EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE BUSINESS LITERATURE: CURRENT FINDINGS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

John Angelidis, St. John's University, New York, NY angelidi@stjohns.edu
Faramarz Parsa, University of West Georgia, Carrolton, GA fparsa@westga.edu
Igor Tomic, St. John's University, New York, NY tomici@stjohns.edu
Nabil Ibrahim, Augusta State University, Augusta, GA nibrahim@aug.edu

ABSTRACT

In recent years Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been introduced in mass-market books and articles and discussed in television programs. In addition, there has been a substantial amount of research on EI across a wide array of disciplines. Yet, this term has received little attention in the business literature.

A review of studies examining EI is presented in this paper, with special attention to its treatment in the business literature. Furthermore, the relationship between emotional intelligence and ethical judgment among practicing managers with respect to questions of ethical nature that can arise in their professional activity is discussed.

Research questions that await scholars interested in EI and business ethics and requiring empirical investigation are proposed. This paper shows that there is a wealth of opportunities for researchers to expand and refine our understanding. A thorough scholarly investigation of these topics would expand our knowledge of this important concept and suggest ways to improve business ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The October 2, 1995 cover of *Time* proclaimed that "emotional intelligence may be the best predictor of success in life, redefining what it means to be smart". When an article on EI was published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1998, it gained a greater percentage of readers than any previously published article in that journal in the previous four decades (Cherniss 2000). An annual "International Conference on Emotional intelligence", featuring a wide variety of speakers and researchers, has been held since 2007 to share the results of various studies, guide future research on the subject, and discuss ways to applying EI in the workplace.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The construct EI was first identified by E. L. Thorndike in 1920 when discussing the possibility of a form of intelligence that he termed "social intelligence" as distinct from abstract or academic intelligence (Matthews et al. 2002). Subsequent research has revealed different forms of intelligence and grouped them mainly into three clusters: abstract intelligence - the ability to understand and manipulate with verbal and mathematic symbols, concrete intelligence - the ability to understand and manipulate with objects, and social intelligence - the ability to understand and relate to people (Ruisel 1992).

Salovey and Mayer (1990) were among the earliest to suggest the term *emotional intelligence* to refer to the ability of a person to deal with his or her emotions. They defined it as "a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Mayer and Salovey 1993, p. 433). Interestingly, they traced the intellectual origins of the construct to the ancient Greek Stoics who maintained that reason was superior to emotion (Mayer et al. 2004). However, the appeal and usefulness of EI is probably due to

Goleman's (1995, 1998) work in which he used the construct to describe certain abilities found in people who excel in the workplace. He asserted that "the most effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence... emotional intelligence is the *sine qua non* of leadership" (1998, p. 94).

EI has been defined as "the set of abilities that enable a person to generate, recognize, express, understand, and evaluate their own, and others, emotions in order to guide thinking and action that successfully cope with emotional demands and pressures" (Van Rooy and Viswesvaran 2004, p. 72). It is "related to the ability to accurately perceive, understand and manage both one's own and others' emotions" (Holian 2006, p. 1129). Thus EI is an individual difference variable involving one's ability to identify, perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and in others (Ashkanasy and Daus 2005). Goleman (1998) contends that a lack of EI is an obstacle to self-confidence; maturity is a process of increasing one's awareness about one's emotions and relationships.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ETHICS

In his pathbreaking work, Forsyth (1980) identified two distinct dimensions that play an important role in ethical evaluation and behavior – idealism and relativism. These two aspects explain a significant amount of the variance in what different individuals perceive as right and wrong. He defined the former as the degree to which "a person focuses on the inherent rightness or wrongness of an action and assumes ... that desirable consequences can, with the .right. action, always be obtained..." (p. 176). Relativism is defined as "the extent to which an individual rejects universal moral rules in making ethical judgments" (p. 175). In a later study, Forsyth (1992) wrote that idealists "feel that harming others is always avoidable, and they would rather not choose between the lesser of two evils which will lead to negative consequences for other people" (p. 462). On the other hand, relativists "generally feel that moral actions depend upon the nature of the situation and the individuals involved, and when judging others they weigh the circumstances more than the ethical principle that was violated" (p. 462). Idealism and relativism are two distinct concepts; an individual may be high or low on either dimension.

An Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) was developed by Forsyth (1980) to measure am individual's ethical judgment. The EPQ consists of two scales, each containing six items; one scale is designed to measure idealism and the other to measure relativism. Different versions of these two scales have been widely used in ethics research (e.g. Singhapakdi et al. 1999. Marta et al. 2008, Zhao 2008). Forsyth states that "the two scales that make up the EPQ were found to have adequate internal consistency, were reliable over time, were not correlated with social desirability " (1980, p. 175). Others have subjected these scales to considerable empirical verification and were found to be both valid and reliable (see, e.g. Rawwas 1996, Lee and Sirgy 1999, Vitell et al. 2001). Examples of typical idealism items are: "The dignity and welfare of people should be the most important concern in any society" and "One should never psychologically or physically harm another person." Each respondent's score was computed by calculating the mean of the scores to ten items measuring idealism.

These two constructs have been extensively used in the business ethics literature. For example, they have been found to be quite useful in the study of consumer ethics in China (Zhao 2008), ethical decisions of small business managers (Marta et al. 2008), the moral ideology of African Americans (Swaidan et al. 2008), ethical sensitivity (Sparks and Hunt 1998), the ethical ideology and judgment of Portuguese accountants (Marques and Azevedo-Pereira 2008), and the ethical beliefs of Austrian consumers (Rawwas 1996).

Rather than classify individuals as either relativistic or idealistic, Forsyth (1992) recommends dichotomizing each dimension into "high" and "low" levels, and constructing a four-fold classification based upon one's preferred ethical ideology as shown in Table 1. In the first cell are "situationists" - individuals who are highly relativistic and highly idealistic. They believe that people should make every effort to produce positive consequences for all those who are involved, but that moral rules cannot be applied across all situations. They choose to closely scrutinize the situation before reaching an appropriate

moral evaluation. They might rely on deception if it yielded the best possible results.

The second cell contains "subjectivists" – those who are highly relativistic and possess a low level of idealism. They do not believe in universal moral principles or absolutes. They are not interested in achieving the best consequences for all involved, and evaluate each decision based on whether they stand to gain or lose. They describe their moral decisions as subjective judgments that cannot be reached based on more objective information, such as universal moral absolutes or the extent to which the action harms others. Next are "absolutists" – those who are low in relativism and, like situationists, are highly idealistic. They believe that actions should produce the best consequences for all involved. However, they are not relativistic. They feel that some ethical absolutes are so important that they must be strictly adhered to when making moral judgments. Finally, in the fourth cell are "exceptionists" – individuals who are low in both relativism and idealism. They adhere to universal moral rules to guide their behavior, but believe that deception and actions that yield some negative consequences cannot always be avoided. They are willing to make exceptions to their moral principles by harming some individuals in order to benefit others.

TABLE 1: CLASSIFICATION OF ETHICAL IDEOLOGIES a

Idealism

When this classification was used in a number of empirical studies, the results revealed a fairly consistent pattern. A study of business students by Barnett et al. (1994) reported significant differences in ethical judgment due to the students' ethical ideology in 14 of 26 scenarios. Absolutists were the least lenient in 10 of the 14 scenarios while subjectivists were the most lenient in 11. In another study involving marketing professionals, Barnett et al. (1998) found that absolutists were the strictest when judging actions involving ethical vignettes and subjectivists were the most indulgent. In addition, they reported significant differences between absolutists and subjectivists and between absolutists and exceptionists. Among finance professionals, Hartikainen and Torsila (2004) found absolutists to be the least lenient when judging ethical actions presented in four of five scenarios while subjectivists were the most lenient in all scenarios.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE BUSINESS LITERATURE

Although a wide range of diverse issues related to EI have been investigated, business researchers' interest in this concept can be attributed to studies showing it to be an important quality of effective leaders (Mandell and Pherwani 2003, Bradberry and Greaves 2005, Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008). There is increasing evidence that EI predicts a wide range of additional positive outcomes. EI rather than intellectual capabilities has been found to be the differentiating factor in job performance (Goleman 1995, Goleman et al. 2002, Dulewicz et al. 2005), sales performance (Wong et al. 2004), supervisor ratings of overall job performance (Law et al. 2004, Slaski and Cartwright 2002), and team performance (Druskat and Wolff 2001, Jordan and Troth 2004).

Furthermore, some writers have argued that EI can be usefully linked to job satisfaction (Sy et al. 2006),

organizational change (Huy 2002), workplace spirituality (Marques et al. 2008), global leadership (Alon and Higgins 2005), and effectiveness under high stress (Gohm 2003). For example, Muchinsky (2000) asserts that EI can be a valuable tool in personnel selection. He contends that it "may be the long-sought missing link ... which unites the classic `can do' ability determinants of job performance with the `will do' dispositional determinants" (p. 807) and argues that an assessment of a candidate's EI could become a primary tool in personnel selection. More recent studies have demonstrated that the competencies associated with EI are twice as important for career success as intelligence or technical abilities (Cote and Miners, 2006, Law et al. 2004).

