



# EMOTIONS AS A MANAGEMENT FASHION

## A Critical Analysis of Daniel Goleman's Construction of Emotional Intelligence and Competence

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### THE PROLIFERATION OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI)

Measured by print media indicators EI has attracted widespread interest – a hint for its fashionable character. The typical turning point of a fashion is not yet reached (cf. fig. 1). Goleman's bestseller of 1995\* can be seen as a main accelerator for this fashionable theme. Also his more explicit management book of 1998 gains faster in interest than the seminal article of Salovey & Mayer (1990) (cf. fig. 2).

Focusing on management literature, academic publications actually outnumber practice oriented articles. Also in the management sphere EI has become an object of public and scientific discourse (cf. fig. 3).

Fig. 1: Number of articles with the keyword EI in theme-specific databases

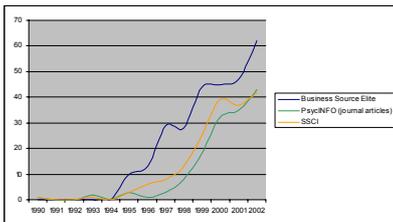


Fig. 2: Number of citations of Salovey/Mayer (1990) & Goleman (1995; 1998) in the SSCI

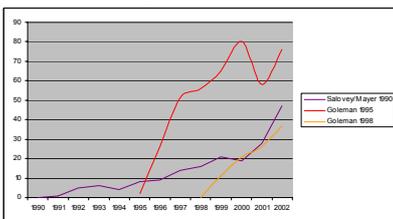
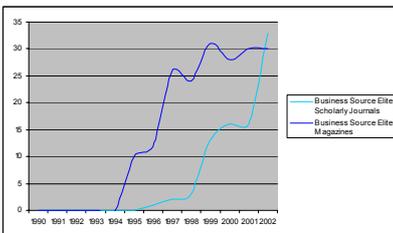


Fig. 3: Number of articles with the keyword EI in management literature by orientation on academic and wider business audience



Already the increasing interest in this theme hints at EI being a management fashion. The spectrum of publications and the number of persons and institutions propagating EI imply further characteristics of a management fashion which can be illustrated by the figure of an arena.

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

Emotions at work are gaining interest in management research and practice. I concentrate on a critical outcome of this development: the creation of commodifiable concepts which put a clear focus on manageability, reducing emotions to factors of economic value and requirements of emotional labor to individual competencies.

I demonstrate that Goleman's EI-version is a typical example of such a tailoring of a management fashion. This EI-version is further analyzed

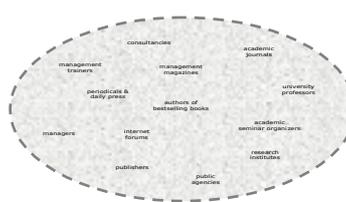
- from a methodological perspective, unveiling the author's science claim as a rhetorical strategy that enhances the commodity character of EI.
- from a political perspective, highlighting problematic effects of this simplified view on emotions at work.

### EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN ARENA

A management fashion can be conceptualized as an arena (Kieser 1997) in which different groups of participants play for reputation, profit, power, and so forth. The games are marked by co-operation and competition.

Numerous types of possible participants who can enlarge the scope of a fashion animate the EI-arena, advocates as well as critics (cf. fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Participants in the EI-arena



Focusing the view on the kind of games played and the rules applied there can be marked different fields in this arena, e.g. a "science" and a "practice" field. There are numerous hints that Goleman's EI-version plays a dominant role in both, in management research and practice. With his different teams this dominant player himself participates in the practical and the academic sphere of the EI-arena.

One of the best accelerators of a management fashion is a bestselling business book with a specific kind of rhetoric, e.g. the concentration on a key factor with healing force for menacing dangers, a mix of simplicity and ambiguity, and so forth. The business book of Goleman (1998) proves to have all these bestseller – and therewith fashion fueling – qualities. Because of its insistent claim to science and the great audience it gets, its argumentation is analyzed more in depth (also in comparison to more recent publications).

