Dorota Szczygieł*, **
Róża Bazińska*

Emotional intelligence as a moderator in the relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion among employees in service sector occupations

Abstract *Traditionally, most of the research on occupational burnout has focused on organizational stressors, such as workload and time pressure, and has overlooked the emotional nature of customer service work and its effect on burnout. This study was designed to examine the effects of individuals' affective traits (i.e., dispositional affectivity and emotional intelligence) and affective states (i.e., emotions experienced at work) on burnout. The main hypothesis of this study was that emotional intelligence acts as a moderator in the relationship between negative emotions felt by employees during their interactions with clients and emotional exhaustion. A total of 137 service sector employees rated the extent to which they felt four positive emotions (i.e., contentment, enthusiasm, joy, and liking) and four negative emotions (i.e., irritation, annoyance, antipathy, and anger) while interacting with clients. The results indicated that negative affectivity was significantly associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion, whereas high positive affectivity showed the reverse pattern. It was also observed that employees who declared greater intensity of negative emotions reported more symptoms of emotional exhaustion. However, as predicted, this effect was observed only among employees who were low in the trait of emotional intelligence. Negative emotions and emotional exhaustion were unrelated among employees who were high in trait emotional intelligence.*

Key words: *emotions, dispositional affectivity, emotional intelligence, occupational burnout*

Introduction

Burnout has been defined as a specific kind of occupational stress among human service professionals that is a response to stressful work conditions (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Although the concept of burnout was originally restricted to the human service sector, a number of studies have demonstrated that burnout occurs in occupations outside the service sector as well (e.g., Chirkowska-Smolak & Kleka, 2011; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). As a consequence, although in the early days of research on burnout the prevailing perspective was to explain burnout as being caused by demanding and emotionally charged interactions with other people, most empirical studies focused on organizational variables (job-related stressors), while ignoring the importance of employee relationships with clients (client-related stressors) (Cordes & Dougherty,

1993; Enzmann, 2005). This lack of attention to the emotional nature of interpersonal encounters as predictors of burnout has been acknowledged by burnout researchers (cf. Enzman, 2005). Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, and Holz (2001) pointed out that in the meta-analysis of Lee andAshforth (1996), who analyzed the effects of various predictors on burnout, the list of possible predictors did not include the frequency of interactions with clients and the emotional burden associated with these contacts.

To answer the question whether burnout was caused by the frequency or quantity of interactions with clients, Cordes, Dougherty, and Blum (1997) analyzed four aspects of the interpersonal interactions of human resources workers: their number, emotional intensity (i.e., how emotionally charged and stressful the interaction was), duration (i.e., amount of time spent with a client during a typical visit) and directness (i.e., percentage of interactions that

* Szkoła Wyższa Psychologii Społecznej, Wydział Zamiejscowy w Sopocie, ul. Polna 16/20, 81-745 Sopot.
** dorota.szczygiel@swps.edu.pl

were face-to-face). The results revealed that the number of interactions was not related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but was positively related to personal accomplishment. Emotional intensity of interactions was positively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but unrelated to personal accomplishment. Duration of interactions was unrelated to emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, but inversely related to depersonalization. Finally, directness of interactions was related inversely to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but positively to personal accomplishment. Similar results were obtained by Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), who found that frequency and duration of interactions with clients were unrelated to emotional exhaustion or depersonalization, but were positively associated with personal accomplishment.

Taken together, these results paint a somewhat confusing picture and might suggest that the prevailing claim that burnout is specifically related to interpersonal stressors on the job has proven to be false. However, some authors recommend that in studies of burnout among service sector professionals it is important to take the *amount* as well as the *nature* of interactions with clients into account (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; de Jonge & Dormann, 2003). Enzmann (2005) suggests that occupational burnout is primarily caused by stressful interactions with customers. According to this view, research has revealed links between stressful employee-customer interactions and burnout. For example, Dormann and Zapf (2004) have developed a self-report inventory to assess various forms of customer service related social stressors. The results revealed four subscales: Disproportionate customer expectations, verbal aggression displayed by customers, disliked types of customers and ambiguous customer expectations. Further analyses have shown that each of these subscales predicts all three dimensions of the burnout syndrome beyond a variety of control variables (Dormann & Zapf, 2004).

These findings raise the question of how stressful interactions with clients manifest into occupational burnout. One possible explanation is that emotionally charged interactions may manifest as chronic as well as acute stressors which induce employees' negative emotions, which then, in turn, lead to occupational stress and burnout. In line with this, recent research has demonstrated that occupational situations most commonly reported by service sector representatives as triggering negative emotions were of an interpersonal nature, with customer events being most common among them (Diefendorff, Richard, & Yang, 2008). Furthermore, Glomb, and Tews (2004) have found that employees' negative emotions during interactions with clients, such as disliking, irritation, distress and anger were positively related to emotional exhaustion. Bazińska and Szczygieł (2012), in a study based on self-report data, have identified eight emotions that are most frequently experienced by customers service employees during their interactions with

clients. In a descending order of frequency of occurrence, they found that employees report experiencing negative emotions of irritation, annoyance, antipathyand anger. The positive emotions experienced by service sector employees were, again in descending order of frequency, contentment, enthusiasm, joy and liking. Further analysis demonstrated that negative emotions were positively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but positive emotions were unrelated to emotional exhaustion and inversely related to depersonalization (Bazińska & Szczygieł, 2012). However, the above-mentioned studies suffer from a lack of measurement of employees' dispositional affectivity (this is discussed further in the next section).

