EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND HOTEL EMPLOYEES IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Recent research recognises the importance of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in the Hospitality Industry. Hospitality employees are required to regulate their emotions effectively during face-to-face interactions with customers, which form a crucial part of the experience.

Hospitality research in EI has only explored issues such as its role in managerial positions and its relationship with work-related factors such as social skills, stress management, counterproductive work behaviours and work effectiveness. Furthermore, most studies have taken a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between EI and such factors.

Taking a qualitative approach, this study explores employees' understanding and application of EI in interactions with both domestic and international customers as well as co-workers in Vietnamese hotels. The research has three stages of data collection; focus groups with hotel employees, semi structured interviews with hotel employees and use of the Critical Incident Technique. This paper reports on the focus group interviews, examining employee understanding of EI during interactions with customers and co-workers. Initial findings suggest that hotel employees are aware of EI and its application in interactions with customers and colleagues. The majority emphasised that learning from real-life situations is more effective for improving emotional control than training programmes developed by hotels or universities.

THE STUDY IN CONTEXT

In service industry, it is the frequent face-to-face interactions with customers and long working hours that lead to the vulnerability to stress among hospitality workers (Faulkner and Patiar 1997; Pizam 2004; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons 2007; Pienaar and Willemse 2008). Due to the high competition in the context of the global economic crisis, employers have given greater focus on managing their staff's emotions to offer better service at lower cost (Diefendorff and Richard 2003) as the customers' impression of the company depends on employees' attitudes and emotions during the service encounter (Lee and Ok 2012). A well-known method of managing employees' emotions is to impose emotional display rules on interactions with customers both explicitly and implicitly, known as emotional labour (EL) (Hochschild 1983; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Another concept emerging in the realm of organisational behaviours is emotional intelligence (EI) which has attracted both practitioners and academic researchers (Cartwright and Pappas 2008). EI is the '*ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions*' (Salovey and Mayer 1990: 189). In order to successfully cope with stress from contact with customers, hotel staff members tend to seek support from a community with their colleagues who turn out to have direct impact on their working environment and employee attitudes (Limpanitgul et al. 2014). Thus, the proposed research will look at employees' EI in interactions with both customers and co-workers.

The increasing significance of emotions in relation to hospitality workers is indicated by the proliferation of recent studies conducted on Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Labour (EL) of hotel employees over the last few years (Cichy et al. 2007; Kafetsios and Zampetakis 2008; Cha et al. 2009; Kusluvan et al. 2010; Kim and Agrusa 2011; Kim et al. 2012; Prentice 2013; Prentice et al. 2013; Wolfe and Kim 2013; Haver et al. 2014). EI

research has been undertaken from a variety of perspectives but is largely limited to its roles in managerial positions (Cichy et al. 2007; Scott-Halsell et al. 2008a; Scott-Halsell et al. 2008b; Haver et al. 2014) and its relationship with work-related factors such as social skills, stress management (Cha et al. 2009), counterproductive work behaviours (Jung and Yoon 2012) and work effectiveness (Othman et al. 2008). In a wider sense, recent works of emotional capital gurus such as Daniel Pink and Martyn Newman have fostered the importance of EI in both work and social life. Daniel Pink describes the shift from the left-brain culture (associated with logic and analysis) to the right brain rising (related to empathy and synthesis) in his book 'A whole new mind' (2005). He also claims that connecting individual talents and aspirations to organisational goals will lead to success for the organisation. Taking a more practical approach, Martyn Newman's (2008) introduces 'Emotional Capitalists – The new leaders' which serves as guidelines to build emotional skills. In a recent article in Human Resources Magazine, Newman (2013: 33) claims "*Loving what you do is a necessary condition to maintaining your emotional well-being*", which places more emphasis on happiness at work among employees and their emotional well-being.

