Emotional Intelligence and Intrapersonal Conversations

By:

Suzette Plaisance Bryan, Ph.D.
Southeastern University
Department of Communication

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

Dodgson, C. L, 1865

The construct of Emotional Intelligence appears to be at a crossroads. While a number of investigations support the argument that there is indeed something besides cognitive intelligence (IQ) and specific job skills that accounts for the variance between average and superior performance (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004), there are many questions yet to be answered concerning Emotional Intelligence. Perhaps the most significant issue regarding EI is the lack of a specific methodology to facilitate the development of Emotional Intelligence competencies, although a variety of different approaches have been enumerated. This paper will investigate the controversy surrounding the construct, specifically how it relates to the development of Emotional Intelligence competencies, and identify a methodology to develop these competencies.

There appears to be no dearth in controversies regarding the construct of Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is defined in a myriad of ways, but ultimately appears to reflect a similar orientation among researchers. There are strong congruities among definitions, although the philosophies guiding the formulation of these definitions are strikingly different. Caruso (2005) references EI as a “conceptual inkblot” (p.1) referring to the large numbers of interpretations associated with Emotional Intelligence. He identifies three distinct approaches representing different fields of study whereby Emotional Intelligence was defined. The first, delineated by Bar-On, was influenced by his interest in the aspects of performance not linked to intelligence; the second, Goleman’s interpretation, approached EI through competency models; and the third, represented by Mayer and Salovey, was influenced by their interest in the relationship between cognition and emotion.

Landy (2005) recently referenced these interpretations, evoking Thorndike’s (1920) conception of a type of social intelligence that he considered distinct from cognitive abilities. In recounting the conceptual history on which his model is based, Bar-On (2005) supports the contention that Emotional Intelligence models do have many similarities. He suggests, for example, that all are inclusive of components which include the ability to mindfully recognize one’s emotions and how they are expressed; the ability to perceive how one’s emotions affect others; and the ability to manage these emotions in
an efficacious manner. The definition offered by Salovey and Mayer (1990) evokes these very abilities when they suggest that Emotional Intelligence involves attending and identifying to one’s emotions and discerning how these are associated with both thought and action. Goleman’s (2002) model engenders this definition in the “self awareness” and “self management” components that he further suggests are the bases for developing abilities to manage others within an organizational context. Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2004) identify EI as a type of intelligence; however, they reference the emotional component as “the meaning of emotions, emotional patterns and sequences, and the appraisals of relationships they reflect” (p. 209). Even the Army War College (Wong, et al., 2003) has recognized the importance of self-awareness, specifically defined as “the ability to assess abilities, determine strengths in the environment, and learn how to sustain strengths and correct weaknesses,” (p.3) as essential for military leaders, although this is not referenced specifically as a component of Emotional Intelligence.

Locke (2005) has interpreted these definitions as problematic owing to the copiousness of the construct, but does suggest that the general emphasis on introspection is useful since it allows for individuals to monitor emotions, feelings, and actions and attribute causation to these internal states as they relate to external events. He suggests that emotions are “automatic productions of the subconscious mind” (p. 427) whose function is to promote action. This observation is supported in part by LeDoux (1998, 2002) whose investigations of fear responses suggests emotions can be described as automatic, primarily controlled by the relatively primitive amygdala in a complex neural circuit that is much more efficient than that which accesses high level thought processes controlled by the frontal cortex. However, Locke’s (2005) suggestion that reason and emotion are incompatible is at present not supported by the majority of extant research. In fact, LeDoux (1998, 2002) argues that while human animals may be at an evolutionary crossroads where emotions are registered at more primitive and efficient portions of the brain, cortical connections with the amygdala are far greater in primates in general and humans in particular. This suggests the ability to monitor and ultimately alter emotional responses, although requiring “rewiring” at the synaptic level. Lopes, Cote, and Salovey (2005) support this contention, at least in part: their extensive review of literature suggests that Emotional Intelligence abilities can be developed though training.

This perhaps addresses the heart of the Emotional Intelligence construct, since it is the ability to consciously develop EI competencies that speaks to the needs of applied researchers and practitioners. The case for EI and higher levels of success has been supported in conclusions emanating from qualitative and quantitative research conducted in a variety of settings by researchers from throughout the world. For example, Goleman (1998) and Goleman, Boyatis, and McKee (2002) review a plethora of examples whereby individuals displaying higher levels of Emotional Intelligence competencies achieve higher levels of success in work contexts. In their meta-analysis of 69 studies of Emotional Intelligence Van Rooy and Viswesvaran (2004) concluded “EI should indeed be considered a valuable predictor of performance” (p.87). Emmerling and Goleman (2003) reference additional research suggesting that EI (or something like it) can explain the variance in performance not attributed to either cognitive intelligence (IQ) or specific job skills. Most recently Mount (2005) has investigated Emotional Competencies such as
achievement motivation and impact and influence and found these to be positively and significantly associated with superior performance in international business dealings. His competency model revealed that of the variance between superior and average performances, 19% could be attributed to cognitive intelligence (IQ), 38% to specific skills and expertise, and 44% to Emotional Intelligence (EQ). While Mount (2005) focused on individual performance, Elfenbein (2005) discovered that higher average levels of Emotional Intelligence in team members predicted higher levels of performance by the team.

