

## WHAT IS SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE ?

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a summary and aims to define social intelligence. The original definition of social intelligence concept belongs to Edward Thorndike, who defined it in terms of ability to understand people and to act wisely in human relations.

Despite its usefulness and freshness, the term social intelligence was initially criticized by some researchers who rejected the concept considering it as a simple ability to manage social situations. Furthermore, the main argument the opponents of the theory of social intelligence had against it was related to the inability to measure social intelligence of a person. However, the psychology researchers have found a way to give social intelligence a quantitative note by using the hypothesis of effective behavior which can be measured by multiple ratings. Therefore, today we can say that social intelligence is defined as an individual's background knowledge about the social world.

**Keywords:** abstract intelligence; social intelligence; social consciousness; social ease; social behavior.

In simple words, general intelligence is an operations system that conditions the way we approach and solve various tasks. It is closely linked to the process of adapting<sup>1</sup> to new situations and to inference, generalization, correlation or integration of parts into a whole. Social intelligence determines the individuals' ability to quickly compare several options when they are faced with a choice and decide in favor of optimal version, in this case having the ability to anticipate the results of actions even before they are undertaken. Seen in these parameters, General Intelligence has a few basic features: the

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<sup>1</sup> (Piaget, 2012: 53)

ability to solve new situations, speed, mobility, flexibility, and lastly, adequate and effective adaptability to circumstances.

When these characteristics apply to social interaction in one individual's, we are talking about a new kind of intelligence that is *social intelligence*. Given that this is a concept closely related to other social concepts, currently it is quite difficult to give a fixed definition to this concept. In addition, other concepts such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal intelligence partially overlap the social intelligence. Therefore, one of the main difficulties in the studying of social intelligence is that the researchers have defined this construct in various ways.

What is however clear about social intelligence is that it has three different components, namely the component of perception, the analysis and the cognitive-behavioral component. This way, we could say that people with a high level of Social Intelligence are those who have the capacity to produce appropriate behavior in order to achieve their social targets.

According to psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, Social Intelligence (rather than "quantitative" intelligence) is what defines man as a social entity<sup>1</sup>.

The original definition of social intelligence concept belongs to Edward Thorndike, who, by the 20s, defined the term as "the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls, to act wisely in human relations"<sup>2</sup>.

Despite research on the social intelligence initiated by Edward Thorndike, this concept was long identified with sensitivity to stimulus and social cues, with an insight into available to others, or a circuit of temperaments and personalities of individuals. In 1950, for example, David Welchsler (who created one of the most common measures of IQ) continued to reject social intelligence, considering it as "an intelligence applied to social situations"<sup>3</sup>.

Today, though, we can say that social intelligence is defined as "an individual's background knowledge about the social world"<sup>4</sup>.

Other researchers, such as S. Greenspan and P.F. Love, defined social intelligence as "an individual's ability to understand situations and interpersonal transactions and to use that understanding to help a person to achieve an interpersonal goal. Social intelligence can be considered as cognitive an anchor for the social competence and it is an important factor contributing to the success of social activities such as work and interpersonal relationships"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, social intelligence is understanding what a person needs in

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<sup>1</sup> (Humphrey, 1983: 142)

<sup>2</sup> (Thorndike, 1920: 87)

<sup>3</sup> (Welchsler, 1958: 75)

<sup>4</sup> (Kihlstrom, & Cantor, 2000 a: 359)

<sup>5</sup> (Greenspan & Love, 1997: 311)

order to make that person work efficiently and comfortably for himself and others in social life.

Regarding the social intelligence (as well as the emotional intelligence) one thing is sure: it is not a purely cognitive aspect of personality. On the contrary, the concept bends more to the emotional side, but is not to be limited neither to this one. After the success of the promotion famous theory of emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman has developed an almost equally avid interest for the social intelligence. In 2006, he published a volume entitled "Social Intelligence" where (influenced by the idea promoted by Edward Thorndike) he writes that Social Intelligence is the ability to act wisely in human relations. In addition, he proposed that Social Intelligence was defined in terms of social knowledge and social facilitation<sup>1</sup>. Goleman thought that, the social intelligence's elements (which differ from those of Emotional Intelligence) can be organized in two categories: **social consciousness** (what we notice about others) and **social ease** (what we do with that consciousness)<sup>2</sup>.

