

Appropriate Emotional Responses and Emotional Intelligence
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Abstract

Some people have unusual emotional reactions. The purpose of this research is to learn more about those people. First, can tests distinguish between those people who have appropriate emotional responses to and those who do not? Second, do people who have appropriate emotional responses differ from those who do not in terms of their Emotional Intelligence? A total of 376 undergraduates participated in this study. They completed the first item from the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS), which asks them how they would feel in a certain situation. Another person is also mentioned in the situation, and they are also asked how that person would feel. Responses to each of these two questions were categorized as being appropriate or not, based upon the frequency of reported emotional reactions in the undergraduates included in this study. Emotional Intelligence was measured using the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, which has four branches: Perceiving Emotions, Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought, Understanding Emotion, and Managing Emotion. This study showed that our new scoring keys can successfully distinguish between people who have appropriate emotional responses and those who do not. In fact, the categorizations based upon the two questions were in perfect agreement: Everyone who gave an appropriate response to the first question also gave an appropriate response to the second question. However, these two groups did not differ on any of the four branches of Emotional Intelligence. Future research should further compare people who have emotionally appropriate responses and those who do not. First, are the same people identified when other emotionally evocative situations are used, or when the appropriate emotional response is determined using data from different cultural groups? Second, if these two groups do not differ in their emotional intelligence, what ability or personality characteristic allows the first group to provide appropriate responses when the second group cannot?

Introduction

Some people have bizarre emotional reactions. If you give them a compliment, they get angry. If they see someone about to shoot themselves, they laugh. What's with these people? Do they not know how they should respond? Do they know how they should respond but they don't care? Do they want to respond appropriately but are unable to control their reactions? The purpose of this research is to identify people who have unusual emotional reactions and learn more about them.

To identify people with unusual emotion reactions, we developed a new scoring key for the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990). The LEAS is an open-ended test. Respondents are asked to describe how they would feel in 20 emotionally evocative scenarios. Another person is mentioned in each scenario, and the respondent is also asked to describe how that person would feel. We did not use the regular method of scoring the LEAS. Instead, we developed a new scoring method: Participants receive a score of 1 if they give an emotionally appropriate response to the scenario, and a 0 if they do not. Using responses from the first scenario on the LEAS, we developed separate scoring keys for the question "How would you feel?" and "How would the other person feel?" This gave us two different ways of identifying participants who give appropriate emotional responses. In order to check that we had successfully identified the people who gave appropriate emotional reactions (and those who did not); we compared the people who were identified by each of these questions.

There are many ways that participants who did not give appropriate emotional responses might differ from participants who did. One way they might differ would be in their Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is "the capacity to reason about emotions and enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004, p. 1). Emotional Intelligence includes four branches (Mayer et al., 2004): Perceiving Emotions, Using Emotions, Understanding Emotions to Facilitate Thought, and Managing Emotions. People with greater Emotional Intelligence have better social skills, are more cooperative with their partners, have more affectionate relationships, and have partners who are more satisfied with their marriages (Schutte et al., 2001). High Emotional Intelligence is also important for effective leadership in the workforce in such areas as teamwork and multitasking (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003). This paper will compare people who have appropriate emotional reactions to those who do not based upon the four branches of Emotional Intelligence.

Method

Participants

A total of 376 (214 female, 162 male) undergraduate students participated in this study. They ranged in age from 18 to 50 (Mean 19.98, Standard Deviation 3.48). The participants identified their ethnicities as follows: 57.4% Caucasian, 12.8% Hispanic, 12.2% Asian, 7.2% African American, 6.4% Pacific Islander, and 3.7% other.

Measures

Emotional Appropriateness

The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane et al., 1990) consists of 20 open-ended items that are designed to evoke one of four emotional responses: sadness, happiness, fear, and anger. Each item describes a scenario involving the participant and another person. The participant is asked to describe how they would feel in the scenario as well as how the other person would feel. In this study only item 1 was used.

The LEAS is usually used to measure Emotional Awareness. In this study, we used the first item from the LEAS to measure Emotional Appropriateness, instead. Specifically, we created two new scoring keys that we then used to divide participants into two groups – those who gave appropriate emotional responses and those who did not. We created separate scoring keys for responses to the questions "How would you feel," and "How would the other person feel?"

Creating each of the new scoring keys involved four steps. First, we calculated the frequencies of words and phrases that participants used in their responses. For example, the word "angry" was used 73 times by the 376 participants. Second, we grouped synonymous words and phrases together. For example, "anger" was used 25 times, and is a synonym of "angry". To determine which words are synonyms of which other words, we received some guidance from the list of emotion synonyms provided by James A. Russell (personal communication, March 2, 2010). Third, if an emotion or its synonyms occurred frequently, we declared that this was an appropriate emotional reaction. Thus, we did not start with preconceived ideas about what would be appropriate emotional reactions to this situation. Instead, we used a purely descriptive approach: An appropriate emotional reaction is one that is common within the norm group. Fourth, we formatted the final list of words and phrases so that it could be used with Program for Open-Ended Scoring (POES; Leaf & Barchard, 2010) to score the raw responses.

