



Emotional intelligence. A theoretical approach

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ABSTRACT

This work sets out to emphasise the importance of Emotional Intelligence at the present time, from a theoretical point of view. To this end, some of the most relevant contributions made by authors who have worked in this field over the last decade, are presented. The importance that this field entails in the life of an individual is underlined and it becomes clear throughout all these works that to encourage emotional intelligence is to promote good health, thanks to putting into practice emotional competencies.

Key words: emotional intelligence; health; emotional competencies.

INTRODUCTION

The term *emotional state* has been a constant both in the permanent observation of people that I have treated for many years and in the relationship between their mood and the diseases that they have suffered from.

Some time ago, after having read the book by D. Servan-Schreiber (2004) *Healing without Freud or Prozac*, also known as *The Instinct to Heal*, in the USA and Canada, I could corroborate what I had been feeling without any scientific basis whatsoever. As a psychiatrist, he questioned the contempt for traditional medicines that had been instilled into him during his years as a student. He shared with his readers one of the greatest discoveries in recent decades, namely the existence of an emotional brain which is independent from the neocortex, and whose control encompasses both psychological well-being and the functioning of the heart, blood pressure, hormones, the digestive system and the immune system. In my particular case, the content of this book encouraged my interest in emotional intelligence.

Theories and Approaches to Emotional Intelligence (EI)

The origins of the term *emotional intelligence (IE)* date back to 1990, when Peter Salovey, from the University of Yale, and John Mayer, from the University of New Hampshire, published an article entitled "Emotional Intelligence" (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) and this created great interest in the idea. Salovey and Mayer are the real coiners of the term, which they define as *the ability to accurately perceive, evaluate and express emotions; the ability to have access to and/or to generate*

feelings which make thinking easier; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and the ability to manage emotions by promoting emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 4).

Their contributions can be regarded as a starting point from which a great number of studies on emotional intelligence have been developed and it is also important to acknowledge the USA as the most advanced country in this line of research.

The theoretical model used by Mayer and Salovey regards EI as a genuine type of intelligence (Extremera y Fernández Berrocal, 2003) based on the adaptive use of emotions in our cognition in such a way that the individual is able to solve problems and adapt effectively to the environment. This conceptualisation emphasises the role of the emotional processing of information and adopts a more cognitive approach, which makes it different from other considerations, such as that of the mixed model (Bar-on, 2000; Goleman, 1998), which define emotional intelligence as a set of personality traits.

That is the case of the interest shown by Profesor McClelland, from the University of Harvard, who in the 1960s, attempted to analyze the determiners of professional success and, some years later, in his paper "Testing for competence rather than for intelligence" affirmed that school marks, academic knowledge and intelligence quotient do not predict better performance (McClelland, 1973). He wanted to show that "competencies" or personal characteristics are what people who perform better put into play.. He died in 1998 but not without beforehand sharing his knowledge and scientific evidence accumulated over more than thirty years.

Personal success has traditionally and fundamentally been related to a person's intelligence

quotient. However, this assertion is nowadays being substituted by proof that less than 20% of success is related to IQ and the remaining 80% corresponds to other more important factors.

This is the line of thought in which the contributions by Howard Gardner, a psychologist from the Harvard School of Education, can be placed. According to his work, *Frames of Mind* (1983), the IQ theory would lose the dominant position it had held since from the First World War. Gardner is fundamentally known for his theory of multiple intelligences and points out that there is not only one intelligence in the human being, but a diversity of intelligences, which mark the potentials and significant traits of each individual laid out by means of a number of strengths and weaknesses in a whole series of expanding scenarios of intelligence. For Gardner, natural intelligence is not a substratum identical to all individuals, but a unique biopsychological basis made up of multiple potentialities which do not always unfold as a consequence of a standardised education which does not distinguish the differentiating nuances of the individual.

Out of the seven types of intelligence that make a difference, it is worth pointing out, on the one hand, interpersonal intelligence, defined as the ability to understand others (how they act, what motivates them, how to relate or cooperate with them satisfactorily); and on the other hand, intrapersonal intelligence, understood as the capacity to form a rigorous and truthful idea of oneself and the ability to use that idea to effectively operate in one's own life.

In the same line are the contributions of psychologist and journalist **Daniel Goleman**, who emphasises the relevance of emotional intelligence over IQ to achieve both professional and personal success (Goleman, 1996, 1998).

