EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ONTOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM: A CONCEPT CAUGHT BETWEEN MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

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ABSTRACT
Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a significant advance beyond the narrow conception of IQ. Despite this, it is constrained by the same essentialist assumptions that limited IQ. To the extent that EI engages with the ways in which signs circulate and are interpreted, the concept can benefit from an encounter with postmodernism, where such phenomena have been explored for some time. Such an encounter would benefit HRM practice.

Key words: emotional intelligence, modernity, postmodernism.
Introduction

The concepts of IQ and Emotional Intelligence (EI) have generally been considered as alternative categories rather than as historical constructs. Such an approach tends to contrast them side by side, and in binary oppositional terms: IQ is thought to measure technical rationality, whereas EI is thought to measure or to express something more intuitive. There are, of course, other binary oppositions at work: IQ is somewhat cold and clinical, whereas EI is warm and reciprocal; and IQ has masculine connotations, whereas EI expresses a feminine semiotic. In this paper I seek to cast the concepts of IQ and EI in the transition from modernity to post modernity. Briefly, I define modernity in terms of essentialist categories and a metaphysics of depth; and I define postmodernism in terms of a decentred interplay of signs and referents rather than as a relationship between fixed substances. In the evocative imagery of Taylor (2001), modernity’s orientation is towards a grid, whereas the impulses of postmodernity are dispersed into a decentred network of ceaseless flows. There is a danger here, of course, of adding another modernity/postmodernity binary opposition. I argue, however, that some concepts of EI, particularly as expressed in the work of theorists such as Mayer and Salovey (1990; 1993), straddle the categories and periods of modernity and postmodernity. In the work of Goleman (1998), however, the concept is expressed in terms of the decentred fluidity of postmodernity.

It is often argued that emotional intelligence represents a considerable departure from traditional measurements of IQ. In a sense, this is certainly true. EI focuses on the individual's immersion in a complex social world of emotions, and in so doing it seeks to examine how the human subject relates to his or her own emotions, and to the emotional states of others. EI also attempts to evaluate the individual's ability to manage those emotions in the interests of attaining an optimal social outcome (Goleman, 1995). At first appearance, EI seems to be a very broad concept: by looking at facets of the individual beyond the narrow, technical and logocentric confines of IQ, it follows a holistic trajectory set by Gardiner (1983). Its reach is also wider than that of IQ, for EI moves beyond IQ’s
standardised measurement of an individual's ability to use specific skills to find the correct answer to specific problems. EI seeks to evaluate the human subject within a broad and complex social setting.

Nevertheless, researchers into EI have not extended the concept as far as they should have done. EI straddles a confused interface between late modernity and postmodernity, and this cultural location has retarded the continued development of the concept.

**IQ and Modernity**

The concept of IQ embodied many of the essentialist assumptions of modernity. It was conceived as a set of attributes or skills that resided deep within the individual (Cianciolo, A & Sternberg, R, 2004: 2-3). Admittedly, there was a counter-current of thought, especially from the 1960s, that placed more emphasis than hitherto on nurture and environment rather than on genetics and heredity, but this perspective was really a challenge to the early and primary tendency, represented by Galton (1869), to see IQ in terms of genes. Indeed, the idea of a fixed, bounded and essentialist category of intelligence has always been the point of reference and departure for those engaged in the debate about IQ.

