

# Emotional intelligence: an integral part of positive psychology

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Both “emotional intelligence” and “positive psychology” are rapidly becoming very visible, popular and important areas within psychology. This article suggests that emotional intelligence should be considered an integral part of positive psychology. Empirical findings are presented that support this notion in addition to examining the way both disciplines have been described, defined and conceptualised over the past decade. This approach to categorising emotional intelligence is one way of justifying where it should be placed within the field of psychology. In light of the fact that the current article addresses this issue directly and based on the specific approach which is applied, it is hoped that this publication will represent a useful contribution to the literature.

**Keywords:** Bar-On model of emotional intelligence; Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence; emotional intelligence; emotional-social intelligence; humanistic psychology; positive psychology

I completed my doctorate in 1988 at Rhodes University, South Africa. Upon recently re-reading my doctoral dissertation while preparing the present publication, it is abundantly clear that I was conducting research in an area which is directly associated with “positive psychology” as well as “emotional intelligence” although both terms were virtually unknown at the time. I hypothesised that “effective emotional and social functioning” (the precursor of the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence) should eventually lead to a sense of “well-being” (Bar-On, 1988). In light of the fact that well-being is an area that attracts a great deal of scholarly attention in positive psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Positive Psychology Center, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman *et al.*, 2005), the connection between emotional intelligence and positive psychology should become palpable from the outset of the present discussion.

Although Bar-On’s conceptualisation of emotional intelligence emerged from my experience as a clinical psychologist, it is important to stress that this construct should not be considered an integral part of clinical psychology. On the contrary, the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence represents a eupsychic response to the medical model which has prevailed in psychology since its early beginnings. It is necessary to emphasise this distinction in light of the fact that positive psychology represents the *antithesis* of the medical model, which continues to exist within various fields of psychology today such as clinical psychology with its need to focus on the study, diagnosis and treatment of psychopathology. As in medicine itself, however, psychology (including clinical psychology) has begun to emphasise the importance of optimal health factors and preventative work.

Furthermore, it is axiomatic to the present discussion to emphasise that Charles Darwin’s work on the role of “emotional expression in survival and adaptation” (1872/1965) has influenced the ongoing development of the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence, which also stresses the importance of emotional expression and views the outcome of emotionally intelligent behaviour in Darwinian terms of effective adaptation (Bar-On, 2006b). Whereas emotional awareness and emotional expression are key components of emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 1997b; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and in light of the fact that optimal adaptation also represents an important area of inquiry in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the link between these two areas of psychology is hopefully being brought into sharper focus for the reader. Additionally, the Bar-On model as well as other current models of emotional intelligence have ‘extended’ Darwinian thinking by highlighting the importance of the ability to *thrive* in addition to merely survive (Bar-On, 1997b; Goleman, 1998), which also represents a major focus of interest for positive psychology today (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

At the time this article was re-submitted for publication in late September 2009, an extensive search of the literature revealed 39 publications that contain reference to “emotional intelligence” and “positive psychology” in their title or text. Nearly all of these publications are books, edited books or chapters (without one journal article on the topic itself). Additionally, none of these publications directly discusses the nature of the relationship between the construct of emotional intelligence and the field of positive psychology nor provides extensive evidence supporting this notion. Only one chapter (Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002), which was later reprinted (Salovey *et al.*, 2004) and mildly revised (Salovey *et al.*, 2008, 2009), refers to this relationship in its title (alone) without further explaining how emotional intelligence and positive psychology might be related; instead of attempting to do this, either directly or indirectly, the chapter focuses entirely on the authors’ conceptual and psychometric model of emotional intelligence as well as on research findings generated by the MSCEIT (Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test). Only one other publication, titled *Emotional Intelligence: Perspectives on Educational and Positive Psychology* (Cassady & Eissa, 2008), suggests a possible relationship between the two concepts but provides only limited, indirect and/or partial evidence that a relationship does indeed exist (see for example the following chapters: Chang, 2008; Furnham & Petrides, 2008; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2008). What is noticeably lacking in this discussion to date is a direct examination of the degree to which emotional intelligence impacts key aspects of positive psychology such as successful performance, happiness and well-being. As such, the current publication represents the first attempt to directly examine the proposed relationship between emotional intelligence and positive psychology as well as to suggest that the former be considered an integral part of the latter by providing both theoretical and empirical evidence to support this view.

