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Emotional intelligence and the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas

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Abstract

The present study investigates the connection between emotional intelligence and the tendency to use certain dysfunctional cognitive schemas. We started from the hypothesis that emotional intelligence, or some of its components are negatively correlated with the tendency to use certain types or categories of dysfunctional cognitive schemas. The hypothesis was validated, therefore the stage of development of the emotional intelligence (and we mean the global, total score) has an influence on the tendency for dysfunctional thinking. On the other hand, however, when we analysed the inter-scale correlations, the results are more nuanced, some of them validates the hypotheses, others contradicting them, as detailed below.

1. Introduction and theoretical perspectives

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). People with a high EQ have a richer language when it comes to expressing emotions, and they distinguish multiple nuances. They have the ability to use the language of emotion and are capable to distinguish complex or contradictory emotions and, once they identify them, they accept

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them openly and are honest with themselves. Last but not least, they are able to use their will in order to purge an emotion, when it is not beneficial to them.

In the past years, several tools to measure this particular type of intelligence have been developed. Although the idea was popularized by Goleman in his books, which have been translated in numerous languages, the term itself has first appeared in Wayne Leon Payne's doctoral dissertation from 1985, designating “an ability which implies a creative relation with states of anxiety, pain and desire.” He wrote his unpublished doctoral dissertation which included the term emotional intelligence in the title, *A Study of Emotion: Developing Emotional Intelligence* from 1985.

At present, emotional intelligence is regarded as a collection of attitudes related to the processing of emotional information (Bar-On & Parker, 2012). These authors consider that thinking and emotions are processes that positively influence each other, as it can be seen clearly from their definition of emotional intelligence as “the ability to perceive emotions and their significance, as well as to efficiently regulate emotionality in order to bring about a better emotional and intellectual development”. As a result of thorough research in the field, Bar-On & Parker (2012) group the components of emotional intelligence as follows: intra-personal aspect - becoming aware of one's own emotions, assertiveness, self-respect, self-realization, independence; interpersonal aspect - empathy, harmonious interpersonal relations, social responsibility; adaptability - problem solving, reality testing, flexibility; stress management - stress endurance, impulse control; mood status: happiness, optimism.

On the other hand, schemas are cognitive structures consisting of a person’s core beliefs and assumptions developed early in life (Beck and Weishaar, 2005). These cognitive structures, which are borrowed from the information processing paradigm, support and influence the way in which we construct our current experiences and they lead to the establishment of new sets of information. In other words, the personal schemas are particularly organized entities which include the individual's knowledge about self and about the world. They act as implicit rules which organize and guide the individual's set of information, influencing the way in which the individual assesses an event. One of the major objectives of the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is to challenge ingrained dysfunctional beliefs of the patient and to develop more adaptive and more purposeful cognitive schemas.

### 2. Objectives and hypothesis

The objective of the present study is to investigate the link between emotional intelligence and the tendency to use certain dysfunctional cognitive schemas.

We have started from the hypothesis that certain components of the emotional intelligence are negatively correlated with the tendency to employ certain types or categories of dysfunctional cognitive schemas, as follows: the predisposition to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *disconnection and rejection* category may be negatively correlated with the stage of development of the social abilities; the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *autonomy and performance* category may be negatively correlated with the ability of self-motivation; the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *impaired limits* category can be negatively correlated with the development stage of one's social abilities and of self-consciousness; the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *other-directedness* category may be negatively correlated with the ability of self-motivation and with the development of self-consciousness; the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *hyper-vigilance and inhibition* category may be negatively correlated with the ability of self-motivation and self-regulation.

### 3. Subjects

The present study involved of 120 participants, aged between 18 and 60 years, 51 of them males and 69 females. 75% of the subjects have a college degree (in psychology, economy, law, or engineering) and the remaining 25% of them are high-school graduates.
4. Method

The following psychological inventories have been used: Emotional Intelligence Inventory (Wood and Tolley, 2003) and Cognitive Schema Questionnaire (Young, 2003). The emotional intelligence inventory contains situational subtests for self-assessment, specific to each aspect of the emotional intelligence: self-regulation, self-consciousness, motivation, empathy, social skills. The Cognitive Schema Questionnaire distinguishes 18 maladaptive schemas, which are grouped in five domains: disconnection and rejection (consisting of the schemas – emotional deprivation (ED), abandonment/instability (AB), distrust/abuse (MA), social isolation (SI), deficiency/shame (DS); impaired autonomy and performance (consisting of the schemas – failure (FA), dependence/incompetence (DI), vulnerability to harm and illness (VH), enmeshment/underdeveloped self (EM); impaired limits (consisting of the schemas – entitlement/grandiosity, insufficient self-control (IS); other-directedness (consisting of the schemas – subjugation (SB), self-sacrifice (SS), approval seeking/recognition seeking (AS); hyper-vigilance and inhibition (consisting of the schemas – negativity/passivity (NP), emotional inhibition (EI), unrealistic standards/hypercriticism (US), punishment (PU).

