

Does Emotional Intelligence Moderate the Relationship between Satisfaction in Specific Domains and Life Satisfaction?

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that individuals experience higher satisfaction with life when they are satisfied with their jobs, with their social environment, and with themselves. Also, independent of their life situations, individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to feel higher life satisfaction. It remains unclear, however, the question of whether personal experiences and personality traits interact. This paper, therefore, examines the hypotheses that: 1) Life satisfaction is predicted by the satisfaction experienced in specific domains such as: job, social environment, and self, and by emotional intelligence. 2) Emotional intelligence moderates the relation between the satisfaction experienced in those three context-specific areas and the general satisfaction with life. To test these hypotheses, we surveyed 2,233 adults and university post-graduate students participating in various courses in Cataluña and Aragón. Regression analysis showed that the three context-specific dimensions of satisfaction and emotional intelligence explain 54% of life satisfaction. Emotional intelligence moderated the relation between satisfaction with self and life satisfaction, and between satisfaction with the social environment and life satisfaction.

Key words: life satisfaction, emotional competence, job satisfaction, prediction, moderation.

Novelty and Significance

What is already known about the topic?

- Humans experience a higher sense of life satisfaction when they are satisfied with specific domains of their lives such as the job, the relationships, and themselves.
- Certain personality characteristics such as extraversion, neuroticism, or emotional intelligence increase or decrease human beings' tendency to feel satisfied with life regardless of actual experience.

What this paper adds?

- Emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between satisfaction in specific areas and general satisfaction with life.
- People with higher emotional intelligence derive higher satisfaction from positive experiences and lower dissatisfaction from negative experiences and end up enjoying higher satisfaction with life than people with lower emotional intelligence.

Life satisfaction as a research field became relevant during the 1970s. In those years, a psychosocial dimension was added to the concept of quality of life beyond the physical and material conditions necessary for a comfortable life (food, housing, and medical care, among others). In this way, life satisfaction relates to a personal feeling of well-being or happiness. Therefore, it reflects a personal perception about one's own life situation based on one's own goals, expectations, values, and interests, influenced by the cultural context of reference (Pérez Escoda, 2013).

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Diener (1984) proposed that the concepts of life satisfaction, subjective well-being, or happiness were essentially all the same. He believed there are two basic approaches to explain them. The first approach, termed the bottom-up approach, proposes that people are satisfied with life when they live through a substantial amount of positive experiences. The following three areas in which we can feel satisfaction seem to be especially influential: the job (Judge & Watanabe, 1993), the social environment, especially from family, friends and neighbors (Aquino, Russell, Cutrona, & Altmaier, 1996), and one's self (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005).

Argyle (1992) and Diener (1994) proposed that job satisfaction is one of the life domains that more strongly affect a person's perception of well-being or life satisfaction. This idea has been confirmed in a few studies (Barrientos, 2005; Diener, 1994; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Barrientos, 2005). Diener *et al.* (1999) also proposed the social environment as the other important predictor of life satisfaction. Supporting this idea, Glaesmer, Grande, Braehler, & Roth (2011), in a study with 2,519 German adults found that the perception of support from family, friends, and neighbors strongly correlates with life satisfaction. Demir and Weitekamp (2007) also found that satisfaction with friends significantly contributes to a feeling of happiness.

The relation between life satisfaction and satisfaction with self has also been observed in different studies. Navarro, Ojeda, Schwartz, Piña-Watson, and Luna (2014) found a strong relationship between those two variables in a study with 446 American students of Mexican descent. Also, Galíndez and Casas (2010) found high correlations between self-concept and self-esteem, and life satisfaction in a sample of 339 Basque Middle and High school students. Previously, some other studies found similar results (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Diener, 1995; Martínez Antón, Buelga, & Cava 2007; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Diener, 1995).