For business students, Tucker et al. (2000) discuss the importance of EI in the development of graduates across several disciplines. For accountants, Akers and Porter (2003) state that "The AICPA and the Institute of Management Accountants recognize that emotional intelligence skills are critical for the success of the accounting profession" (p. 65). In health care, McQueen (2003) argues that EI can be of enormous help to nurses by mitigating the effects of job stress and burnout, while Freshman and Rubino (2002) contend that EI skills are a core competency for health care administrators. More broadly, Holt and Jones (2005) emphasize the economic value of EI "In the age of information and highly specialized work teams, EI is becoming a vital skill as people must accomplish their work by collaborating with each other, and their ability to communicate effectively becomes as critical, if not more critical, as technical skills and capabilities" (p. 15).

With a few exceptions, the literature only briefly alludes to the relationship between EI and certain aspects of ethics such as honesty and integrity (see Holian 2006, McPhail 2004, Bay and Greenberg 2001). In the popular press, writers have asserted that "without a moral compass to guide people in how to employ their gifts, emotional intelligence can be used for good or evil" (Gibbs and Birnbaum 1995, p. 67). In a recent non-empirical article, Maak and Pless (2006) argued that "responsible leaders need both emotional and ethical qualities to guide their action and behaviour in interaction" (p. 105). They maintained that, to be effective, leaders should possess a high level of "relational intelligence" - a blend of emotional intelligence and ethical intelligence. In a study of management decision making, Holian (2006) recommended that future studies investigate whether ethical decisions are influenced by skills associated with emotional intelligence. Similarly, Mulki et al. (2009) suggested that future research include an examination of the impact of emotional intelligence on an individual's ethical judgment. Overall, however, in a recent paper Bay and McKeage (2006) unequivocally state that "the link between emotional intelligence and ... ethics is not verified by the (so far) hypothesized link between these constructs and emotions" (p. 452). They encourage researchers to examine this possible relationship: "It may eventually be shown that emotional intelligence is one of the variables that may explain the current gap between ethical understanding and ethical behavior" (p. 441).

AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Ethical conduct is essential for the proper functioning of society in general and business in particular. The ethical standards of managers have been one of the perennial and most vexing issues confronting business and society for many years. Of particular interest to educators, practitioners, and regulators is the extent to which businesses are responsive to the claims of shareholders and society. While businesses have always been responsible for maximizing shareholders' long-term value, they are increasingly expected to recognize the importance of their responsibilities toward society and to faithfully adhere to certain ethical standards.

The recent proliferation and widespread media accounts of myriad illegal and fraudulent practices involving some of the largest corporations and financial institutions have shaken the public's confidence and diminished investors' trust in the soundness of corporate decisions and the integrity and competence of business managers. Events such as the current crisis confronting the financial system, the sub-prime mortgage scandal, and questionable CEO compensation packages have shocked and outraged the public and tarnished the reputation of business executives. As a result, numerous calls for reform and closer

scrutiny of business ethics are being made by many, including business practitioners and researchers. In addition, these problems and ethical lapses have prompted fresh concern over the societal impact of corporate activities and the extent to which managers are responsive to society's expectations. Thus perhaps today, more than ever, understanding the ethical perspective of managers and determining the possible link between their ethical attitudes and other variables are of critical importance.

Corporate Training Programs

For practitioners, it is vital for managers to pay more attention to emotional intelligence. Those with personal qualities that enable them to recognize and evaluate their own and others' emotions are more likely to make decisions whose consequences are favorable for all those involved. Would corporate training programs whose goal is to improve ethical sensitivity be more effective if they concentrated on developing or enhancing participants' EI?

Although much has been written about the efficacy of many ethics training programs, contradictory conclusions have been reported about their ability to sensitize employees to ethical matters and to shape their ethical perceptions. Some have stated that "it is encouraging to note that individuals are, in fact, positively affected by formal ethics training, even as adults" (Lopez, et al. 2005, p. 353). When members of the Columbia University Graduate School of Business classes of 1953-1987 were surveyed, they reported that their respective firms. ethics training programs had a positive impact (Delaney and Sockell 1992). The authors of that study concluded that "The existence of an ethics training program lowers the extent to which respondents perceived that they had to do unethical things to get ahead in their firm" (p. 723). However, only one-third of the respondents indicated that their firms provided such programs. On the other hand, others found that "current ethics training focuses on superficial ethical dilemmas for which most in the room can call out a simple and ready answer" (Jennings 2006, p. 46). Furthermore, Jennings (2006) has criticized such training because employees might not be willing to subscribe to the corporate values espoused by these programs. Training and development efforts that focus on emotional intelligence might offer a more effective way to improve managers' ethical behavior.

