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Cognitive approach to emotion management

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Abstract: Reviewing interdisciplinary approaches to the study of emotions and mental processes. Despite a long history, research on the influence of emotions on mental processes is a debatable topic as most paradigms do not fully validate emotional intelligence and neglect interdisciplinary approaches to this complex topic.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, cognitive approach to emotions, mental processes.

“Intelligence can come to nothing when the emotions hold sway”

– Daniel Goleman

In the study of mental processes¹ a debate is raging about the status of emotions in contrast to logic and reason, while it is commonly held in (cognitive) psychology that emotions can be successfully applied as a tool of interpretation on many levels including social behaviour and communication.

When undertaking a literature review from the perspectives of mental processes and psychology of emotions what is evident that there is relatively little work on the function of emotions in the way we think (imagining, reasoning), perceive and memorize (store and retrieve information). Traditionally the major topic of mental processes and emotions falls on the research of the latter in (i) opposition to high-level mental processes, especially psychological patterns of social behaviour and from (ii) psychodynamic perspective of emotions² involving an impact of the unconscious part of the mind³.

For the past three decades the key approaches to the study of emotions shifted towards understanding them from a cognitive perspective to help monitor and self-regulate emotional states. These actions or

¹ the reference is made specifically to memory, perception and thinking

² originated by Sigmund Freud. See also Alfred Adler (1927), Carl Jung (1964)

³ see e.g., Freud, S. (1900). *The Interpretation of Dreams*

awareness of such are one of the most significant tasks in successful management of mental processes, which is the main concern of emotional intelligence (EI).

In the Western intellectual tradition EI is a discipline related to a wide social and psychological context where emotions are tied to symbols of power embedded in brain processing. Emotional intelligence theory applies a more complex set of actions concerning this process. The American Psychological Association defines EI as “the ability to perceive, appraise and express emotions and appropriately, to use emotions to facilitate thinking, to understand and analyse emotions”⁴.

The definition of EI has undergone some changes over time. Nowadays it is gaining its position in psychology identifying in more detail the relationship between emotions and cognition, intellect and affect. The notion of social intelligence was used a long time before IE. The idea of multiple intelligence appeared in the works of Howard Gardner in 1989, an American developmental psychologist who introduced the study of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. The term “emotional intelligence” appeared in the works of German psychiatrist Hanscarl Leuner⁵ and Stanley Greenspan⁶, an American child psychiatrist who promoted the idea of EI in behavioural psychology.

However, it was not until 1990 that major models of EI were proposed by the American psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer. They define EI as “...the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions”⁷. The higher EI the more controlling position a person holds against emotions. In a broader sense, EI is an individual’s ability for effective communication by the means of understanding and managing personal emotions and emotions of other people. It’s a skill of perception of other people’s emotions and ability to influence them, as well as to assess, control and display one’s own personal emotions.

The role of emotion management proved to be one of the most significant in social studies. It labelled together, for example, the studies of social and psychological adaptation of individuals in society. EI theory is always related to IQ tests (Intelligence Quotient) and The Big Five factors (Five Factor Model or FFM). Some critics question idolization of the IQ test, which is often considered as a leading determinant of success. Thus, Goleman in his work *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* argues in favour of emotional strength and its impact on success, achievements, education and social intelligence. For example, he points out the favourable influence of positive emotional states on the brain in decision making: “Good moods, while they last, enhance the ability to think flexibly and with more complexity, thus making it easier to find solutions to problems, whether intellectual or interpersonal”⁸.

The main emphasis in favour of EI is person oriented: “the emotionally intelligent person... attends to emotion in the path toward growth. EI involves self-regulation appreciative of the fact that temporarily hurt feeling or emotional restraint is often necessary in the service of a greater objective”⁹.

A similar approach to connect emotions and mental processes pertains to cognitive psychology. As a fundamental construct, cognitivism prevails in modern psychology. In the light of recent and rather rapid developments in cognitive linguistics and psychology, emotion vs. cognition paradigm began to show some significant input. Originally cognitive theory used to focus on an individual’s behaviour in terms of informational flow and that individual’s reaction to it. The past twenty years have seen

⁴ American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/research/action/glossary.aspx?tab=5>

⁵ see e.g., Leuner, B. (1966). Emotionale Intelligenz und Emanzipation [Emotional Intelligence and Emancipation]. *Praxis der Kinderpsychologie und Kinderpsychiatrie*, 15, 196-203.

⁶ see e.g., Greenspan, S.I. (1989). “Emotional intelligence” in K. Field, B.J. Cohler, & G. Wool (eds), *Learning and education: Psychoanalytic perspective*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.

⁷ Salovey, P., & Mayer, J.D. (1990). Emotional intelligence, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9, 185-211.

⁸ Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Bantam Books.

⁹ Salovey, P., & Mayer, J.D. (1990). Emotional intelligence, *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 9, 185-211.

increasingly rapid advances in the field of neurophysiology. The paradigm began to show interrelation of mental and physiological processes¹⁰. Questions have been raised about the usage of cognitive processes in understanding how the brain transforms information it receives during mental process of perception and conceptualization of reality under the influence of emotions, affects and moods¹¹.