The second approach, termed the top-down model, believes that human beings have a higher or lower predisposition to view experiences in a positive light and that this disposition influences the particular interactions between an individual and the world. According to this approach, a person's life satisfaction is determined by his or her personality characteristics (Diener, 1984). Supporting this proposition, extroversion, and neuroticism have been found to be consistent, although opposite, predictors of happiness (Argyle, 1992; Cheng & Furnham, 2001). Beyond personality types, transversal personality factors may also predispose human beings to experience life satisfaction. For instance, Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, Hollander, and McKenley (2002) propose that the ability to understand and process emotional information about our own and others' emotions and feelings, which is known as emotional intelligence, is linked to positive mood. This proposition has been confirmed by an abundance of studies (Bermúdez, Álvarez, & Sánchez, 2003; Extremera, Durán, & Rey, 2005; Freudenthaler, Neubauer, & Haller, 2008; Páez, Fernández, Campos, Zubieta, & Casullo, 2006; Bermúdez *et al.*, 2003; Palomera & Brackett, 2006; Extremera *et al.*, 2005; Páez *et al.*, 2006). Not so well studied is the relationship between emotional intelligence components and life satisfaction. Palmer, Donaldson, and Stough (2002) found that one of the components of emotional intelligence, clarity of feelings, explained variance in life satisfaction even after controlling for positive and negative affect. Also, Montes Berges, and Augusto Landa

(2014) found that another component of emotional intelligence, mood repair, significantly predicted life satisfaction. Furthermore, Landa, López Zafra, de Antoñana, and Pulido (2006) found strong correlations between life satisfaction and those two components (emotional clarity and mood repair). Moreover, Gannon and Ranzijn (2005) found that although there was conceptual overlap between emotional intelligence and personality, the former still explained unique variance in life satisfaction beyond personality variables.

Additionally, Pavot and Diener (2008) propose an integrative model in which personality traits in conjunction with situational factors influence life satisfaction judgments. Specific personality characteristics may affect the way the experiences we have in particular areas influence our life satisfaction. Because emotional intelligence is considered a constellation of self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, 2011), we can expect that people with higher emotional intelligence will view their experiences at work, with the social environment, and with oneself, in a more favorable way than people with lower emotional intelligence, and therefore, the relationship between their satisfaction in those areas and their general life satisfaction will be stronger. Because, emotional intelligence has demonstrated its ability to explain variance beyond the Big-Five (Petrides, 2011), it can be very useful to investigate this potential moderating effect. Partially supporting this proposition, emotional intelligence has been found to relate to job satisfaction (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008; Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006; Wang, Cai, & Deng, 2010; Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008), and social environment (Zou, 2014). Moreover, Gallagher, and Vella-Brodrick (2008) showed that social environment, emotional intelligence and their interaction effect, significantly predict subjective well-being. Nevertheless, the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relation between the satisfaction experienced in specific domains and life satisfaction has not yet been fully investigated. Therefore, the current study investigates two hypotheses: (1) Job satisfaction, satisfaction with the social environment, satisfaction with self, and emotional intelligence predict life satisfaction; (2) The relation between the three domain specific areas of satisfaction -job, social environment, and self- and life satisfaction is enhanced by the emotional intelligence of the individual.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 2,233 adults participated in this study. Of those, 1,065 (47.7%) were Education and Psychology graduate students from different universities. The other adults attended different adult university courses related to the areas of personal and social development. 83.8% of participants were studying and employed in some capacity at the same time. Everyone participated voluntarily. Questionnaires were answered in class with the professor absent, and then deposited in a mailbox before the researchers returned. All questionnaires were anonymous. The majority (80.7%) of the sample was composed of females. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 67 years, with a mean of 35.28 years ($SD= 11, 27$). Around three quarters of the sample had college degrees (70.7%).

Instruments

Life Satisfaction. This was measured with the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS is probably the most cited measure of life satisfaction in the scientific literature (Vázquez *et al.*, 2012). It consists of five statements that the respondent has to evaluate on a Likert-type scale of seven points, from 1 (complete disagreement) to 7 (complete agreement). Pavot and Diener (2008) and Diener and González (2011) summarized in two studies the investigations developed during the last 20 years that confirmed the psychometric properties of this instrument. Cronbach reliabilities range from .79 to .89 (Blais, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Briere, 1989; Diener, *et al.*, 1985; Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991). There is also extensive evidence of the SWLS validity in Spanish samples (Atienza, Pons, Balaguer, & García Merita, 2000). In the current study the Cronbach reliability was $\alpha = .84$.