### PERSPECTIVES OF CRITIQUE

Scientific knowledge finds different modes of utilization in organizations (cf. Astley/Zammuto 1992; Nienhüser 1998):

- instrumental mode (direct influence on/application in managerial practice)
  - ↳ **methodological perspective:** analysis of the claim to science based on basic scientific criteria
- political mode (shaping perceptions; legitimating actions and decisions)
  - ↳ **political perspective:** analysis of basic assumptions and implications based on the "conceptual and symbolic language" utilized

### GOLEMAN'S EI-VERSION ...

The author defines EI as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (1998: 316). For the foundation of his so called "EI-theory" (2001b) he draws on

1. recent findings of neuroscience
  - main references: Damasio (1994); LeDoux (1998)
  - argumentation: EI & intellect differ on a neuronal basis (Emotional & intellectual learning the same); this calls for a new training model
2. intelligence concepts
  - main reference: Salovey/Mayer (1990)
  - argumentation: EI-model with 5 dimensions (later 4)
3. competency research
  - main reference: based on McClelland (1973)
  - argumentation: Emotional Competence Framework (1998) – 25 competencies in 5 clusters "Refinement of the model" (2001b) – 20 competencies in 4 clusters
4. own empirical findings
  - basis: analyses of competency studies
  - interpretation: EI : intellect = 2 : 1

### ... UNDER CRITICAL EXAMINATION

#### ↳ The methodological perspective

The methodological scrutiny shows that the concept builds on

1. an unstable neuroscientific basis.
  - Damasio (1994) underlines the "concerted activity" of all neural systems; this contradicts the dichotomy between EI & intellect.
  - LeDoux (1996) explains the ways the brain handles traumatic experiences and the difficulties to overcome them. He neither depicts neural processes while learning an EI competency like e.g. leadership, nor he gives hope to handle emotional (re)learning in management training.
2. an indecisive recourse to intelligence concepts.
  - Goleman only borrows the label from Salovey & Mayer (1990). With its strange mixture of personality attributes and cultural norms like optimism or trustworthiness, the model deviates from what is considered (an) intelligence (cf. Mayer et al. 2000), and also from what can be called a handling of emotions. Furthermore, empirical examination questions, if EI can be regarded a psychometrically sound construct at all (Matthews et al. 2003).
3. a questionable transfer to work.
  - The competence framework looks like a typical classification of work requirements, but it fulfills none of the usual standards: Neither a clustering method was applied, nor a logical grouping can be observed. Rather it looks like an arbitrary collection of (socially desirable) traits, behaviors, and concepts like change and diversity management. This impression not vanishes after the (empirically based) refinement of the EI model.
4. a putative empirical prove of "the ratio for excellence".
  - The author's claims cannot pass for empirical evidence. Neither data nor methods (only vaguely described) are appropriate to solve the research question. Moreover, the author interprets his findings improperly. In recent publications, the author still refers back to these findings, but at the same time he restricts his strong assertions, conceding that systematic research still has to be done (2001a).

Such inconsistencies are typical for a management bestseller style. Nevertheless, they challenge not only the scientific foundation of this EI-concept, but also its practical benefit.

#### ↳ The political perspective

Much more insidious than simply a lack of scientific care underlies the way in which this EI-version frames the role of emotions at work. All four construction steps ...

1. the location in the brain
  2. the association to 'intelligence' and IQ scores
  3. the framing in a periodic system of certain enumerable subcomponents
  4. the attempt to quantify its economic worth
- ... mediate the impression of EI being a measurable, tangible construct – and therewith a potential object of 'intelligent', rational control (cf. Fineman 2000). Framing EI as a 'thing' puts a focus on

- individual competence and effort.
  - Ignored are: The interaction with others in specific situations, working conditions, the determination by and of (power) relationships, as well as organizational and wider cultural norms while enacting the denoted desirable behaviors.
- socially desirable and 'effective' behavior.
  - Ignored are: 'Bad' and mixed emotions (incl. the costs and difficulties of suppressing them); emotions that counteract organizational effectiveness; cultural differences in emotion (feeling & display) rules.
- a harmonizing image of management and organization.
  - Ignored are: Questions of power, e.g. the burden and the effects of categorizing people in EI/non-EI; the incalculable effects of training such a diffuse and indistent 'thing'.

The political oriented analysis highlights that this view on emotions oversimplifies highly complex phenomena, and it disregards possible costs and side-effects for managers and those who are managed.

\* All references can be found in the paper handout.

