

Emotional Intelligence as a Credible Psychological Construct: Real but Elusive – A Conceptual Interpretation of Meta-Analytic Investigation Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence was thought to fill a gap that otherwise could not be explained by less encumbered traditional intelligence measures, and hence, its almost immediate popularity and appeal. The research, however, has been rather equivocal and suffers from poor operational definitions of the dependent variables and limited external validity. The results of a recent meta-analysis (Joseph, et al., 2014) demonstrated that the mixed EI measures overwhelmingly overlapped with traditional psychological constructs including: Ability EI, Self-Efficacy, Self-rated Performance, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and General Mental Ability. The apparent inconsistency of the relative predictive utility of disparate measures of EI does not preclude its consideration as a heuristic explanatory construct in organizational leadership and industrial-organizational psychology. It is reasonable to maintain that a unique predictive combination of previously known variables may still constitute a viable new construct – such as EI. Emotional Intelligence represents a heuristic explanatory device that makes a positive contribution to our understanding of organizational development and leadership behavior. Emotional intelligence, for all its ambiguity and measurement challenges, still represents a viable construct in leadership theory and organizational development. EI does much to explain why certain individuals are more effective than others in business and in life. The mere fact that the various components of EI can be predicted by more discrete and traditional measures in no way serves to diminish or undermine the utility and integrity of the concept.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, leadership theory, organizational development, meta-analysis, copyrights & patents, psychological constructs

Introduction

Most readers are aware that Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence book transformed the way we view intelligence and leadership success. Time Magazine designated it as one of the 25 most influential books of all time. Although always

controversial from an empirical perspective, it was overwhelmingly engaging as an explanatory concept for phenomenon that intuitively felt right to many observers. Emotional intelligence seemed to fill a gap that otherwise could not be explained by less encumbered traditional intelligence measures, and hence, its almost immediate popularity and appeal.

Definition

Coleman (2008), defines emotional intelligence (EI) as:the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.[1] There are three models of EI. The ability model, developed by Peter Salovey and John Mayer, focuses on the individual's ability to process emotional information and use it to navigate the social environment.[2] The trait model as developed by Konstantin Vasily Petrides, "encompasses behavioral dispositions and self perceived abilities and is measured through self report". The final model, the mixed model is a combination of both ability and trait EI. It defines EI as an array of skills and characteristics that drive leadership performance, as proposed by Daniel Goleman.

Methodology & Results

Northouse (2015) observes that "There are different ways to measure emotional intelligence. One scale used to measure EI is the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). The MSCEIT measures emotional intelligence as a set of mental abilities, including the abilities to perceive, facilitate, understand, and manage emotion" (p. 28). But the popularity of the concept was not limited to that relatively straightforward definition. Instead, it was expanded into a far

more generic and philosophical discussion of the perceived quality that makes some managers and leaders more effective and successful than others.

The research, however, has been rather equivocal and suffers from poor operational definitions of the dependent variables and limited external validity, beyond the specific sample used in the study. Landy (2005) was among the early skeptics who observed and lamented that the few incremental validity studies (at the time) conducted on EI demonstrated that it added little, if any, predictive value to relevant dependent variables such as academic and work performance. He also argued that the limited predictive validity observed in some studies was merely a function of a methodological fallacy. While this adverse position from as noted an industrial-organizational psychologist as Landy might have been devastating to the concept of EI, its popularity continued to grow. Joseph, et al. (2014) note that over 150 consulting firms now offer Emotional Intelligence (EI) type products.

Joseph and Newman (2010) argue against the utility of certain EI measures by noting that while mixed EI measures were able to significantly predict job performance beyond cognitive ability and Big Five personality traits, ability based EI measures manifest almost no incremental validity. This is particularly problematic because ability based EI is built on a stronger theoretical model than the far more predictive mixed EI measures that had a significant and robust relationship to job performance. The authors aptly describe this awkward situation as “an ugly state of affairs” (p.72) because of this apparent contradiction in logic and rigor.