We used the new scoring keys to divide participants into two groups: those who had appropriate emotional responses and those who did not. This involved two steps. First, we scored participants' responses by giving the new scoring key to POES. The POES output told us how often each participant had used the words in the Wordlist. Second, if a participant had used one or more appropriate emotion words, they were classified as belonging to the first group. If a participant did not use any appropriate emotion words, they were classified as belonging to the second group.

Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test

The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2004) includes 141 closed-ended questions that measure four branches of Emotional Intelligence: Perceiving Emotions, Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought, Understanding Emotions, and Managing Emotions. Each branch includes two tasks. The first branch, Perceiving Emotions is measured by asking participants to identify the emotions in faces and pictures. The second branch, Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought, is measured by asking participants to compare emotional sensations to sensory stimuli and to identify the emotions that would best facilitate a

certain type of thinking. The third branch, Understanding Emotions, is measured by asking participants to identify how emotions change and are related to each other. The fourth branch, Managing Emotions, is measured by asking participants to select the action that would be best to maintain or change an emotion or to manage a relationship.

Procedures

Participants completed the LEAS and MSCEIT on-line as part of a larger study that included two 90-minute testing sessions.

Data Analysis

The first purpose of this study was to identify the participants who gave appropriate emotional responses. We identified these participants in two ways, first using the answers to the question “How would you feel?” and then using the answers to the question “How would the other person feel?” To check that we had successfully identified participants who gave appropriate emotional responses, we compared the results from the two questions, by cross-tabulating the number of appropriate emotion words given to the two questions.

Next, we compared participants who had appropriate emotional responses and people who did not in terms of their scores on the four branches of the MSCEIT using independent sample t-tests.

Results

The two methods of identifying participants who gave appropriate emotional responses were in complete agreement. Every participant who gave an appropriate emotional response to the question “How would you feel?” also gave an appropriate emotional response to the question “How would the other person feel?” Moreover, the participants who did not give appropriate emotional responses to the first question also did not give appropriate emotional responses to the second question. See Table 1.

Participants who gave appropriate emotional responses did not differ significantly from participants who did not give appropriate responses on any of the four MSCEIT branches. Because the two LEAS questions resulted in identical classifications of the 376 participants, the results were identical regardless of whether we calculated appropriateness based upon their answers to the question “How would you feel?” and the question “How would the other person feel?” Therefore, just a single set of results is given in Table 2.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn more about people who do not have appropriate emotional responses. First, we classified people into two groups (those having appropriate emotional responses and those who did not have appropriate emotional responses) based upon the first item on the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS). This item includes two questions, “How would you feel?” and “How would the other person feel?” Classifications based upon these two questions were in perfect agreement. This indicates that we can successfully and consistently distinguish between these two groups of people. Future research should classify the responses to the remaining 19 LEAS items and to other open-ended questions, to further explore the consistency of Emotional Appropriateness.

The second purpose of this research was to determine if participants who had appropriate emotional responses differ from those who did not have appropriate emotional responses in terms of their Emotional Intelligence. No significant differences were found on any of the four branches of the MSCEIT. Because dichotomous variables usually result in lower statistical power than continuous scales, the relationship between Emotional Appropriateness and Emotional Intelligence should be re-examined once Emotional Appropriateness can be scored from 0 – 40, based upon the 2 questions for each of the 20 LEAS items. If there is still no relationship, it might be due to socially desirable responding. The LEAS asks people what they would feel, not what they should feel or what would be appropriate. It might be that emotionally intelligent people know what the appropriate emotional response is but only a subset of the emotional intelligent people – the ones who score high on socially desirable responding – tell us that they personally would have the appropriate emotional response. It might be that most emotionally intelligent people know that they will often feel something else, and they will tell us precisely what they would feel unless they are trying to impress us. If so, this would suggest the need to revise the questions that are used to assess Emotional Appropriateness: We may want to ask separate questions about how the person themselves would feel and what most people would feel in that situation. Perhaps the most emotionally intelligent people are the ones who can recognize that others may feel differently than they would.

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Table 1
Identifying People who gave Appropriate Emotional Responses using Two Different Questions

How would you feel?	How would the other person feel?	
	Emotionally Appropriate Response	No Emotionally Appropriate Response
Emotionally Appropriate Response	319	0
No Emotionally Appropriate Response	0	57

Table 2
Comparing the Emotional Intelligence of People Who Did and Did Not Give Appropriate Emotional Responses

MSCEIT Branch	People with appropriate emotional responses			People without appropriate emotional responses			Comparing these two groups	
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	t-obt	p
Perceiving Emotions	319	99.80	15.39	57	98.99	15.88	-0.37	.715
Using Emotions	319	94.05	17.85	57	94.52	16.87	0.19	.853
Understanding Emotions	319	89.42	14.20	57	87.79	11.96	-0.82	.414
Managing Emotions	319	89.07	15.02	57	89.45	13.80	0.18	.859

Note. df = 374.