (less than 2.5 *SD* below the mean) were excluded from all analyses because they completed the test in a fraction of the time other participants did and were suspected of filling in answers blindly. Due to the disproportionate ratio of women to men, as well as the moderate sample size, gender comparison analyses were not conducted.

Hypothesis 1

The PMP total score and the PIL total score were significantly correlated, $r(48) = .75, p < .01$. The PIL was also positively correlated with each of the 7 subscales of the PMP (see Table 1). As predicted, participants scoring higher on the PMP scored higher on the PIL, indicating that personal meaning and purpose in life were significantly positively correlated.

Hypothesis 2

The PMP relationship subscale and the PMP intimacy subscale were significantly correlated, $r(48) = .44, p < .01$.

Hypothesis 3

MSCEIT scores ($M = 97.61, SD = 12.26$) were similar to previous studies (Mayer et al., 2003). Tests for mediation were conducted to examine the role of social relationships as a mediator of the relationship between emotion management and meaning in life. Regression analyses satisfied the necessary mediation conditions: (a) Emotion management significantly

accounted for variance in meaning in life, $\beta = .43, p = .002$; (b) emotion management significantly accounted for variance in social relationships (intimacy and community combined), $\beta = .40, p = .005$; (c) controlling for emotion management, social relationships significantly accounted for variance in meaning in life, $\beta = .52, p < .001$. The relationship between emotion management and meaning in life, however, was not significant when analyses controlled for social relationships.

Discussion

The data supported each of our hypotheses. A specific facet of emotional intelligence, emotion management, was related to meaning in life and meaningful social relationships. Further analyses investigated the relationships between these three variables (emotion management, social relationships, and meaning in life) and the potential influences and indirect effects each exerts on the other. As hypothesized, meaningful social relationships were found to mediate the connection between emotion management and meaning in life.

One goal of this study was to examine the relationship between a specific subset of meaning in life factors (i.e., intimate, personal relationships and community relationships) and emotion management abilities. To accomplish this goal, we used a meaning in life scale, the Personal Meaning Profile (Wong, 1998), that consisted of subscales measuring these dimensions (i.e., the *intimacy* and *relationship* scales). An experimentally-validated measure of meaning of life, the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), then served as the primary meaning in life measure and also provided additional validation for the Personal Meaning Profile. Indeed, the overall score and each subscale of the Personal Meaning Profile was correlated with the Purpose in Life test, seemingly providing researchers an instrument with identifiable factors to describe various avenues for meaning in life.

The mediation analyses carried out were based on the premise that social relationships were related to the two variables of primary interest: emotion management and meaning in life. In reference to the latter, and similar to previous research (DeBats, 1999; Krause, 2007; Setterson, 2002), the present results found that social relationships are a vital source of meaning and purpose in life for many individuals. This study included both intimate relationships and broader community relationships in the overall conceptualization of social relationships. Prior research has shown that quality social relationships are also related to the successful management of emotion (Lopes et al., 2003; Lopes et al., 2004). The current research verified that the ability to manage emotions is associated with meaningful social relationships.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) Subscales and the Purpose in Life (PIL) Test

	PIL
PMP fair treatment	.52*
PMP intimacy	.53**
PMP self acceptance	.45**
PMP transcendence	.65**
PMP religion	.45**
PMP achievement	.64**
PMP relationship	.51**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Although, ostensibly, there seem to be clear relationships between emotion management, social relationships, and meaning in life, the present results demonstrate added complexity. Past research has indicated that individuals with greater emotional intelligence have shown greater meaning in life (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; David, 2002). Greater meaning in life is related to numerous positive outcomes (Wong, 1998.). Because individuals derive meaning in life in a number of ways, it is important to understand how these different avenues may be fostered. The current study examined how valuing social relationships, in particular, explained the relationship between emotion management and meaning in life. Specifically, meaningful social relationships were found to mediate the association between emotion management and meaning in life. In other words, the successful management of emotion contributed to meaning in life in part through quality social relationships. It is likely that individuals with better emotion management skills foster more meaningful intimate relationships (e.g., close friendships and romantic relationships) and community relationships (e.g., a neighborhood watch group), which lead to a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life.

The present study yielded a number of significant findings. It supports the previously established association between emotion management (branch 4 of emotional intelligence) and social relationships. In accordance with past work on meaning in life, this research indicated that social relationships are an essential source of meaning and purpose in life. Most importantly, the results demonstrate that the relation between emotion management and meaning in life is mediated by social relationships. Future theoretical and empirical work is needed to identify how the particular abilities of emotion management influence social relationships. Additional research could also focus more extensively on the types of social relationships that are important in influencing meaning in life and emotion management. For example, are intimate relationships or community relationships more important? Or, are there other types of social relationships that could mediate the relation between emotion management and meaning in life? Using a questionnaire designed solely to measure different types of social relationships could accomplish this task and could also avoid any potential issues that arise with using the combined subscales of a larger questionnaire (i.e., the Personal Meaning Profile) as the social relationship variable. Further research could also examine whether the relationship between other aspects of emotional intelligence may be related to meaning in life through different mechanisms of deriving meaning, not only social relationships.

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