Arguments regarding the robustness of the construct and the measurement instruments associated with Emotional Intelligence notwithstanding, there appears to be at least a modicum of agreement that EI or something like it is associated with variance between superior performance and adequate performance that cannot be attributed to cognitive intelligence and/or specific job skills. It is, however, the ability (or inability) to develop one’s Emotional Intelligence competencies that moves the argument forward into the realm of practical application. That is, a case certainly has been made for the association between well-developed Emotional Intelligence competencies and greater success in a variety of work and non-work settings; however, for further exploration of the construct, a methodology must be identified that assists individuals to develop one or more of these competencies. While a number of methods have been utilized, most are based at least to some degree on enhancing the mindfulness of participants. For example, Locke (2005) refers to introspection as a method for developing one’s Emotional Intelligence while Ciarrochi and Godsall (2005) offer mindfulness-based emotional intelligence training.

Introspection and mindfulness have been utilized clinically with varying degrees of success. For example mindful cognitions termed visualization (Wientjes, 2002), mindful meditation (Ott, 2004) or guided imagery (Wallace, 1999) have been used to elicit a sense of well-being by heightening awareness. These techniques have been associated with positive outcomes such as mood improvement (Bakke, Purtzer, & Newton, 2002) and increased relaxation (Walker et al., 1999).

Perhaps Langer (1988) has proffered the best developed theory of causation in relationship to the mindlessness debate and by extension, the manner in which one can become more mindful. She suggests a number of reasons why mindlessness tends to be the default for the majority of our responses: 1) because of extreme certainty, new or contradictory information is ignored; 2) a tendency to think in either/or terms; 3) ways of responding that guide behaviors without conscious notice; and finally, 4) premature cognitive commitment defined as decision-making based on initial impressions rather than responding to a more fully realized situation. She suggests that mindlessness is associated with a variety of unintended consequences such as reduction in creativity and negative impacts upon the immune system, and she recommends “though we cannot and would not want to be mindful of everything simultaneously, we can always be mindful of something” (p. 199).

Certainly, identifying causes and willfully increasing attending behaviors can be associated with gaining more conscious control over one’s emotions and their effects on
others. However, research by both LeDoux (1998, 2002) and Gottman (1994) suggest that this process must be more rigorous, that new responses must be learned and practiced repeatedly, causing new patterns of neurons to fire and generating new synaptic pathways. Behaviors that occur with great frequency, albeit mindless, become well established through the strengthening of neural pathways forming what Edelman (1997) refers to as the “secondary repertoire”; increasing the likelihood that the behaviors will be repeated. Both LeDoux (1998, 2002) and Gottman (1994) reveal the difficulty associated with replacing one set of behaviors with another, implying that simply increasing mindfulness may be necessary but not sufficient to alter behaviors. Early research by Barthol and Ku (1959) suggested the difficulties inherent in changing behaviors when they discovered that under stress an individual tends to respond with earlier behavior patterns. This has been substantiated in case studies referenced by Boyatzis and McKee (2005) who suggest that under changing conditions, leaders often resort to “old habits” (p.38) rather than respond creatively to new challenges To successfully integrate responses into one’s repertoire of behaviors requires conscious effort that goes beyond mindfulness training. Programs that report success in developing Emotional Intelligence (Boyatzis and Van Oosten, 2002) reveal that mindfully identifying behaviors to be changed combined with opportunities to practice new skills produce more lasting behavioral changes.

Imagined Interaction Theory, a theory of intrapersonal communication, offers a methodology that can bridge the gap between identification of competencies associated with success and incorporation of these competencies into one’s repertoire of behaviors. Imagined Interactions are defined by Honeycutt and Zagacki (1990) as “cognitive representations of conversation experienced as internal dialogues with significant others.” (p.893). Gotcher and Edwards (1990) reference Imagined Interactions as “instantiations or exemplars of cognitive scripts” (p. 257). Simply stated, Imagined Interactions are thoughts about interactions. These imagined dialogues can be of any duration, reflecting the conversations they reference, allowing an individual to conceptualize different resolutions to a particular encounter as well as take different perspectives in the encounter. Imagined Interaction Theory is constituted from a long and varied tradition of the study of social interaction and its influence (Mead, 1934).