Present study

The current study was conducted in an attempt to gain more insight into the emotional nature of customer service work and its effect on burnout. Given that the focus of this study is the emotional aspect of service sector jobs, we will concentrate on the emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is often considered the core symptom of the burnout syndrome and refers to feelings of fatigue and being emotionally overextended by interactions with other people one works with, e.g., customers (Cordes et al., 1997; Shirom, 2005). We will focus on the individual by examining the effects of individuals' affective traits (i.e., dispositional affectivity and emotional intelligence) and affective states (i.e., emotions experienced at work) on emotional exhaustion.

The concept of dispositional affect has received considerable attention from Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988). Those researchers suggest that dispositional affectivity is divided into two dimensions: negative affectivity (NA) and positive affectivity (PA). Individuals high in NA tend to emphasize the negative aspects of their experience and are characterized as being easily distressed, agitated, upset, pessimistic, and dissatisfied (Watson et al., 1988). Conversely, individuals high in PA tend to emphasize the positive aspects of their experience and are characterized as being cheerful, enthusiastic, alert, active, and energetic (Watson et al., 1988). Because emotional exhaustion is associated with negatively toned feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work, it is predicted that NA is positively and PA negatively related to emotional exhaustion. This hypothesis is consistent with previous research. It has been demonstrated that NA is significantly associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion, whereas high PA shows the reverse pattern (Iverson, Olekalns,& Erwin, 1998; Wright &Cropanzano, 1998). Thus, we predict the following:

H1: NA is positively related to emotional exhaustion. PA is negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

We also hypothesize there is a positive relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion. Of

importance, we hypothesize that this relationship exists *beyond* the affectivity of the employee. This hypothesis is grounded in the bulk of research which shows that dispositional affectivity is linked both to daily emotional experiences, including discrete emotions experienced on the job (e.g., Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001), as well as to outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (e.g., Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).Larsen and Ketelaar (1991) have demonstrated that dispositional affect has a causal effect on affective states, e.g., individuals high in NA show increased emotional reactivity to negative-mood induction, whereas individuals high in PA show increased emotional reactivity to positive-mood induction. Therefore, one may expect that individuals high in PA are prone to report more positive emotions while interacting with clients, whereas NA fosters negative emotional experiences. Furthermore, dispositional affectivity has also been linked to our criterion variable, which raises the possibility that emotional exhaustion is only spuriously associated with negative emotions, and the actual "driver" of this relationship might be dispositional affectivity (cf. Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Thus, in the present study we control for this possibility and we predict the following:

H2: Negative emotions experienced during interactions with customers are positively related to emotional exhaustion, beyond dispositional PA and NA.

The distinction between PA and NA as a trait, and positive and negative affect as a state (i.e., an emotion), is essential in attempting to investigate the roles of dispositional affectivity and emotions in burnout. Dispositional affectivity is an overall tendency to respond to situations in highly stable, predictable ways across time and situations (Watson et al., 1988). Research has shown trait affect to be partially genetically determined (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and related to individual differences in biological structures (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989, 1991). In contrast to considering emotions as traits or dispositions, emotional states capture how an individual feels at a particular moment in time (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989) or in a specific situation.Therefore, dispositional affectivity (i.e., trait) refers to stable personality characteristics, while emotions (i.e., states) refer to variability of states due to situational influences (Vansteelandt, Mechelen, & Nezlek, 2005; Zelenski & Larsen, 2000). Referring to our study, we assume that negative emotions experienced during an interaction with a particular client, are related to emotional exhaustion and this effect is likely to remain even after the PA and NA (i.e., general and stable personal characteristics) have been controlled.

It is important to note, that negative emotions are not harmful per se. As pointed out by Parrott (2002), negative emotions have considerable potential to be useful; however, for this potential to be realized, "these emotions must appear under the right circumstances, be expressed in ways that are productive in the current situation, be regulated so

their intensity and manifestations are appropriate, and be restrained under circumstances in which they are not helpful" (Parrott, 2002, p. 341-342). In such cases, the ability to regulate emotions is a hallmark of successful human functioning. Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence what emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how they express these emotions (Gross, 1998). Research shows that people differ in the way they are able to regulate their emotions (Gross & John, 2003). The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) introduced by Saloveyand Mayer (1990) has been proposed to reflect this variability. Therefore, as a second purpose of the current study, we wanted to evaluate whether employee's EI acts as a moderating variable in the relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion.

