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Once More With Feeling

Introduction

We are creatures saturated by feelings. We are a species that can love and hate. Having a strong sense of past, present and future, we can worry about what we have done, what we might do, and what might happen. It is because we are social beings that we are also emotional beings. Many of our strongest feelings arise in relationship with others: envy and shame, desire and regret, sadness and joy. In this book, I want to argue that the more we understand ourselves at the level of feeling, the wiser we become. Certainly, being intelligent about emotions and the part they play in our lives makes us socially more skilled. Knowing when to contain anger, knowing when to say nothing rather than something, understanding the value of a kind word at the right time, recognizing the need to stay with someone who is hurt rather than dismiss them as out-of-control, these are examples of emotional intelligence. It is this kind of intelligence that marks out personal success and wellbeing.

The people-oriented professions inevitably find themselves working daily with people whose needs are pressing and whose emotions are disturbingly aroused. Illness, physical decline, and poverty increase anxiety. Injustice, deprivation and discrimination provoke anger. Loss and rejection leave people feeling hurt and sad. It is critical that social and health care workers understand the fundamental part that emotions play in the lives and behaviour of those who use their services. Emotions define the character of the professional relationship. Practitioners need to understand how emotions affect them as they work with users and engage with colleagues.

This, then, is a book about the emotions – what they are, why we have them, how they affect us, how they colour relationships. Social and health care work is emotional work of a high order whether it's with older people, children and families, offenders, disabled children and adults, or the mentally ill. The more intelligent practitioners are

about emotions and the part they play in health and health care work, the more sensitive, thoughtful and effective will be their practice. Emotional intelligence is therefore a core skill without which practice would not only be ineffective, it would lack humanity.

Reason and Emotion

The term *emotional intelligence* has captured the popular imagination. Although there were precursors, emotional intelligence was first discussed in earnest in the early 1990s when its use spread quickly in the media and popular science. People who were emotionally literate appeared to do well at school and were successful at work. They were good at social relationships. Indeed, it was not long before some argued that emotional intelligence should rank alongside, or even above cognitive intelligence in importance. And individuals fortunate to be in possession of both types of intelligence were said to be doubly blessed. It was highly likely that life would give them an easy ride.

Psychology has always suspected that success and competence are not governed by one general type of intelligence. There are horses for courses; those who are good at one activity are likely to have one kind of 'intelligence', while those skilled at another will be supported by a different innate talent. A gifted dancer, a brilliant footballer, or an imaginative artist might be at least as successful in life as the more conventional academically 'intelligent' individual. Sternberg (1985) was impressed by people who had what he called *practical intelligence*. Individuals in possession of this intelligence, knowing what to do in a given situation, got on and did it whether or not it involved the use of intellectual, physical or social wit. Gardner (1983, 1993) talked of 'multiple intelligences'. He identified 'intelligences' that were linguistic, spatial, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic ('athletic'), *intrapersonal*, and *interpersonal*. Emotional intelligence is roughly defined by these last two, and it is these two that social workers need in good measure.

There is evidence that there is considerable overlap between many of these intelligences, particularly those involving the use of practical, social and emotional skills. This trio appears to work particularly well in situations which do not lend themselves to straightforward, correct, single answer solutions. However, in broad terms we might recognize two kinds of mind: one that thinks and one that feels.

Goleman (1995: 8) wonders whether interactions between these two fundamentally different ways of knowing might in fact 'construct our mental life'. We shall be paying particular attention to the mind that feels.

Of course, there is a problem writing about the emotions. Writing requires thought and thoughts have to be organized, ideas ordered. Books are a product of the mind, of cognition. They demand structure. But the emotions speak of a different world. They colour experience. A feeling can agitate the body every bit as much it can trouble the mind. A mood can cloud a day or excite a week. We challenge those whose emotions are running high to show calm and be reasonable. We accuse those who are all head and no heart of being cold and unfeeling.

For the first half of the 20th century, psychologists got round the problem of writing about the emotions by dismissing their importance, at least as far as the scientific study of human behaviour was concerned. They either ignored feelings or saw them as a contaminant to the proper study of people and their behaviour. Although several pioneering 19th century scientists, including Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and William James, saw emotions as central to the task of enquiring about human psychology, by the 1920s behaviourists were dismissing the emotions as worthy of scientific study. The later 'cognitive revolution' in the 1950s also had little time for the emotions. But lest we be too harsh, these early behavioural and cognitive psychologists were merely the latest in a long line of thinkers who remained suspicious of the part that the emotions might play in understanding the human mind.

Forgas (2001a) writes that 'Many philosophers, starting with Plato, have traditionally assumed that affect has a dangerous, invasive quality on rational thinking and behaviour' (p xv). The Stoics of ancient Greece also believed that feelings undermined rational thought. If we are to lead the good life, they argued, we should not allow ourselves to be at the mercy of our passions. If our actions are to be rational, we should overcome our base emotions using the power of reason and logic. Centuries later, many Western philosophers including St Augustine, Descartes, and Kant continued to see the emotions as basic, primitive, disruptive. Human enlightenment, they believed, required that we rid ourselves of animal passion and rise above emotion.

