

The Impact of Social Desirability and Expectation of Feedback on Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

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Abstract

The use of Emotional Intelligence (EI) questionnaires and scales in the workplace has been growing rapidly over the last decade. EI has been a popular measure to develop key competencies in staff in the workplace and has started to be used in guiding staff recruitment and selection. Because most questionnaires involve self report assessment, the use of EI scales to assist in employee recruitment may be compromised if test-takers are able to fake good responses to the scales or to show social desirability. The current study investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) as measured by the Workplace version of the Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test (SUEIT), and a new social desirability scale designed specifically for the Workplace – the Social Desirability Questionnaire (WSDQ) in 79 participants. A weak relationship between EI and social desirability was observed, and this relationship was stronger with the SUEIT dimensions of Emotional Control and Emotional Management than with the other dimensions. Social desirability was experimentally manipulated by examining the relationship between EI and WSDQ in two groups. The first group (N=34) completed the questionnaires anonymously and were told that no feedback was to be provided. The second group of participants (N=45) were informed that they would receive detailed feedback about their EI. EI did not significantly differ between the two feedback conditions. The results indicated that there is not significant or substantial relationships between self report EI and social desirability. The results of this study have significant implications for the use of self-report EI scales in employee recruitment.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence; Emotions; Social Desirability; Feedback.Recruitment; Personnel Selection*

Emotional intelligence has been touted as “the panacea for modern business” (Matthews, Zeidner & Roberts, 2002, p. 4.) and the key to individual performance and career success (Lam & Kirby, 2002). Some researchers have also argued (Ciarrochi, Chan, Caputi, & Roberts 2001) that developing emotional intelligence in individuals can lead to more adaptive behaviour and better mental health. Given the potential benefits and theoretical importance of these claims, it is somewhat surprising that there is no universal definition of emotional intelligence (Ashkanasy, Zerbe & Hartel, 2002). Additionally, there is yet to be consensus on the competencies that define emotional intelligence, or how it should be measured (Ashkanasy, et al., 2002). Research continues in an effort to better define the meaning of emotional intelligence, as well as to develop robust test measures (Mayer, 2001).

Salovey & Mayer (1990, p. 189) describe emotional intelligence as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions”. Their ability-based model presents emotional intelligence as a form of actual intelligence, combining emotions and thinking (Salovey & Mayer, 2000). This perspective maintains that emotional intelligence is best measured using the same type of performance-based measures used for psychometric intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey 1999, 2000; Matthews et al., 2002). The tests developed to operationalise the model, the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) and Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), are designed to tap intellectual abilities that relate to feelings and emotion (Gowing, 2001). In contrast to self-report measures, an ‘ability’ measure is purportedly not influenced by mood or a person’s own judgment of their emotions (Mayer, Caruso, et al., 2000). For

example, perception of emotion in oneself is significantly correlated with the ability to recognise emotions in others (Zuckerman, et al., 1975). This skill of accurately recognising emotions in others is the basis behind the MEIS and MSCEIT faces task, where there are 'right answers' based on correctly identifying "universal facial expressions of emotions among humans" (Mayer, Caruso, et al., p. 326).

There has been some criticism of the use of the currently available 'ability' measures of emotional intelligence. These criticisms centre around the validity of the scoring procedures (Expert or Consensus), used to evaluate responses on the MEIS and MSCEIT (Zeidner, Shani-Zinovich, Matthews & Roberts, 2005). Other researchers have reported less than ideal reliabilities for the sub-scales of the MEIS (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso & Sitarenios, 2003) and MSCEIT (Palmer, Gignac, Manocha & Stough, 2005). Despite these criticisms these tests have otherwise demonstrated adequate validity in predicting everyday (e.g., Lopes, Salovey & Straus, 2003) and workplace (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2006) criteria. They also show good discriminant validity from personality measures (Lopes et al., 2003) and discriminant and convergent validity from psychometric tests of intelligence (MacCann, Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2003).