The definitions of positive psychology and emotional intelligence are described below in an attempt to better understand the underlying theoretical relationship between these two fields. This is followed by a summary of empirical findings that support the idea that emotional intelligence is an integral part of positive psychology. The findings will show that emotional intelligence has a significant impact on successful performance, happiness, well-being and the quest for a more meaningful life, which are important topics of study in the area of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

## **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY BASED ON THE WAY THE TWO FIELDS ARE DESCRIBED**

The terms “positive psychology” and “emotional intelligence” are described and defined in this section for the purpose of showing that these fields are integrally linked.

### **Positive psychology**

Positive psychology emerged from the humanistic movement that became popular in the 1960s, although studies associated with this school of psychology began in the 1930s.

Certain issues which the humanistic psychologists began to raise were in the form of a direct critique of the psychological and psychiatric establishment of the day. The humanistic movement represented a swing away from focusing primarily on psychopathology toward enhancement of normal and optimal human growth, which is a basic precept of positive psychology today. This movement represented an historic break from the psychoanalytic *normality as fiction* orientation, which suggested that normality, let alone optimal psychological well-being, is an unobtainable myth. Buhler (1979) considered it “a near revolutionary step to create confidence in the concepts of healthy growth and constructive potentials of human nature,” because “for so long the predominant outlook had been one stressing the neurotic disturbances in people’s lives.” In essence, this new development in psychology counterbalanced the pathological side of the human psyche with that of optimal health, thereby, offering an expanded dimension to the well-being continuum. In the early 1960s, the humanistic movement influenced countless practitioners in the mental health establishment and a whole

new generation of psychology students, like the author of this article, to ponder the possibility of personal growth motives in addition to developmental strivings prompted by some basic need to avoid psychopathology (Coan, 1977).

The first major study in humanistic psychology began in 1935, which was conducted by Abraham Maslow who studied the nature of “self-actualisation” (1950). Based on research that spanned close to two decades, Maslow identified a number of key characteristics of “self-actualising people” such as self-acceptance, the ability to relate well with others, the capacity to act independently, social responsibility, the intent to solve rather than avoid problems, spontaneity, creativity, and a tendency to behave realistically.

Eight years after Maslow published his initial work on self-actualisation, Marie Jahoda completed a survey of existing theories and research findings related to the positive and salutogenic aspects of the human psyche (1958). Based on an exhaustive search of the literature, she summarised the key factors that contribute to “positive mental health” (which is identical to what is being voiced by the positive psychology movement today). The key factors that Jahoda described were very similar to the characteristics of Maslow’s self-actualising individuals and included self-acceptance, self-determination, self-actualisation, flexibility, satisfying interpersonal relationships, stress tolerance, effective reality testing and acceptance of reality, efficient functioning and adaptation, problem solving, and achievement in significant areas of life.

Maslow and Jahoda were two of the most influential contributors to the scholarly and scientific foundations of the humanistic movement (presently referred to as “positive psychology”). Additionally, the vast majority of the positive human characteristics described by them are currently the focus of study in positive psychology.

Positive psychology is defined on the Positive Psychology Center website as “the scientific study of positive characteristics and strengths that enable individuals to thrive”. Additionally, it is thought to be “based on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work and play” (January 2, 2009).

Rather than a clearly defined field *per se*, positive psychology is a *movement* within psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005), nearly identical to the humanistic movement of the 1960s, as well as an *umbrella term* covering a very wide variety of fields and disciplines (Seligman *et al.*, 2005). The main purpose of this movement has been described as the need to “rebalance” psychology and encourage it to study and enhance positive human characteristics, experiences and outcomes (Gable & Haidt, 2005). This is incredibly similar to how Buhler described the *raison d’être* of the humanistic movement in 1979; and this was one of the major purposes behind the author’s doctoral research that began in 1983 (Bar-On, 1988), which was to create a conceptual and psychometric model that could describe emotional and social functioning on a continuum with psychopathology at one end and well-being at the other end.

To summarise, the most prevalent human factors that are currently the focus of study by positive psychologists are self-regard and self-acceptance based on self-awareness, the ability to understand others’ feelings (i.e. social awareness and empathy) and the capacity for interpersonal interaction (i.e. social skills), compassion and altruism, integrity and responsibility, cooperation and teamwork, self-regulation (i.e. emotional self-control), problem solving, giftedness, optimism and hope (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Positive Psychology Center, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman *et al.*, 2005). These factors, in turn, have an impact on the following outcomes which are also studied by positive psychologists: optimal physical and psychological health, successful performance and achievement, intelligent decision making, creativity, self-actualisation and finding meaning in life, the ability to thrive and flourish, happiness, and well-being. The degree of overlap between these factors, those that were studied by humanistic psychologists, those that are currently considered to be part of positive psychology and emotional intelligence is extensive.

### Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become a major topic of interest since the publication of a bestseller by the same name in 1995 (Goleman). Despite the heightened level of interest in this new idea,

scholars have been studying this construct for the greater part of the twentieth century, and its historical roots can be traced to the nineteenth century (Darwin, 1872/1965).

From Darwin to the present, a number of different conceptualisations and definitions of this construct have appeared creating some degree of confusion regarding the way it 'should' be defined, measured and applied. To help clarify this situation, the *Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology* (Spielberger, 2004) suggests that there are three major EI models: (a) the Mayer and Salovey model (1997) that defines this construct as the ability to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions to facilitate thinking; (b) the Goleman model (1998) that views it as an assortment of various competencies and skills that contribute to successful managerial performance; and (c) the Bar-On model (1997b) that describes EI as an array of interrelated emotional and social competencies and skills that impact intelligent behaviour.

The present paper makes particular reference to the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence, because of its comprehensive structure, robust factor validity and moderate to high predictive validity associated with a wide variety of human behaviour. According to this model, *emotional-social intelligence is an array of interrelated emotional and social competencies and skills that determine how effectively individuals understand and express themselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures*. The emotional and social competencies and skills referred to in this conceptualisation of the construct include five meta-components, and each of these meta-components comprises a number of closely related competencies and skills that are briefly defined in the Appendix.

Based on the way positive psychology and emotional intelligence are described here, both fields share obvious similarities. The similarities in positive human characteristics and strengths, that are studied in both fields, are the following: (a) self-regard which is based on accurate self-awareness; (b) understanding how others feel, compassion and altruism which are based on social awareness and empathy; (c) social skills which are based on the capacity for social interaction; (d) group identity, social responsibility, cooperation and teamwork; (e) impulse control, self-regulation and the ability to control emotions; (f) good decision making, effective functioning and achievement-oriented high performance, which are based on personal and interpersonal problem solving; (g) optimism and hope; (h) self-actualisation and the drive to achieve goals, flourish, thrive and lead a meaningful and fulfilling life; and (i) general happiness, subjective well-being and the ability to generate and use positive mood. This overlap is not only visible when examining the Bar-On model of emotional intelligence but is also evident when other EI models are examined (see for example: Goleman, 1998, pp. 26-27; Salovey *et al.*, 2008, p. 189).

## **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY BASED ON EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

This section summarises a number of empirical findings that support the notion that emotional intelligence is an integral part of positive psychology by demonstrating that EI has a significant impact on (a) human performance, (b) happiness, (c) well-being and (d) the quest for meaning in life, all of which are the focus of interest in positive psychology. Because of space limitations and the rather large number of studies that were reviewed, the author has had to summarise the key findings; readers who are interested in receiving more detailed information regarding the results are referred to the sources cited.

### **Emotional intelligence has a significant impact on human performance**

In order to demonstrate that emotional intelligence has a significant impact on human performance, a number of studies that have focused on academic and occupational performance are briefly summarised here.

The findings from four studies demonstrating a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance have been summarised by Bar-On in 2007; and the correlation

coefficients have been found to range from .41 to .45. Based on the studies that were summarized, the EI factors that impact academic performance the most are the ability to effectively manage emotions and cope with stress, the ability to put things in correct perspective, the ability to solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature, the drive to set and accomplish personal goals, and optimism (Bar-On, 2007). It is important to reiterate that these EI factors are studied in what is currently referred to as “positive psychology” as was previously mentioned. In addition to the above findings, Brackett and Salovey (2004) also describe a significant relationship between EI and academic performance.

In a number of studies that have been conducted over the past decade (e.g. Bar-On, 1997b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Bar-On, Handley, & Fund, 2006; Ruderman & Bar-On, 2003), EI has consistently demonstrated a highly significant relationship with occupational performance. The average predictive validity coefficient for these studies is .55 (Bar-On, 2006b). These results were supported by findings reported by Brackett and Salovey (2004), revealing correlation coefficients ranging between .22 and .46. A consensus of findings in the studies summarised here indicate that the most powerful EI contributors to occupational performance are: (a) the ability to be aware of and accept oneself; (b) the ability to be aware of others’ feelings; (c) the ability to manage emotions; (d) the ability to be realistic and put things in correct perspective; and (e) the ability to have a positive and optimistic disposition. Once again, these factors are quite similar to those studied by positive psychologists and by the humanistic psychologists before them.