Concerning the hospitality industry, Cha et al.'s (2009) study on the application of EI among catering industry executives reveals that those with high EI tend to manage stressful circumstances better and handle social relationships at their workplace better than their counterparts with low EI. In addition, individuals with high EI are reported to perform better in service recovery when emotional labour is intense (Kim et al. 2012). In a labour intensive and human-oriented industry, it is of crucial importance that hoteliers manage their staff's EI effectively in order to improve business outcomes and working environment (Jung and Yoon 2012). A stable collegial working environment will consequently contribute to organisational

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objectives and deliver better services to customers. This is to say that an emotionally intelligent employee per se is unlikely to build up the entire organisation; the emphasis is on the development and application of EI among employees as a long-term strategy for human resources management. This managerial implication has also been found in other studies concerning EI in hospitality industry (e.g. (Kim and Agrusa 2011). Research shows that EI training programmes can improve the ability to understand and manage emotions among retail managers (Slaski and Cartwright 2002). Other researchers (Kim et al. 2012) also recommend undertaking EI assessment of job applicants as a part of recruitment process in hospitality context. Among the Big Five Personality dimensions (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience), agreeableness and extroversion are proved to have more positive influence on employee work behaviours; hence, they deserve more attention from recruiters (Kim et al. 2007). Nevertheless, small hotels tend to rely on informal method of recruitment and selection whereas larger ones are more likely to use structured interviews and biodata which helps identify the right personality (Lockyer and Scholarios 2004). Surprisingly, such systematic methods as ability or personality testing and work samples are considered useful assessment tools by hoteliers but very few organisations attempted to use them (ibid.)

Previous research shows that culture shapes an individual's personality and behaviour towards his or her job (Chong 2008), particularly customer-contact employees tend to establish different perceptions towards customers' nationalities (Pizam and Sussmann 1995; Kim et al. 2002). Nationality not only exerts the strongest influence on customer's experiences in service interactions but also reveals certain stereotypes (Prayag and Ryan 2012). In a study examining the influence of culture on parenting practices and EI, Sung (2010) emphasises the crucial part that culture plays in the development of an individual's EI.

This is to say that culture should be taken into consideration within the hospitality context. To date there is no formal research conducted on EI in hotels taking the Vietnamese culture into account. To fill this gap, this research explores Vietnamese hotel workers' perceptions and interpretation of EI in the workplace. Vietnamese culture has, to some extent, served as a major source of reference for their behaviours in social interactions. Hence, this research will appraise culture from its practical rather than theoretical side.

METHODOLOGY

With the aim of exploring the understanding of EI among hotel staff in Vietnam, this qualitative study takes the phenomenology approach to describe and interpret Vietnamese hotel workers' views and experiences of EI. The phenomenology approach is chosen because it fits the research aim and objectives, and enhances the depth and richness of EI phenomena (Arendt et al. 2012). The merits of qualitative research are well documented. It allows for understanding certain phenomena in real-life settings, introduces flexibility into the research process, which is sensitive to detailed analysis and allows research findings to emerge from the data (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). It also allows the researcher to interpret and make sense of experience (Holloway and Wheeler 2013). The wider study has three stages of data collection; focus groups and semi structure interviews with hotel employees which are appropriate for such an exploratory study where the researcher is interested in 'what', 'why' and 'how' type questions (Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2012). The final stage will use Critical Incidents Technique (CIT) (Lundberg 2011) in the form of work diaries which hotel workers are encouraged to write for 2 to 3 days to describe their routines at work.

This paper reports on the first stage, focus groups with hotel employees. Focus groups generate a rich source of qualitative data, with the synergy generated between the participants is a key differentiation between group and individual interviews (Oates 2000). The focus groups were designed to generate a broad understanding of EI emanating from interactions between employees with co-workers and customers. Three main themes were explored; understanding of EI, applications of EI (positive and negative) and training.