A number of self-report, or 'trait' measures of emotional intelligence, have also been developed in the past 16 years of emotional intelligence research (e.g., Bar-On, 1997; Schutte et al., 1998). These types of measures have also received some criticism, particularly concerning their construct validity (Matthews et al., 2002), internal consistency, predictive validity (Janovics & Christiansen, 2001), and susceptibility to socially desirable responding. These criticisms centre on whether self-report measures of emotional intelligence are distinguishable from common personality traits, and whether they can provide incremental predictive validity beyond personality and psychometric intelligence measures. The resolution of these issues is vitally important considering the investment that organisations throughout the world are currently making in emotional intelligence testing in light of the various claims of emotional intelligence's relationship with job performance (e.g., Bachman, Stein, Campbell & Sitarenios, 2000; Janovics & Christiansen, 2001), and other work behaviours (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, 2004).

In general, organisational research is reliant on how individuals perceive themselves and how they choose to present themselves (James & Mazerolle, 2002). Questionnaires are the most widely used method to measure constructs such as attitudes, values and preferences, intentions and personality in the workplace (Ganster, Hennessey & Luthans, 1983). Questionnaires are both easy to administer and inexpensive (Ganster,

Hennessey & Luthans, 1983), due to their brevity and self-report nature. Some researchers purport that self-report questionnaires are subject to response bias and this may obscure findings concerning the construct of interest (Moorman & Podsakoff, 1992). Individuals, who are required to complete self-report questionnaires to apply for, or keep a position, may consciously or unconsciously provide answers that are socially desirable (James & Mazerolle, 2002). Therefore, the way in which individuals respond on self-report questionnaires may be a potential source of inaccuracy (Paulhus & Reid, 1991), which may produce negative consequences for organisations. As such, self-report measures of emotional intelligence inherently have the propensity to be susceptible to socially desirable responding.

The way in which data is collected may also provide a further source of inaccuracy for organisations. For example, it has been suggested that there will be greater likelihood of social desirability bias with data collection that involves personal interaction as opposed to self-administration (Nederhof, 1984). Nederhof's study of social desirability bias in equity experiments indicated that participants gave a more altruistic and socially desirable response in the face-to-face condition than from a mail survey. This suggests interaction with the experimenter should be avoided, in order to minimise socially biased responses, although this bias may be important to measure if it is related to the construct under investigation. Research by Gerstein, Ginter and Graziano (1985, p. 387) supports this conclusion, and suggests that "when evaluations are to be made public and actual interaction is expected, sociability and social skills may become more valuable assets ... than when evaluations are private and no actual interaction is expected". Additionally, a study by Richman Kiesler, Weisb and Drasgow (1999), revealed that when respondents are assured of anonymity they score lower in social desirability. Further to this, Richman et al. found that social desirability was reduced using computer interviews rather than when using face-to-face interviews. Paulhus (1984) suggests that impression management (as opposed to self-deception) is more sensitive to context than self-deception. Martin and Nagao (1989) also support that anonymity provides more accurate and less socially desirable responses than a face-to-face interview.

In the current study, participants were assigned to one of two feedback conditions. One group were advised that they would receive feedback on the results of the emotional intelligence test and the other group were informed that they would not receive any feedback and could complete the questionnaire anonymously. The present study investigated whether there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and social desirability. More specifically, the study explored whether social desirability presents as a response bias when measuring self-report emotional intelligence. In

addition, the effect of the expectation of feedback on emotional intelligence and social desirability was investigated. It was hypothesised that the expectation of feedback should cause socially desirable responses on both the self-report emotional intelligence test and social desirability measure (Martin & Nagao, 1989; Richman et al., 1999).

Method

Participants

Seventy-nine participants were recruited from organisations in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Fifty-six participants (71%) classified their occupation as Professional and/or Management, 18 participants (23%) described their occupation as clerical and/or customer service and five participants (6%) described their occupation as trades-people. Fifty-two participants were female (66%) and 27 were male (33%). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 57 ($M = 36.15$ years, $SD = 8.74$ years).

