Family test used as an experientialist method focused on emotional intelligence development

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Abstract

We live in a rapid changes period that requires those personal competences that are comprised in one of the most controversial concept of psychology – emotional intelligence. The present research proposes the use of the family test and a variation of it in a formative manner in order to increase emotional intelligence in psychology students. Thirty psychology students were involved during an 18 months period in an experiential group centred on the development of emotional intelligence. In the course of meetings, the family test was adapted in a formative approach to facilitate expression of life situation in a „here and now” modality and to help participants to improve their emotional intelligence. Participants had the opportunity to clarify different aspects regarding their family, the relationship with parents, maladjustment habits that may exists in their family of origin and which may generate difficulties in subsequent relationships. The use of the family test in a formative approach triggered the participants to become aware of the personal perceptions, thoughts, emotions, feelings, fears, barriers and vulnerabilities.

Keywords: family test, emotional intelligence, empathy, motivation, self-regulation, self-awareness, social abilities;

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence connects the field of emotions to the one of intelligence, by considering emotions as a viable source of information that helps the person understand and explore the social environment. This concept has generated a real big interest from scientists and not only, therefore, it has been the subject of numerous studies and articles published in magazines, journals, and several books (Mayer, Caruso, Salovey, 2004; Bar-On, 1997, Goleman, 2001; Segal, 1999; Petrides, Furnham, 2001;
Wood, Tolley, 2003; Lyusin, 2006, etc.). It has became a "cultural trend" of nowadays and it promises to facilitate solving at least a small part of human’s problems, such as the conflict between what a person feels and what one thinks (Bar-On, Parker, 2000).

2. Method

2.1. Hypotheses

The family test used in a formative manner in the experiential group leads to the development of psychology students’ emotional intelligence. This experiential group method determines the development of each component of emotional intelligence.

2.2. Participants

There were involved 30 subjects who participated for 18 months in an experiential training focused on developing the emotional intelligence. The 30 subjects in the control group had similar features (age, gender and level of emotional intelligence) as the study group.

2.3. Measures

Pre and post the experiential group intervention four psychological surveys were applied individually to assess the development of the emotional intelligence and its components: Emotional Intelligence test through behaviour measurement – TQE (Segal, 1999), Emotional Intelligence Scale – EIS (Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Haggerty, Cooper, Golden, Dorheim, 1998), Emotional Intelligence test – TIE (Goleman, 1995, adapted by Roco, 2001) and Battery of Emotional Intelligence profile – BTPIE (Wood, Tolley, 2003).

2.4. Techniques

In the experiential group, the family test was adapted in a formative manner to facilitate the here and now experimentation of life situations to help participants develop emotional intelligence and its components (self conscience, empathy, social skills, motivation, and self-regulation).

"Allow yourselves be taken over by music and focus on your family life events, which certainly have designed you, have defined you or have left their mark on you, on what you are at this moment. There may have been pleasant events or changes that made you feel happy, satisfied, fulfilled or, conversely, there may have been a series of less pleasant events that have determined you to live a state of discontent, deep sadness, anger. Be aware of all these events, as well as the emotions you have, here and now, when you think about your own family. [...] As soon as you are fully aware of what you are feeling now when you are thinking of your own family, we will invite you to choose a piece of paper and try, step by step, to define your family by drawing. It is important to make a drawing that is representative of your family. Perhaps it is very easy to draw it, to define it on the sheet of paper, or maybe it is pretty hard. As you are shaping, on the sheet of paper, a significant part of your family please be aware of everything you are living, the emotions, sensations that you are experiencing, the thoughts or images that you are thinking of. [...] If you have finished drawing, please form triads, in which each of you will take a few minutes to describe your own family. Then, it is very important that all of the triad colleagues ask questions the one who presented drawing of his/her family. Try to become very curious, formulate as many questions as you can, so that you can learn more details about what his/her family is. In the meantime, be aware of your
own feelings and thoughts that go through your mind when talking about your own family, but also when you are listening to your colleagues describing their families. [...] Now, please take another sheet of paper and try to create a story in pictures and words of your own family, with different characters, one for each family member. It can be any story you want, it is important to be as creative as possible. Do not think too much, just let your hand slide on the sheet of paper and, certainly, it will know how to outline a significant character for each member of your family. As you are creating characters and making your story, I invite you to be aware of everything that is happening to you, your feelings, what thoughts are going through your mind or what memories your family members are awakening.”

3. Results

This experience gave each participant the opportunity to know himself / herself better, to discover his/her own resources and exploit them in and through meeting each other. Thus, students have learned that among themselves there are people who do not have too much self-confidence, which makes them wait for the confirmation of the significant people in their lives. They also understood the reasons for this low self-esteem, and that each of them needed to focus on their successes and resources in order to feel valued and accepted by themselves and others. Notable for the previously stated is Gladiola’s experience. She chose to be the first to present her family story, which, as she claims, is much like the animated cartoon whose protagonist is Shrek (figure 1.).