Emotional Intelligence. This was measured with the *Emotional Development Questionnaire for Adults* (CDE-A, Pérez Escoda, Bisquerra, Filella, & Soldevila, 2010). It is a self-report questionnaire, developed for Spanish populations, based on the emotional education theoretical model developed by Bisquerra and Pérez (2007). According to this model, the questionnaire measures five emotional competence dimensions in addition to offering a global score. It consists of 48 items of which seven items correspond to the emotional awareness scale, 13 items to the emotional regulation scale, seven items measure emotional autonomy, 12 items measure social skills, and nine items measure life and well-being skills. It uses a Likert-type scale with answer options ranging from 0 (completely disagree with the statement) to 10 (completely agree). In a previous study with a sample of 1,537 adults, the authors of the questionnaire obtained a reliability of $\alpha = .92$ for the complete scale, and above .69 for each one of the five dimensions (Pérez Escoda *et al.*, 2010). In this study, the Cronbach reliability was .74 for the emotional awareness scale, .80 for the emotional regulation scale, .71 for the social skills scale, .73 for the autonomy scale, .74 for the life and well-being skills, and .92 for the complete scale.

Satisfaction in Specific Personal Domains. An *ad-hoc* questionnaire was developed to gather information about the participants' degree of satisfaction with specific areas of their experience. It consists of nine items of which two measure job satisfaction ("I like my job, it fulfills me, and satisfies me", and "I am satisfied my job situation"), three items measure the satisfaction with the social relationships ("I have the support I need to confront adversity", "I am satisfied with my family situation", and "I am satisfied with my social life"), and four items measure satisfaction with self ("I am proud of myself", "I cope efficiently with stress", "I am an intelligent person", "I am emotionally intelligent"). Internal consistency of this scale measured with Cronbach's alpha was .81. The three subscales had a reliability of .77, .73, and .77 respectively.

To validate the scales, we developed a pilot study with 72 participants from a different sample, and we asked them to answer three scales of the *Constructive Thinking Questionnaire* (CTI, Epstein, 1987): self-esteem, confidence in people and positive attitude, and ruminative thinking. As expected, satisfaction with self correlated with self-esteem as measured by the CTI ($r = .27$). It was expected that job satisfaction would correlate with the ability to trust peers at work and to have a positive attitude towards them. The expectation was confirmed. Job satisfaction correlated with confidence in people

and positive attitude towards them ($r = .33$). Finally, it was considered that for a person to establish positive relationships with family and friends, the person has to be able to overcome and pay little attention, avoiding ruminative thinking, to the disagreeable events and exchanges that inevitably occur from time to time in almost all close relationships. The results confirmed this expectation as well ($r = .56$).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics can be seen in Table 1. The two-tailed Pearson product-moment correlations are detailed in Table 2. There is a robust correlation between the three specific types of satisfaction -job, social environment, and self- and life satisfaction. Emotional Intelligence also significantly correlates with life satisfaction. Additionally, all dimensions of emotional intelligence correlate with the three context-specific satisfactions, although they correlate more strongly with satisfaction with the self.

Table 1. Descriptive data ($N = 2233$).

Variables	Total			
	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Total Emotional Competence (CDE-A)	2.50	9.23	6.36	1.04
Emotional Awareness (EA)	2.43	10.00	7.17	1.24
Emotional Regulation (ER)	.46	9.62	5.73	1.34
Social Skills (SS)	2.42	9.75	6.26	1.22
Emotional Autonomy (EA)	.00	9.57	5.66	1.38
Life and Well-being Skills (LWS)	2.11	10.00	7.29	1.18
Life Satisfaction (Diener)	5.00	35.00	25.15	5.14
Job Satisfaction	2.00	14.00	10.44	2.80
Social environment Satisfaction	3.00	21.00	16.73	3.19
Satisfaction with Self	4.00	28.00	20.88	3.75

Table 2. Correlations ($N = 2233$).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2. Total CDE-A	.38**								
3. Emotional awareness	.25**	.69**							
4. Emotional regulation	.29**	.87**	.46**						
5. Social Skills	.25**	.82**	.55**	.58**					
6. Autonomy	.30**	.82**	.43**	.69**	.57**				
7. Life Skills	.48**	.82**	.53**	.64**	.57**	.63**			
8. Job Satisfaction	.48**	.20**	.14**	.18**	.11**	.15**	.23**		
9. Social environment Satisfaction	.64**	.31**	.20**	.20**	.26**	.23**	.37**	.31**	
10 Satisfaction with Self	.53**	.49**	.35**	.40**	.37**	.41**	.47**	.33**	.55**