Emotional intelligence as a moderator of the negative emotions-emotional exhaustion relationship

A number of conceptualizations of EI have been proposed and they are classified into two categories: ability models (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and trait models (e.g., Bar-On, 2006; Petrides & Furnham, 2003). The former define EI as a set of emotional abilities measured by performance tests relating to maximum-performance (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003), whereas the latter consider EI as emotion-related dispositions assessed by self-report inventories referring to typical-performance (Petrides, 2011). These two models of EI are often presented as competitors, however, both approaches have merits and should be treated as complementary (cf. McCrae, 2000; Mikolajczak, 2009): the former captures individuals' ability to use and understand emotions and emotional knowledge (i.e., what a person is capable of doing), whereas the latter refers to people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities and aims to capture what a person actually does, i.e., how much of these abilities manifest in practice (Petrides & Furnham, 2000). The present paper focuses on the trait EI model. The construct of trait EI defines EI as a constellation of emotion-related dispositions capturing the extent to which one is able to attend to, identify, understand, regulate, and utilize one's own emotions and other people's emotions (Petrides, 2011).

Results of several studies provide evidence that trait EI is a particularly useful construct to assess individual differences in emotion regulation. For example, Mikolajczak and Luminet (2008) have observed that individuals high in trait EI are both more likely to appraise stressful situations as a challenge (rather than a threat) and are more confident that they can cope with such situations. Therefore, high trait EI would be expected to be protective against stress. There is indeed evidence supporting this assertion. For instance, Mikolajczak, Roy, Luminet, Fillee, and de Timary (2007) demonstrated that individuals high in trait EI (as compared to individuals low in trait EI) showed significantly

lower reactivity to a stressful event (i.e., public speaking task) at both psychological (i.e., mood deterioration) and physiological (i.e., salivary cortisol) levels. Mikolajczak, Petrides, Coumans, andLuminet (2009) observed that individuals high in trait EI reported a smaller increase in negative mood as a result of laboratory-induced stress than their low in EI study counterparts. The results of another study revealed that students high in trait EI appraised stressful events such as exam sessions as less threatening and displayed a lesser increase in psychological symptoms and somatic health complaints during exams than their low in trait EI counterparts (Mikolajczak, Luminet, & Menil, 2006).

Thus, it is highly plausible that employees high in trait EI are more likely than employees low in EI to be able to reduce the likelihood of emotional exhaustion caused by negative emotions experienced as a result of interactions with clients. Hence, the relationship between experienced negative emotions and emotional exhaustion should be weaker among those with high trait EI. We make sure to control for dispositional affectivity to ensure that this relationship is not driven by the affective disposition of the employee, and predict a moderating hypothesis:

H3: Emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion, in such a way that the relationship is weaker among those higher in emotional intelligence than among those lower in emotional intelligence.

Positive emotions have also been measured in this study, however, given the inconsistent results obtained in previous research, we did not make any specific predictions about the association between positive emotions and emotional exhaustion. For example, Bazińska and Szczygieł (2012) observed that positive emotions experienced during interactions with clients were unrelated to emotional exhaustion, whereas Zellars, Hochwater, Hoffman, Perrewé, and Ford (2004) found a negative correlation, albeit a small one (r=-0.23, p<0.01), between positive moods felt at work and emotional exhaustion.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited by 17 psychology students who volunteered to participate in this project. Each student was given instructions on recruiting participants, defined as full-time working employees of the service sector. Specifically, three kinds of occupations were the targets: sales assistants, frontline banking personnel and restaurant workers. Each student was given 10 packets consisting of a cover letter explaining the aim of the study (i.e., an assessment of occupational stress in service sector jobs) and five identical questionnaires designed to measure employees emotions experienced during interactions with clients. Employees who expressed interest in this research project completed questionnaires on demographics, emotional exhaustion,

EI and dispositional affectivity. Then they were asked to complete questionnaires concerning emotions. They were instructed to fill out one questionnaire a day, i.e., over five consecutive working days. Participants were also assured that data collected would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes. A total of 176 individuals initially expressed interest in this research project with 151 individuals actually participating in the project (86%). Fourteen participants were excluded from the final sample because of missing data and the final sample size was 137. The participants were employed in three occupations: retail sales assistants (46.72%), banking customer service representatives (31.39%), and restaurant service (21.89%). This final sample had a slightly greater number of female respondents than male respondents (56.93% female, 43.07% male). The participants were on average around 35 years old (M = 35.38 years, SD = 7.75). Of all the respondents, 59.85% reported they had a university degree whereas 40.15% reported being graduates of high-school or vocational school. The participants reported spending more than two thirds of their time on the job with customers (*M*= 77.31%, *SD* = 14.19%). Their average tenure with their current employer was approximately 4.5 years (*SD* = 4.08) and ranged from one year to 20 years.