Measures

A self-report 'workplace' measure of emotional intelligence was employed in this study, as it would provide some degree of relevance to participants recruited from organisations (Zeidner et al., 2004). The SUEIT is a 64-item measure of emotional intelligence which provides scores on five dimensions: Emotional Recognition and Expression (11 items); Understanding Others Emotions (20 items); Emotions Direct Cognition (12 items); Emotional Management (12 items); and Emotional Control (9 items). Responses are scored on a five-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very seldom) to 5 (very often), with respondents indicating how they typically think, feel and act at work. The workplace SUEIT factor scores have previously shown good levels of internal consistency (Downey, Papageorgiou & Stough, 2006); emotional recognition and expression ($\alpha = 0.91$), understanding emotions external ($\alpha = 0.89$), emotions direct cognition ($\alpha = 0.70$), emotional management ($\alpha = 0.83$) and emotional control ($\alpha = 0.77$). As the SUEIT does not possess a social desirability indicator, a separate measure was used to assess social desirability.

The Workplace Social Desirability Questionnaire (WSDQ) (Gignac, 2006) was designed to assess the extent to which people endeavour to present themselves favourably. The WSDQ was used in this study to further validate the tool as a short-form social desirability measure, and to assess whether usage of WSDQ was necessary when administering the SUEIT. The scale includes 21 items, 11 items measuring the dimension agreeableness, or the extent to which people are "differential" in relationships and 10 items measuring narcissism, which pertains to how "egotistical" respondents are in their responses. An example item measuring agreeableness is: "I've always got along with everyone I've worked with". The

statement "I never show up to work late" is an example of an item measuring narcissism. Each item was rated on a 7-point likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true), 4 (somewhat true), and to 7 (very true). The items were conscientiously worded such that respondents most likely to engage in impression management would endorse a 6 or 7 (very true) response. A 'very true' response to a statement, was allocated one point for either on the agreeableness or narcissism scale. The possible score range was 0 to 11 for agreeableness and 0 to 10 for narcissism (Gignac). Approximately 22% of the items are negatively keyed to reduce response bias.

The WSDQ was specifically developed for the workplace setting to use with other workplace measures such as the SUEIT. In this study, the WSDQ had internal reliabilities of $\alpha = 0.64$ for agreeableness and $\alpha = 0.55$ for narcissism. Overall, the alpha coefficient for the WSDQ was 0.63. Previous analysis on data compiled by Gignac provides an overall internal consistency of .72 and a correlation with the Balanced Inventory for Social Desirable Responding (BIDSR) (Paulhus, 1984) of $\alpha = 0.65$.

Design and Analysis

To test the research hypotheses (that participants would report higher self report emotional intelligence in the feedback condition compared to the no-feedback/anonymous condition), a quasi-experimental design was used. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In one condition, participants were advised they would receive individualized feedback on their emotional intelligence score and participants in the other condition were advised their scores would be anonymous and that no feedback would be provided. Each participant received one questionnaire (the SUEIT and WSDQ were combined to appear as one questionnaire on emotional intelligence). Participants assigned to the feedback condition received a consent form and were requested to indicate their names and contact telephone numbers so that a feedback session could be organized. Participants were not advised of the WSDQ measure included to capture data on social desirability. The response rate differed among the two conditions. Seventy-five questionnaires were distributed for each condition. Of the total, 79 (53%) questionnaires returned, 45 (57%) participants were in the 'Feedback' condition and 34 (43%) participants were in the 'Non-Feedback' condition. The second hypothesis that there would be a significant relationship between self-report emotional intelligence and social desirability was tested by computing correlations between EI and social desirability scales across the total sample ($N=79$).

Psychometric properties of the WSDQ As the WSDQ is in development and its psychometric properties are not well established, it was decided to investigate the factor structure of the WSDQ as well as its internal consistency. The internal reliability of the

Workplace SUEIT was also investigated. A factor analysis was conducted of the 21-item WSDQ. Theoretically, the WSDQ is a two-dimensional measure, assessing Agreeableness and Narcissism, so the number of extracted factors was set to two. Factor loadings above 0.3 were considered significant (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The Kaiser-Meyer-Okin value was 0.62 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. A two-factor solution using principal component analysis and varimax rotation accounted for 28.50% of the shared variance. Items WSDQ5 and WSDQ18 did not differentiate between the two factors, with loadings of 0.39 and 0.28 on factor 1 and 0.27 and 0.15 on factor 2 respectively, while items WSDQ21, WSD3, and WSDQ20 did not load significantly on either factor. The two WSDQ subscales demonstrated adequate levels of internal consistency with alpha coefficients of $\alpha = 0.64$ and $\alpha = 0.55$ for Agreeableness and Narcissism respectively. The internal consistency for Agreeableness would be slightly increased to 0.65 if item WSDQ21 was deleted. Thus, consistent with findings of Gignac, the results of this study indicated that WSDQ is a two-dimensional construct with adequate reliability.

