

Abstract

Workplace theft costs U.S. companies millions of dollars every year. If there were a reliable way to predict who would steal from the workplace, this would be extremely valuable. The purpose of this study was to determine if Emotional Intelligence predicts workplace theft. A total of 178 employed undergraduate students completed a questionnaire regarding workplace theft and Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence (TMEI; Wang, Gribler, & Martinez, 1997). The number of thefts committed and the value of items stolen were correlated with each of the 12 subscales of the TMEI. Of these 24 correlations, seven were statistically significant. For example, those who empathize with the emotions of others are less likely to steal from the workplace, and those who are able to recognize their own emotions are more likely to steal. However, some of the findings seemed incongruent. Therefore, additional research is needed to determine if Emotional Intelligence can be used to predict workplace theft.

Introduction

Predicting theft and other deviant behaviors in the work place could lead to increased company productivity, a better overall working environment, and profit increase. Many employers attempt to determine if potential employees have a history of theft prior to hiring them. Several different approaches are taken. One approach is to administer lie detector tests. "Lie detectors or polygraph tests measure several physiological processes (e.g. heart rate) and changes in those processes" (National Research Council of the National Academies, 2003, p.1). Experts, however, question the validity of these tests. Many people in the psychological community believe that polygraph lie detection is not theoretically sound, that claims of high validity for these procedures cannot be sustained, and that polygraph tests can be beaten by learned counter measures (Iacono & Lykken, 1997). Thus, it seems that passing a polygraph test cannot be considered adequate proof that a person has not committed a theft.

Because some professionals have found lie detector tests to be ineffective, many employers are using integrity testing for employee selection. "Integrity tests are used to predict dishonesty or counter productivity; these tests are composed of items that query job applicants about their attitudes toward theft and inquire about any past thefts" (Camara & Schneider, 1997, p. 112). One criticism of integrity tests is that applicants may be excluded due to measures that are not necessarily related to integrity or honesty, such as social closeness or traditionalism (Lilienfeld, Alliger, & Mitchell, 1995).

It also is possible for participants to figure out what integrity tests are trying to measure, and to alter their responses accordingly. Respondents who are trying to make a favorable impression may alter or exaggerate their answers to appear to be a better potential employee. Most integrity tests do not contain lie scales. Lie scales or socially-desirable responding scales are designed to detect exaggeration and false answers. These scales ask the participant to indicate the extent to which a number of statements are true to them. Usually these statements refer to behaviors that are common, but undesirable. If the respondent endorses an unusually low number of these statements, the test administrators would interpret the respondent as being deceptive. Integrity tests without lie scales allow participants to distort responses without detection (Lilienfeld et al., 1995). Therefore, it remains unclear if integrity test results can predict who engages in deviant behaviors such as theft.

Predicting theft is an important issue. The lack of adequate measures that predict theft means we should look for other measures that might be related to theft and could be used for employment screening. We hypothesize that Emotional Intelligence tests might be related to theft, and therefore could be used for employment screening. It is the goal of this study to determine if a person's level of Emotional Intelligence is related to their likelihood to be involved in theft. According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), Emotional Intelligence is "the subset of social intelligence that involves 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" (p. 189). Previous research has found that lower Emotional Intelligence is predictive of deviant behavior. For example, lower Emotional Intelligence has been linked to drug abuse and excessive drinking in male college students (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner; 2004). As well, lower Emotional Intelligence is associated with higher numbers of unexcused absences in secondary school students, and students who have been expelled from secondary school are more likely to fall into groups of people who have lower Emotional Intelligence (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2003). Handling relationships and self-control are both correlated with vandalism, general deviance, and assault (Lance, 2003). Finally, the ability to manage emotions, which includes emotional management and emotional relations, is related to deviance (Bora, 2003). Thus, previous studies have demonstrated that there is a relationship between lower levels of Emotional Intelligence and several different types of deviant behavior. Because theft is a form of deviant behavior, we predict that there might also be a negative correlation between theft and Emotional Intelligence. In this study, self-reports of Emotional Intelligence and theft were compared to determine whether the two variables are correlated.

Method

Participants

A total of 178 undergraduate students participated in this study. Of these 178 participants, 94 were females and 69 males. Participants agreed to take part in this study in return for research credit for psychology course work. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56 (mean 21.32, standard deviation 5.53). Participant's ethnic breakdown was as follows 46.1 % Caucasian; 19.7% Asian; 7.9% African American; 6.7 % Hispanic; 5.6 % Pacific Islander; 1.1% Native American, and 5.1% other.

Measures

Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence

Tett's Measure of Emotional intelligence (TMEI; Wang, Gribler, & Martinez, 1997) is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure 12 aspects of Emotional Intelligence. The 12 scales are listed in Table 1. Participants responded using a 6-point Likert rating scale. Possible responses ranged from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 6 "Strongly Agree."