Measures

Emotions

We assessed employees' emotions using the Employee Emotions Scale (EES) developed by Bazińska and Szczygieł (2012). The EES consists of eight adjectives describing emotions which are most frequently experienced by customer service employees during their interactions with clients. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced each emotion while interacting with a client and were instructed to complete the scale at the end of the working day and with respect to the last interaction of that day. The EES was completed by employees five times, over five consecutive working days. The response options ranged from 0 (not at all) to 6 (to the greatest magnitude of this emotion). In this study we followed Fisher's approach for data analysis (Fisher 2000, see also Conway & Briner, 2002; Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002), and hence, we computed the mean level of intensity for each of the eight emotions by summing a person's ratings on each emotion and dividing this figure by 5 (i.e., number of reports). The rationale for suchanalysis is that the *aggregated emotional reactions* are of interest in the current study.There is some empirical support for analysis based on the aggregated emotional reactions. For example, researchers in the area of subjective well-being have explored the relationship between momentary affective experiences and overall happiness, and have observed that positive affect experienced by people *across time*predicts overall well-being stronger than being extremely happy *some of the time* (Diener, Sandvik,

& Pavot, 1991). Hence, we assumed that the same pattern will occur in predicting emotional exhaustion.

Subsequently, we conducted a principal components analysis with varimax rotation to examine the factor structure of the eight emotion items. Two factors were extracted based on eigenvalues-greater-than-1 (explaining 79.7 per cent of common variance), with a clear differentiation between positive and negative emotion factors. The first factor accounted for 41.7 per cent of the total variance and consisted of negative emotions ('irritation', 'annoyance', 'antipathy', and 'anger'). The second factor accounted for a further 38 per cent of the total variance and consisted of positive emotions ('contentment', 'enthusiasm', 'joy', and 'liking'). All factor loadings exceeded .82. Scores for negative and positive emotions were created by averaging their respective items. Alpha coefficients were .93 and .89 respectively.

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was assessed with the nine-item subscale of the Polish version (Pasikowski, 2000) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory—General Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). This nine-item scale measures how often one feels emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. All items were scored on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 0 "never" to 6 "every day." The present study established a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Trait emotional intelligence

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF; Petrides&Furnham, 2006; Sevdalis, Petrides, & Harvey, 2007) was used to measure trait EI. The TEIQue–SF is derived from the full form of the TEIQue (see Petrides, 2011, for a comprehensive description of the factors and subscales) and comprises of 30 items rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). A trait EI score is calculated by summing up the item scores and dividing them by the total number of items. The TEIQue has been shown to have very good psychometric properties (for a summary, see Petrides, 2011). In this study we used the Polish version of the TEIQue-SF, which is available at: www.psychometriclab.com (for the psychometric properties of the Polish adaptation of the TEIQue, see Wytykowska & Petrides, 2007). In this study the average internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for this measure was .94.

Control variables

PA and NA were measured using the Positive Affectivity Negative Affectivity Schedule (PANAS, Watson, Clark, &Tellegan, 1988). PANAS is a 20-item scale which consists of 10 positive and 10 negative adjectives describing emotional states. Participants were asked, "To what extent do you generally feel this way, on average, across all situations?" We used a Polish adaptation of the PANAS (Brzozowski, 2010). Participants indicated their answers on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). For each subscale, scores range from 10 to 50 points. PA and NA had an alpha coefficient of .84 and .88, respectively.

Results

There were no significant differences among the three occupational groups in the variables measured. The occupational groups were, therefore, combined for the analyses reported in this paper. Before treating all participants as one sample, t-tests were performed on all variables using gender as the independent variable. Only one significant difference emerged. Results showed female participants to report a higher score on the NA than did male participants, $t(135)=2.49$. $p<.05$, $M = 26.62$ ($SD = 4.26$) and $M = 24.66$ ($SD = 4.89$), respectively. We tested the hypotheses while statistically controlling for gender and as no changes were found in the pattern of the results, it was decided to treat the group as one sample. Table 1 contains the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all the variables measured. Generally speaking, the pattern of correlations between the variables was in line with our expectations. As predicted, emotional exhaustion was negatively related to PA and positively related to NA. As predicted, emotional exhaustion was negatively related to PA and positively related to NA, providing support for H1. Negative emotions felt during interactions with clients were positively related to NA, but unrelated to PA. Positive emotions were positively related to PA and inversely related to NA. Trait EI was positively related to both PA and positive emotions, but inversely related to both NA and negative emotions. The results indicate that employees declared a significantly higher proportion of positive than negative emotions: $t(136) = 16.7$, $p< .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.43$. Positive emotions were negatively associated with emotional exhaustion.