The concept of EI certainly engenders a more complex picture of the individual than did IQ, and it certainly conveys a more complex idea of intelligence, but it remains trapped within many of the modernist assumptions that underpinned IQ. Before outlining why this is so, it is perhaps important to draw attention to one considerable advance made by the concept of EI. When the individual is reading the emotional states of other individuals, that individual is reading signs of emotional states. These signs may be read through action or inaction, or through a complex array of body language, whether that language is visual or aural. Indeed, the emotionally intelligent individual must be able to look beyond the formal signs, expressed for example by words, and look for visual cues that may
indicate something quite different. In this sort of situation, the emotionally intelligent individual is able to examine the nuances of body language, and then link these not to the specific objective content of aural communication, but rather to the *mode* of aural expression: to tones, inflexions and pauses. Having done that, the emotionally intelligent individual will conduct an emotional audit of his or her own inventory of emotions and signs, and then, from this analysis, choose the optimal sign, or combination of signs, that will induce in the other a response that will be emotionally optimal for both parties. What will be considered optimal, of course, will depend on the respective agendas of each individual and also upon the organisational or contextual constraints within which each party operates. This exchange is really an exchange of individually generated signs within a circulatory environment of emotional flows and cultural signs. This decentred semiotics is postmodern, and its affect is to be found in our language: in such phrases, for example, as being 'in the loop', or being engaged in 'networking'. To conceptualise intelligence in these terms is to move some distance from the influence of genetic, and even eugenic, conceptions of IQ. In short, it is to make a giant leap from genes to memes.

Having said that, the concept of EI remains remarkably essentialist, and it is therefore modernist rather than postmodernist in its thrust. Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (1999; 2000) attempt to link thought and emotions into a coherent entity in which emotions service the intellect. Consequently, there is an essentialist tendency to see emotional intelligence as a discrete entity or set of skills that reside within the unified human subject.

Goleman (1998), however, deals with a human subject that is constantly making and remaking itself. In identifying multiple skills and attributes that function in a world of emotional flows and exchanges, his conception of EI moves towards a decentred postmodern understanding of fragmentation and dispersal. Mayer and Salovey, in seeking to draw these back into an integrated expression of an individual’s skill, seek to find in EI the unity, closure and essentialism of modernity.
Considered from this perspective, the individual is seen as an autonomous and intentional entity with a centre to his or her being. It remains a fundamental assumption of EI that there must be a discrete set of attributes that manifest themselves more or less consistently within the one individual so that that individual can be said to possess a certain quantitative level of EI. Once it has been established that an individual has a superior level of EI, there is an assumption that this individual will function more effectively in all social situations, or at least in the general run of social situations, than will an individual with lower levels of EI. In this sense, by attributing to the individual a generic set of attributes, as Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (2000) attempt to do, the concept of EI replicates some of the philosophical assumptions evident in the concept of IQ. Ontological essentialism, it seems, is an intractable assumption.

In turn, this essentialist conception of the self is based on an essentialist conception of emotions. According to this interpretation, emotions reside at some deep, subterranean part of the self, and it is the autonomous and centred individual who has to either deal with them or be dominated by them. This process of reception and adaption is what the appraisal theory of emotion seeks to analyse (Lazarus, 1991). Despret (2004: 149-151), in an analysis of Goleman's (1995) conception of EI, traces this idea back to Plato's dualistic and hierarchical division of the soul into passions and rationality. In Plato, the higher rational part of the human subject has to manage and subjugate the lower passions.

Despret (2004: 146) is certainly correct in identifying a similar conception in the thought of that great theorist of modernity, Sigmund Freud. In Freud, although the unity of the self is always in question, there is always a coherent link between external stimuli and internal reality. In the Freudian conception, emotions can be traced back to the primal forces that originate in the id (Freud, 1964). These forces are the powerful driving impulses of human existence, but they are modified by the ego in the context of the reality principle. The outcome might be civilisation, but it is a civilisation that
bears the consequences of this adaptive process (Freud, 1961). The psychoses and neuroses that result from dealing with emotions are a far cry from any concept of EI, but it is remarkable that emotions are still viewed implicitly by EI theorists as primal and given to the individual in much the same manner as Freud saw them as given to the individual from within the deeper recesses of the id.

The Freudian legacy of the emotions is persistent but it would seem that this is because the ontological essentialism on which it is based is also persistent. In his conception of the emotions, Freud embodied all of the essentialist assumptions of modernity.

EI and Postmodernism: A New Direction?