Researchers from disciplines related to cognitive psychology converge: physiological, mental and behavioural aspects of emotions are defined by foregoing cognitive processes¹². Thus, Portuguese-American neuroscientist Antonio Damasio points out that “emotions and feelings enmeshed with non-emotional mental events are quite apparent...[that] the human importance of emotions and feelings comes in great part from those other mental events with which they become associated, is just as obvious”¹³.

Marvin Minsky in his book on Artificial Intelligence and how the human mind might work¹⁴ does not leave the appraisal element out of “IF-then-DO” rules (*If you’re facing a threat, Select some defence*) in “Rule Based Reaction-Machine”.

The thesis of emotions as a function of cognition is supported by the theory of emotion and personality. One of the most complex approaches to this thesis is linked with the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Emotions developed and popularized by Arnold, Lazarus, Schachter and Singer. According to Arnold emotions appear as a result of consecutive events described with the tools of perception and appraisal. She presents a model, which includes a perception-appraisal-emotion construct with an emphasis on the point that “everyday experience is never the strictly objective knowledge of a thing; it is always a knowing-and liking, or knowing-and-disliking”¹⁵.

The priority of the appraisal component of a situation is also the main topic for Ellsworth and Scherer, who state that “If people from different cultures appraise a situation in the same way, they will experience the same emotion. If they experience a different emotion, it is because they have appraised the situation differently”¹⁶. Thus, we are afraid because we have decided to be afraid that something is threatening us. We intuitively feel that something is (potentially) dangerous or negatively marked, which makes us start thinking how to avoid it. Then need for action emerges which can be expressed via bodily changes. Arnold suggests seeing appraisal as something ingenuous and involuntary is thus quite closely allied with intuition.

Emotions develop more often from cognitive interpretations of reality rather than from reality as it is. Emotions are one of the most significant indicators of motives and behaviour. Goleman reminds us that “the very root of the word *emotion* is *motere*, the Latin verb “to move”, plus the prefix “e-” to indicate “move away””¹⁷. Specific research on emotions, motivation and behaviour was offered by the Dutch psychologist Nico H. Frijda. He suggested the “awareness of state of action readiness” to be the central notion in emotion study to explain that emotions are actions of awareness which are motivational states. He emphasized that emotions involve “change in action readiness: (a) in readiness to go at it or away from it or to shift attention; (b) in sheer excitement which can be understood as being ready for action but not knowing what action; or (c) in being stopped in one’s tracks or in loss of interest”¹⁸.

¹⁰ see e.g., Cabeza & Nyberg (2000), Davidson et al. (2002)

¹¹ see e.g., Schwarz & Clore (2007), DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wagener & Braverman (2004)

¹² see e.g., Bower (1981), Fiedler (1988), Elster (2000)

¹³ Damasio, A. R. (2004). *Emotions and Feelings*, The Amsterdam Symposium, Studies in Emotional and Social Interaction, (eds) Antony S.R. Manstead, Nico Frijda, Agneta Fischer, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Minsky, M (2006). *The Emotion Machine. Commonsense Thinking, Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of the Human Mind*. Simon & Schuster.

¹⁵ Arnold, M. (1960). *Emotion and Personality*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁶ Ellsworth, P. & Scherer, K. (2002). “Appraisal processes in emotion”, in Davidson, R.J., Scherer, K. & Goldsmith, H. (eds). *A Handbook of Affective Sciences*. Oxford University Press, 572-595.

¹⁷ Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional Intelligence. Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Bantam.

¹⁸ Frijda, N.H. (1988). The Laws of Emotions. *American Psychologist*, 43 (5), 349-358.

On the one hand, different emotions can cause the same behaviour, on the other hand, different behaviour can occur as a result of the same emotion. Goleman points out, “All emotions are, in essence, impulses to act, the instant plans for handling life that evolution has instilled in us”¹⁹. For example, the emotion of fear triggers body changes such as (*to be paralyzed with fear*) and the reverse emotion of surprise provokes the same “unable to move” situation, as in *rooted to the spot* meaning that a person is amazed and surprised that he/she can’t move.

The strong negative emotion of anger can cause bipolar behaviour: a person can *rant and rave*, *vent one’s spleen* or a person can *allow/appease one’s anger*. The latter is often experienced in a *cold revenge* situation. There is a phrase concerning this topic – *revenge is a dish best served cold* – suggesting that revenge is more effective when the person has no emotional attachments to the object of vengeance. Apparently, rage, anger or other negative affects occurring in betrayal are hard to suppress. It takes time *to cool down*, to have *cold blood* in order to *wreak vengeance upon an enemy*.

The American psychologist Ulric Neisser claims that “every psychological phenomenon is a cognitive phenomenon” and cognition includes “all processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used”²⁰. Naturally psychology is a science devoted significantly to the study of emotions, feelings and moods. For further elaborated interdisciplinary research to disclose complex cognitive-emotion behaviour one needs to approach these multi-complex entities from a cognitive perspective.

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¹⁹ Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional Intelligence. Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Bantam.

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