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Emotional intelligence, satisfaction with life and burnout among university students

Ana-Maria Cazan ^{a*}, Laura Elena Năstasă ^b

^{a,b} Transilvania University of Brasov, Eroilor 29, 500036, Brasov, Romania

Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between emotional intelligence, burnout and satisfaction with life among university students. Emotional intelligence is related to better adjustment or success in academic settings. High levels of emotional intelligence are associated with lower levels of anxiety, stress, burnout and with higher levels of satisfaction with life. The results led to the idea of a mediation model, academic burnout mediating the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction. Overall, the results of this study highlighted the possibility to identify students who are at risk regarding their high level of burnout or their low level of life satisfaction.

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Keywords: Academic settings; burnout; emotional intelligence, satisfaction with life.

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence plays a significant role in academic settings, including burnout, academic adjustment and satisfaction with life. From the perspective of Salovey and Mayer (1990) emotional intelligence represents the ability to monitor feelings and emotions, and to use them in order to guide thinking and actions. Previous research suggests that emotional intelligence predict satisfaction with life and burnout dimensions, emotional intelligence having a protective effect regarding stress and reactions to stress. Emotional intelligence refers to people’s self-perceptions of their own emotional abilities and skills, personality characteristics and behavioral dispositions that influence their ability to cope successfully with environmental demands and pressures. The research in the field

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0740065734.

E-mail address: ana.cazan@unitbv.ro

showed that emotional intelligence is related to better adjustment or success in academic settings. Also, high levels of emotional intelligence are associated with lower levels of anxiety, stress, burnout and with higher levels of satisfaction with life. These results are reported not only for the students, but also in professions, such as mental health professionals and teachers, emotional intelligence emerging as an important personality-level predictor of burnout and job satisfaction (Platsidou & Salman, 2012).

Burnout is described as a physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding (Maslach, Leiter, & Schaufeli, 2008). It includes exhaustion referring to a person's levels of emotional and physical resources, the cynicism indicating the interpersonal distancing element of burnout, and self-efficacy, as the self-evaluation element of burnout (Maslach, Leiter & Schaufeli, 2008). Academic burnout influences the learning as well as students' overall health and well-being. Burnout syndrome has been described as being the result of chronic work-related stress and usually it is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion (being emotionally drained by intense contact with recipients, depersonalization or negative, cynical attitudes toward them or toward the work in general, and a sense of lack of personal work) (Durán, Extremera, Rey, P Fernández-Berrocal, & Montalbán, 2006). Student burnout can lead to higher absenteeism, lower motivation to do required course work, higher percentage of drop out and it has a negative effect on academic achievement (Yang, 2004).

Satisfaction with life ensures people to feel themselves better and to express positively affects. According to Pavot and Diener (2004), satisfaction with life is a cognitive component of well-being. Recent studies showed that self-esteem and social support partially mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction (Runcan & Iovu, 2013) and that perceived stress and coping resources are useful in predicting life satisfaction (Matheny, Roque-Tovar, & Curlette, 2008).

2. Purpose of study

This research investigates the relationship between emotional intelligence, burnout and satisfaction with life among university students. The research design is correlational and the main hypothesis is that emotional intelligence predicts burnout and life satisfaction in university students.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 91 undergraduate first (N = 42) and third year students (N = 49). The research design is correlational. The participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. The questionnaires were completed during class time, were anonymous and no compensation was offered.

3.2. Instruments

Several instruments were administered to the students. We used the Romanian versions of the instruments. The psychometric properties of the instruments were also tested, showing high reliability coefficients.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002) consists of 15 items that constitute three scales: Exhaustion (5 items), Cynicism (4 items) and Efficacy (6 items). The Alpha Cronbach coefficients for the Romanian version were high: .87 for the Exhaustion scale, .90 for the Cynicisms scale, .85 for the Efficacy scale and .76 for the entire scale.

The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte et al., 1998) is considered a brief self-report measure of global emotional intelligence and it consists of 33 items assessing perception, understanding, expression, regulating and harnessing of emotion in the self and others. The Alfa Cronbach coefficient was high, .88 for the entire scale. The scale evaluates emotional intelligence from the perspective of its skills, based on the original model proposed by Salovey & Mayer (1990), using a self-administered questionnaire.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life. The Satisfaction with Life Scale was

developed to assess satisfaction with the respondents' life as a whole. According to the SWLS, higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction. As previous research suggested (Cazan, 2014), the Romanian version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale has good psychometric properties. The Alfa Cronbach coefficient obtained for the entire scale is .82.

Factual data related to age, gender, parents' schooling, environment, and academic results for all the participants at the end of the academic year were also collected.

4. Results and discussion

The Pearson coefficients showed there were significant relationships between emotional intelligence, burnout, and satisfaction with life (Table 1).

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients between burnout, emotional intelligence and satisfaction with life

	Exhaustion	Cynicism	Efficacy	Emotional intelligence	Satisfaction with life
Exhaustion	1				
Cynicism	.397**	1			
Efficacy	-.300**	-.423**	1		
Emotional intelligence	-.272**	-.213*	.324**	1	
Satisfaction with life	-.077	-.309**	.365**	.383**	1

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

Correlational analyses showed that emotional intelligence was significantly related to life satisfaction: students displaying high levels of understanding and expressing emotions also report greater satisfaction with life. The analysis also showed significant negative correlations between emotional intelligence and burnout. Students experiencing burnout are emotionally exhausted, for them, negative emotions are dominant, they have a sense of reduced personal accomplishment, and a low level of self-efficacy. The highest positive correlation between emotional intelligence and burnout dimensions was obtained for the efficacy scale, proving the fact that emotional intelligence can alternatively be labelled as trait emotional self-efficacy (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). As expected, academic performances were not associated with emotional intelligence, academic burnout and satisfaction with life. The only significant association was obtained between academic performances and self-efficacy (Table 2).