As predicted, negative emotions experienced by employees during interactions with clients were significantly related to emotional exhaustion ($r = .39$, $p< .001$; see Table 1). As a more conservative test of this relationship, H2, which stated that negative emotions are related to emotional exhaustion beyond dispositional affectivity, was tested with two multiple regression analyses. The results revealed that NA and PA, which were entered in the first step of the regression equation, were both significantly related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .31$, $p< .001$ and $\beta = -.21$, $p< .05$, respectively), explaining 18% of the variance. Beyond these control variables, negative emotions were significant as a predictor of emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .28$, $p< .001$), explaining an additional 7.6% of the unique variance. Therefore, H2 was supported. Entering positive emotions into a regression equation did not affect the results and produced the same amount of variance explained.

It should be noted, however, that while the significant effect of PA on emotional exhaustion remained the same when negative emotions were entered into the model, the

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all study variables*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Positive affectivity	36.64	4.07	—				
2. Negative affectivity	25.77	4.63	−.41***	—			
3. Positive emotions	4.35	.92	.39***	−.20*	—		
4. Negative emotions	2.11	1.04	−.05	.19*	−.24**	—	
5. Emotional intelligence	4.94	.61	.43***	−.33***	.27**	−.18*	—
6. Emotional exhaustion	21.52	7.35	−.33***	.39***	−.19*	.35***	−.36***

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001. (all two-tailed significance tests).

Table 2. *Regression of negative emotions and emotional intelligence on emotional exhaustion*

Model	R^2	ΔR^2	B	SE B	β
Step 1: Control	.15***				
Negative affectivity			.48	.13	.30***
Step 2: Main effects	.26***	.12***			
Negative Emotions			1.71	.53	.24**
Emotional Intelligence			−2.11	.95	−.18*
Step 3: Interaction	.29***	.04*			
Negative Emotions x Emotional Intelligence			−1.57	.60	−.20**

Note. All coefficients are reported for the final step. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Table 3. *Regression summary for the interaction with emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable without control variables*

Model	R^2	ΔR^2	B	SE B	β
Step 1: Independent variables	.20***				
Negative Emotions			2.05	.55	.29**
Emotional Intelligence			−3.33	.95	−.28*
Step 2: Interaction	.22***	.02			
Negative Emotions x Emotional Intelligence			−1.16	.62	−.14

Note. All coefficients are reported for the final step. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

effect of NA decreased from β = .31, *p* < .001 to β = .25, *p* < .01. This result suggests that negative emotions mediate the relationships between NA and emotional exhaustion. Such a mediation is likely, given that above mentioned analyses (see correlations in Table 1) revealed a significant association between NA and both negative emotions and emotional exhaustion. In order to precisely determine whether negative emotions mediate the NA – emotional exhaustion relationship, separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, predicting scores on emotional exhaustion. NA was entered in the first step and negative emotions were added in the second step of the regression equation. NA was a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion at step 1 [β = .39, *t*(136)=4.99, *p* < .001]. When negative emotions entered the equation at step 2, they significantly predicted emotional exhaustion [β = .29, *t*(136)=3.74, *p* < .001] and reduced the beta weight for NA [β = .34, *t*(136)=4.43, *p* < .001]. Therefore, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for mediation, partial mediation is indicated. A Sobel test, obtained using procedures developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), confirmed partial mediation (*z* = 2.86, *p* < .01). The mediation analysis dem-

onstrate that NA directly and indirectly (through negative emotions experienced during interactions with clients) relates to emotional exhaustion.

H3 stated that IE would moderate the relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion, namely that the positive relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion is weaker among people high rather than low in IE. To test this hypothesis, we performed moderated hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The variables were entered into the regression equation in three steps. The control variables were entered in the first step. In the second step, we entered the "main effects" (negative emotions and EI). Finally, negative emotions x IE product term variable was entered in the third step. Negative emotions and IE were centered prior to creating the interaction term, allowing the beta-weight of the interaction term to be more directly interpretable (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken. 2003). The interaction of negative emotions and IE term was significant ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .01$) and accounted for a significant portion of the variance in emotional exhaustion ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p < .05$; see Table 2).

To further examine if the interaction matches the hypothesis, the relationship between negative emotions and emotional exhaustion was plotted comparing people who scored more than 1 standard deviation above and below the average level of trait IE (see Figure 1). The interaction form was consistent with our predictions. Further, following guidelines suggested by Aiken and West (1991), simple slopes analysis was conducted for participants who scored one standard deviation below and above the mean on EI. As predicted, negative emotions were positively related to emotional exhaustion among employees who were low in trait EI ($\beta = .67$, $p < .05$). In contrast, negative emotions and emotional exhaustion were unrelated among employees who were high in trait EI ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .83$). In other words, negative emotions only increase emotional exhaustion for employees low (vs. high) in trait EI. Thus, H3 was supported.
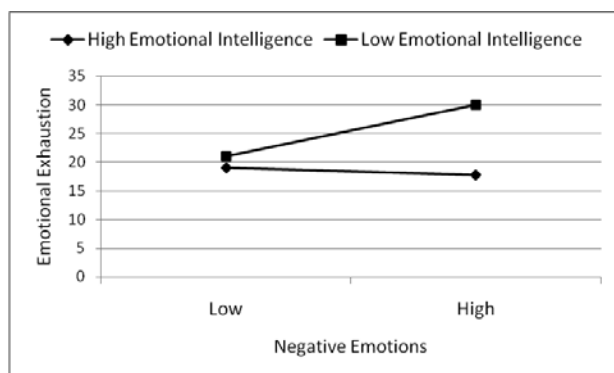

Figure 1. Interaction between negative emotions and emotional intelligence predicting emotional exhaustion. Low and high negative emotions were defined as one standard deviation from the mean.