Goleman suggests a model conceptualised as a "theory of execution" of emotional competences which are applied to the work and business world. The competences that he refers to are fundamentally the following: 1. self-awareness; 2. self-control and 3. motivation. In this way, he identifies IE with traits closely related to personality. Goleman (1998) agrees with the idea that, even though knowledge, experience and IQ have an importance as threshold requirements, they are these emotional competences that actually determine higher results. He points out that success in life mostly depends on emotional intelligence and that its development is possible from childhood up to the age of retirement.

Even though Goleman's intention was to arouse interest in the educational world, he could not imagine that the publication of his next book in 1998, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, would arouse the interest of the business world, which would acknowledge his work and repeatedly requested him to explain and present his theoretical approach. In 2006 Goleman published *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, where he gathers together the latest discoveries of neuroscience after 1995, through which he hopes to contribute to building a society which encourages those issues that really matter. Looking for the origins of 'social neuroscience', he discovered that a scientific conference on this theme was held in 2003, and that

the 'prophets' of this new science as he himself calls them, are John Cacioppo and Gary Berntson.

Among the discoveries it is worth drawing attention to the 'mirror neurons', which register the movements and feelings of others and which immediately predispose us to imitate the same movements and to show the same feelings.

The neuroplasticity of the brain explains the role of relationships in the brain's remodelling, it is the repetition of experiences which shape the form, size, number of neurons and even the brain's synaptic connections.

Goleman sets out to respond to questions such as "how can relationships protect us from illnesses", and alerts us to research that reveals that "just the fact of thinking of a group that we hate provokes repressed anger", in such a way that the body gets flooded by stress related hormones, blood pressure increases and the efficiency of the immune system decreases. The antidote for this situation is forgiveness, since forgiveness inverts this biological reaction and reduces the number of these hormones, blood pressure, suffering and depression. He speaks of toxic relationships being a risk factor for illness and even for death, and whose influence on heart diseases is important.

Within the framework of emotional intelligence applied to the world of work and more specifically related to leadership is a collaborator of Goleman's, **Richard Boyatzis**, a professor in the Department of Organizational Behavior, Psychology, and Cognitive Science at Case Western Reserve University, and an expert in the field of Organisational Behaviour.

For these authors, to lead is an 'emotional task' in the sense that the leader needs not only to worry about their employees accomplishing an aim, that is, an end, but also that this should take place by means of positive human relationships (the means), (Goleman, McKee and Boyatzis, 2003) From the analysis of almost four thousand managers from all kinds of organisations, they show that emotions are the key for motivation and that being sensitive to them is an essential task for a leader. One of the terms in their model is 'resonance' or the ability to inspire others energy, passion and enthusiasm. Resonance is the indispensable success factor in a leader, and has the advantage that it can be learnt. The '*resonant leader*' is the one who makes you feel valued and who inspires the feelings and the sensation of belonging to a team. (Goleman, McKee and Boyatzis, *ibid.*)

Their work reveals scientific evidence that shows that the emotional competences of a leader have an enormous impact on the effectiveness and results of an organisation. The business world, which had underestimated emotions as it regarded them as an obstacle for the performance of organisations, is precisely the one which currently finds it necessary to admit the benefits of 'primal' leadership, which is an essential way for a leader to manage the relation with him/herself and with others. At the same time, they recognize that the emotional states of a leader have a profound effect on their subordinates.

The emotions of others can affect us to such an extent that they can even modify our hormone rate, cardiovascular functions, the sleep cycle and

even the immune system. In part, our emotional stability depends on others. If people are physically close, emotional contagion may take place even in the absence of verbal contact. Those who work together, therefore, inevitably end up capturing and sharing the feelings of other people.

It seems that mood ends up determining efficiency at work. It takes hours for the stress hormones which are secreted into the blood flow to reabsorb themselves. Hence, an argument with a boss may plunge us into tension and worry for hours. As a matter of fact, the negative influence of a boss can generate more stress than other work related factors.

Boyatzis points to laughter as the way to measure the degree of connection between the hearts and minds of the members of a team. From the neurological point of view, laughter is the shortest distance between two people, as their limbic systems immediately get into tune, which he says does not have anything to do with 'jokes'.

