

Emotional Security and its relationship with emotional intelligence

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Abstract:

Emotional security has been researched in the context of parent-child attachment and interparental marital conflict and it has been shown to affect children's adjustment. According to previous research, emotional intelligence influences also children's adjustment. This paper proposes that emotional security and emotional intelligence are mutually interrelated and affect each other. This relationship has important implications for intervention in the area of children's emotional competence.

*Introduction*

One of the first scholars to develop a theory of emotional security was Dr. William E. Blatz. He defined security as "A state of mind in which one is willing to accept the consequences of one's behaviors" (Blatz, 1954) He considered that "all aspects of an individual's behavior in all areas of his life can be interpreted in terms of security".

In Blatz's theory the goal of every individual young or old, is the achievement of a feeling of security or serenity. Individuals, constantly strive to achieve this state in a dynamic and constant stream of choices throughout the lifespan.

Abraham Maslow (1942), proposed that the only definition of security that is satisfactory is of the catalogue type. In this sense he described an insecure person as a person that "perceives the world as a threatening jungle and most human beings as dangerous and selfish; feels rejected and isolated, anxious and hostile; is generally pessimistic and unhappy; shows signs of tension and conflict; tends to turn inward; is trouble by guilt-feelings; has one or another disturbance of self-esteem; tends to be neurotic; and is generally egocentric and selfish." (Maslow, 1942, pp. 35). He viewed in every insecure person a continual, never dying longing for security.

John Bowlby (1973) considered attachment as a source of security when he wrote "Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships. The formation of a bond is described as falling in love (...). The unchallenged maintenance of a bond is experienced as a *source of security*, and the renewal of a bond as a source of joy". (Bowlby, 1980, p.40). Mary Ainsworth (1988) confirmed this vision of attachment as a

source of emotional security when she wrote: “Thus Bowlby conceives of security as a feeling that can be experienced in the context of attachment, but surely he would not limit the applicability of the feeling to that context any more than he would limit the emotions of anger and fear and joy to attachment-related situations”(p1).

In this sense, young children with a secure attachment derive their security from the conviction that the mother (or attachment figure) is in a relative proximity and available when needed. Older children derive their feeling of security from the idea that even if not available in the moment, they can count on their attachment figure when needed. This is what scholars have called “confidence in protection” (Goldberg, Grusec, & Jenkins, 1999). Therefore, a securely attached child is a child that feels emotionally secure because of a good attachment with the mother.(Cummings & Davies, 1995)

As a consequence of Bowlby’s writings, the concept of emotional security has been consistently linked to attachment theory. The study of emotional security disconnected of its linkage to attachment theory, however, was almost forgotten for more than 20 years in psychological research. In 1994, however, the concept appeared again when Davies and Cummings published an article on *Psychological Bulletin* called “Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis”. In this article the authors built on attachment theory to show that the feelings of insecurity generally believed to derive from a negative bonding between parent and infant may also be the consequence of parents interparental marital conflict.

Marital conflict makes children think that their security is in danger, and consequently they experience feelings of insecurity. Cummings and Davies (1994) proposed that when the individuals feel they have lost security mobilize their resources to recover a state of emotional security. Therefore when exposed to marital conflict children feel insecure and then develop emotional and behavioral strategies to rapidly recover their sense of security. (Davies & Cummings, 1994). In the way that Emotional security is being currently understood (Ovid database, 2003), it can be defined as a person’s feeling of having the inner resources to confront new and threatening situations.

*Processes.* Emotional security includes three different processes: Emotional reactivity, behavioral regulation, and internal representations. Emotional reactivity refers to the fact that in the presence of potentially threatening situations the person feels fear or distress, and develops attitudes of vigilance or covert hostility. Behavior regulation refers to the regulation of exposure to threatening situations: Insecure people will tend to develop an overregulation of exposure to potentially dangerous situations shown by either overinvolvement in the situation or by the avoidance of it. Finally, internal representations will affect conscious or unconscious schemas of potential danger. Insecure appraisals of situations will lead insecure people to think that situations will escalate, and will affect them personally and negatively (Davies & Cummings, 1995).

*Emotional security and adjustment.* Emotional security has been shown to affect internalizing and externalizing (Cummings & Davies, 1998; Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2002; Davies & Foreman, 2002). It also seems to affect some other aspects of social adjustment as the tendency to place excessive importance on possessions (Kasser, 2000), the tendency to reenact poor parenting practices with their children (Phelps et al, 1998) and the ability to tolerate frustration in preschool settings (Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983).

In a study of parenting (Phelps et al, 1998), insecure adults showed a tendency to reenact poor parenting practices with their children, while earned secure people (who had an insecure attachment but later in life were able to develop a coherent perspective

of their negative experiences and recover security) did not reenact those practices, not even in situations of high stress.