But those of a more artistic temperament have always rejected the rationalist's distrust of feeling. A number of Enlightenment philosophers, including David Hume and Adam Smith, understood that, along with reason, the emotions were an integral part of our individual and collective psychology. Only when reason and emotion are working in harmony is intelligent action possible. Others went beyond even this arguing that emotions are fundamentally at odds with reason (Evans 2001: xii). Flourishing in the 18th century, the European Romantic movement rode the waves of untamed passion and positively embraced the life-enhancing power of the emotions. Truth and authenticity are to be found in the contemplation of nature. Emotion and human passion lie deep in the heart of the natural world. In contrast to the Rationalists, Rousseau believed that reason was the problem not passion. To recover our wellbeing, he felt, we have to return to an innocent state of nature.

In the hands of the Romantics, art becomes the expression of emotion (Collingwood 1938). Painters and poets celebrated intuition and mocked logic, revelled in empathy and eschewed science. They preferred the pastoral, fleeing the city as the tentacles of urban life spread the ugly grip of science and industry ever wider. It is art's business to explore, value and express the natural world, a world which includes human minds and relationships, whether in prose or poetry, painting or music. Our relationship with the world of things and people is a thoroughly emotional one and it is the role of art to examine this. 'If a story doesn't work emotionally', wrote Martel, 'it does not work at all' (1993: p viii cited in Cozolino 2006: 66). Robinson (2007) agrees. In her examination of the role that emotions play in literature, music and art, she suggests that great writing, symphonies and painting have to be experienced emotionally if they are properly to be understood. Gérard, a character in Forster's novel about the artist Gwen John, says 'Paintings are feelings. It doesn't matter what the eye sees, the heart must feel, or it is useless' (Forster 2007: 328). Reason and critical thought on their own are dry and without passion. It is only when art engages us emotionally that connections are made, experience expands, and understanding, not just of the novel or poem, piano piece or picture, but also of ourselves, deepens.

It is also the case that we seek out artistic experiences in order to excite and intensify our emotions. The pursuit of pleasure makes us happy, even ecstatic. However, we can also appreciate artistic

experiences that cause us sorrow (a play based on a tragedy), or make us angry (a politically inspired painting or photograph), frightened (a horror film), or sad (a moving piece of music). There is a sense of being alive whenever our passions are roused and heightened. These aesthetic experiences help us to feel, explore and think about many of the common conditions that affect humanity and in so doing they raise our understanding and sympathies. The arts and humanities, being explorations of the meaning of experience, can therefore help us develop our emotional intelligence and make us more compassionate and decent beings.

Being Acknowledged

Although disdain of the emotions might have been true of some mid-twentieth century academic psychologists, many of those at the applied end of the discipline knew better. Their daily experience was one in which the passions were all too often careering out-of-control, de-railing relationships, creating problems at work, making people feel unhappy and even unwell. Folk wisdom has always understood that the heart as much as the head is the source of feeling, that the body as well as the mind is involved in emotion. 'The heart', wrote Blaise Pascal (1643/1966: 113), 'has its reasons which reason knows nothing of'.

We also capture something of the insights generated by folk psychology when we ask those who have been on the receiving end of social work, counselling and psychotherapy to evaluate the experience. Client views and the perspective of service users have a habit of talking about the technical business of providing a professional service in a direct, down-to-earth, feeling-based way. 'The nearer we stay to common speech', believes Lomas (1981), 'the less likely we are to destroy the meaning of those who seek our help'. Clients and service users value the quality of the relationship and the things that promote it including how they feel about the social worker and how the social worker makes them feel. For example, users positively rate social workers who they see as 'warm and friendly' (Strupp 1969: 17). They value help which feels supportive.

Maluccio (1979: 61) discovered that when counsellors are asked to recall the first session, they mention the problems presented. However, when clients are asked the same question, they remember

their feelings, including how the counsellor made them feel. It seems that when our emotions run high, most of us tend to talk more. Talk also turns out to be part of the medium in which the self forms and re-forms in which we try to mend our broken and hurt selves (Howe 1993). So, the emotional tone of the worker-user relationship is critical to therapeutic success.

One of the hallmarks of a good relationship is that our feelings, however dark and distressing, are recognized, understood and accepted by the other. If the relationship is a place where we can feel safe, then we can explore the thoughts and feelings that are distorting and disfiguring our lives. A daughter might admit: 'I know I shouldn't feel so angry with my ageing mother, but her growing dependence and forgetfulness irritate me and I'm surprised and alarmed at the aggression I feel.' Or the stressed father of an autistic son confesses: 'My longed for son seems no more interested in me than his toy cars. I suppose I am disappointed. I'm not sure I like him. How can I possibly be feeling this way? I feel wretched.' For service users, such feelings are real, but hard to face up to. It is up to the social worker and the care worker to offer a relationship where it feels safe to recognize and explore the emotions that trouble and cause pain.