Business Instruction

For business educators, it is important to note that research confirms that ethical sensitivity is a highly valued trait in applicants for various business positions (see, e.g., Ahadiat and Smith 1994). In public accounting, for example, employers believe that "a commitment to ethical behavior is ... the foundation for all other standards of performance" (Turpen and Witmer 1997, p.65). They seek to hire accountants who will consider the ethical implications of their actions and expect them to respond appropriately when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

Unfortunately, an extensive literature has offered conflicting evidence and positions regarding the influence of ethics instruction on business students' ethical attitudes (Arlow 1991, Glenn 1992, Weber 1990). Some have argued that ethics cannot be taught since a student's character development has already occurred prior to their college education (Cragg 1997). Changing a person's values and standards in one or two college-level courses or by integrating ethics into the business curriculum is difficult if not impossible to achieve (Ritter 2006; McDonald, 2004). Business courses designed to persuade students to consider the ethical dimension when making decisions may not lead them to act in a more ethically sensitive way.

Advocates of ethics instruction contend that it must be given a high priority in the business curriculum (Henle 2006, Sims and Felton 2006). Improvements in ethical sensitivity, moral reasoning, and ethical behavior can be achieved in such courses (Loe and Weeks 2000, Weber and Glyptis 2000). For example, Carlson and Burke (1998) report that "education in ethics produces more enlightened consumers of ethics information who are able to make sound determinations about responsibility in ethical dilemmas" (p. 1179). Still others have proposed a variety of pedagogical approaches to enhance the effectiveness of

these business courses by promoting ethical decision making (Smith and Queller 2000, Ritter 2006, Pettifor et al. 2000, Weber 2007). Interestingly, a recent study found that while ethics education can impact ethical behavior, it "does not necessarily result in internalized ethics values" (Mayhew and Murphy 208, p. 297). Indeed, Richards has found that while integrating a limited amount of ethics training into a business course can have an immediate positive impact, "those results give false hope, because the effects of such training appear to be short-lived. Subjects' ethical standards declined significantly over a four-week period after exposure to an ethics module incorporated into a management course" (Richards 1999, p. 332). More dramatic results have been reported by Wolfe and Fritzsche (1998) who found that in some cases business students tend to be more unethical after graduation than before.

Overall, designing in-service ethics training programs and business ethics courses aimed at increasing emotional intelligence is an appealing undertaking. Unlike traditional programs and courses, those that enhance managers' and students' "soft" or "people" skills – the ability to identify with, understand, and empathize with others – might offer a superior approach to shaping managers, ethical judgment.

Additional Research Avenues

However, there are caveats regarding results showing a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and ethical ideology. It cannot be said that such investigations empirically resolve the causal relationship between the variables. Clearly, such studies are "correlational." They open a line of inquiry on whether a high level of emotional intelligence can improve ethical behavior. Conversely, does a high degree of concern of concern for ethics - focusing on the inherent rightness or wrongness of an action – produce "the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Mayer and Salovey 1993, p. 433).

Research with large national samples is necessary to confirm any findings. As Shaub (1994) points out, an individual's ethical perspective could be influenced by geographical and cultural location. Studies tend to be based largely on aggregate measures. However, they open a line of inquiry on whether their results are valid when only those operating in particular industries are surveyed. This would ensure a greater homogeneity within the group being studied. A related issue concerns the possible presence of covariates – e.g., age, gender, years of business experience – that could affect the relationship between the variables being investigated. For example, it would be useful to examine differences between future managers, younger managers, and managers with more extensive work experience. This type of analysis would yield insight into the relationship between these three generations' EI and their attitudes toward business ethics. Finally, another interesting research avenue would be a longitudinal study (with a control group) to determine whether a selection process that includes personality tests or assessment centers that measure or evaluate applicants' EI can have a positive impact on managers' ethical decisions.

This paper shows that there is a wealth of opportunities for management scholars and practitioners. The entry of scholars from disciplines such as marketing, finance, and organizational behavior into this field can enrich the quality of future research. This will expand and refine our understanding of EI and business ethics and, in turn, assist practicing managers to make better operational and strategic decisions.

In conclusion, this study provides helpful insights into an area of growing concern to society, all types of organizations, and educators. The numerous managerial ambiguities that are inherent in business decisions are further complicated by growing societal demands on corporations and increased awareness of the ethical dimension of decision making. This issue is likely to gain increased attention by educators and practitioners in the coming years.

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