It is to the poststructuralist Lacan that we must turn in order to understand the role played by language and the Symbolic Order. Lacan (1977) regarded the self as a fragmented and dispersed field of being constructed in and through language. For Lacan, the Unconscious is not a sub-layer of the individual, but is dispersed at different points within language and culture, and it is manifest at different points of intersection with the human subject. Emotional states must therefore be understood by reference to a cultural field of symbolic representation, and not merely to direct social engagement with others. Fragmented individuals are located at various textual sites, and dealings with them inevitably involve a textual reading of those aspects of the Symbolic Order that intersect at such sites. Emotional flows and cultural flows are intertwined.

Even this decentred approach might understate the complexity of emotional states at this moment in history. Some individuals play with emotions, and often even simulate them. Indeed, there is a considerable organisation and administrative infrastructure to support the tactical creation and simulation of emotions. Sports psychologists understand this phenomenon perfectly well, as does the
military. Emotions can be inculcated through training and psychological preparation so that the
requisite emotions can be drawn upon and used as a kind of performance enhancing drug. The Maori
haka that precedes each New Zealand All Black Rugby game is a dramatic example of this
phenomenon. Importantly, the Haka derives its emotional force from a complex cultural history. In
such organisational contexts emotions need to be identified and understood, but they sometimes also
need to created, simulated and manipulated.

The point of significance here is that the relationship of the human subject to various emotional states
is not by any means the relationship of an autonomous and unified subject to a primal entity that
already exists and which merely needs to be identified and managed. In the Lacanian view, the
relationship is more fluid than that: the decentred self is inserted into culturally constructed world of
emotions. These emotions are never unmediated: they are filtered through culture, and then
cognition, before they are addressed by the individual human subject in any purposeful manner. Since
emotions are embedded in culture (Oatley, 1993; Ahmed, 2004), they are subject to the processes of
historical change. This is true for emotions *per se*, but it is also true for the creation of the human self
that is a field of being through which those emotions are mediated. More to the point, it is also true
for intellectual constructions of emotions by theorists of social and psychological causality, as Kern
(2004:189-225) shows. EI itself should be understood as an historical construct.

At this point I should make clear that I am not denying that some individuals perform better in some
social situations than other individuals do in those situations. I am arguing that the set of emotional,
or perhaps social, skills responsible for this success is more ambiguous and fluid than the advocates of
EI tend to recognise. The first point to understand here is that the ability to identify emotional states
in others has both a developmental and an experiential dimension. Profyt and Whissell (1991), for
example, confirm that older children have a greater ability to identify facial expressions of emotions
in others as well as an ability to alter and regulate their own expressions of emotions in response to those expressions.

This phenomenon should not be seen as simply a matter of child development, but rather as a limited and specific example of a life-long learning path of adapting experience to interpretation. The question that needs to be asked and answered is this: in what ways does EI mix with experience, personality and traditional measurements of IQ to produce emotional phenomena? The additional question that also needs to be asked is this: in what ways do these aspects interact with cultural phenomena?

Emotional phenomena may be manifest to varying degrees in the one individual, depending on context. A manager, for example, may operate with a high level of emotional skill in the workplace, particularly in times of stability, and yet may be hopelessly inept or uncommunicative in private relationships, or perhaps only in some types of personal relationships.

**Implications for Human Resource Management**

Looking specifically at EI within an organisational context, it can be argued that organisations consist of micro-cultures and sub-micro-cultures, and that what is taken for EI is often related, at least in part, to an ability to read these cultures textually, sub-textually, contextually and inter-textually. In order to understand the emotional states of others in an organisational micro-culture, it might be crucial to understand the nature of the business in a financial and legal context. It might also be significant to understand contractual obligations and clauses, and their relationship to risk management. It might also be important to understand political decisions that impinge on the business, and perhaps even global conditions. Without these skills an individual will be in a position similar to someone
operating in a different culture. In such a situation, what appears as a deficient level of EI may be no more than a mismatch of the professional experience and contextual exposure of the individual to the issues arising from a rapidly changing organisation and economy. Conceptually, it can be extremely difficult to identify what might fall within the domain of EI and what might be fall within the cultural and organisational realms of text and context, or what might simply be an insufficient level of professional experience for the position that the employee now occupies.

REFERENCES