Notes: 1 = Life satisfaction; * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

The regression analysis (see Table 3, step 1a) showed that the three context-specific satisfactions -job, social environment, and self- predict life satisfaction, and so did the participants' emotional intelligence and gender. Age and education level did not predict life satisfaction. When we used the five components of emotional intelligence instead of the global score, social skills and life and well-being skills predicted life satisfaction (see Table 3, step 1b). The three components of satisfaction and emotional intelligence explained a significant proportion of the variance in the life satisfaction scores, $R^2 = .54$, $F(7, 2225) = 366.703$, $p < .000$. Tolerance levels were all above .40 showing no collinearity problems.

Table 3. Regression of life satisfaction on life and well-being skills and emotional intelligence ($N=2233$).

Step	B	B	Error Std.	Beta	t	p
	(Constant)	.813	.648	--	1.255	.000
	Age	-.013	.007	-.028	-1.727	.084
	Education	.042	.054	.012	.775	.439
1a	Gender	-.382	.191	-.029	-2.002	.045
	Job satisfaction	.524	.029	.286	17.894	.000
	Social environment satisfaction	.689	.029	.428	24.090	.000
	Satisfaction with self	.198	.026	.144	7.487	.000
	Emotional intelligence	.608	.083	.122	7.316	.000
	(Constant)	.168	.672	--	.250	.802
	Age	-.008	.007	-.019	-1.172	.241
	Education	-.006	.053	-.002	-.122	.903
	Gender	-.400	.188	-.031	-2.122	.034
	Job satisfaction	.497	.029	.271	17.420	.000
	Social environment satisfaction	.649	.028	.403	2.997	.000
1b	Satisfaction with self	.184	.026	.134	7.149	.000
	Awareness	-.049	.075	-.012	-.658	.511
	Regulation	-.019	.085	-.005	-.220	.826
	Social skills	-.335	.083	-.079	-4.041	.000
	Autonomy	-.004	.080	-.001	-.046	.964
	Life skills	1.154	.094	.265	12.255	.000
	Job x EI	-.026	.027	-.114	-.957	.339
2	Social environment x EI	.109	.026	.636	4.224	.000
	Self x EI	-.066	.020	-.494	-3.260	.001

Finally, to analyze the possibility that emotional intelligence moderates the relation between the context-specific satisfaction variables and life satisfaction, we also introduced the interaction effects obtained by multiplying the standardized emotional intelligence coefficient by each one of the three standardized coefficients of the context-specific satisfactions. The results showed that the interactions between satisfaction with self and emotional intelligence and between social environment satisfaction and emotional intelligence are both significant (see Table 3, step 2). These results suggest that the effect of both satisfaction with self and satisfaction with the social environment on life satisfaction depends on the individual's degree of emotional intelligence of the individual.

As a consequence of these results, we tested the slope of the regression lines corresponding to the relationship between satisfaction with self and life satisfaction, and the relationship between social environment satisfaction and life satisfaction for three levels of emotional intelligence: low EI (one standard deviation below the mean), medium EI (between one standard deviation below and one standard above the mean), and high EI (one standard deviation above the mean). Each one of the slopes showed a positive relationship between the variables, but the relationship was stronger for high levels of emotional intelligence ($\beta= .69$ and $.78$ respectively) than for medium ($\beta= .54$ and $.64$) or low levels ($\beta= .38$ and $.49$). *T*-test analyses were conducted to test the differences between the low EI and the medium EI group, between the low EI and the high EI group, and between the medium EI and the high EI. For satisfaction with self, all differences between slopes were significant ($t= -2.83, 4.59, -3.23$), and so they were for satisfaction with the social environment: ($t= 3.49, -5.03, -3.09$). For individuals with low emotional intelligence (one standard deviation below the mean), increases

in satisfaction with self or satisfaction with social environment are accompanied with relatively low increases in life satisfaction, while increases in life satisfaction are higher for individuals with medium emotional intelligence and even higher for individuals with high emotional intelligence. The interaction term was not significant for job satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to test the potential moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationships between the satisfaction experienced in specific domains of the personal experience and the general satisfaction with life. We did this in two steps: In the first hypothesis, we tried to confirm, as it has been repeatedly shown in the literature, that life satisfaction depends on the satisfaction experienced in specific moments or areas such as the workplace, the social environment of family, friends, and neighbors, and oneself, and on some personality traits. In particular, we investigated the effect of emotional intelligence on life satisfaction.

