

Emotional Intelligence—Fact or Fad?

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and the debates surrounding its validity. Scholars argue that EI significantly impacts workplace, relationships, mental health, and daily decision-making. They advocate for its incorporation into formal and informal training programs. Critics raise concerns about its measurement, cross-cultural applicability, and the conceptual breadth of "emotional intelligence." The debates emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of the construct, which will enable the clarification of a possible conflation with other personality traits or social skills. This essay concludes with evidence supporting the value of EI in various domains, stating that further research is essential to establish its psychometric credentials to gain broader acceptance among psychologists and establish its place in psychology.

Keywords: psychology, emotional intelligence, fact, fad, personality traits and relationship.

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Introduction—Key Concepts

It is well recognised that the ability to manage emotions—whether one's own or those of others—is crucial for optimal psychological and social functioning. Emotions are internal states that mediate physiological awareness and behavioural expressions of subjective feelings, including love, pleasure, jealousy, guilt, pain, etc. According to Lerner and Kelter (2000), people's emotional states inform their level of decision-making and many other aspects of their lives. Intelligence represents a multifaceted and intricate construct, resistant to precise encapsulation within a singular definition. It is fundamentally referred to as the capacity to acquire knowledge, encompassing the comprehension of multifarious dimensions of intricate concepts and the adept navigation of complex problem-solving tasks (McGregor, 2007). In the discerning analysis of Gottfredson (1997),

intelligence emerges as a robust and compelling determinant that significantly augments one's prospects for attaining educational, financial, and occupational success. Furthermore, intelligence plays an instrumental role in facilitating effective interpersonal interactions and socialisation skills.

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been defined as the ability to notice one's emotions and those of other people (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Charles Darwin's (1872) seminal work on emotional expression in animals and humans appears to have informed the concept of EI. The concept was popularised by Daniel Goleman, who classified EI into four broad components: self-awareness, self-management, empathy or social awareness, and social skills. Goleman emphasised that EI was more important than the intelligence quotient (IQ) for success in education, the workplace, and leadership roles (Goleman, 1998). According to Nelis *et al.* (2011), Goleman surveyed evidence indicating the strong role that the amygdala plays in emotional regulation. Their research states that EI can be improved through knowledge and exposure. Since introducing the concept of EI, many studies, debates, and criticisms have revolved around it and will be discussed and compared in this essay. Some researchers have taken it up and promoted it, while others have seen it as overhyped and possibly redundant. The rest of this short essay examines the arguments for and against EI as a psychological construct.

Emotional Intelligence is a Fact

According to Brackett *et al.* (2011), EI is an attribute that allows people to perform well in such diverse areas as the workplace, social relationships, academics, leadership, mental health, and daily decision-making. Hence, they argued that training on EI should be incorporated into formal settings, such as workplaces and academic institutions, as well as more relaxed programs, such as life coaching and meditation sessions (Goleman, 1995; Lopes *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, Joseph and Newman (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of studies. They found that high levels of EI predicted sound mental health, high job performance, and strong leadership skills—key constituents of positive psychology (PP). Furthermore, the congruence between EI and PP principles implies that the principles of EI can be strategically employed to enrich the practice of PP. This convergence

holds the potential to foster healthier interpersonal relationships and enhance overall life satisfaction for individuals (Salovey *et al.*, 2009). Fredrickson's (2004) "broaden-and-build" theory elucidates the attributes of positive emotions that can be effectively applied to augment the efficacy of EI as a facet of PP. Such integration promises to drive personal development to new heights and enhance social understanding in various contexts, including workplaces, educational institutions, and community gatherings.

Mikolajczak and Luminet (2008) argued that EI encourages self-efficacy, equipping people to effectively deal with difficult life situations, and protects against burnout (Lopes *et al.*, 2011). Along the same line, Reuven Bar-On (2006) asserted that successfully managing environmental needs and pressures depends on the sense of "interrelated emotional and social competencies" that help us understand ourselves and others. He divided these competencies into five categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. Each of these aspects, he suggested, would be well-developed in a person with high "emotional-social intelligence" (Bar-On, 2006). Researchers have argued that people who show competence in managing their own emotions appear to be adept at recognising and dealing with the emotions of others (Downey *et al.*, 2008; Maltby *et al.*, 2010). In sum, the studies outlined above present empirical evidence for EI as a predictor of outstanding performance in various areas of life. Through the definitions of EI, other aspects of psychology, such as social, PP, and similar others, could flourish more, which presents EI as being a fact (Bar-On, 2010). Nevertheless, several psychologists have challenged the conceptual basis of the construct.

Emotional Intelligence is a Fad

It is interesting to note that a prominent psychologist, Hans Eysenck, found fault with the concept of EI. In his view, emotional "intelligence" was not nearly as scientifically testable as IQ, nor was there a clear benchmark by which to compare EI across individuals (Eysenck, 2018). Van der Zee *et al.* (2002) also disputed the claim that EI predicts job performance better than IQ, indicating that the reverse accorded more with the facts. On a more conceptual level, some researchers have raised concerns about whether instruments purporting to measure EI are measuring something else. For instance, Brackett and Salvey (2006) cautioned that researchers trying to measure EI may

inadvertently include other personality traits (such as the Big Five trait, agreeableness) or even general intelligence. They therefore tried to point to the fact that EI cannot be measured without other things interfering and affecting its true result.

Similarly, Mayer *et al.* (2008) suggested that what some people call EI could be no more than a bundle of other distinct personality traits and social skills, such as empathy and self-awareness. Apart from questioning the validity of the construct, Cote and Miners (2006) observed that the concept of EI has limited applicability to other societies and cultures apart from Western ones. Finally, researchers such as Matthews *et al.* (2004) have claimed that EI, as usually defined, is a concept too broad to be precisely measured given the two significant words that make it up. According to Girrell (2005), what is referred to as EI would be better off addressed as “emotional intimacy”. For him, an individual needs to have some level of experience with what others go through before they can fully understand and know how to manage such situations. Locke (2005) argued that EI is a wrong concept; for him, it has no connection to the actual meaning of “intelligence”, and he perceived the use of EI to evaluate competence for leadership and job qualification as a biased measure.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding EI is multidimensional and cuts across its perceived values and criticism within psychological domains. While proponents highlight its potential to significantly impact various aspects of life, including workplace performance, social relationships, and mental health, critics have raised valid concerns regarding its measurement, cross-cultural applicability, and conceptual clarity. Despite the considerable research efforts dedicated to applying EI in diverse social settings, there remains an essential need for more rigorous research and investigation into its psychometric foundations. Without establishing robust psychometric credentials, it is unlikely that EI will achieve the level of near-unanimous acceptance among psychologists that IQ has garnered. Therefore, while acknowledging the potential benefits of EI, further research is imperative to address the existing concerns and clarify its conceptual boundaries. Only through continued exploration and refinement can EI truly find its place within the broader landscape of psychology.

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