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Issues in Conceptualising and Assessing Emotional Intelligence

Jennifer Bryce

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Dr Jennifer Bryce is a Research Fellow at ACER where she has worked in the area of assessment and reporting since 1992. She also has professional interests in teaching and learning practices and has recently completed projects involving case study work in areas such as lifelong learning, arts education and mental health. Jennifer is currently working with Doug McCurry on a project for the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority that involves conceptualising and assessing generic skills. In 2003 she completed a PhD entitled *Constructing Intra and Interpersonal Competencies in a Context of Lifelong Learning.*

Introduction

The author is in the process of developing a construct of the 'emotional intelligence' needed by novice workers. Driving this research is a belief that emotional intelligence is valued in today's workplace particularly because of the need for flexibility and adaptability in terms of career prospects and because today knowledge is so readily accessible and constantly changing that young people need to have strong generic skills that will help them to keep learning throughout their lives.

The intent is to develop a robust construct that will form a basis for rigorous high stakes assessment. It will be argued that some existing measures of emotional intelligence are not entirely suitable for use at the point of transition to the workplace from secondary school or university. They were not designed for this purpose, thus many of these tests are formative/diagnostic and self-report, for example, Bar-On (1997). Various existing measures of emotional intelligence and personal skills will be discussed in this light.

A robust construct of emotional intelligence needs to be made up of conceptions for which there is a shared understanding of meaning and, being an 'intelligence', the conceptions need to be defined as kinds of cognition rather than personality attributes. Thus, as Mayer et al. (1999) have argued, such conceptions need to:

- be capable of being operationalised as a set of abilities;
- have components that can be intercorrelated and be related to pre-existing intelligences (while also showing some unique variance); and
- have abilities that develop with age and experience.

Being forms of cognition, such conceptions should be able to be learned, or at least enhanced, in schools.

As a first step towards developing the construct, personal skills have been socially constructed. This process will be outlined. The paper will then go on to argue how and why such personal skills should be conceptualised as a form of cognition. The paper will conclude with a demonstration of the kinds of items that can test these areas.

A desired outcome from this research would be the incorporation of assessment of 'emotional intelligence' at the end of secondary school.

Social construction of personal skills: a first step

The author will describe fieldwork undertaken to socially construct the personal skills needed by novice workers. This is seen as a first step to conceptualising 'emotional intelligence'. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with young people who had started work straight after school and also young people who had started professional work after completing a university degree. In addition, human resources managers and 'professional representatives' involved with recruitment were interviewed.

The major question discussed was:

- What personal skills are needed when young people enter the workforce in today's environment of rapidly changing knowledge?

Supporting questions were:

- What do employers look for when recruiting school leavers and university graduates?
- What intra /interpersonal skills do young people believe they need when they start work?

The broad categories of personal skills that emerged from these discussions were Communication, Working with Others (interpersonal) and Self-Management and Self Confidence (intra personal). These categories were expected, as they have emerged from other studies where employers have been asked similar questions, for example Wellington (1994), A.C. Nielsen (2000). The purpose for this study was to probe the meaning of these conceptions and to amplify the definitions of these concepts with facet descriptors (McCurry & Bryce, 1997). The outcomes will be presented and discussed.

What is new about this social construction of personal skills?

The broad categories that emerged from discussions with novice workers and recruiters are similar to those outlined in much of the literature reporting on surveys of employers and the deliberations of education bodies, such as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and the National Goals of Schooling in Australia (Adelaide Declaration 1999). But discussions probed the meaning of these broad terms and the analysis defined the conceptions by using facet descriptors. The purpose was to look at a particular conception from several different angles – in what ways might a person excel at this personal skill? There have been many surveys of employers, asking them what skills they look for when recruiting, the outcomes of some of these will be referred to, in particular the frequently quoted response: 'hire the smile and the attitude and we will train the rest'. The research tried to find out exactly what is meant here by 'the smile' and 'the attitude'.

A novel aspect of this research was the inclusion of novice workers. These recently employed young people could readily recall the 'steep learning curves' and other significant experiences that occurred during their first few months of employment. Some facets of personal skills were mentioned by novice workers, but not by the recruiters. These were:

- a facet of self confidence: to take risks;
- a facet of working with others: to 'read' what is happening in a group;
- a facet of communication: to communicate with someone older or more senior; and
- another facet of communication: public communication/ to present a professional image.

The meaning of these, along with the other facet descriptors, will be discussed.

Comparison of socially constructed personal skills with similar conceptions

Conceptions related to personal skills have been seen as an important part of education since the time of Aristotle, but, at least since the late nineteenth century, while such skills have been mentioned as important, they have not been an integral part of the assessable curriculum. Some early attempts to deal with this area will be discussed (such as Spearman 1927, 1950) particularly the affective domain taxonomy developed in the early 1960s by Krathwohl et al., (1964). It will be argued that a significant reason for the difficulties encountered by this taxonomy was the insistence upon separating cognition and affect.

A more useful way of structuring emotional intelligence is as a subset of socio-cultural understanding (which in turn is a subset of general ability). The approach of Mayer et al. (1997, 2000) can be seen as fitting this model where the conception of 'emotional intelligence' is described as a mental ability model. The strength of this model for the purpose of high stakes measurement will be shown by contrasting the construct with published mixed abilities models. The construct is useful because it is concerned with reasoning about emotions, not defining what those emotions or feelings should be or suggesting what kinds of attitudes are desirable. In terms of encapsulating the 'emotional intelligence' needed by novice workers, the Mayer et al. construct (1997) is useful as a model for the intrapersonal skills, but, having been designed for a different purpose, it does not adequately cover the interpersonal skills needed by novice workers.

It will be suggested that the Mayer et al. construct of emotional intelligence explores the distinction between cognition and personality in the realm of feelings. Another approach is to take the definition of 'intelligence' and acknowledge that it incorporates 'more' and 'less' cognitive components (McCurry & Bryce 1997). Gardner's (1993 a and b) work on multiple intelligences is useful here although it will be noted that these intelligences are not socially constructed (as discussed above), but viewed as 'biopsychological potentials' that can be destroyed or spared in isolation by brain damage. Although they are differently constructed, the conceptions of Mayer et al. (1997) and Gardner (1993 a and b) are very useful for looking at the alignment of cognition and feelings. Similarities and differences in the two constructs will be discussed.

This part of the discussion will conclude with a comparison of the Mayer et al. emotional intelligence, Gardner's personal intelligence and the socially constructed personal skills outlined above. I shall consider what needs to be done to shape the broader socially constructed personal skills into an ability model.

Issues concerning assessment

The paper will conclude with suggestions as to how these kinds of conceptions can be assessed in a rigorous manner. This will include discussion about the importance of definition so that there is a clear, shared meaning of what is meant, for example, by 'working with others'. The development of the construct is not yet complete, but the author will provide some examples of test items that model reasoning about intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, some of these use extracts from literature as stimulus material. The process of developing such items will be discussed, including the determination of correct answers by a process of reasoning.

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