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ABSTRACT

Although many people have studied social intelligence and theorized about it over the past 60 years, no one has been able to provide a clear picture of its nature. Traditional methods have overemphasized the social-cognitive outcomes of human functioning instead of social-behavioral outcomes. Two approaches used to study social intelligence can be categorized as implicit and explicit theories. Implicit theories include four major ideas: being a prosocial person (sensitive to the feelings of others), having well developed instrumental skills (communication and leadership), enjoying social activity, and having a good self-concept. Explicit theories focus on two sets of interrelated abilities: self-assertiveness, which is the ability to maintain and promote the well-being of the self in social situations, and integrative, which is the ability to maintain and promote the well-being of other people or the social groups of which one is a part. In order to understand why some people are more socially intelligent than others it is important to look at contributing processes. The single most important process is social planning ability. Other processes that appear to be important are an indivdual's perception of control, competence, empathy, and goal-directedness, and degree of interest in social kinds of accomplishments. An empirically coherent domain of social abilities can be identified if one stops trying to conceptualize social intelligence as purely a cognitive phenomenon, and views it instead in terms of effective social behavior that results from the interaction of a variety of psychological and sociocultural processes. (LLL)

# THE NATURE OF SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE: PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

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Psychologists have been interested in social intelligence for a long time, dating all the way back to at least the 1920s. This interest is rooted in a powerful intuition that there are many educationally-relevant aspects of human abilities that are not accounted for by traditional conceptions of academic intelligence (Keating, 1978). For example, Neisser (1976) has commented that "academically intelligent people do often behave stupidly. The existing evidence does not suggest that they are markedly more successful than the unintelligent. Nor is it clear that the quality of their lives is more enviable than that of other people" (p. 139). Research on implicit theories of intelligence by Sternberg and his colleagues (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, & Bernstein, 1981) also reveals the pervasiveness of our belief in the importance of social intelligence. Sternberg et al. (1981) found that when they asked either experts or laypersons to make ratings of the characteristics associated with intelligence, academic intelligence, or everyday intelligence, in every case the raters' conceptions of intelligence included a social competence factor that referred to characteristics such as "admit mistakes," "displays interest in the world at large," and "is on time for appointments." So, apparently, if you ask most people, they'll tell you that social intelligence must be an important aspect of human abilities.

And yet, although a lot of distinguished people have tried to study social intelligence and theorize about it over the past 60 years -- for example, Thorndike, Vernon, Guilford, Wechsler, Gough, Sternberg, Keating, and probably many others -- so far no one has really been able to provide a clear picture of the nature of social intelligence. We still aren't even sure that social intelligence exists from a psychometric standpoint. In fact, we don't have any consensus yet about even the most basic issues, such as how social intelligence should be defined or how it should be measured. About all we really know at this point is that the concept of social intelligence is intriguing enough to keep psychologists coming back to it even when their intuitions are not confirmed by their empirical research.

Well, as you might expect, I too believe that the concept of social intelligence is a useful one, and that it represents an important domain of human abilities that is deserving of much more of our attention both as researchers and as practitioners. However, it seems clear that we are not going to make any real progress in this area if we continue to commit the fundamental error of conceptualizing and studying social intelligence using the same theories and methods that have traditionally been used to study academic intelligence. This approach has led to an overreliance on paper-and-pencil tests and an overemphasis on social-cognitive outcomes of human functioning instead of social-behavioral outcomes. In other words, my view is that we can identify an empirically coherent domain of social abilities if we stop trying to conceptualize social intelligence as a purely cognitive phenomenon, and instead view it in terms of effective social behavior that results from the interaction of a variety of psychological and sociocultural processes. For too long we have studied social intelligence as if it were simply the ability to reason about social issues in a sophisticated way or the ability to make insightful social inferences. These abilities may be important in some situations, but in general, the literature shows that these skills have very little relationship to how effectively a person behaves in social situations (M. Ford, in press). The reason for this is not completely clear, but it appears that people typically do not need more than minimal information from their social environment to guide their social behavior. In fact, social psychologists have shown that most people don't know what to do with rich data when they have it (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Therefore, unlike academic intelligence, where the outcomes of interest are primarily cognitive, and where being able to deal with complex information is very important, social intelligence is primarily focused on behavioral outcomes -- on effective action -- and is apparently much less a function of complex inferencing or reasoning skills.