5. Results

The general hypothesis that emotional intelligence, or some of its components are negatively correlated with the tendency to use certain types or categories of dysfunctional cognitive schemas was validated, as the Pearson Chi-square coefficient was 0.020 (p < 0.05). Therefore, the stage of development of the emotional intelligence (referring to the global, total score) does influence the proclivity towards dysfunctional thinking, as it can be seen in the table below.

Table 1 The global score of EQ and the tendency for dysfunctional thinking (SCY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EQ_TOTAL</th>
<th>SCY</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EQ_TOTAL Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-.208*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCY Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>-.208*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

When analysing the inter-scale correlations, we notice that the results are a bit more nuanced, as some of the results validate the initial hypotheses, while others contradict them, as we will detail below.

The tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the disconnection and rejection category do not influence – as initially hypothesized – the stage of development of the social skills, despite the fact that when an individual believes that the people around her do not love and protect her, we would expect her to try to avoid social interactions. On the other hand, the Pearson Chi-square coefficient, which is 0.03604 (p < 0.05), validates our hypothesis that the degree of self-knowledge and the ability to be honest with oneself influence the way one assess her self-efficacy (the total score for self-consciousness is inversely correlated with the tendency to construct dysfunctional thinking schemas from the autonomy and performance category).

We have also hypothesized that the tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the autonomy and performance category may be negatively correlated with the ability to self-motivate. This hypothesis has also been confirmed (the Pearson Chi-square coefficient was 0.017 (p< 0.05)). More to the point, the individuals who believe they are not capable to do anything worthy and who need constant help from others find it difficult to channel their
energy to reach their goals. The *Pearson Chi-square* correlation coefficients of 0.040 and respectively 0.001 between these scales and the global EQ factor confirm our hypothesis. For that matter, we don't expect these individuals to set audacious goals pertaining to self-imposed high standards.

The hypothesis according to which the tendency to utilize dysfunctional cognitive schemas which belong to the *impaired limits* category is negatively correlated with the development of social skills and self-consciousness was not confirmed, as the total scores on the three factors were not significantly correlated (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficients were 0.706 and 0.278). It should be mentioned though that the tendency for excessive subjugation, for ignoring one's own emotions and needs, is correlated with social skills (the *Pearson Chi-Square* coefficient is 0.027 \((p < 0.05)\)), probably due to the fact that such individuals tend to be perceived and valued better by those with which they interact. It seems that in this case, the need to establish relations (relatedness), a fundamental need from the perspective of relational therapy (Safran, Muran and Rothman, 2006) takes the upper hand, to the disadvantage of other primal needs, such as self-efficacy and independence (agency). These needs are dialectically opposed to each other, and individuals shift back and forth in their efforts to meet them both. By employing compliant behaviors or by avoiding difficult interactions, these individuals fulfill their need to establish relations, while sacrificing the other need, of independence and self-efficacy.

Another hypothesis that could not be statistically confirmed was that the tendency to utilize dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the other-directedness category is negatively correlated with the ability to self-motivate and the development of self-consciousness (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficient is 0.147). The hypothesis was predicated on the idea that those individuals who prioritize others will have difficulties in establishing their own goals and in efficiently focusing their energy in order to achieve them. Nevertheless, even though the global scores are not significantly correlated, the individuals who depend on others, who repress their emotions and adopt a self-sacrificial attitude have major difficulties in being honest with them (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficients are 0.002, 0.002, and 0.005 \((p < 0.05)\)). Moreover, emotional repression can result in decreased efficacy in communication.

The tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *hyper-vigilance and inhibition* category does not correlate with the capacity for self-regulation and for self-motivation, when considering the global scores (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficients are 0.620, respectively 0.439). Nevertheless, we should emphasize that we were able to confirm that individuals who focus solely on the negative side of life have problems in setting goals in an adaptive manner and in focusing their energy to achieve them, a fact that depends on the ability to self-motivate (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficient is 0.03 \((p < 0.05)\)). This influence seems to be a profound one, given that it is correlated with almost all the subscales for the measure of motivation (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficients are 0.002, 0.002, and respectively 0.005 \((p < 0.05)\)). These statistical findings can be explained, but we cannot be certain if the low ability to self-motivate determines the emergence of cognitive schemas from the negativism category (as a negative dissonance, as a way to justify one's failings) or if the negative aspects of life are much more prominent, obscuring the positive ones.