To examine the effects of control variables, we also tested our hypothesis without the control variables included, following Becker's (2005) recommendation for treating control variables. Dropping PA from the regression equation produced essentially the same amount of variance explained and did not affect the nature of the interaction; therefore, we did not include PA as a control in the results reported in Table 2 (see Becker, 2005, for a description of the proper treatment of control variables). Not including NA as a control variable, however, did impact the results. Although the pattern of the findings pointed in the same direction, without NA as a control the negative emotions x IE interaction on emotional exhaustion no longer reached conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .065$). Regression results without the control variables are presented in Table 3. Given that there have also been some suggestions that job tenure and directness (i.e., face-to-face) of the employee-customer interactions may be linked to emotional exhaustion, we also tested the hypotheses while statistically controlling for these variables. Job tenure and directness of interactions had essentially no influence on the results.

We also checked whether EI moderates the relationship between NA and emotional exhaustion. In the first step the "main effects" (NA and EI) were entered into a regression equation. NA x IE product term variable was entered in the third step. The interaction term was not significant ($\beta = .003$, $p > .10$) and did not explain any additional variance in emotional exhaustion beyond the main effects of NA and EI ($\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p > .10$). Instead, both NA and EI had a direct relationship with emotional exhaustion, $\beta = .31$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$, respectively.

Discussion

We began this article by underscoring that most of the burnout research has focused on organizational stressors, such as role conflict, workload and time pressure, and has disregarded the emotional work demands. Furthermore, although researchers have proposed that the causes of job burnout can be found both in the individual and the working environment (Beehr, 1998), relatively little attention has been paid to differences among individuals that may create a greater susceptibility or resistance to job burnout. The present study was designed to examine the effects of individuals' affective traits (i.e., dispositional affectivity and emotional intelligence) and affective states (i.e., emotions experienced at work) on emotional exhaustion.

Our findings demonstrate that dispositional affectivity of an employee is an important factor in the burnout process and should not be ignored. In accordance with our hypothesis, both NA and PA were significant predictors of emotional exhaustion, though the relationship between dispositional affectivity and emotional exhaustion was stronger for NA, which is consistent with previous research. A number of studies have demonstrated that the relationship

between emotional exhaustion and dispositional affectivity is especially strong for NA, with correlation coefficients ranging from *r*= .28 (Zohar, 1997) to as high as *r*= .72 (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998), but usually in the range 0.40-0.50 (Grandey, Dickter & Sin, 2004; Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003; Zellars & Perrewé, 2001). The rationale for these findings can be found in Spector, Zapf, Chen, and Frese (2000), who have outlined six plausible mechanisms through which NA might influence stress, and hence burnout (Lee & Ashforth, 1996): perception, hyper-responsivity, selection, stressor creation, mood, and causality mechanisms (see Spector et al., 2000, for a comprehensive description).

Three of themechanisms outlined by Spector et al. (2000) may be especially relevant in clarifying the NA - emotional exhaustion relationship in service occupations: perception, hyper-responsivity and stressor creation mechanisms.According to the *symptom perception* mechanism, NAreflects the person's tendency to have the negative "view of the world", thus individuals high in NA, when evaluating events, ascribe weight to their negative aspects (Uziel, 2006). Thus, in job situations, employees high in NA tend to perceive (and hence report) their environment as containing more negative events and high levels of stressors, even in the absence of objective stressors. According to Spector et al. (2000) these reports accurately reflect people's perceptions and experiences, but those perceptions are influenced by NA. An alternative to this view is that high in NA individuals may exhibit a heightened response to stressors under the same environmental conditions. Spector et al. (2000) have labeled this *hyper-responsivity*mechanism. In this case high-NA individuals "do not necessarily perceive stressors differently than a low NA person. It is only their response or strain that differs" (Spector et al., 2000, p. 88). Thus, according to the above, customer service employees high in NA may perceive job demands (e.g., interactions with clients) as more stressful and/or may have an exaggerated response to them. Another possible explanation is that by their behavior high in NA employees actually create adverse circumstances. They may, hence, create job stressors for themselves. Spector et al. (2000) have labeled this *stress creation mechanism*. For example, negative outlook on life may spill over into an employee'sbehavior, inducing negative reactions from customers and leadto tense, and hence, more demanding interactions. The end result would be analogous to the predicted by the symptom perception hypothesis, albeit these two predictions postulate different mechanisms. It is important to note, that the mechanisms described by Spector et al. (2000) are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that all play a part.