Fig. 1. The characters in Gladiola’s story about her own family

„Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess waiting impatiently for her prince. One day he came and woke her up from the sleep of indifference. Curious is that the Prince had proven to be a grumpy ogre, while the princess had not changed status, as in the movie Shrek, but still remained princess. For a long time, she was surprised that the knight who had woken her suddenly changed into a brute, although if she had been careful at the beginning of their relationship, she would have been able to see the
Prince’s true face. The two had together a Xena - Warrior Princess, a cat that adapted easily to different situations and a garbage basket where the family’s dark thoughts were thrown. The two faced many problems so they separated but still live in the same castle. The atmosphere in this family is greatly influenced by the ogre that ramps for various reasons, and the princess, tired of his cries, laments all the time. And just like that, time passed and this family full of malfunctions lived together. The end is looked forward with the hope that the two, ogre and princess, will no longer live together, so the other family members will be happy.”

Gladiola said that she liked the proposed exercise because it gave her the opportunity to look at her family from a different perspective, which made her be more detached and less dramatic. Thus, she understood that each member of her family was unique and she succeeded in describing them using both negative and some positive features. Her story contains the following characters: ● the father - a grumpy ogre who "ramps for various reasons" but who loves her mother very much and who cares a lot about his family, this being the reason for which he has not left the house; ● the mother - a princess, "awakened from the sleep of indifference by love" and, although she divorced her husband, she is still living with him and his daughters, and whenever her husband is nervous, she cries and tells Gladiola all her problems and the reasons for which "the ogre is evil and does not deserve to be loved"; ● the big sister - Xena, the warrior princess, who "struggles with evil forces to rescue the weak and innocent"; ● the younger sister - a cat that is "easily adapts to different situations and always falls standing"; ● herself - a garbage bin in which "there is thrown everything that is not useful, all the dark thoughts of the family, which only receives and can not spit what she does not like".

Due to the clarifying questions, Gladiola discovered why she adopted the role of "the garbage bin" for her sisters and parents, that is her own need to be protected and the desire to feel powerful, beloved, useful and accepted. She also noted that, when talking about herself, she mostly used rationalization and often changed the subject, meaning that she talked about someone else’s needs or desires or about something else. This helps her to not face her own reality and thus her vulnerabilities. She also understood that her own inner conflict arose as a result of her identification with her own father, who felt misunderstood and marginalized and therefore "ramped", and the takeover of the mother’s model, which was always complaining and passing the responsibility to the "evil ogre who did not deserve to be loved." Thus, she realized not only the benefits (attention, love, acceptance, power) but also the disadvantages (blocking emotions, passivity, denial of femininity, relationship difficulties) arising from the role of "the garbage bin" of the family, but also the fact that she was the one responsible for changing the way she got involved in the family life. Following the feedback received from the group members, she discovered a number of possible strategies for avoiding adopting the role of parental child who is the "garbage bin" of the whole family and remains anchored in her dysfunctional family.

Table 1 shows the effectiveness of experiential group intervention as measured with the t test.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probele psihologice</th>
<th>Media (σ) – lot experimental</th>
<th>Media (σ) – lot de control</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IE – TQE (Segal, 1999)</td>
<td>8,87 (1,92)</td>
<td>6,43 (1,96)</td>
<td>4,85**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE – EIS (Schutte et al., 1998)</td>
<td>129,60 (11,78)</td>
<td>122,47 (10,27)</td>
<td>2,49*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE – TIE (Goleman, 1995, adapted by Roco, 2001)</td>
<td>109,50 (22,33)</td>
<td>86,33 (23,45)</td>
<td>3,91**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE – BTPIE (Wood, Tolley, 2003)</td>
<td>66,93 (4,66)</td>
<td>60,06 (3,31)</td>
<td>6,56**</td>
</tr>
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*p < .05, **p < .001
Psychological analysis of the students revealed that the family test, when used in formative manner and the additional exercises led to enhanced self-awareness ($t_{58} = 2.01$, $p = .05$), improved ability to balance one’s emotions ($t_{58} = 6.25$, $p = .001$), increased motivation ($t_{58} = 2.91$, $p = .01$), improved empathy ($t_{58} = 7.88$, $p = .001$) and social abilities ($t_{58} = 4.41$, $p = .001$).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Using the family test in a formative manner in the experiential group challenged the psychology students involved to realize their own perceptions, thoughts, emotions, feelings, fears, blockages and vulnerabilities, then, to consciously assume them, to transform them through redefinition and take control over them and themselves. The subjects improved, statistically significant, their level of emotional intelligence development assessed through all four psychological test: TQE, EIS, TIE, BTPIE (Nastăsă, 2010). The results sustain the use of family test in trainings focused on emotional intelligence development, with major implications on personal and professional development of future psychologists.

References