An interesting research aspect was to investigate whether a low capacity for self-motivation brings to light a tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *autonomy and performance* category. The hypothesis was confirmed (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficient being 0.017 \((p < 0.05)\)).

Individuals who are convinced they cannot do anything right and that they constantly need help from others will find it difficult to efficiently channel their energy in order to reach certain goals (the *Pearson Chi-square* correlation coefficients between these two measures and the global score for self-motivation are 0.040, and 0.001, respectively \((p < 0.05)\)). For that matter, we could expect that they would not aim for audacious goals, if they are convinced they will fail and that they need the help of others in order to succeed in any enterprise.

We have also put forward the hypothesis that an individual's ability to self-regulate may influence the same tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *autonomy and performance* category and this hypothesis has been validated (the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficient is 0.011 \((p < 0.05)\)). It is possible that the cognitive schema for failure is determined by a lower degree of assertiveness (the *Pearson Chi-Square* coefficient is 0.011 < 0.002), which imparts to these individuals a tendency to fail with regard to the requests and demands they have for others.

The stage of development of social skills does not seem to influence the tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the *impaired limits* category – the *Pearson Chi-square* coefficient being 0.708, when considering the global scores. Neither was self-consciousness, as a global score, correlated with the tendency to
develop cognitive schemas regarding impaired limits, the Pearson Chi-square coefficient being 0.278. We should note, however, that self-respect and self-honesty are negatively correlated with the tendency for dysfunctional thinking regarding the limits when relating with the others (the Pearson Chi-square coefficients are 0.043, and 0.008, respectively).

An inverse correlation can be noticed between the tendency to employ dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the other-directedness – subjugation category and the ability to take initiative and to cash in on good opportunities. Those who prioritize others will have difficulties in establishing their own goals and in channelling their energy in an efficient manner to reach those goals.

Neither was the tendency to use dysfunctional cognitive schemas from the hyper-vigilance and inhibition category inversely correlated with the ability of self-motivation and self-regulation, considering the global scores. Nevertheless, between the sub-scales of these measures there are factors that influence each other. For instance, individuals who focus on the negative aspects of life (negativism) have difficulties in communicating and being assertive and self-regulate (the Pearson Chi-square coefficient was 0.012 < 0.021), as well as finding it difficult to self-motivate (Pearson Chi-square coefficient was 0.022 < 0.003).

At present, psychotherapy may be regarded as an emotional education, necessary in the present context of our continuous decrease of emotional competence. This lack of emotional competence results in isolation, feelings of unhappiness, anxiety and depression (Gârlașu-Dimitriu, 2004). In order to challenge ingrained dysfunctional cognitive schemas which appeared early in life, cognitive-behavioral techniques are very useful. The efficacy of CBT is strongly supported by a body of empirical evidence that is large and continues to grow.

6. Conclusions

The development stage of the emotional intelligence is inversely correlated with the tendency to utilize dysfunctional cognitive schemas. People's beliefs and their ingrained cognitive schemas strongly affected their emotional functioning and their emotional intelligence. In particular certain dysfunctional cognitive schemas made people feel depressed, anxious or angry and led to self-defeating behaviors. One of the most troubling experiences for patients is the experience of being overwhelmed by their negative emotions and not knowing how to cope with their intensity. As a result, some patients utilize problematic styles of coping, such as rumination, worry, dissociating, agoraphobia with panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, depression, bulimia, blocked performance, alcohol or drug abuse. Once negative emotions and dysfunctional cognitive schemas reach a certain level that become problematic, it may be very useful to utilize cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for restructuring and emotional schema therapy (EST) for a better emotional functioning.

The present article analyses and proposes several explanations regarding the inter-scale correlations. It would be interesting to find out if a larger sample would nuance the results or if it would modify them, although we do not expect to see any crucial alterations. In the future, we want to investigate emotional intelligence and the tendency to use emotional schemas (Leahy, 2011), coupled with dysfunctional cognitive schemas.

In light of the results reported here, we would recommend that programs targeted towards the development of emotional intelligence contain sections dedicated to identifying and modifying automatic negative thoughts and dysfunctional cognitive schemas.

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