To summarize, then, I believe that we should define and assess social intelligence in terms of how effectively a person behaves in social situations. I used this strategy in a study I published this year with Marie Tisak (Ford & Tisak, 1983), and the result was that we were able to show that social intelligence can be identified as a separate domain of human abilities if a behavioral effectiveness criterion is used. On the other hand, if one were to use a strictly cognitive definition of social intelligence, I do not believe that a separate domain of social abilities would emerge. It hasn't so far, which suggests that although there may be unique features that differentiate social from nonsocial cognition (Shantz, 1983), the commonalities are probably more salient than the differences. Cognitive processing per se may be pretty much the same regardless of whether it is applied to social or nonsocial content.

One problem with using a behavioral effectiveness definition of social intelligence is that there are many different ways of being socially effective. For example, a person might be socially competent in terms of cooperative behavior but not in terms of leadership skills. Or a child who is in constant trouble with authority may also be very successful in his or her peer relationships. Therefore, social intelligence is probably a somewhat more diverse and loosely organized domain than academic intelligence (Ford & Tisak, 1983).

Along these lines, one question I've been trying to address in my recent research is whether there are some ways of being socially effective that are more important than others either theoretically or empirically. Essentially, I'm now attempting to identify and empirically validate different types of social intelligence, whereas in my initial work I focused more on the "g" factor in social competence. I'm using two different approaches to address this problem (Sternberg et al., 1981) -- one is an "implicit" theoretical approach, where I've been relying on people's conceptions of social competence to help me identify the key components of

social intelligence, and the other is an "explicit" theoretical approach, where I've been relying on the literature on social motivation and on a theoretical framework called "living systems theory" (D. Ford, 1983) to help me identify the types of social-behavioral outcomes that are the most central to a person's functioning and development.

I'll start with my research on people's implicit theories of social competence (Ford & Miura, 1983). This approach has been surprisingly productive, thanks in large part to the efforts of my collaborator on these studies, Irene Miura. In our first study we asked people to describe "the most socially competent person I know." Using a methodology developed by Horowitz (Horowitz, French, & Anderson, 1981), we coded these descriptions into content categories, dropped the unusual categories, and then had another sample group the remaining 20 descriptors in whatever way made sense to them. We did a cluster analysis of the grouping results and found that people's conceptions of social competence seemed to include 4 major ideas, or put another way, they seemed to refer to 4 different ways of being socially intelligent.

The first requirement for being a prototypically socially intelligent person according to these data is to be a prosocial person, that is, to be sensitive to the feelings of others, to respect other people's rights and viewpoints, to be genuinely interested in other people, to be dependable and socially responsible, and so forth. This result suggests that perhaps unlike academic intelligence, the domain of social intelligence (or at least this first part of the domain) may be as much a function of emotional and motivational processes as of purely cognitive factors.

The second requirement for being judged a prototypically social intelligent person is to be have well developed instrumental skills. This type of person "knows how to get things done," "has good communication skills," "likes to set goals," "has leadership abilities," and so forth. Instrumental skills and pro-social skills are both very prominent aspects of the literature on social competence

(e.g., Ainsworth & Bell, 1974; Anderson & Messick, 1974; Baumrind, 1975; M. Ford, 1981; Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner, 1976), and yet, the literature suggests that these two sets of skills are only modestly correlated. This of course supports the strategy of looking for different types of social intelligence.

The third component of the social competence prototype is what we call social ease, which includes characteristics such as "enjoys social activities and involvement," "is socially adaptable," "opens up to people," and "is easy to be around." And finally, the fourth component of the prototypically socially intelligent person is self-efficacy, which refers to characteristics such as "having a good self-concept," "having your own identity and values," and "having a good outlook on life." Again, you can see how different this picture of social intelligence is from traditional conceptions of academic intelligence.

I should mention that we have conducted this same type of study using 6- to 10-year-old children as our target group, and the results show that the prototype of the socially competent child in this age range looks about the same as the prototype of the socially competent adult according to both child and adult raters. This suggests that culturally shared meanings of social intelligence are probably learned fairly early, and are likely to be applied with only minor variations to a wide range of people.