Three focus groups were undertaken during October 2015, comprising of nine, six and five people respectively. Each lasted between 50 minutes and one hour fifteen minutes. Participants were hotel staff working in Front Office and Food and Beverage departments in hotels in Nhatrang including large hotel chains such as Novotel, Sheraton and IHG as well as family-owned hotels. Due to the availability and accessibility of participants, each focus group is a mix of employees working in both big hotel chains and small or medium-sized family-owned hotels, which enhances the diversity of working environments. At this early stage, a focus group interview is used as a tool to generate ideas; therefore, no criterion was adopted to select research participants regarding what their personality traits are and how they were recruited. Besides, staff personality and its fit in the organisation was not considered as an objective for conducting focus group interviews. The focus groups took place in an office that the researcher had access to. The interviews covered topics such as general opinion of their jobs, experiences of dealing with customers and their emotions at work, and the training they have received in relation to customers. All interviews were recorded by a digital recorder. All interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese, then translated into English by the researcher. Interview transcriptions were checked for consistency by a native speaking English language teacher and a qualified Vietnamese teacher to ensure the authenticity and

reliability of the information. The focus groups were then analysed thematically (Strauss and Corbin 1998) using NVivo (10) software.

FINDINGS

Understanding of EI in the context of Vietnamese hospitality

The term EI was not explicitly mentioned in focus group interviews but the feelings of happiness at work described by hotel staff implies an important component of the EI construct. Participants reveal that their happiness comes from the job itself for such reasons as skill improvements, promotion opportunities, benefits for future career, non-routine work, high income, flexible time, easy start, as well as enjoyable job without tasks to do out of working hours. From the organisational behaviour's perspective, Newman (2013) emphasises that business leaders focus more on happiness because it goes hand-in-hand with several emotional and social skills and there is a distinct difference in EI level between happy and unhappy people.

A few participants admitted that hotel work came to them as a destiny and they realised it fits their personality. Though participants did not expect to work in hospitality sector but it is the hoteliers who recognised their personality fit in the selection and recruitment process. A good fit between employee personality and organisational culture fosters employee job satisfaction and performance (Huang 2006); enhances customer satisfaction and improve organisation image and overall organisational performance (Carraher et al. 2003); and helps predict labour turnover (Pizam and Ellis 1999). The desired employees in hospitality and tourism are those with the right attitude and appearance; in other words, those who can demonstrate emotional labour and aesthetic labour (Nickson et al. 2005; Nickson 2013). Lange and Houran's (2009) research findings reveal that managers and human resources professionals rated traits directly

impact the interaction with customers and co-workers (Service Orientation, Communication Style, Agreeableness, Sense of Humour, Sensitivity to Diversity, Group Process and Team Building) as more important for lower level employees in the service industry. Similarly, Hogan et al. (1984) suggest a construct of service orientation being personality characteristics useful for service such as courtesy, consideration, tact, perceptiveness, and good communication skills.

Besides, culture and knowledge exchange is mentioned as one of the characteristics of hotel work that attracted them. As part of the job, they enjoy interacting and building relations with customers and co-workers:

"*Working in hotels and dealing with customers as well as colleagues makes it like a family where everyone is sociable and happy.*" (FG1)

"*It's a chain reaction; of course I can't be unhappy if people around me are happy.*" (FG2)

"*… [I like my job] because of my colleagues. At the hotel, we get on very well. We share fun stories every day.*" (FG2)

In addition to talking about the aspects of hotel work that attract them, research participants showed that they are fully aware of the characteristics of their job:

"*It is stressful working in the tourism sector which is said to be 'a daughter-in-law to 100 families', '9 people with 10 ideas' (equivalent to 'so many men, so many minds'), so we have to face that. It helps me determine who I am and why this work attracts me. I have to make it clear in my mind.*" (FG3)

The striking metaphor 'a daughter-in-law to 100 families' was used to describe the nature of hotel work reflects the culture element in the context of hospitality in Vietnam. By traditional

standards, a daughter-in-law is supposed to be a good housewife apart from her own social status with such characteristics as caring, patient, thoughtful, empathetic and good at taking care of the whole family. They are the standards and responsibilities set by the society for a woman to take on once she is married. The saying has described and exaggerated, to some extent, the requirements and pressure a hotel employee has to cope with. This is in line with Guerrier and Adib's (2000: 257) comments on hospitality employment which is often perceived as female roles with a lower status and makes hospitality workers 'cope with the psychological pressures of smiling and keeping their tempers in response to verbal provocation'. Research participants understand this perception and take this as the lodestar for their behaviours and attitudes towards customers.