It should also be noted that the relationship between NA and emotional exhaustion is partially mediated by negative emotions experienced by employees during their interactions with clients. Namely, individuals high in NA are susceptible to experience negative emotions while interacting with clients (e.g., due totheir greater sensitivity to the impact of stressors, as the hyper-responsivity hypothesis suggests), which, in turn, lead to emotional exhaustion. Taken together, the results demonstrate that NA relates to emotional exhaustion both directly and indirectly, through negative emotions experienced by employees. These results are in line with previous findings by Zellars et al. (2004) who found that negative moods felt at work partially mediated between neuroticism (which is often considered as a construct similar to NA, Uziel, 2006) and emotional exhaustion.

We predicted that there is a positive relationship between negative emotions experienced by employees during their interactions with clients and emotional exhaustion. The results support our prediction. There are at least two reasons for the negative emotions-emotional exhaustion relationship.

The first reason is of a general nature. A consistent theme across general theories of emotion is that experiencing negative emotions increases one's level of physiological and psychological arousal, which, if prolonged, can have deleterious consequences on physiological, affective and cognitive functioning (Chepenik, Cornew, & Farah, 2007; Szczygieł, Buczny, & Bazińska, 2012) as well as physical and mental health (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001; Spector, 1987). The results of numerous studies show that negative emotions activate stress (Mayne, 2001) and lead to negative health outcomes (Consedine, 2008). Gross, Semmer, Meier, Kälin, Jacobshagen, and Tschan (2011) showed that negative emotions experienced by workers intensify their fatigue and lead to chronic stress.

The second reason is linked to emotional work demands that have been found to be specific for those doing "people work". The term "people work" refers to occupations where the focus of the job is "interaction with other people" (Mann, 2004, p. 205). With the expansion of the service economy (this trend is also noticeable in Poland; see Rogoziński, 2003) and increased competition among service providers, emotions experienced by employees during interactions with clients have become important, as they can influence customer evaluations of service quality and affect organizational outcomes. For instance, Pugh (2001) demonstrated that employees' displays of positive emotion were directly related to customers' favorable evaluations of service quality. The expression of emotions has also been linked to customer mood, likelihood to return as a repeat customer, and overall satisfaction with the organization (Luong, 2005; Tsai, 2001). Therefore, many service organizations have expectations as to which emotions should be displayed by an employee when serving customers. In most service contexts, employees are expected to express positive emotions, such as friendliness, happiness or cheerfulness, and hide negative emotions, such as anger, contempt or resentment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Thus, in many stressful job situations employees must suppress negative emotions, such as these

under study here, and instead, they have to express positive emotions. It means, that employees may need to mask their true emotional reactions while they assist their clients (cf. Grandey, 2003).

Therefore, in order to effectively deal with negative emotions, as well as with the necessity of their regulation to meet the organization's requirements, employees must have sufficient resources at their disposal. In other words, employees have to be able to recognize, understand and regulate emotions, and this leads us directly to the EI concept (Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004).

We tested the hypothesis that trait EI acts as a moderator in the relationship between negative emotions experienced by employees during their interactions with clients and emotional exhaustion. The results support our prediction. We found that employees who declared greater intensity of negative emotions reported more emotional exhaustion symptoms, however, this effect was observed only among employees who were low in trait emotional intelligence. In contrast, negative emotions and emotional exhaustion were unrelated among employees who were high in trait EI.

In other word, the results of the study demonstrate, that when confronted with negative emotions, employees high in trait EI experience less stress than employees low in trait EI. This suggests that employees high in EI have better emotion regulation skills and are thus better equipped to deal with negative emotions. This favorable effect of EI has been demonstrated by other researcher's findings as well. For example, Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, and Quoidbach (2008) have observed that trait EI promoted the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies (e.g., positive reappraisal) and prevented the choice of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (e.g., self-blame) strategies in the case of anger, fear, jealously, stress and shame. There is also evidence that when confronted with stressful situations, unlike individuals low in trait EI, individuals high in trait EI are more likely to utilize coping styles which are generally regarded as adaptive (e.g., task-focused coping) rather than those that which are generally regarded as maladaptive (e.g., emotion-focused coping) (Bastian, Burns, & Nettelbeck, 2005; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, & Davidson, 2007).

These results suggest that trait EI functions as a psychological resource that buffers the negative association between emotionally charged interactions with clients and emotional exhaustion. Hobfoll (2001) defines resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right, or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources" (p. 339). In line with this, Mikolajczak, Menil, and Luminet (2007) have shown that service sector employees who were high in trait EI reported fewer symptoms of burnout and fewer somatic complaints than those who were low in trait EI. Ogińska-Bulik (2005) has

observed that human service employees with higher trait EI scores displayed a lower level of occupational stress and suffered less from negative health consequences than their counterparts who scored lower in trait EI.

