

Social Intelligence

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Synonyms

Social intelligence; Social relationships; Emotional intelligence; Perspective taking

Social relationships are an invaluable component of one's life. The quality and structure of social relationships are consistently associated with better outcomes across the lifespan, ranging from academic achievement and substance use in adolescence to mental and physical health and longevity in adulthood through old age (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Umberson and Montez 2010). More specifically, empirical evidence from research studies has repeatedly shown that reporting stronger social relationships and being more integrated or active in one's social network is associated with feeling happier, better coping with daily and major life stressors, protecting individuals from the incidence of disease, and living a longer life (Cacioppo et al. 2015; House et al. 1988; Infurna and Luthar in press). Given the importance of social relationships, understanding how to maintain and strengthen them is essential. Our focus is on describing how social intelligence is one avenue for navigating the nature and

development of social relationships across the lifespan. This is especially critical in the world today, as the makeup of social relationships is constantly evolving, given technological advances and structural changes within schools, businesses, and families. In particular, the focus of this entry is as follows: (1) defining social intelligence; (2) how social intelligence is measured; (3) the importance of studying social intelligence; and (4) whether or not social intelligence can be learned.

Social Intelligence

Social intelligence is a major building block of developing and maintaining social relationships. Thorndike (1920) originally explained social intelligence to be a facet of generalized intelligence and defined it as the ability to understand humans and act wisely in human interactions. Snow (2010) further expanded upon Thorndike's definition by describing that social intelligence is the accumulation of knowledge, cognitive abilities, and affective sensitivities that allows individuals to navigate their social world. Honeywill (2015) and Albrecht (2005) described social intelligence as the capacity to get along with others and navigate complex social relationships and environments. Although the definition and understanding of social intelligence has evolved over the years (Thorndike 1920; Guilford 1967; Kosmitzki and John 1993), research on the topic

has consistently provided a generalized explanation of the concept of social intelligence and its potential benefits to society. We next discuss the myriad of research contexts through which social intelligence has been used to further our knowledge and understanding of this idea.

How is Social Intelligence Measured?

A multitude of social intelligence inventories have been developed with an aim towards understanding and measuring individual differences within social intelligence (Walker and Foley 1973). Several inventories focused on the assessment of an individual's capacity to understand others: George Washington Social Intelligence Test (Hunt 1928; Moss et al. 1955), the Dymond Rating Test (Dymond 1949, 1950), and the Six Factor Test of Social Intelligence (Composed of six tests that examine four different forms of cognition of behaviors: (1) cognition of behavior implication is the ability to predict what will occur after a given social situation; (2) cognition of behavioral classes is when an individual is capable of seeing similarities in behavioral information in varying expressional modes; (3) cognition of behavioral systems is the capability of analyzing the interaction of individuals and organizing a series of situations or systems; and (4) cognition of behavioral transformation refers to the ability of being flexible with one's interpretation rather than ridged; O'Sullivan et al. 1965; O'Sullivan and Guilford 1966). More recently, Silvera and colleagues (2001) developed a questionnaire, the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale, which examines individuals' social skills, as well as their ability to understand others and process various social information. These inventories assessed social intelligence as an individual differences factor through a structured questionnaire, resulting in subjective responses that provided researchers with one's level of social intelligence. We next discuss the importance of studying social intelligence, with a focus on the significant association between social intelligence and various pertinent outcomes.

Why Is It Important to Study Social Intelligence?

Thorndike's conceptualization of social intelligence has generated research in various disciplines, including leadership development, business and economics, and developmental, cognitive, and behavioral psychology. Social intelligence research has not only provided extensive knowledge surrounding the concept but has also helped develop an understanding of the context in which it is applied. Empirical evidence suggests that reporting lower levels of social intelligence is associated with the development of various psychopathology, such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Faust et al. 1985; La Greca and Lopez 1998; Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010). Highlighting the general importance of social intelligence beyond psychology, Zaccaro et al. (1991) framed social intelligence as a quintessential facet of an organizational leader. For example, empirical evidence suggests that organizational leaders who have two prominent characteristics of social intelligence, social perceptiveness and behavioral flexibility, are more likely to report better success at work, in addition to a better work atmosphere and productivity (Zaccaro et al. 1991). In problematic organizational situations, leaders high in social intelligence are more flexible with their responses and more aware of the various demands and requirements of those situations (Zaccaro et al. 1991). Additionally, Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) added to the existing literature about social intelligence's role when dealing with leadership by explaining the importance of social intelligence when defining the key characteristics of leaders within business environments. The recurrence and dissemination of social intelligence as a construct within various researching communities emphasizes the importance to pursue future research on social intelligence. Given the implications social intelligence has for successfully developing and maintaining social relationships, we next discuss whether social intelligence can be changed. In other words, we examine whether interventions focusing on social intelligence can

lead to improvements in social relationships and pertinent outcomes over time.

Can Social Intelligence Change or Be Learned?