In addition to the studies described above, that have demonstrated a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and successful performers at school and in the workplace, there is a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that EI significantly impacts other forms of human behaviour and performance such as social interaction (Bar-On, 1997b, 2000, 2006b; Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005) as well as the ability to cope with medical problems and to be resilient in the face of life-threatening health conditions (e.g. Bar-On, 2004, 2006b, 2007b; Bar-On & Fund, 2004; Dunkley, 1996; Krivoy, Weyl Ben-Arush, & Bar-On, 2000).

### **Emotional intelligence has a significant impact on happiness**

Happiness was considered by Wechsler to be a key “conative” factor that has a positive impact on “intelligent behaviour” (1940). In addition to its motivational value, happiness is also barometric in nature (Bar-On, 1997b, 2000). It both monitors one’s immediate well-being and interjects positive mood in the way individuals cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures. Apparently, it is this positive mood that, metaphorically speaking, fuels the emotional energy required to increase one’s motivational level to get things done. It helps individuals do what they want to do and then tells them how well they are doing.

In an effort to better understand the relationship between emotional intelligence and positive psychology *vis à vis* happiness, I examined the correlation between happiness (as measured by the Bar-On EQ-i Happiness scale) and emotional intelligence (as measured by the Bar-On EQ-i after removing the Happiness scale from the calculation of overall emotional-social intelligence in order not to artificially increase the correlation between the two). A sample of 51,623 individuals was provided by Multi-Health Systems (MHS) after being randomly selected from their extensive North American database of Bar-On EQ-i scores. A correlation of .78 was revealed, indicating that emotional intelligence is highly associated with happiness representing a domain overlap of over 60%. This finding strongly supports the relationship between emotional intelligence and positive psychology, in that happiness is considered to be a major focus of interest in positive psychology today (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Positive Psychology Center, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman *et al.*, 2005). Using a different self-report measure of emotional intelligence, Furnham and Petrides (2008) received a correlation of .70 which supports the results received by Bar-On.

### **Emotional intelligence has a significant impact on well-being**

In a study conducted by the author (Bar-On, 2005), the relationship between EI and subjective well-being was examined. In this study, well-being was defined as a subjective state that emerges from a

feeling of satisfaction with one's physical health and oneself in general, with close interpersonal relationships, and with one's occupation and current financial situation. On a sizable North American sample ( $n = 3,571$ ), the relationship between EI and well-being was examined with multiple regression analysis. The results indicated that the two constructs are highly correlated (.76). Based on the four highest EI predictors of subjective well-being, it appears that the following competencies and skills contribute the most to this subjective state: (a) the ability to understand and accept one's emotions and oneself in general; (b) the ability to strive to set and achieve personal goals to enhance one's potential; and (c) the ability to verify one's feelings and put things in correct perspective. This means that those individuals with an enhanced sense of well-being are those who possess high emotional self-awareness, accurate and positive self-regard, self-actualisation, and effective reality testing. These findings support those obtained earlier by other researchers using different measures of emotional intelligence and well-being (Brackett & Mayer, 2003).

### **Emotional intelligence has a significant impact on the quest for meaning in life**

Self-actualisation involves a lengthy process of attempting to realise one's potential and searching for a more meaningful life. It requires the ability and drive to set and achieve personal goals designed to actualise one's inner potential. It is not merely performing well, but striving to do the best one can.

In re-examining an older dataset used in my doctoral research (Bar-On, 1988), a multiple regression analysis was applied to studying the impact of EI competencies and skills on self-actualisation. A subset of 67 South African university students were identified within the dataset who concomitantly completed an earlier version of the Bar-On EQ-i and the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI; Shostrom, 1974), which is a measure of self-actualisation based on Maslow's theory. The I Scale, which captures 85% of the instrument's items, was designated the dependent variable while the 15 Bar-On EQ-i subscale scores were identified as the independent variables in the regression model. The results indicated that emotional intelligence significantly impacts self-actualisation (.64).

Three additional studies have also examined this relationship (Bar-On, 2001). Large samples were studied in the Netherlands ( $n = 1,639$ ), Israel ( $n = 2,702$ ) and North America ( $n = 3,831$ ). The results from these studies confirm the above-mentioned South African study indicating that EI strongly impacts self-actualisation with multiple regression correlations reaching .78, .75 and .80 for the Dutch, Israeli and American samples, respectively.