> "*There are always some unhappy moments in my personal life but once I put on the hotel uniform, I put them all aside to make customers happy. Sometimes, when I've just started my shift, I look so grumpy. But after talking to customers for a while, (of course I can't serve them with such a grumpy face, I have to wear a fake smile), I become genuinely happy because I notice the customers enjoy the good service delivered and I forget all the things that were annoying me.*" (FG2)

Hotel employees also reveal chances to practice self-control in dealing with customers, which is recognised as one of the benefits of hotel work from employee perspective.

"*It's one of the best things about working with customers: we are always junior to customers. Gradually it has calmed me down and limited my hot temper, compared to the days when I started working in hotels.*" (FG1)

"*The biggest lesson in the service industry is self-control. Whatever people do to us, we must stay in control. We must wear a mask.*" (FG2)

To some extent, this viewpoint expresses their positive attitude towards the downside of their job. Newman (2008) also recognises the distinct difference between optimists and pessimists in the way they cope with difficult situation, which implies the research participants have obtained a certain degree of EI though the opinion they shared.

The happiness at the workplace together with the strong awareness of their roles and responsibilities has established and enhanced employees' understanding of their own emotions as well as emotions of others, which guides their thoughts and actions in interactions with customers and colleagues. In other words, it is the interpretation of EI in the context of hospitality in Vietnam from hotel employee's viewpoint.

Applications of EI

In interactions with customers

In service encounters, failures are unavoidable and the research participants pointed out the following common reasons: language barriers, cultural differences, inadequate services and customer complaints for complimentary offers. Interestingly, the most popular reaction is to smile, listen, apologise, empathise and explain. The next step is to solve the problem as best as they can and seek managers' help if needed.

Several participants set their own goals in dealing with customers including self-persistence, working from their heart and putting themselves in customers' shoes.

"*I think I must be persistent, as in the Vietnamese saying 'We have gone too far to draw back', I'm assigned to serve that customer, whatever happens, I must be responsible for it.*" (FG3)

"When I started, I worked in a small restaurant and a lady told me to use my heart in delivering services, generally to get something in return but regard them as my family members and be considerate with them." (FG3)

"Feelings are important. Simply put yourself in customers' shoes, when buying a service, we expect to get something in return… If every employee understands this reason, it's easy for them to deal with customers." (FG3)

On the positive side of applying EI in unsuccessful service encounter, solving customers' complaints makes employees happy.

"I learnt that they could be very angry if their demands are not met; but if we could solve the problem, they would be very happy, it's also a source of happiness for me, solving customers' complaints." (FG2)

On the other hand, participants describe their experience of stress from suppressing true feelings and dealing with customer complaints as well as from managers.

"It was very stressful because I wasn't supposed to express my feelings." (FG2)

"If the problem happens once, it's fine, but in case of several guest complaints on the same day I feel very stressed because I'm unable to offer them good service." (FG3)

"Because when they complain, I'm afraid of being blamed for those problems, of being criticised for that by the management team. So, apart from responsibility, it also involves pressure which does count." (FG3)

In response to the stress from work, hotel staff admitted that they would take off the mask when they go home and be who they are or talk to each other behind the customers' back. Previous quantitative research (Cha et al. 2009; Min 2014) proves that people with high EI are

less vulnerable to work-related stress than those with lower EI. However, the specific strategies that customer-contact employees deal with stress are neglected, which brings forward a potential issue for this qualitative research to explore in the next stage of data collection – semi-structured interviews.

In interactions with co-workers

Regarding workplace relations, most participants emphasised the importance of understanding the different working styles of their managers, supervisors as well as co-workers. They also tend to seek help and advice from the management team to resolve conflicts with their colleagues.

