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Emotional Intelligence: Between Business, Culture and History

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Abstract

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Keywords: emotional intelligence; organizations; IQ.

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is both an academic and a popular phenomenon. It is not surprising, then, that it has generated a vast literature. Remarkably, there has been little meta analysis of the various assumptions adopted by different theorists, and nor has there been any body of work that seeks to link the assumptions embedded in EI to organizational, historical and cultural phenomena.

This paper attempts to redress this in a small way. Many EI theorists make assertions about the structure of the mind, the role of genes (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000: 111) and the relationship between emotions and intelligence; and they do this in discursive terms, using language and metaphors that provide rich material for textual and deconstructive analysis.

This preceding discussion may infer that the scope of this paper is wide, but this should not be overstated. Indeed, the scope is restricted to some extent by the fact that I do not address all of the models so far developed by EI researchers. That needs to be part of a larger work. The most conspicuous omission here is the Bar-On (2000) model, the Emotional Quotient Inventory.

My modest aim in this paper, then, is to provide new interdisciplinary insights into a lineage that I see running from the emergence of IQ in the early work of Galton (1869) to the concept of multiple intelligences developed in the 1980s by Gardner (1983). The concept of EI developed by Mayer and Salovey (1990, 1997) can be seen as a station along the way: on
the one hand it represents a considerable departure from the work of Gardner because it specifically draws a connection between the emotions and intelligence, but on the other hand it is closer to Gardner than to subsequent work by Goleman(1995, 1998) because it retains many of the techno-cognitive assumptions embedded in the tradition extending from Galton to Gardner. I include within the Mayer and Salovey model all of their co-authors.

The Biological Essentialism of IQ in Historical Context

For the purposes of this analysis, the key feature of IQ was its fixation on developing a single measurement of an individual’s techno-cognitive skills. Moreover, the skills measured in IQ tests were innate in the sense that they were present at birth and were thought to change very little over the course of an individual’s life (Cianniolo, A & Sternberg, R, 2004: 2-3). The conception of IQ was thus based on a form of biological essentialism.

This conception of the individual is strikingly modern, and it is undoubtedly related to the emergence of an industrial society characterized by the rise of an administrative state, with its correspondingly strong emphasis on statistical calculation and technical expertise. Galton (1869), whose work contains one of the first conceptions of what might now be recognized as something akin to IQ, should be seen in this light. Galton was fixated on biological essentialism and statistical calculation.

It is important to note that Galton’s ideas emerged at the precise moment when the industrial administrative state became manifest. From the 1870s, especially in Britain, the aristocracy lost control of parliament (Cannadine, 1994); the Civil Service reforms of the 1870s were put in place (Gladden, 1967); the modern administrative state developed a strong propensity for data collection (Silverman, 1983; MacLeod, 1988); and society generally developed a statistical imagination (Hacking, 1990; Porter, 1995).

IQ and the Unemotional Self

The techno-cognitive element of IQ was founded on a radical ontological dualism. The human subject was split into two: a rational calculating self and a more primeval self in which the murky emotions resided. This binary conception of the human subject stretches all the way back to Plato (Despret, 2004: 149-151), and it is implicit in the Cartesian idea of a mind-body split. In the twentieth century it was bolstered by the cultural pervasiveness of the Freudian paradigm. In Freud’s conception, the primal forces of the id are mediated by the calculative reasoning of the ego (Freud, 1964). In Freud, however, the human subject cannot really know or change the emotional states that arise from deep primal forces, except, of course, through extensive psychoanalysis. As a result, civilization goes hand in hand with discontents (Freud, 1961). For the purposes of this paper, the key issue is that in Freud the emotions pose a threat to the individual and are consequently repressed, so much so that they remain inaccessible in any rational form except through years of professional psychoanalysis.

From IQ to Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences
The dominance of this dualistic paradigm prevailed until the 1980s, despite the tentative steps taken by Thorndike (1920) to look beyond the self-contained techno-cognitive individual in search of a broader conception of 'social intelligence'.

In the 1980s, however, a decisive shift emerged in the work of Gardner (1983). Gardner's framework adopted a broader conception of the individual than that contained within traditional conceptions of IQ. His work accepts the view that there are alternative abilities and paths for a diverse population consisting of people with widely ranging skills and abilities. Gardner's work represents a tolerance of social diversity rather than a restrictive, and perhaps implicitly authoritarian, commitment to one narrow singular concept. Considered from this perspective, his ideas seem refreshing. The sense in which this is so, however, is more restricted than is commonly perceived. The boundaries containing Gardner's multiple intelligences were still fairly tightly drawn, and his focus was still predominantly cognitive rather than relational and self-reflexive. His work did have elements of these, but to some extent Gardner also thought that his various intelligences were related to the structure of the brain. In this search for an innate physiological basis to intelligence there is thus a strong residue in his work of techno-cognition, with all of the old ontologically essentialist foundational assumptions characteristic of Galtonian IQ.