A very similar regression model surfaced in each of the above-mentioned studies regarding the ability of emotional intelligence to predict self-actualisation. In addition to being sufficiently motivated to set and accomplish personal goals, self-actualisation depends on a deep sense of self-awareness and understanding of who one is, what one wants to do, can do and enjoys doing. Self-actualisation also depends upon good problem solving for making sound independent decisions regarding what one wants to do, and then being sufficiently assertive to follow through with these personal decisions. Additionally, one must be optimistic and positive to more fully actualise one's potential and lead a more meaningful life based on the findings of these studies.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Not only does emotional intelligence and positive psychology appear to share a rather wide domain overlap based on the way both concepts have been described and defined, but the empirical findings presented here suggest that emotional intelligence has a positive and significant impact on performance, happiness, well-being, and the quest for a more meaningful life, all of which are key areas of interest in positive psychology.

The findings presented in this article strongly indicate that emotional intelligence is indeed an integral part of positive psychology. Based on the approach applied, the following factors appear to share the widest degree of overlap between these two fields of psychology:

- self-regard and self-acceptance based on accurate self-awareness
- the ability to understand others' feelings and the capacity for positive social interaction

- the management and control of emotions
- realistic problem solving and effective decision making
- self-determination
- optimism

To summarise, the above six factors are shared areas of interest between emotional intelligence and positive psychology; and they are also the strongest predictors of performance, happiness, well-being, and the quest for a more meaningful life based on the findings presented.

## DISCUSSION

In light of the fact that the specific approach applied here has most likely influenced the findings that were presented, future research studying the relationship between emotional intelligence and positive psychology should apply alternative definitions and a wider variety of psychometric instruments on larger and more diverse population samples.

Based on the close underlying relationship between emotional intelligence and positive psychology, as has been demonstrated in this article, the growing body of research findings related to emotional intelligence would appear to have a great deal to contribute to the entire area of positive psychology. Furthermore, future research in this area should continue to examine the impact of emotional intelligence on human performance, happiness, well-being and the quest for a more meaningful life.

In addition to exploring how emotional intelligence develops over the life span, it would be of particular importance to positive psychology to examine the impact of EI on raising and educating healthy, well adjusted, effective, productive and happy children.

In that emotional intelligence can be enhanced through rather simple didactic methods over a relatively short period of time (Bar-On, 2007a), it would also be valuable to examine how best to increase EI competencies and skills as well as other closely related factors in positive psychology. There is a need to develop more educational programmes designed to improve emotionally and socially intelligent behaviour that are based on empiricism rather than supposition and unsubstantiated theory in the fields of both emotional intelligence and positive psychology. Continued research on how EI affects various aspects of human performance, self-actualisation, happiness and well-being should guide the development of these programmes. Organisations like the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL; [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)) and the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE; [www.csee.net](http://www.csee.net)) should continue with an aggressive policy of developing, conducting, evaluating and promoting those educational programmes and didactic techniques that get the best results.

In closing, it is reasonable to assume that if we succeed in raising and educating more emotionally and socially intelligent children, we will help build more effective, productive and humane organisations, communities and societies, which is one of the major goals of the positive psychology movement (Positive Psychology Center, 2009).

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## APPENDIX

### The Bar-On EQ-i subscales and what they assess

EQ-I subscales	The EI competencies and skills assessed by each subscale
<b>Intrapersonal:</b>	
Self-Regard	To accurately perceive, understand and accept oneself.
Emotional Self-Awareness	To be aware of and understand one's emotions.
Assertiveness	To effectively and constructively express one's feelings and oneself.
Independence	To be self-reliant and free of emotional dependency on others.
Self-Actualization	To strive to achieve personal goals and actualize one's potential.
<b>Interpersonal:</b>	
Empathy	To be aware of and understand how others feel.
Social Responsibility	To identify with one's social group and cooperate with others.
Interpersonal Relationship	To establish mutually satisfying relationships and relate well with others.
<b>Stress Management:</b>	
Stress Tolerance	To effectively and constructively manage emotions.
Impulse Control	To effectively and constructively control emotions.
<b>Adaptability:</b>	
Reality-Testing	To objectively validate one's feelings and thinking with external reality.
Flexibility	To adapt and adjust one's feelings and thinking to new situations.
Problem Solving	To effectively solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature.
<b>General Mood:</b>	
Optimism	To be positive and look at the brighter side of life.
Happiness	To feel content with oneself, others and life in general.