> "*My manager told me something which made me understand thoroughly 'When you hit the ball against the wall, it will come back to you with the same force'. I have thought of it ever since to remind myself of self-control. It needs daily practice.*" (FG2)

Though this story is not strong enough to illustrate employee interaction with colleagues, it implies an interesting area to explore using Critical Incident Technique (CIT) in the third stage of data collection. The researcher faced difficulties getting greater details of workplace conflicts because participants hesitated to talk behind their colleagues' back. Therefore, one-to-one interviews or will probably be a better method for collecting data on this issue.

It can be seen that research participants' opinions and stories of interacting with customers and colleagues are in line with the Five Components of EI at Work established by Goleman (2004).

Table 1 – The Five Components of Emotional Intelligence at Work (Goleman 2004)

The Five Components of Emotional Intelligence at Work

	Definition	Hallmarks
Self-Awareness	the ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others	self-confidence realistic self-assessment self-deprecating sense of humor
Self-Regulation	the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting	trustworthiness and integrity comfort with ambiguity openness to change
Motivation	a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status a propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence	strong drive to achieve optimism, even in the face of failure organizational commitment
Empathy	the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions	expertise in building and retaining talent cross-cultural sensitivity service to clients and customers
Social Skill	proficiency in managing relationships and building networks an ability to find common ground and build rapport	effectiveness in leading change persuasiveness expertise in building and leading teams

From the stories shared by research participants, it can be implied that they experienced all the five components of EI at work though they are not explicitly mentioned. To be specific, they showed the ability to recognize, understand (Self-Awareness) and control (Self-Regulation) their own moods as well as to understand the emotions of others (Empathy). They also demonstrated the passion for their job which goes beyond money or any benefits (Motivation). For instance, a receptionist expressed her satisfaction from recommending a local restaurant with authentic food to the customers who came back with positive feedback and appreciation. She knew she could have got tips from the restaurants that have corporate prices for the hotels but it was not what the customers were looking for (FG2). The last component Social Skill lies in the participants' efforts to enhance relationships with colleagues and create some team building activities out of work such as having dinner together or chats about their own life for better understanding and sharing personal interests (FG2).

Surprisingly, Vietnamese culture has been mentioned quite frequently and described as both positive and negative impacts on relations at the workplace with the following characteristics: suppression of true feelings, keeping their thoughts to themselves, lack of freedom of speech,

collectivism in over-valuing the community, jealousy and competition instead of constructive feedback.

TRAINING OF EI

As a response to the cultural impacts on interactions in hospitality context, Kim and Lee (2009) recommend that employees be provided with specific service manuals pertaining to passengers' nationalities to reduce national stereotyping which is closely related with emotions and service behaviours. The emphasis on training is in accordance with another research on the impacts of culture element on the interaction between casino workers and guests at the largest casino in South Korea conducted by Kim and his colleagues (2002) who suggest employees should be better equipped with formal training on the range of customer behaviours rather than merely basing on guest's nationality. This should be done with caution because employees tend to pick up on this knowledge informally without full awareness of variations in behaviour among individuals from a particular nationality. They also recommend cultural training start with staff's cultural norms for a better understanding of themselves from non-native guests' perspectives and then continue with cultural norms of guests.

In contrast to the significance of training recognised by academics, interviews with hotel workers highlights the need for a comprehensive and practical training programmes for hotel staff in Vietnam. Most participants agree that they did not get sufficient training from colleges or universities and emphasised the heavily theoretical nature of higher education. The majority of them insisted learning from real-life situations is the most effective way for their job. It is the reality they face in their daily duties that outweighed knowledge obtained from universities or hotel training programmes.