The results confirmed the first hypothesis: job satisfaction, satisfaction with the social environment, satisfaction with self and emotional intelligence significantly predicted life satisfaction. In relation to regarding emotional intelligence, the life and well-being skills of a person were the variables that most strongly predicted life satisfaction.

Finally, in relation to our second hypothesis that the emotional intelligence of the participants, could moderate the relationship between the satisfaction experienced in specific and concrete areas and a general, more abstract evaluation of satisfaction with life, the results showed that emotional intelligence indeed moderated the relationship between satisfaction with self and life satisfaction and the relationship between satisfaction with the social environment and life satisfaction. That is, for individuals with higher emotional intelligence, their self-satisfaction and their satisfaction with their social environment produces proportionally higher levels of life satisfaction than for those individuals with lower emotional intelligence. This, on the other hand, does not happen for job satisfaction.

Although the literature had already shown a relationship between both job satisfaction and satisfaction with supportive relationships with life satisfaction (Barrientos, 2005; Diener, 1994; Diener *et al.*, 1999; Galíndez & Casas, 2010; Barrientos, 2005; Glaesmer, Grande, Braehler, & Roth, 2011; Martínez Antón *et al.*, 2007), this study shows that the three variables independently contribute to the variance explained.

Likewise, it has been previously shown that emotional intelligence predicts life satisfaction (Bermúdez, Álvarez, & Sánchez, 2003; Extremera, Durán, & Rey, 2007; Freudenthaler, Neubauer, & Haller, 2008; Páez *et al.*, 2006; Palomera & Brackett, 2006). However, it was not yet clear the role that emotional intelligence could play in the relationship between the context-specific life satisfactions and the general satisfaction with life. In this study, we show that the most emotionally intelligent individuals get greater life satisfaction from experiences with their social environment and with themselves than the rest.

This fact seems logical, if we consider that by definition emotionally intelligent people understand well their own emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). When they feel

satisfied with themselves at a cognitive level, they can experience also the emotional aspect of this satisfaction and transfer that positive emotion to their life in general. The less emotionally intelligent individuals, even when they are cognitively satisfied, by definition, have less contact with their emotions, and therefore have more difficulty feeling that very satisfaction at an emotional level. It is not surprising therefore that they can transfer less emotional satisfaction to their feelings about their life.

Likewise, the more emotionally intelligent people better understand the emotions of others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). When other individuals have positive feelings towards them, they can perceive it better and feel satisfaction more often. On the contrary, when the people in their environment express negative feelings, their emotional intelligence helps these more emotionally intelligent individuals to interpret the causes of the others' behavior and helps them avoid taking personally the discontent of others that may have been caused for a variety of reasons. As they avoid negative interpretations, they more often experience a positive mood, which facilitates feeling a higher life satisfaction.

This study has several limitations. First, data were obtained through questionnaires answered by the same individuals, which can artificially increase the correlation among variables. Also, we did not collect data on the socioeconomic status of the participants, a demographic variable that may strongly influence life satisfaction. However, we did obtain data on educational level, which can serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status. We observed that this variable did not affect the patterns of relationships among the variables. Additionally, we did not gather information on other potentially important variables such as satisfaction with intimate friends or lovers. Also, we utilized a sample composed for the most part by Spaniards. Therefore, we cannot generalize findings to other cultures. To further investigate the hypotheses it would be necessary to develop new studies in which the above-mentioned variables and populations were also measured or selected.

In any case, increasing individuals' life satisfaction is a challenging task. The findings of this study, showing that certain experiences contribute to explain life satisfaction, allow us to develop more targeted interventions. To nurture job satisfaction, the quality of the relationships in that environment seems to be the most important variable. The satisfaction with the social environment also depends mainly on the way family members, friends, and other members of society relate to us. In both cases, the success of these relationships depends in part on our own ability to establish positive social relationships, which is one of the abilities of emotional intelligence. The satisfaction with oneself depends probably on our self-esteem, on our personal capabilities, and on the feedback we receive from others about ourselves. For all these reasons, it is important to foster from early childhood a high level of self-esteem, and to train a person's social abilities, well-being, and life skills, which is precisely the purpose of the emotional education.

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