**Social consciousness** covers a wide spectrum, ranging from instant notification of the other's inside status to understanding the other's feelings and thoughts or understanding complicated social situations.

- Primary empathy implies the feelings being shared with others the notice of nonverbal emotional signals.
- Emotional resonance: understanding the others' thoughts, feelings and intentions.
- Social cognition: knowing how the social world works.

**Social ease.** The simple apprehend of someone's feelings or the fact that we know what someone thinks or intends does not guarantee fruitful interaction. The social ease builds on social consciousness in order to rise effective and harmless interaction. Social ease's spectrum includes:

- Synchrony: nonverbal fruitful interaction.
- Self-image: effective presentation of himself.
- Influence: shaping the outcome of social interaction.
- Concern: taking into account the needs of others and acting accordingly.

In order to study social intelligence there have been used several different empiric approaches. Thus, we have psychometric approaches, ideographic and implicit theories. Within the psychometric approaches, proponents believe that a person's psychological traits can be identified, measured and compared. In this approach the study of intelligence believes that social intelligence is a configuration of traits and skills that people own. The proponents of this approach also believe that one individual's performances in what social intelligence matters can be measured, evaluated

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<sup>1</sup> (Goleman, 2007 a: 84)

<sup>2</sup> (Goleman, 2007 b: 102)

and compared. For example, how the person reasons in certain social situations or how he can recognize one interlocutor's mental state.

The psychometric vision of social intelligence is rooted in Edward Thorndike's theories. He believed that abstract intelligence is the ability to understand and work with ideas, mechanics intelligence is the ability to understand and work with concrete objects, and social intelligence is the ability to understand and work with people, to act wisely in human relations. When the issue of measuring the social intelligence has arisen, Thorndike noted that "it is difficult to test. Social intelligence is manifested fully in kindergarten, playground, barracks, factories and commercial salons, but escapes the formal conditions of a standardized test laboratory"<sup>1</sup>.

However, the psychometric side of social intelligence was later translated through standardized laboratory instruments which measured the difference that socially occurs among people<sup>2</sup>.

The second empirical approach, the ideographic one, was introduced in sociology by Nancy Cantor and John F. Kihlstrom, as well as E. H. Taylor. This approach did not envisage measuring social intelligence of the individual based on the norms and standards, but by trying to understand one individual's cognitive processes and what the basis of human personality's composition is. How this appears and how the specific structures operate in people's lives<sup>3</sup>.

A third approach to the empirical study of social intelligence was a **theoretical vision**. The method was promoted by R.J. Sternberg and C. Smith and was meant to observe what people understand by social intelligence, by investigating their implicit and tacit understanding of the concept<sup>4</sup>.

Of these three approaches, the psychometric vision is the most relevant for social intelligence, succeeding in some way to put it on the same level with the abstract intelligence and the instrumental intelligence.

The main argument the opponents of the theory of social intelligence had against it was that of the inability to measure social intelligence of a person. However, the psychology researchers M.E. Ford and M.S. Tisak have validated the success in establishing the separation between the academic and social intelligence by using the hypothesis of effective behavior which can be measured by multiple ratings<sup>5</sup>. In a study conducted on a sample of 600 high school students, they used four methods for evaluating the teenagers'

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<sup>1</sup> (Thorndike, 1920: 231)

<sup>2</sup> (Taylor, 1989: 423)

<sup>3</sup> (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 2000 b: 362)

<sup>4</sup> (Sternberg & Smith, 1985: 168)

<sup>5</sup> (Ford & Tisak, 1983: 196)

mathematical and verbal skills using standardized scores in order to measure the academic intelligence of the subjects. The researchers have subsequently tested the social intelligence by using combined methods based on self-assessment or peer information between teammates. They have also used a quantification offered by the students' teachers. The quantification was made possible when the teachers were asked to use any sample of empathy, self-reports of social competence and a semi-structured interview among their students. This is how the researchers have found evidence for the separation between the effectiveness of human behavior and academic intelligence.