Talking of her own experiences of being in psychotherapy, France (1988: 111) believes that 'what is needed is a friendly therapist, the creation of space where you are entitled to be just who you are, however defective'. Only then can you feel understood, only then can the serious business of addressing the hurt and the harm begin. It is vital that the social worker and the counsellor, the therapist and the care worker create a space where it is safe for the service user to admit feelings and to let down anxiously held-on to defences.

The more I felt secure in the feeling of being accepted as me, not necessarily liked, but responded to as an individual, the more I felt I was able to explore this self, and its more unsavoury aspects.
(France 1988: 242)

Empathy, acceptance and not judging the other allows people to acknowledge and accept what they think and feel. They don't have to run and hide, defend and deny. There is someone prepared to stay with them. The simple presence of another who is strong enough to

'hold' the relationship and the user's difficult emotions in itself can be therapeutic. Service users no longer feel demeaned by their base emotions, they do not feel diminished. As feelings are described, the social practitioner is also giving the message that the individual is worth listening to and worth understanding.

So it is that a knowledge and understanding of our own and other people's emotions is key to the helping process. The social worker who is emotionally intelligent is more than half way to being an effective social worker.

Understanding Feelings and Feeling Understood

It has been rather late in the day that the psychological research community has begun to catch up with what everyone else knew: that not only are the emotions of great importance in the conduct of everyday life, but they also define what makes us human. 'Should we not define ourselves as those beings that can love and make commitments, that suffer grief at losing someone irreplaceable, and that feel shame at having behaved badly?' (Oatley 1998: 285). This is why the computer brain will never be like the human brain, no matter how much information it processes or rational logic it acquires. To be human, computers would need to experience the world at the level of feeling. 'If computers want to think', declares Hobson (2002: xv), 'they had better get a social life'. Tomkins (1962: 112) felt that 'reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind'. Emotions may, in fact, be vital to intelligent action (Evans and Cruse 2004).

Better late than never, the last twenty years has seen an explosion of research and writing on the emotions. It is this more recent work that will inform much of this book. Not surprisingly, given the fundamental and universal character of the emotions, many of the psychosocial sciences as well as the humanities have much to say on matters of feeling. If we are to do justice to the subject, we shall need to engage the thoughts of psychologists and psychiatrists, biologists and neuroscientists, philosophers and anthropologists.

In the following pages, we define emotional intelligence (Chapter Two). Evolutionary theory forms a backcloth to these early discussions. How we cope with stress – or not – also plays a part in our understanding. Feelings have an elusive quality. Quite what they are

or why we have them is not immediately obvious. We all know what it is like to feel happy or sad, but what are these subjective states? What exactly are emotions? These questions need attention (Chapter Three).

The development of the emotions from infancy to adulthood also takes us on a wonderful journey, particularly as it tells us something about the social nature of our selves and what it is to be human (Chapter Four). At this point in the story we shall meet the brain scientists (Chapter Five). They have many interesting things to say about the emotions and the ways in which we learn to understand and regulate them, particularly in the context of close relationships. Closely tied to these issues is the relationship between stress, coping and our physical health (Chapter Six). Emotional wellbeing affects not only our mental health but also our physical health. The growth of 'positive psychology' or the science of happiness is a reminder that the mind and the body are intimately connected. Unfortunately, for some children their journey across the seas of emotional development is anything but smooth. The quality of their care is poor, social relationships are difficult. This takes us into the troubled waters of emotional disorders, behavioural difficulties and relationship problems both in children and adults (Chapter Seven).

Helping service users and clients to feel in control of their lives, to be able to regulate their emotions, and to achieve emotional wellbeing is what much of social work is about. There is a strong case to be made that helping people manage their emotions and cope with stress is the basis of most interventions and therapies. We shall consider social work help, support and treatment in terms of recognizing, understanding and learning to manage distress and emotional arousal (Chapters Eight and Nine).

Conclusion

The emotionally intelligent social worker understands the part that emotions play in her own and other people's thoughts and feelings, hopes and beliefs, designs and plans, behaviour and perceptions. She can use this knowledge with skill and sensitivity to engage with those in distress and difficulty. She is intelligent about what emotions are, about how they affect us. The emotionally intelligent worker knows what emotions are and how they can be managed, developed and

used in the self and others. The social work profession, particularly during its early development, has always understood that emotions lie at the heart of its concerns. Let us now examine the emergence and growth of 'emotional intelligence' – as a concept, a skill, indeed as a defining feature of the socially gifted.

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