Imagined Interactions (II) have been found to have a number of significant characteristics and perform functions associated with the actual interactions they represent. These functions and characteristics appear particularly germane to developing more conscious control of interactions. A confirmatory factor analysis (Honeycutt et al, 1992-93) suggested that Imagined Interactions display the characteristics of discrepancy, or the deviation of the II from the actual interaction; activity or frequency, associated with how often an individual experiences IIs; retroactivity, or whether the II occurs after the target interaction; proactivity, or whether the II occurs prior to the anticipated interaction; valance, which measures whether the II is interpreted as pleasant or unpleasant; variety, which references the number of different individuals with whom the target has IIs; specificity, which refers to whether the II is detailed or more vaguely recalled; and self-dominance, a characteristic that references who communicates more frequently within the interaction, the individual himself or his partner. Imagined Interactions’ characteristics
have been specifically associated with increased communication competency in a variety of areas. As Honeycutt et al. (1992-93) discovered, increased frequency of having Imagined Interactions is associated with the ability to effectively paraphrase a communication partner’s comments. “Specificity,” the characteristic that references the detail inherent in the communication encounter, and “variety”, the characteristic of Imagined Interactions referencing the number of relational partners as well as topics addressed, both appear to be related to conversational sensitivity in that individuals who imagine more specific conversations tend to be more aware of anticipating other’s responses and responding in kind. Conversely, the characteristic of self-dominance has been utilized in reverse (imagining one’s partner to take the lead in a conversation) to allow an individual to recognize the tendency for egocentrism.

It is these characteristics coupled with the following functions that make Imagined Interactions an effective methodology for developing EI as part of a mindfulness-based intervention program. First, Imagined Interactions may substitute for actual interactions with relational partners who are separated by distance thus allowing the partners to maintain the relationship. In addition, Imagined Interactions can offer an individual an opportunity to practice for an anticipated interaction, serving a rehearsal function. They can serve a compensatory function when actual interactions are precluded and they can assist an individual to clarify his thoughts, feelings, and actions as he reflexively reviews his behaviors; they may also serve a cathartic function, providing an emotional release.

By definition Imagined Interactions cannot be associated with individuals with whom the subject has no viable opportunity of engaging in an actual interaction. This distinguishes them from fantasies. Imagined Interactions, although representing thought processes, must have an association with a past or future possible or actual event. Imagined Interactions have been found to be strongly associated with many different aspects of interpersonal communication, a process that is closely aligned with Emotional Intelligence. For example Honeycutt, Edwards, and Zagacki (1989) discovered that Imagined Interactions high in discrepancy, i.e. those determined to be dramatically different from the actual interactions they referenced, predicted higher levels of loneliness. Honeycutt (1999) discovered that husbands’ and wives’ satisfaction with the communication in their marriages was correlated with pleasant IIs.

It is specifically the rehearsal and self-understanding functions of Imagined Interactions that can be most effective in assisting individuals to develop Emotional Intelligence competencies. These functions coupled with the characteristics of specificity, proactivity, retroactivity, and valance afford the opportunity to explore past encounters and prepare for future ones. Imagined Interactions allow an individual to reflect on past interactions to enhance self understanding, specifically invoking the self awareness component of Emotional Intelligence models. In a similar vein, preparing for future encounters provides an avenue to explore potential responses in relationship to particular EI competencies. Incorporating the characteristics of specificity and self-dominance, Imagined Interactions would allow any individual involved in developing his Emotional Intelligence an opportunity to create a number of different scenarios, extending a potential behavior repertoire to include those which demonstrate higher levels of EI
competencies. These exercises thus expand on the concept of training in mindfulness to include the depiction of actual behaviors and possible responses in order to select those determined to be most efficacious in any particular context. The “self talk” in American Express’ training program alludes to a training strategy similar to Imagined Interactions, but does not reference an interactive component (Emotional Competence Training – AMEX, n.d.). Lopes, Cote, and Salovey (2006) suggest a similar type of intervention strategy:

Helping people to broaden their repertoire of coping strategies and try out new ways of handling emotionally charged situations may be a good way to enhance emotional management skills. This might involve discussing coping strategies and ways to handle particular situations to raise awareness about alternative strategies. (p. 69)

Training that incorporates Imagined Interactions into any EI intervention offers a specific methodology that can be most efficacious in allowing participants to expand their repertoire of behaviors, selecting those that demonstrate the higher levels of EI competencies, and rehearsing them in anticipated encounters as well as offering an avenue for exploration of behaviors associated with past encounters. That is, programs could incorporate both the causes of mindlessness (Langer, 1989) coupled with exercises that include participants envisioning a variety of Imagined Interactions, specifically recounting both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Identifying those behaviors displaying the higher levels of EI competencies, would allow participants to prepare for subsequent similar encounters. As Gottman (1994) suggests, behaviors must be practiced repeatedly to become incorporated into one’s repertoire. Imagined Interactions provide a resource whereby an individual can rehearse a variety of behaviors, anticipate responses to each behavior set, and select the most efficacious to practice in role play and subsequently utilize in actual encounters. Conversely, individuals can be taught to use Imagined Interactions retroactively to assess performance, identifying those behaviors associated with both successful encounters and those associated with less efficacious results.

Research has illustrated that most individuals have Imagined Interactions; however, coupled with mindfulness training and using an Emotional Intelligence model, training participants could be taught to utilize these mental movies as tools to develop competencies identified for development. Although a relatively new construct, Imagined Interactions are reported to help individuals develop behavioral scripts for encounters in unfamiliar locales (Grendrin, 1991), homeless women to plan for their futures (Grendrin, 2000), and debaters in college forensic events achieve higher levels of success (Gotcher and Honeycutt, 1989). Thus the use of Imagined Interactions is as yet an untapped resource that appears to have great potential for addressing an integral portion of the Emotional Intelligence paradigm.
References