Gardner (2002) has recently admitted that while developing his “pluralistic theory” he “still thought that in “intelligence was a singular concept” (Gardner, 2002: 140). He apparently now believes that his current work has moved on from there, but this belief seems an illusion. He still asserts, for example, that “different tasks call on different intelligences or combinations of intelligences” (Gardner, 2002: 141).

To see intelligence in this way is to see it as a composite, or aggregation, of different compartmentalized entities that can be mixed and matched incrementally, in a Ricardian manner, to produce an instrumentally optimal outcome for each set of tasks. Seen in this light, Gardner’s conception of multiple intelligences can be regarded as little more than a detailed elaboration of IQ. This is still ontologically essentialist; it is simply masked by the incorporation of a calculus whose purpose is to cut waste and inefficiency in the search for rational optimality. The end goal is still conceived in terms of fixed singularity; it is simply the case that the path for getting to this point of singularity involves acknowledging and refining different quantitative levels of a more diverse range of skills and abilities than those included within traditional conceptions of IQ. At all times, however, these diverse skills and abilities are regarded as sub-sets of what remains a singular concept of intelligence. Furthermore, it seems that Gardner has a technocratic pedagogical understanding of how the educator should respond to the individual's ontological calculus. The educator, it seems, "is faced with clear-cut educational choices" when faced with the realization that a child has “little potential for the development of spatial intelligence”. These choices involve “giving up” or “working much harder to deliver instruction” (Gardner, 2002: 141).

From Gardner to Mayer and Salovey

The first attempt to overcome the binary opposition between emotions and intelligence occurred in the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990). In that work ontological essentialism was less evident than in the thought of Gardner and of those who preceded him, but it was not
expunged. A techno-cognitive form of ontological essentialism has been an intractable philosophical presence underpinning the trajectory of the research field since the initial formulations of IQ. Despite the originality of their conception of EI, Mayer and Salovey have not broken free of this framework. In their work, however, the technical and cognitive aspects that were so characteristic of IQ were now concerned with the appraisal and utilisation of emotion.

In some regards Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000) invert Freud; but in other regards they adopt a compartmentalised view of the mind that is firmly rooted in the Freudian tradition of segmentation and containment. They (Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2000: 98-99) talk, for example, of the mind and its ‘constituent parts’.

Although they generally depart from a binary conception of emotion and reason, there is a sense in which Mayer and Salovey still adopt a weak binary position. Effectively, they have inverted Freud by domesticating the emotions and transforming them into a knowable and exploitable resource base capable of being used by the efficient managerial self. In their hands, emotions fast-track, or streamline, the cognitive function. At some points (Mayer et al 1999: 267), they posit a technocratic self that can draw on underlying emotional content, as if it is a Ricardian factor input, in order to achieve efficient outcomes. The individual subject, they say, ‘can reason and problem-solve’ on the basis of’ emotions. Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000; 107) talk of the ‘processing of emotional information’ and of ‘inputting information from the emotion system’. In this input/output processing model, emotions are fed through a complex system. In their view (2000: 107) emotional intelligence operates ‘across both the cognitive and emotional systems’. This systemic and binary ontology of self is not based on a mind/body split, as envisaged by Descartes, but rather on a weak emotional/cognitive systemic split. This binary systemic ontological organization of the human subject is sub-divided into a form of branch management. The human subject has four branches: the first deals with ‘emotional perception and identification’; the second and third with processing that information ‘with an eye to problem-solving’ by ‘using emotion to improve cognitive processes’ and then to achieve the effective ‘cognitive processing of emotion’; and the fourth ‘concerns emotional self-management and the management of emotions in other people’.

**Mayer and Salovey in Historical Context**

In the work of Mayer and Salovey there remains a strong techno-cognitive element, but it is important to understand that this is not a techno-cognitive element that serves the needs of a rational administrative, industrial-bureaucratic state of the kind that existed in the Galtonian age of IQ. The techno-cognitive residue so evident in Mayer and Salovey performs a streamlining function for the intellect in a fast, diverse and complex world driven by information overload. In a fast moving and borderless era of global change Mayer and Salovey’s understanding of EI promises to empower a human subject cut adrift from stable organisational structures and institutions, such as old-fashioned bureaucracies. Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000: 109) assert that ‘emotions…can impose priorities such that the cognitive system attends to what is important’. Such a resource-based throughput model obviously achieves considerable improvements and efficiencies in emotional data processing and management. Thought is to be guided by being in touch with one’s resource-
based emotions rather than by following a pre-set series of impersonal processes and procedures.