Results

Correlational and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and social desirability. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the SUEIT and WSDQ for both feedback conditions. and Table 2 details the correlations between the SUEIT and WSDQ subscales.

Table 1 indicates that there are no significant differences in mean scores of the emotional intelligence subscales. The largest difference between the two conditions is found in Understanding Emotions dimension, where counter-intuitively scores in the feedback condition are slightly lower than the 'non-feedback' condition. A series of one-way ANOVAs with the emotional intelligence subscale scores as the dependent variables and feedback condition as the independent variable was conducted. The ANOVAs indicated that none of the emotional intelligence dimensions differed significantly across the feedback conditions. This result indicates that the expectation of feedback did not impact responses on the emotional intelligence measure.

In regards to the relationship between the emotional intelligence and social desirability, Emotional Management was positively and significantly related to Agreeableness ($r = 0.28, p < 0.05$) and Narcissism ($r = 0.27, p < 0.05$), indicating that participants who can more effectively manage positive and negative emotions within themselves and others are better able to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. Additionally, Emotional Control was also positively and significantly related to Agreeableness ($r = 0.30, p < 0.05$) and Narcissism ($r = 0.33, p < 0.05$), indicating that individuals better able to control strong emotional states are also better able to present themselves in a socially desirable way. To ascertain the overall strength of the relationship between the two constructs, the correlation between the total score for the SUEIT and WSDQ was calculated. The scores were positively and significantly correlated, $r = 0.27, p < 0.05$. The relationship was only weak, indicating that emotional intelligence and social desirability share little measurement overlap when assessed with the scales used in this study (less than 10% shared variance).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of SUEIT and WSDQ subscales for 'Feedback' and 'Non Feedback' conditions.

Subscale	Feedback (N = 45)		Non-Feedback (N = 34)		Total (N = 79)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Emotional Recognition and Expression	37.44	5.94	38.32	6.37	37.82	6.10
Understanding Emotions	77.58	8.02	75.47	9.00	76.67	8.47
Emotions Direct Cognition	33.80	5.80	34.29	7.09	34.01	6.34
Emotional Management	42.29	5.14	41.15	6.43	41.80	5.72
Emotional Control	32.38	4.70	32.14	3.77	32.28	4.28
Agreeableness	4.51	2.08	5.00	1.86	4.72	1.99
Narcissism	4.15	1.80	3.70	1.49	3.96	1.68
Total Social Desirability	8.67	3.43	8.70	2.78	8.68	3.15

Table 2: Intercorrelations between the SUEIT and WSDQ Subscales for 'Feedback' and 'No Feedback' conditions.

Subscale	Feedback		Non-Feedback	
	Agreeableness	Narcissism	Agreeableness	Narcissism
Emotional Recognition & Expression	0.07	-0.06	0.04	0.24
Understanding Emotions	0.21	0.07	-0.05	0.36
Emotions Direct Cognition	-0.07	-0.12	0.15	0.21
Emotional Management	0.34*	0.37*	0.27	0.14
Emotional Control	0.30*	0.36*	0.30	0.26

Table 2 illustrates the correlations between the SUEIT and WSDQ for both feedback conditions. The correlations between social desirability and two dimensions of the SUEIT, Emotional Control and Emotional Management were higher in the 'feedback' condition than the 'no feedback' condition. This pattern of correlations for the 'feedback' condition suggests that the expectation of feedback had an effect on the relationship between social desirability and emotional intelligence than in the anonymous condition.

In order to assess the degree of effect the condition had on the relationship between social desirability and emotional intelligence the correlation between emotional intelligence and social desirability for the 'feedback' group ($r = 0.26$, and 'no feedback' group ($r = 0.30$) were converted to z scores. This z score (difference in the size of the correlation coefficient was 0.207 and was not statistically significant. This indicated the differences in correlations between the two groups were not significant.