Emotional insecurity can also have effects on aspects of personal adjustment as self-esteem. Michelle Little and Roger Kobak (2003) examined the effect that stressful circumstances have in the self-esteem of children and found that emotional security with teachers moderated this relation, so more emotionally secure children reacted with lower decreases in self-esteem to negative peer events and to conflict with teachers than did more insecure children.

#### *Emotional Security and Emotional Intelligence*

Considering that emotional security entails an appraisal, and an emotional and behavioral reaction to threat, and that emotional intelligence entails the use of emotional information to behave intelligently, it is clear that both constructs are somehow connected. Mayer and Salovey (1995) assert that any psychological processes that block the flow of information may reduce emotional intelligence. Information can be blocked by excessive fear or by fearing the wrong things.

When a person feels threatened, his/her ability to attend to feelings other than his/her fear is undermined and so the intelligence of his/her reactions. In conditions of threat, individuals focus on the potential danger and often react with a short term goal that promotes immediate survival (Goleman, 1995). Humans look for ways to overcome the danger either by avoiding or by overcontrolling the situation (Cummings and Davies, 1995). Furthermore, if because of chronic insecurity a person responds in a surviving way when there is not real threat, then his/her behavior may not be positive, effective or adaptive. It may jeopardize an emotionally intelligent response. A surviving attitude often will be maladaptive. It will lead the individual to fly or fight when it is not needed, and when other solutions are much more positive. From a neurological point of view this person will be using the reptilian brain, the one that it is used when people feel threatened or in danger (Goleman, 1995). Also, according to Mayer & Salovey (2005), a defensive attitude may divert or foreshorten the processing necessary to make correct decisions about feeling and should be negatively correlated with emotion identification which might lead, in turn, to a reduced sensitivity to others, and less social understanding.

On the other hand, if the person feels secure he/she may see the same situation as an opportunity for a positive experience. The person may be guided not only by a short term goal but also by the desire of turning the situation or event into a lasting positive experience. In this case, the person may feel more inclined to solve whatever the problem may be than to try to run away from the situation. Therefore his/her response may be adaptive, more emotionally intelligent. A secure approach may permit individuals to do their best and get the best from others. Their reaction may be more adaptive in the short and the long term. They may be using the neocortex, the part of the brain for the higher thinking (Goleman, 1995).

Indeed, associated with a measure closely related to emotional security, are features of emotional intelligence including: reality-oriented, flexible coping, tolerance, sensitivity and responsibility (Helson & Wink, 1987). Also, proximal indicators of emotional security used by (Patterson, Greene, Basson, & Ross, 2002). have been found to increase the probability of assertive behavior which is a component of interpersonal intelligence (Baron, 2000).

Even when the threat is real, insecure people may be more prone to choose negative, maladaptive responses (avoiding the danger or overreacting) while secure people may tend to choose positive, adaptive, problem solving responses (Davies,

Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2002, Phelps et al. 1998). Therefore a person's emotional security will be related to his/her emotional intelligence.

Also supporting the proposition that security and emotional intelligence are related, securely attached people have been found to show different emotionally intelligent competencies. They are more able to postpone gratification in a standard delay of gratification test (Jacobsen et al., 1997), suffer lower levels of alexithymia (Huston, 1997), are significantly less stressed and enjoy higher levels of coping resources (Buelow, 1997), and perform better in different emotional understanding tasks. (Larble & Thompson, 1998),

Security has been found to relate to emotional intelligent characteristics across the life-span. 6 year-old securely attached children enjoyed an advance understanding of mixed emotions comparing with less secure peers (Steele et al., 1999). Securely attached married women were found to manage their affect better than insecure wives during problem-solving discussions with husbands (Paley et al., 1999). Earned secure parents showed a higher ability to improve poor parenting than insecure parents (Phelps et al, 1998).

Security of attachment also relates to individuals' ability to develop better peer relations (Scheider et al., 2001) to show less disruptive behaviors towards friends (Zimmerman et al., 2001), to display a higher emotional understanding in the Mother-Infant Separation Test Video (De Rosnay & Harris, 2002), and to show more empathic concern for the stranger's distress (van der Mark, et al., 2002). Insecurity also affects a person's strength of self-esteem. (Little & Kobak, 2003), and social competence (Helson & Wink, 1987).

#### *Summary*

In summary, theoretical propositions and empirical research seem to indicate that emotional security affects the individuals' ability to process emotional information and that the ability to process emotional information may affect appraisals of threat. In this way emotional security and emotional intelligence may be interrelated. Implications for emotional intelligence education are important. If the development of emotional security affects the development of children's emotional intelligence, intervention in this area can no longer rely on cognitive training but has to address the sources of emotional security which needs not to be trained but nurtured.

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