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients between academic performances and the other variables

	Exhaustion	Cynicism	Efficacy	Burn-out	Emotional intelligence	Satisfaction with life
Academic performance	.081	-.061	.202*	.145	-.166	-.043

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

A mediation model was tested. The path analysis showed that burnout mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and satisfaction with life. A second model included academic performance, the relationship between academic performance and satisfaction with life being mediated by burnout.

Table 3. Fit indexes for the selected model

Model	χ^2	df	p	RMSEA	CFI
Final model	11.94	3	.008	.182 (.062-.086)	.863

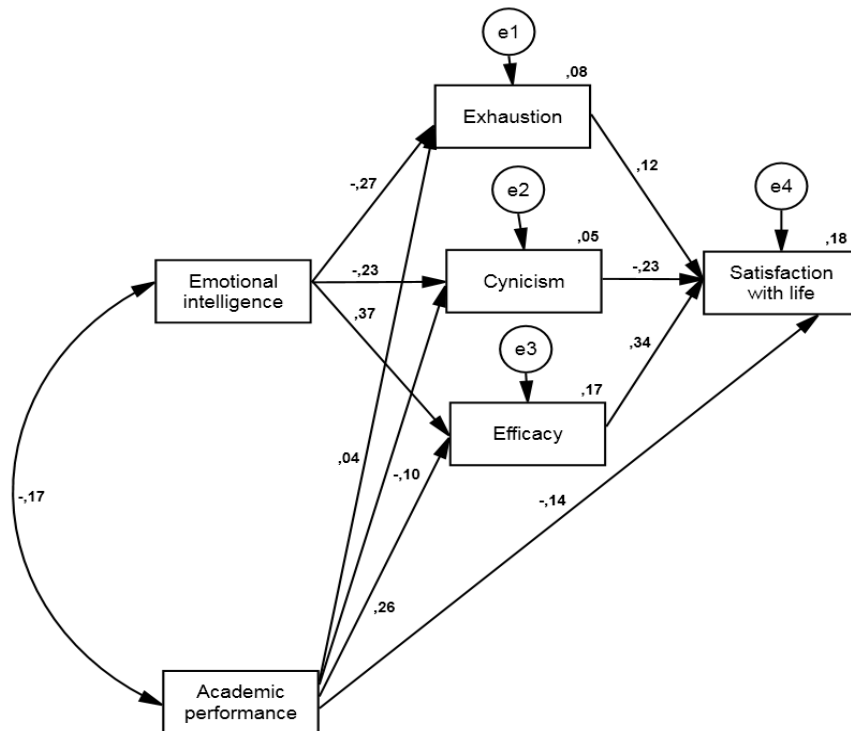


Figure 1. Structural regression model of satisfaction with life (standardized estimates)

The path model showed that emotional intelligence had a significant positive effect on efficacy, and negative significant effects on cynicism and exhaustion; academic performance had a positive significant effect on efficacy and negative effect although not significant on satisfaction with life; cynicism had negative significant effect on satisfaction with life and self-efficacy had a positive effect. The mediation effect explains that emotional intelligence helps students to cope with stressful situations in order to achieve a high level of satisfaction with life (Figure 1). This finding also supports Chang's (2009) claims that individuals need a variety of emotional resources to avoid burnout.

5. Conclusions

The present study tried to investigate the role that burnout might play in the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction in a sample of Romanian university students. Research findings showed that significant relationships exist between emotional intelligence, burnout, and satisfaction with life. The results confirm previous research showing that emotional intelligence predicts satisfaction (Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006) and burnout dimensions (Chan, 2006). The analysis revealed that emotional intelligence and burnout have a positive impact on satisfaction with life. On the other hand, burnout has negative consequences on satisfaction with life. The results led to the idea of a mediation model, academic burnout mediating the relationship between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction. A secondary aim was to identify the associations between academic performances and the other variables. Although previous research indicated that previous academic achievement could predict burnout, our study did not reveal significant relationships between academic grades and burnout or between emotional intelligence and academic results. Overall, the results of this study highlighted the possibility to identify students who are at risk regarding their high level of burnout or their lower level of satisfaction with life. The mediating role

of burnout suggests that students with higher emotional intelligence can cope efficiently with stress which in turn leads to an increase in their life satisfaction.

An important implication of the study is the possibility to develop intervention programs aiming to enhance well-being and adjustment among students. Students' ability to manage their emotions and impulses, to be more flexible, and to express their emotions in an assertive manner represent an important resource against burnout syndrome. As a result, our research supports the opportunity of implementing a program focused on the development of emotional intelligence which can facilitate resilience and academic adjustment. Previous research suggested that a higher level of emotional intelligence has a positive impact on personal and professional development (Năstasă, 2010).

The limitations of the study refer to the small sample size and to the reduced possibility of the findings to be generalized within the Romanian culture. Future researchers must also test mediating models through longitudinal studies and include qualitative research methods which will provide a better understanding of the causes of burnout and low satisfaction with life.

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