Not surprisingly, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000: 108) see emotional intelligence as contributing to intellectual growth. They seem to see this as a contemporary form of self-improvement, but without the onto-theological aspects that characterised nineteenth-century conceptions of self improvement. In contrast to those conceptions, which had as their focus a cleansing of the soul, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso have as their focus a cleansing of the emotional/intellectual branch processing system. With their focus on the clearance of blockages; they have moved beyond the Freudian model of pressures and displacements, and they have fused that model of hydraulic mechanics with a post-Victorian cleansing of the self. Effectively they have advocated a post-modern form of ontological waste management.

**From Mayer and Salovey to Goleman: From Information Processing to the Re-Engineered (Born Again) Self**

The work of Goleman (1995, 1998) represents a significant departure from techno-cognitive assumptions. Despite the emphasis that Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000: 111) place on systems management and streamlined information processing, they remain wedded to ontological essentialism. In particular, they are critical of Goleman’s (1995) “popular claim” that emotional intelligence “unlike other intelligences…can be learned”. Although they do not revert to claims made for IQ that techno-cognitive skills reside deep within the structure of the individual self, and are therefore immutable, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000: 111) suggest that many of the “personality traits that are listed as a part of emotional intelligence…have rather considerable genetic, biological, and early-learning contributions, which, as with other parts of personality, make them difficult, albeit not impossible, to change”. Given that emotional intelligence, as they themselves conceive it, is attitudinal rather than technical or biological in nature, it is difficult to see the logic upon which they assert a genetic basis to their own model of EI. For them to hold such a position, they would have to believe that attitudes have a basis in individual genetics. This is not a view that they explicitly advocate.

Although Goleman developed the work of Mayer and Salovey, he is no mere populariser of their work. His ‘Emotional Competence Framework’ is almost entirely self-reflexive and socially relational (Goleman, 1995, 26-27). This stands in contrast to the greater emphasis on cognitive skills evident in the work of Mayer et al. Goleman seems more concerned with emotional flows and circuits rather than with the creation and development of emotional and intellectual stocks. In this sense, he might be thought of as a post-Ricardian economist of the emotions, whereas Mayer and Salovey appear distinctly Ricardian.

Goleman departs from Mayer and Salovey in another important regard. Their focus is always on the individual subject, even when that subject is situated in a social context, whereas Goleman’s focus is increasingly on the flows, loops and circuits that he believes exist within interactive groups. In Mayer and Salovey the individual subject identifies, processes and regulates its own emotional states and also tries to efficiently manage and manipulate the emotional states of others, but the focal point of analysis is always the individual. Goleman, by way of contrast, focuses not just on the individual, but on ‘consensual emotions’ and
“emotions (as) an open loop system” (Goleman, 2002: 25). He says that on “a resonant team” the members “vibrate together” (Goleman, 2002: 26-27). Resonance, he says, “releases energy in people, and it increases the amount of energy available to the team” (Goleman, 2002: 26).

Goleman’s conception of EI implies not only a new conception of the human subject but also a new conception of intellectual capital and human resource management in the contemporary global economy. His work is attractive to knowledge-based workers who are now more likely than hitherto to change employment at regular intervals (Sennett, 1998). Goleman’s emotionally intelligent individual is constantly adapting the self, as a niche product, to the needs of a rapidly moving world. For Goleman (1998:239-243) the human subject can be in a constant process of making and unmaking itself, of learning and unlearning habits and patterns of thoughts. There is no sense here in which it can be thought that Goleman has in mind a single measurement of EI; and nor can it be thought that his concept of EI is either fixed or bounded. His conception of EI is not generic in the way that IQ once was, and nor is it rooted in cognition and information processing to the extent that it is in Mayer and Salovey. His competencies can be adapted, modified and mixed creatively to form a shifting portfolio of attributes that can be pitched in different ways to different organisational types (Goleman, 1998: 259-262). Goleman’s human subject can be seen as a flexible emotional inventory to be delivered ‘just in time’ to a highly nuanced and rapidly changing spread of different organisational types.

Clearly, this view of the human subject is well suited to the needs of flexible and fast moving organisations. It is also well suited to flattened organisational structures characterised by complex networks of teams and internal organisational flows. Information in the post-Bretton Woods economy is concerned as much with unimpeded flows than it is with incremental additions to fixed stocks of knowledge or intellectual capital. Goleman’s emotionally intelligent individual is constantly adapting the self, as a niche product, to the needs of a rapidly moving world. Both internally and externally, Goleman’s emotionally intelligent human subject is remaking itself according to the shifting currents of the marketplace.

Conclusion: A New EI Research Agenda?

Given the social, cultural and historical forces that have been influential in the development of the concept of EI, human resource managers should be very cautious in adopting the belief that they might be able to easily capture such a diverse and elusive concept. They should be particularly aware that the conceptual foundations of the concept vary from theorist to theorist, and that the concept is still in a rapid state of development. It might even be said that the speed of conceptual development has exceeded the rate at which empirical knowledge is being accumulated. Perhaps EI’s greatest value has been in shifting the cultural mindset to the need for empathy and communication in flattened organizations.
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