It is important to note that employees rated a higher proportion of positive than negative emotions while interacting with clients. These results are consistent with previous research (Bazińska & Szczygieł, 2012). Similar results were reported by Zellars et al. (2004), who have observed that employees declared a higher proportion of positive than negative mood at work. The preponderance of positive emotions may reflect the general pattern that is observed in studies that examined emotional experiences in everyday life. For example, in a study by Zelenski and Larsen (2000) participants reported three times per day for a month on how much they are experiencing various emotions. The results showed that positive emotions greatly exceeded the negative emotions in terms of mean intensities and frequencies. However, given that participants of our study rated their emotions for the last customer of the day, we cannot rule out the possibility, suggested by one of the Reviewers, that the coming end of the working day could enhance participants mood, and hence, their ratings of positive emotions. Thus, it is unknown whether the measurement of emotions in other parts of the day would lead to similar results and future research is needed to examine this question. We admit that the ratings of emotions in relation to the last customer should be treated as the limitation of our study.

It is also important to discuss the role of NA as a control variable. When NA is not used as a control, the interaction of negative emotions with EI on emotional exhaustion no longer reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. NA was included as a control because, as discussed previously, there is substantial evidence that it impacts both experienced negative emotions and emotional exhaustion, thus potentially contributing to a spurious relationship between the two variables. Due to a general predisposition to experience negative affective states, individuals high in NA are likely to experience negative emotions and report more symptoms of emotional exhaustion. By statistically controlling for this source of common variance between our predictor (negative emotions) and criterion variables (emotional exhaustion), we were able to more clearly examine the role that EI plays in the negative emotions-emotional exhaustion relationship. Without this statistical control, the common effect of NA on both negative emotions and emotional exhaustion appears to mask the impact that differences in levels of EI can have on this relationship.

Limitations and Future Directions
There are limitations to the present study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, all dispositional measures used in the study were assessed at the same time which results in concerns that the relationships among the variables are inflated (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff,

2003). However, we controlled for dispositional affectivity, a likely source of such bias, and we found support for the moderation effect, which is less likely to be due to such biases (cf. Allen, Pugh, Grandey, & Groth, 2010). Secondly, the present study used a cross-sectional design, hence, statements of causal relationships cannot be made. Although we implied a certain causal order of the variables (i.e., emotional exhaustion as an outcome of negative emotions), other causal direction could be possible as well (i.e., emotional exhaustion as an antecedent of negative emotions). Future longitudinal studies, diary studies and quasi-experimental research designs might clarify the reciprocal nature of this relationship. Thirdly, the generalizability of our findings is limited to EI defined as a trait. Thus, future is needed to investigate whether similar results could be obtaining using ability test of EI. Finally, the study was conducted among a sample of workers representing various service occupations, such as sales assistants, frontline banking personnel and restaurant staff. It needs to be pointed out however that employees in these occupations typically have interactions with customers that could be considered service encounters (of short duration, limited prior history, little expectation of interacting again) rather than service relationships (of longer duration, possible prior history, expectation of interacting again; Gutek, Bhappu, Liao-Troth, & Cherry, 1999). Therefore, future research might explore the external validity of current findings among other customer service professionals, as well as among human service workers.

Practical implications

Our results have some practical implications. There is strong evidence indicating that organizations face substantial negative consequences associated with employees burnout, such as higher rates of turnover and reduced levels of work performance (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). To reduce costs that are associated with turnover and poor work performance, service-oriented organizations should take into account EI when training their employees. EI is a relatively stable disposition but some of its facets, such as emotion regulation and stress management, might be improved by training efforts. Evidence for this assumption comes from literature on stress management that shows that individuals can learn how to deal with emotion-laden situations and how to apply efficient coping strategies to reduce stress reactions (e.g., Meichenbaum, 2007; Roger & Hudson, 1995). Thus, organizations may want to consider providing soft skills workshops for their employees. What is more, we believe that particular emphasis during such workshops should be placed on providing employees with knowledge about the efficiency of various coping strategies as recent studies have shown that there are great individual differences with respect to emotion-related knowledge - some people are very knowledgeable in the subject whereas others have

surprisingly little knowledge in the matter(Wranik, Feldman-Barrett, & Salovey, 2007). For example, Loewenstein (2007) has observed that as much as 50 per cent of people do not know that positive reappraisal is a more efficient emotion regulation strategy than suppression (cf. Mikolajczak, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that distraction was a very efficient strategy in down-regulation of anger (Bushman, 2002), and although the majority of people know this (Loewenstein, 2007), many individuals are simply not able to distract themselves when they are angry (cf. Mikolajczak, 2009). Thus, some employees may also need practical training to improve their ability to implement a given strategy in an particular job situation.

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