The other approach I've been using to study social intelligence is the "explicit" theoretical approach based on living systems theory. I'm currently conducting two studies using this approach, the first one in collaboration with Robin Burt and Christi Bergin (Ford, Burt, & Bergin, in preparation), and the second with Neil Carey and Scott Adams (Ford, Carey, & Adams, in preparation). We've been trying to validate a conceptualization of social intelligence that includes 4 types of what we call self-assertive competencies and 4 corresponding types of integrative competencies (M. Ford, 1981). Self-assertion refers to one's ability

to maintain and promote the well-being of the self in social situations, while integration refers to one's ability to maintain and promote the well-being of other people or the social groups of which one is a part. From a living systems theoretical perspective, these are the two fundamental requirements of interpersonal life (Koestler, 1967).

Within these two categories, different aspects of self-assertion and integration can be identified. The first aspect we are studying refers to the issue of defining one's social identity. The task here is to maintain one's individuality, while at the same time achieving a sense of belongingness -- that is, to be part of the group without losing a sense of self. These are both very important social goals according to our adolescent subjects. The second aspect of our self-assertion—integration conception of social intelligence refers to the issue of control. The task here is to maintain a sense of self-control, or self-determination, while at the same time accepting legitimate and necessary forms of social control by behaving in a socially responsible manner. These two kinds of accomplishments have been identified as key aspects of social competence in Baumrind's research on socialization outcomes (Baumrind, 1975) and in numerous studies of moral development (Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The third set of outcomes in our conceptual scheme pertains to the issue of social comparison. Here the task is to be compared favorably to other people, that is, to attain a relatively high level of social status or social superiority, while at the same time respecting the need for equity and fairness in social interactions. Group leaders exemplify the combination of these two competences. And finally, our fourth aspect of social intelligence centers on the issue of the distribution of social resources. The task here is to be able to acquire social resources such as assistance, advice, and social validation when you need it, and also to be willing and able to provide these kinds of social resources to other people when they need it. This dimension refers quite

literally to the give and take that characterizes successful social interactions.

In sum, this theory of social intelligence focuses on two sets of interrelated abilities: first, the ability to maintain and promote the well-being of the self by knowing who you are, by being in charge of your own life, and by reaching desired levels of social importance and social support; and second, the ability to maintain and promote the well-being of other individuals and social groups by becoming a contributing member of social groups, by living up to social commitments and responsibilities, and by treating other people in an equitable and altruistic manner.

Testing the empirical validity of this explicit theory of social intelligence has turned out to be a more difficult task than I thought it would be, primarily because people's implicit theories of social intelligence seem to keep getting in the way. To be more specific, we've had to rely fairly heavily on peer nominations and teacher ratings of social competence in our research since we're dealing with complex, higher-order behavioral outcomes such as self-determination and social responsibility. As a result, although some aspects of these data look quite promising, it appears that instead of getting judgments of social competence along 8 dimensions from these outside observers, we're basically only getting them along 3 dimensions that appear to correspond rather closely to the prosocial skills, instrumental skills, and self-efficacy components of the social competence prototype I described earlier. Fortunately, we've also been using several self-rating measures that appear to be doing a better job of assessing each of the individual components of our conceptual scheme, but it would be nice if we could validate these measures against some external criterion. We do have a rather unique behavioral measure involving an interview situation that's been helpful in this regard in terms of assessing several indices of overall self-assertive and integrative competence, but unfortunately, we haven't yet been able to figure out how to get

a good behavioral assessment of each of the different types of self-assertion and integration.

So far, then, we think we have pretty good evidence to support the major distinction in our theory of social intelligence between self-assertive and integrative competencies, but we're not yet ready to assert the validity of the complete 8-category scheme. We think that this theory is a good start in trying to understand the nature of social intelligence, but it will probably need to be refined to some extent before its validity can be established.

Up to this point I've been talking about the kinds of behavioral outcomes that I think we should be focusing on if we want to define what social intelligence is or if we want to try to measure it. However, if we want to try to understand why some people are more socially intelligent than others, or if we want to try to teach people to behave more effectively in social situations, then we need to know more about the processes that contribute to social intelligence. I've been pursuing this question for several years now both through the literature and through my own research (M. Ford, 1982; M. Ford, 1983; M. Ford, in press; Ford & Tisak, in preparation; Ford, Burt, & Bergin, in preparation; Ford, Carey, & Adams, in preparation), and as a result I have developed a relatively short list of psychological processes that I think are probably the most important in contributing to socially intelligent behavior, at least in adolescence, which is the age group that has been the focus of most of my research.