Research focusing on social intelligence has provided society with a better grasp on the concept of social intelligence and how it influences social aspects of life through improving our understanding of the contexts and environments in which social intelligence exists (Zaccaro et al. 1991; Goleman and Boyatzis 2008; Zautra et al. 2015), why it is important in those situations, and how it can positively influence people. More recently, social intelligence research has led to the development of programs aimed at investigating whether social intelligence can be taught and improved upon. As previously mentioned, social intelligence is an integral part of the development and maintenance of social relationships, which are directly linked to an individual's mental and physical health. In a study by Berkman and Syme (1979), it was found that individuals with fewer social relationships had higher rates of mortality compared to their peers with an average amount of social relationships. Additionally, a myriad of deleterious health problems have been associated with a fewer number and a reduced quality of social relationships, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, recurrent myocardial infarction, atherosclerosis, and slower wound healing (Ertel, Glymour, and Berkman 2009; Everson-Rose and Lewis 2005; Robles and Kiecolt-Glaser 2003; Uchino 2006). Physical health problems are not the only negative consequences linked with poor social relationships. Those with low quality and low numbers of social connections have a higher likelihood of developing depression (Faust et al. 1985), social anxiety (La Greca and Lopez 1998), loneliness (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010), and suicidal ideations (Bonanno and Hymel 2010). Increasing the quality and number of relationships can potentially mitigate the likelihood of occurrence of these negative health-related problems. More importantly, having the means to increase social

intelligence would not only better one's relationships but would also improve their overall health and quality of life.

Zautra and colleagues (2012, 2015) developed a social intelligence training program that is delivered online and aimed at improving social relationships. Zautra and colleagues (2015) utilized both cognitive models and behavioral principals in their approach to defining and applying social intelligence. The online training program is comprised of 42 short videos that span 5–10 min each and are organized around seven modules and four core principles (for more information, see socialintelligenceinstitute.org). The videos were designed to educate individuals on the ability to effectively manage one's social relationships and navigate their social world. The online modules of the social intelligence training program focus on four core principles: (1) humanization of relationships, which describes the importance of treating one another as people with cares and concerns worthy of our attention (Zautra et al. 2015); (2) neuroplasticity, which refers to the brain's ability to form new connections; (3) uniqueness or unique nature of humans describes how we are shaped by our past experiences and expectations of the future; and (4) social intelligence is a choice and seeking connections with others is natural and in order to do so, we must first develop an understanding of one another (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Jolliffe and Farrington 2011).

Following the development of their social intelligence program, Zautra and colleagues (2015) conducted a large-scale study on students at a Spanish university in Madrid. The students were provided with various materials (explained above) in an attempt to improve their social intelligence and other facets, including social cognitions and social relationship quality. Before and after the online materials, consented students were split into either a control or experimental group and were provided with a series of questionnaires aimed at assessing their emotional and social intelligence. They found that those who were in the social intelligence training program showed increases in sustainable social connectivity but also showed indications of an increased willingness to accept the perspective of others. Zautra

and colleagues (2015) results indicated that compared to the control group, the experimental group showed significant increases in social intelligence between the pre- and post-assessments. When examining the measures of sensitivity to others, participants in the social intelligence program additionally showed increases in social sensitivity, perspective taking, social information processing, and sensitivity to others (composite score).

Based on these results, the authors concluded that the social intelligence program showed considerable promise as a way to increase the development and sustainability of positive relationships within young adults. Empirically supported through the application of social neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and social psychology, the students who participated in the program showed an increased attention to the emotions of others, displayed a willingness to take the perspective of others into account, and showed greater self-efficacy in social situations compared to the control group. Overall, Zautra et al.'s (2015) study was one of the most comprehensive evaluations of the social intelligence program. Positive results not only delineate the effectiveness of their social intelligence program but also highlight the potential for social intelligence to be altered and improved upon. In addition, their results emphasize the importance of continued research and implementation of SI programs and point to possible directions for future focus.

Future Directions

The level of intrigue associated with social intelligence spans far and wide, having meaningful implications across a variety of disciplines. As demonstrated by Zautra and colleagues (2012, 2015), the social intelligence training program has the potential to improve the way individuals navigate their social world. While their study developed a solid foundation for promoting social intelligence, an important next step is to evaluate whether their results can be generalized across different groups of people. Their study found

positive results in college-aged students, but can similar findings be replicated for individuals in adulthood and old age? Currently, we are attempting to answer these questions by using the social intelligence intervention program on a sample of participants in mid-life and old age (aged 45–70 years of age) (Zautra et al. 2016). Examining participants in adulthood and old age has the potential to allow for examining whether the potential for change is not limited to adolescence and young adulthood, but to adulthood and old age, where it is possible that there is potential to change. Furthermore, there is potential to examine whether intervention programs can be designed that could cater to specific samples. By tailoring intervention programs to fit particular groups of people, participants can more efficiently relate to the material being presented. Intervention programs that are designed for particular samples could result in increased motivation and ultimately, higher levels of program retention. Overall, the universal significance of social intelligences creates room to pursue future research in a variety of ways.

Conclusion

In a society where social relationships are a crucial component of everyday life, having enduring and enjoyable social ties not only promotes happiness but also better health. The importance of social intelligence, as explained by past research (Zautra et al. 2015, 2016; Walker and Foley 1973), is substantial and growing, providing individuals with the potential to better themselves and their relationships with others. As broad as social intelligence may be, the concept will continue to be researched across various fields for years to come.

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