The biologicist dimension of emotional intelligence

The mind is not only cognitive or only emotional. It is both things and many more. An issue essential to neurobiology is establishing how the brain processes emotional information. **Joseph LeDoux**, a neurophysiology researcher in the of the Center for Neural Science at the University of New York, made important discoveries about the physiology of the brain in the 1980s. In his work *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (LeDoux, 1996) he reveals the prominent role of the amygdala as the nucleus of the limbic system as well as the importance of its role in the emotional brain. Contrary to common belief, awareness of a feeling is not necessary in order to produce an emotional response, given the fact that an emotional response implies unconscious mechanisms (LeDoux, 1995, 2000). The cognitive elements of emotions are mediated by pathways which put the amygdala in contact with the cortex, where the most developed areas of the brain are situated. Unconscious responses depend on subcortical structures of the nervous system.

It is necessary to remember that until now neuroscience had held that the signals emitted by the sensory organs were routed through the thalamus, the neocortex, the limbic system and the efferent pathways. What LeDoux found out was the existence of a shorter secondary pathway that directly connects the thalamus and the amygdala. It is sort of a "bridge" that allows the amygdala to directly receive signals from the senses and to emit a response before the signals are registered by the neocortex. This route accounts for the great power emotions have to override reason, which gives rise to "emotional highjacking."

In order to understand this concept it is important to reflect a little. If we make a small effort, we can all remember when we last lost control and "exploded" either with our child, a relative, a friend or with a patient. When we later unemotionally analyse what had happened, we are surprised and even ask ourselves how we could say or do such an outrageous thing, what could have happened to bring about such behaviour. All in all, what is it that happens to the human being to become so easily and

almost automatically irrational?

Fortunately, science is in a position to answer these questions. It tells us that we have been victims of an emotional or neuronal highjacking, which is related to the limbic system and, more specifically, to the amygdala.

Emotions are inherent to the human being and put us constantly at the risk of losing control. The good news is that there are emotional competences that can be learnt and practised in order to avoid such awkward situations.

Paul Ekman, a Professor of Psychology at the University of San Francisco and an expert on the physiology of emotions, was a pioneer in the study of facial expressions in the 1950s. At that time, scientists used to think that expressions and gestures were learnt socially and varied from one culture to another. Ekman (1980) carried out intercultural studies with members of an isolated tribe in New Guinea and his findings showed that, even though the expression of genuine emotions is automatic and innate, people can actually adhere to manifestation rules which are culturally determined and, furthermore, exert some control over their emotional expression. He admitted that his findings made him change his mind, as the universality of emotions had been demonstrated.

In his book *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, Ekman reveals all that he has learnt about emotions over forty years. He points out that emotions make up the motivation for most of our actions. He discloses that any type of emotion can be enjoyed and that there are even people who enjoy negative emotions. Hence, for example, there are some people who like feeling angry or do not feel uncomfortable whilst feeling afraid. He also points out that recognising an emotion is not the same as understanding its origins, and that it can be more harmful to draw hurried conclusions from someone's sadness than not noticing that they are sad (Ekman, 2003).

Finally, he makes us aware that recognising emotions can have both a constructive use and a destructive one.

Lastly, also framed within a biologicist approach, it is worth mentioning **Antonio Damasio**, a neuroscientist from the University of Iowa and Prince of Asturias Award winner in 2005. His studies have revealed the brain areas which exert a decisive influence on human behaviour, particularly on emotional processes and the elaboration of feelings, as well as giving a better understanding of the cerebral bases of language and memory. According to Damasio, the problem that we are now facing is how to spread scientific knowledge among the public in general, especially among educators and politicians, as people need to understand the importance of learning about emotions.

In order to address social conflict, it is necessary to understand social emotions. To this end an institute to study this issue was established in Southern California. Damasio points out that there are not two categories of people, namely one group of good people and another group of bad people, but the human being is capable of the very best and the very

worst. For example, someone who is able to love and take care of a baby is also able to throw it into the rubbish bin.

The objective of a good education is to organize the emotions in such a way as to foster the good ones and eliminate the worst. That is to say, the issue deals with fostering positive emotions to the detriment of the negative to the point that they are neutralised, given the fact that, as human beings, we have both types. (Damasio, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The explanation of some theories and approaches to emotional intelligence has made it possible to fulfil the aim of sharing them with professionals of psychology and, above all, of summarising them for those who have not yet had the opportunity to know about this theme. With this a number of conclusive ideas can be arrived at. Firstly, emotional intelligence does not mean the triumph of reason over feeling. It is rather an intersection of both. Secondly, it is undoubtedly necessary to encourage research in this field because of its important role in all contexts and because of its repercussions both on the individual himself and on others. Finally, it should be said that promoting its development, its dissemination and its application on a day by day basis could lead to an improvement in public health.

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