There was also a mix of responses in terms of training programmes provided by the hotels they are working for. One of the participants pointed out it is the difference between large-scale and small-scale hotels. This difference was also reflected in the ways they deal with customers. Whereas employees are facing inconsistent policies and regulations in family-run hotels, those working in big hotel chains show a clear understanding of their organisation cultures:

"*In [hotel chain A], they aim to connect people, which involves customers' emotional expression, all kinds of customers, how to take care of customers, how to connect with them, each culture and so on. In [hotel chain B], when customers come to NT, we are supposed to work as tourist guide as well… We were also taught about Vietnamese culture, the Cham ethnic minority, Ponagar.*" (FG1)

"*The hotel I'm working at has a very inconsistent structure. There is no team leader, it's very chaotic, there is no standard, let alone training. Hotel staff can do whatever they want. They can bring or take anything. The security guard doesn't care either.*" (FG1)

As Hofstede (1991) proposes three main factors influencing an individual's behaviour at the workplace including national culture, occupational culture and organisational culture, different organisations; among which national culture will determine the organisational culture of that same national culture. However, different organisations bear their own culture (Pizam 1993), which explains for different conducts revealed by the research participants.

Moreover, management team and colleagues also serve as a source of knowledge and skills for employees to learn from. On-the-job training is also considered an effective way of gaining experience in interactions with customers.

"In my opinion, judging from word of mouth, this industry is more saying 'the profession teaches itself' because the hotel where we start working will teach us, the fastest way is to learn from hands-on experiences. Some of the skills taught are not applicable right away but we must experience them from reality." (FG3)

In brief, although the degree to which training programmes differ from large-scale to small-scale hotels is quite obvious, there is a lack of systematic and practical training to enhance employee's emotional regulation in interactions with customers and colleagues. It is the theoretical nature of most training programmes which creates some negative perceptions toward to efficiency of training related to EI. Though the topic of EI training was not investigated in detail from focus group interviews, EI training has been neglected in most hotels in Vietnam. It is of crucial importance that its value be communicated to hoteliers through academic and practical examples. Adopting the EI developmental programme for UK managers, Slaski and Cartwright (2003) posit that EI can be learnt, taught as well as reduce stress and enhance well-being and performance. Books written by Cherniss and Adler (2000) and Newman (2008) can be valuable source for developing EI training programmes with a strong focus on hospitality context. Further information on EI training will also be gathered in the next data collection stage of this research.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous research shows a consensus that EI is important in human life, especially in the workplace environment because it involves the regulation of one's own emotions and emotions of others, which guide their thoughts and behaviours for better interactions with others. Furthermore, it can be taught and learnt and an individual's EI can be improved through EI training programmes. This qualitative research, therefore, aims to explore employees' understanding and application of EI in interactions with both domestic and international customers as well as co-workers in hotels in Vietnam. The research has three stages of data collection; focus groups with hotel employees, semi structured interviews with hotel employees and use of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). This paper reports data collected from focus groups which shows an overview of EI in the context of Vietnamese hospitality and serves as a basis for further investigation. Issues emerging from these focus groups are threefold. Firstly, the majority of the research participants have found happiness in their job and built a strong awareness of their own roles and responsibilities, which adds considerable impetus for their interactions with customers and colleagues, especially in dealing with complaints or conflicts. This finding presents a contextual and practical understanding of EI in hospitality rather than regarding EI as a conceptual construct. Secondly, in dealing with customers, employees tend to set and maintain their goals so as to deliver the best service, which brings them both positive and negative impacts on their feelings. In addition, Vietnamese culture is mentioned as one of the most profound influence on building relationship with co-workers. The last issue lies in the inadequate training provided to hotel staff in relation to EI application, which implies a new direction for training development this research will take.

Reviewers' comments		
1st reviewer	Clarify aim/objectives	Addressed in Literature review and Conclusions
	National cultural impacts on customers' expectations or behaviour in hotels and interaction with hotel staff	Added in Literature review
	Data presentation and analysis	Added more discussion
2nd reviewer	General personality of the staff at the interview stage of recruitment. Certain traits being essential for the development of positive customer interactions. Psychological testing in major corporations to identify suitable people for customer-facing roles	Amended in Literature review and Methodology
	More recent works of emotional capital (Dan Pink or Martyn Newman), their methods for measuring emotional capital, the value of EI in business environment	I could not find any information on their methods for measuring and it is quite irrelevant for such a short paper to cover that many details
	The importance of staff training	Extended with more discussion

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