Discussion

The present study explored the relationship between the five dimensions of the workplace SUEIT (Emotional Recognition and Expression, Understanding Others Emotions, Emotions Direct Cognition, Emotional Management and Emotional Control) and social desirability. A modest relationship between emotional intelligence and social desirability was observed, but the shared variance between the two measures was low at less than 10%. Studies by Schutte et al. (2001) have investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, finding that higher scores in emotional intelligence were related to higher scores in self-monitoring. Both the emotional control and emotional management dimensions utilise interpersonal skills in an effort to build, manage and maintain relationships, similarly impression management can be described as a conscious effort to create a favourable impression (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). This explanation may account for the shared variance in the variables. As such, the constructs of emotional intelligence and social desirability may share some commonality. The strength of the relationship reported in this study suggests that although a

relationship exists, the constructs are mainly independent.

Whether the expectation of feedback would impact performance on the emotional intelligence measure was also investigated. Martin and Nagao (1989) state that less socially desirable responses are present in anonymous contexts. The scores on the SUEIT in the 'non feedback' (anonymous) condition were compared with the scores in the 'feedback' (face-to-face interaction) condition. No differences in scores were found across the groups. The stability of emotional intelligence scores across the groups indicates that emotional intelligence is a stable construct with no fluctuations in scores within the two different contexts. The findings support the stability of the SUEIT as a self report emotional intelligence test in contexts where individuals may distort responses in a socially desirable manner. These findings are in line with Bar-On's (2000) validation studies, which revealed that responses on the EQ-i, did not produce evidence of socially desirable responding. It would seem that, similar to the EQ-i, responses on the SUEIT are not significantly subject to response bias.

In the organisational setting, there has been controversy over the utility of self-report questionnaires (Richman et al., 1999). Employees or potential employees, may 'fake' answers or unintentionally distort answers due to unconscious self-deception (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Social desirability can be seen as a 'style of responding', or an attempt to consciously manage the impression of oneself given to others (Paulhus, 1984). Studies by Gerstein et al. (1985), illustrate participants had higher levels of social desirability in an interview situation as opposed to an anonymous condition. The social context of an interview is likely to elicit more socially desirable behaviour. James & Mazerolle (2002) believe that people who complete self-report questionnaires in recruitment situations may unconsciously provide answers, which are socially desirable. Therefore it is imperative that the self-report measures used in organisational settings tap into the construct being measured, and are not contaminated by social desirable responding.

The results of the study indicate that social desirability is not a contaminant for self-reported emotional intelligence as measured by the workplace SUEIT. This finding supports the meta-analytic study by Moorman and Podsakoff (1992) who state that within organisational behaviour research, social desirability response styles have had very little effect on a wide range of organisational variables. Therefore, the SUEIT could be used with confidence in the workplace setting. The greater applicability of workplace specific self-report tests over ability based tests, could lie in the use of 360-degree EI rating programs in organisations, where self and peer rating scores are specific to workplace interactions. In cases where impression management may be an issue within organisations (e.g. completing tests as part of a process for promotion, rather than for personal development), the use of peer ratings may negate concerns over socially desirable responding. An alternative explanation for the current results may be that employees do not at this stage know how to best impression manage emotional intelligence. If this is true then as the use of EI in organizations becomes more widespread, it could be predicted that social desirability may become progressively more of an issue for employee recruitment using EI tools such as the workplace SUEIT.

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Research Profile

Luke Downey is currently a PhD student at the Brain Sciences Institute, Swinburne University. His research interests include: the psychological determinants of sporting performance, the application of workplace and adolescent assessments of emotional intelligence, intelligence, and computerised cognitive assessment. Luke is a member of the Emotional Intelligence research unit headed by Professor Con Stough, and is currently involved in a number of projects concerning the validity, reliability, and development of Emotional Intelligence within the Organisational and Educational settings. He has recently presented at the International Society for Intelligence Researches annual conference and Emotional Intelligence in Secondary Schools conference run by the Brain Sciences Institute.