History of Theft

Participants also completed a self-report measure of theft in the workplace. This questionnaire asked participants how many times they had stolen from their work place in the last 30 days. They were asked to report the number of thefts of items worth less than two dollars, worth between two and ten dollars, worth between ten and fifty dollars, and worth more than fifty dollars. Calculations were then done to determine the number of times each participant had stolen from the workplace and to approximate the value of what each participant had stolen. These measures are called Number Stolen and Value Stolen, respectively.

Value Stolen was calculated by multiplying the number of times they had stolen by the estimated value of the items stolen. For the question that asks how many times the participant stole something worth less than two dollars, the value was estimated to be one dollar. For the question that asked participants how many times they had stolen something worth between two and ten dollars, the value was estimated as six dollars. For the question that asked participants how many times they had stolen something between ten and fifty dollars, the value was estimated as thirty dollars. Finally, for the question that asked how many times the participant had stolen something worth more than fifty dollars, the value was estimated as fifty dollars, which is almost always going to be an underestimate of the true value stolen for that category.

Results

Two correlations were calculated for each of the twelve scales of the TMEI: the correlation with Number Stolen and the correlation with Value Stolen. Of the twenty-four correlations, seven were found to be statistically significant (see Table 1).

Recognition of Emotion in the Self had a statistically significant positive correlation with both Number Stolen ($r = .31, p = .01$) and Value Stolen ($r = .26, p = .05$). This means that an individual who is more aware of their feelings and can express these feelings verbally are more likely to commit theft in the workplace.

Empathy had a statistically significant negative correlation with both Number Stolen ($r = -.49, p = .01$) and Value Stolen ($r = -.26, p = .05$). This means that an individual who is able to empathize with the emotions of others is less likely to steal from their place of work.

Regulation of Emotion in Others had a statistically significant negative correlation with Number Stolen ($r = -.35, p = .01$). Individuals who are able to manage the emotions of other individuals are less likely to steal from the workplace.

Intuition versus Reason had a statistically significant negative correlation with Number Stolen ($r = -.34, p = .01$). Individuals who make decisions based on emotion rather than logic are less likely to steal from the work place.

Finally, Mood Redirected Attention had a statistically significant negative correlation with Number Stolen ($r = -.47, p = .01$). Individuals who use negative emotional experiences to help analyze their goals in life are less likely to steal from the workplace.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a link between Emotional Intelligence and the likelihood that an individual has stolen from their place of work. If there is a relationship, then Emotional Intelligence tests might be used to screen potential employees. We correlated the twelve subscales of Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence (TMEI; Tett et al., 1997) with the number and value of goods stolen from the workplace in the last 30 days.

We found that people who can recognize their own emotions are more likely to steal from the workplace. As well, those who empathize with others' emotions, regulate others' emotions, use intuition rather than reason to make important life decisions, and those who use emotions to help analyze their goals in life are less likely to steal from work.

Examining these results, they seem to be inconsistent. On the one hand, people who focus on the emotions of others (empathizing and regulating others emotions) are less likely to steal, and people who think about the consequences of their actions (using negative experiences to set goals) are also less likely to steal. This makes sense to us. Furthermore, people who focus on their own emotions (and are good at recognizing them) are more likely to steal. This seems to be plausible, even given the first set of results. On the other hand, people who make important decisions based upon emotions rather than reason are less likely to steal. This suggests to us that people are rationalizing their thefts. By itself, this result makes sense. However, when considered in the context of the previous results, we are unsure how to reconcile them. People who recognize their own emotions are more likely to steal, but people who make decisions based upon emotions are more likely to steal. This seems bizarre.

One possible reason for uninterruptible results is the presence of Type I errors. We conducted 24 significance tests, each using a Type I error rate of .05. If there were in fact no statistically significant relationships between the variables in the population, we would expect one significant relationship by chance (which would be a Type I error). However, we have seven statistically significant relationships, which is far more than would be expected by chance alone. Therefore, some of the above relationships are probably real relationships. But perhaps one or two of them are Type I errors. Figuring out which is a Type I error and which is a real relationship between the variables is impossible, without replicating the study. We therefore recommend that additional research examine the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and workplace theft. We hope that this research will be able to resolve these contradictory findings.

References

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Table 1
Correlations of Emotional Intelligence with Theft

Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence	Number Stolen	Value Stolen
Recognition of Emotion in the Self	.31**	.26*
Nonverbal Emotional Expression	-.21	-.11
Recognition of Emotion in Others	-.08	-.04
Empathy	-.49**	-.26*
Regulation of Emotion in the Self	.13	.10
Regulation of Emotion in Others	-.35**	-.21
Intuition versus Reason	-.34**	-.21
Creative Thinking	-.00	-.01
Mood Redirected Attention	-.42**	-.15
Motivating Emotions	.04	.02
Delay of Gratification	-.04	-.13
Emotional Appropriateness	-.18	-.16

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