My nomination for the single most important process contributing to effective social behavior is social planning ability. Planning skills have only recently been treated as a theoretically important topic for study; consequently, we know relatively little about precisely how planning influences behavior and even less about the development of planning skills (Pea, 1982). However, my research with adolescents on social planning skills such as means-ends thinking and

consequential thinking, as well as much more extensive work by people like Mischel and Patterson (e.g., Mischel & Patterson, 1979) and Spivack, Platt, and Shure (e.g., Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976) indicates that social planning processes are probably crucial aspects of social intelligence and may account for as much as 20% to 25% of the variance in measures of effective social behavior.

Another set of processes that appear to be very important aspects of the domain of social abilities are perceptions of control and perceptions of competence. A wide range of literatures, including those on perceived control, locus of control, learned helplessness, self-efficacy, perceived competence, and personal agency, all show that individuals who perceive themselves as competent, controlling agents are generally more effective on a wide range of criteria (M. Ford, 1983). For example, locus of control studies show that people with an internal locus of control tend to make greater efforts to master and cope with their environments, are less susceptible to social influences, are better able to delay gratification, and are generally more active and independent (Lefcourt, 1976). Of course, in some cases, it may be unrealistic for a person to maintain strong perceptions of personal control and competence, such as when they are in an environment that is unresponsive or deprived of resources. However, the literature suggests that it is very important to help people avoid consistent patterns of negative self-evaluation. When people get down on themselves, they seem to lose their natural motivation to actively pursue their social goals, and as a result become much less effective in their social interactions and social relationships.

Another process that may be rather crucial for integrative types of social intelligence is empathy. By empathy I mean the degree to which people are emotionally aroused when they perceive that other people are unhappy or in trouble, or could be unhappy or in trouble if they don't do something to prevent it. Empathic emotions appear to provide much of the motivation behind prosocial behavior (Estrada, 1982),

although it's interesting to note that a strong relationship between empathy and social competence isn't really apparent until later childhood and adolescence (Hoffman, 1977). Hoffman (1977) has concluded that this is because younger children are less likely to know what to do in situations where their empathic emotions have been aroused.

A fourth set of processes that probably contributes in significant ways to socially intelligent behavior is a cluster of goal-setting processes I call "goal directedness." This skill refers to a person's tendency to set goals, to be aware of goals, and to effortfully persist in attempting to reach their goals (M. Ford, 1982). Goal directedness appears to have pervasive effects on behavior. For example, in one of our current studies using the self-assertion—integration taxonomy, we found that goal directedness was significantly related to each of the 8 types of social competence in that taxonomy (Ford, Burt, & Bergin, in preparation) This is consistent with research in industrial psychology on goal-setting processes and task performance, which shows that goal setting appears to improve the efficiency of virtually every aspect of human psychological functioning (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981).

My fifth and final nomination for this somewhat speculative list of key processes in social intelligence is simply the degree to which one has an interest in social kinds of accomplishments. Some people seem to generally prefer nonsocial tasks, and only occasionally take an interest in doing things with other people or relating to other people for their own sake (M. Ford, 1982; Ford, Burt, & Bergin, in preparation). This seems to be especially true for males. The consequence of this lack of interest in social goals for social competence seems to be fairly clear. In four different studies I have consistently found that people who give a higher priority to social goals are more socially competent than those who give a higher priority to nonsocial goals (M. Ford, 1982; Ford, Burt, & Bergin; in preparation). This

result seems to be strongest, however, for integrative types of social intelligence such as belongingness and providing resources, which suggests that a good synonym for this process might be caring.

I'd like to conclude by saying that I hope I've been able to give you a general feel for the nature of social intelligence in terms of both its processes and outcomes, but I especially hope that I have persuaded you that we might be able to make better progress in this area of research if we approach it from a social competence perspective instead of a traditional intelligence perspective. Although at this point we do not have the kind of theoretical and empirical foundation that we need to help educators design effective programs for enhancing social intelligence, I think that we can create it if we keep working on it using this approach.

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