These investigations were the summit of the social intelligence discovery. By proving its quantifiable ability, social intelligence has gained itself a well deserved place alongside abstract intelligence.

But more than being measurable, social intelligence and the researches about it make possible the understanding of the constructs we make discovering the cognitive-affective processes that participate in perception and interpretation of social situations. This includes the study of how interpersonal dynamics, cultural norms and other representative factors models and influence the constructive processes. Social knowledge, including the knowledge of cultural norms and how to apply them in different situations, is part of the fund of knowledge that social intelligence encompasses as material for study and investigation.

Social cognition has an ambivalent character, being conceptual and procedural, in other words it includes both social norms knowledge and how individuals tend to act in social situations. In addition, social knowledge affects the way people act in social situations.

Delimitation of different types of approaches of social intelligence shows the interest that putting social intelligence and abstract intelligence in their own places has prompted among psychologists. In clarifying this dilemma, some researchers in psychology focused on the cognitive component's ability to understand others. Others focused on the behavioral side, such as the ability to interact effectively with others. Still, others were based on psychometric approach, defining social intelligence as the ability to successfully solve tests related to social skills.

It is believed that social intelligence is distinct from cognitive intelligence and this difference can be seen easily in the lives of everyday people. Some people who are successful in solving academic issues may have difficulties in solving social situations. They also may face difficulties in understanding others, while others who do not excel in terms of academic intelligence can relate effectively and respond appropriately in social contexts. Social intelligence obviously includes social cognition and social interaction.

The research conducted by specialists have outlined six cognitive abilities related to social behavior of individuals, and presented by N. Cantor and J. Kihlstrom<sup>1</sup>:

1. The ability to identify one individual's mental states;
2. The ability of grouping the others' identified mental states based on similarity;
3. The ability to interpret meaningful connections among behavioral acts;
4. The ability to analyze the succession of social behavior;
5. The ability to be flexible in interpreting changes in social behavior;
6. The ability to predict what can happen in a personal situation.

Specialized studies show that social intelligence is equivalent to interpersonal intelligence (a type of intelligence identified by the Multiple Intelligences Theory<sup>2</sup>) and it can be defined as the intelligence that is behind the interaction group and the individuals' behavior.

On one hand, social intelligence is meant to improve the field of artificial intelligence in some contexts (robots, etc.). On the other hand, social intelligence argues that the art of leadership (according to T. Hatch and H. Gardner) is a form of social intelligence which consists in recognizing the feelings of others and the ability to make quick connections with them. In T. Hatch and H. Gardner's vision, the components of social intelligence are<sup>3</sup>:

- Group organization - necessary skill for any leader who initiates and coordinates the efforts of the group's members. This feature is usually found in executives or military officers etc. They must lead and organize units of any kind. In children, such a talent translates into taking the leadership and decision in relation to the roles every child will fulfill within the game.
- Negotiation - talent to mediate that prevents conflicts and helps resolve them using flair. The person who has such talent excels in arbitrating and mediating disputes, making careers in diplomacy, arbitration. In children, it is about mediating disputes on the playground.
- Personal connections - to recognize and provide feedback for personal feelings, empathize with others, therefore to relate to them. People who have such qualities prove to be friends and good partners. Children who know how to read facial expressions are much more pleasant than those who fail to do so.
- Social analysis - ability to detect what lies behind the feelings, reasons and personal worries. This quality makes the person become a good therapist, counselor or a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 2000 c: 160)

<sup>2</sup> (Gardner, 1993: 231)

<sup>3</sup> (Gardner & Hatch, 1989: 9)

All these abilities are related to interpersonal skills and they are the needed ingredients to achieve social success. These skills are usually owned by leaders, those people expressing the unspoken feelings of the group.

Over the years, numerous studies have debated the issue of social intelligence. This is how the researchers have developed a bigger interest in issues implying social factors which influence human personality. Part of the human condition refers to a person's ability to know himself and others, to understand and work with those around him and to engage in positive social interactions. Social intelligence includes situational awareness and social dynamics that govern them, but also includes the knowledge of interaction styles and strategies that can help a person achieve their social relationships. Particularly, social intelligence involves the awareness of inner states and types of reaction depending on the social context.

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