In an exceptionally well crafted article, Joseph, et al. (2014) observe that although recent empirical reviews regarding Emotional Quotient (EQ) report a strong relationship between job performance and self-reported EQ (sometimes referred to as trait EI or mixed

EI), making it appear, perhaps, as though the EI construct is among the most effective predictors of job performance, that is not necessarily accurate. The obvious and most parsimonious implication of these empirical reviews is that EI should be able to predict job performance more effectively than mere cognitive ability and the Big Five personality traits. But the authors argue that the criterion related studies that gave rise to these conclusions are problematic, "given the paucity of evidence and the questionable construct validity of mixed EI measures themselves" (p.1).

In fact, the results of their own meta-analysis (Joseph, et al., 2014) demonstrated that the mixed EI measures overwhelmingly overlapped with the traditional psychological constructs (multiple $R = .79$) including:

- Ability EI
- Self-Efficacy
- Self-rated Performance
- Conscientiousness
- Emotional Stability
- Extraversion
- General Mental Ability (GMA)

This outcome would appear to suggest that there is not much new or unique to EI. In a similar vein, Ybarra, et al. (2014) observe that "Despite the appeal of this (EI) idea, recent meta-analyses indicate that emotional intelligence has not lived up to its promise." The very telling title of their article is : " The 'big idea' that is yet to be ". Even earlier, the title of an article by Matthews et al. (2012) " Emotional intelligence: A promise unfulfilled " reveals their own skepticism as to the equivocal future of EI.

The case against EI gets even worse as we pursue this line of logic further. Joseph, et al. (2014) report an updated estimate of the correlation between mixed EI and supervisor job performance ratings as $p=.29$. But after controlling for the covariates enumerated above, the relationship is reduced to an astonishingly *negative* $p=-.02!$

Discussion

In fairness, however, the apparent awkwardness of the relative predictive utility of two disparate measures of EI does not preclude its consideration as a heuristic explanatory construct in organizational leadership and industrial-organizational psychology. The mere fact that the explanatory variance in a proposed construct can be fully accounted for by an aggregation of other variables – or even other constructs – does not necessarily reduce the value or conceptual integrity of that construct. Thus it is reasonable that a unique combination of known variables, as determined by a stepwise multiple regression, could constitute an entirely new construct.

It is instructive, that standardized psychometric measures of such a new and unique configuration of psychological variables can properly be protected by copyrights; according to Freres and Finkelman (2014, p. 142): “Indeed, copyright is a more appropriate protection for standardized questionnaires than are patents. Patents allow for competitors to use an incrementally improved version of the invention or a version that does not incorporate all the parts of the original version without infringing the patent (Karjala, 2003, p. 466). Therefore, patents are not sufficient to prevent competitors from using the same standardized questionnaire in a slightly amended yet still valid form (Karjala, 2003, p. 512).”

The implication is that if it is legally defensible to incrementally improve and modify a psychometric “invention” without violating its patent protection (if any), it is

therefore valid and reasonable to maintain that a unique predictive combination of previously known variables may still constitute a viable new construct – such as EI. The foregoing legal argument is only proposed as yet another justification for EI as a credible psychological construct, despite potential measurement and theoretical inconsistencies, as well as the apparent lack of unique variance for which it may account. Emotional Intelligence still represents a heuristic explanatory device that makes a positive contribution to our understanding of organizational development and leadership behavior.

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence, for all its ambiguity and measurement challenges, still represents a valuable and viable construct in leadership theory and organizational development. EI does much to explain why certain individuals are more effective than others in business and in life. Conceptually, EI is heuristic in explaining the differences in how people interact with others in their respective environments and how this appealing psychological construct serves to influence their work behavior and job performance. The mere fact that the various components of EI can be predicted by more discrete and traditional measures in no way serves to diminish or undermine the utility and integrity of the concept.

Future research will no doubt explore areas and domains in which emotional intelligence may account for incremental variance that would otherwise not be identified and instead fall to error variance. Goleman (1995) apparently got it right two decades ago!

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