

# The relevance of emotional intelligence in social work practice and education

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion of the concept of *emotional intelligence* and provides a rationale with reference to the relevant literature on the concept and significance of emotional intelligence in social work education. In this piece I argue that emotions can influence moral decision making in social work and may act as moral markers and motivators for social work practitioners and students. It offers my viewpoint on emotional intelligence based on my practice experience as a registered social worker, a social work educator and a learner completing a PhD in social work. Finally, I explicate some suggestions to further include emotional intelligence in the social workers' ongoing professional development and social work students' education.

**KEYWORDS:** Emotional intelligence; social work; social work education

## Introduction

In my years of practice experience as a frontline social worker, I found emotional intelligence to be one of the most useful skills in managing social work cases. Salovey and Mayer (1990) described EI as “the ability to monitor our own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). An example of when I utilised my skill was when I worked with a perpetrator of domestic violence who was new in the country, spoke very little English, did not have any family members apart from his nuclear family, who were separated from him as soon as the allegation was made. Furthermore, he knew very little of how the systems work in Aotearoa New Zealand. This experience was very significant in my social work career, and although my knowledge of theory and legislation played an important role in my decision-making process, ultimately my emotional intelligence

was the key to my successful professional relationship with the client. My work was not at all perfect, but by using emotional intelligence, I was able to build trust with the client and be aware of my feelings—these moved from blame to non-judgement. Moreover, I was able to realise his sadness over being separated from his children and to manage my own repulsion to the domestic violence situation, and finally combined these to deliver the best service I could offer to the client. I will never forget the physical violence and the emotional abuse he did. My memory of seeing the weapons he used and bruises on his victim’s skin will stay, but I will also never forget the sadness in his eyes as his body shrunk rapidly from not eating and drinking, longing to see his children. My emotional intelligence has helped me see the vulnerability of each member of the family. In addition, this experience has helped me to better understand myself, my clients, and their behaviour.

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Social workers have a significant role in providing emotional support in assisting vulnerable people (Munford, 2021). Furthermore, the ability to recognise, utilise and work with emotions competently has been considered as the heart of social work (Weld, 2006), a way to enhance critical thinking (Rankine & Beddoe, 2020) and one of the strong predictors of resilient social workers (Adamson et al., 2014). This article presents a discussion regarding the relevance of emotional intelligence in social work practice and the role of emotional intelligence in social work education based on my reflections upon practising social work, teaching an undergraduate social work degree, and studying towards a PhD in social work. This article finally explicates some possible ideas to further include emotional intelligence in the social workers and social work students' learning journey towards becoming effective practitioners.

### The concept of emotional intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence (hereafter EI) has been described slightly differently by many authors. In conceptualising EI, Salovey and Mayer (1990) argued that there are three components that make up the concept of EI:

1. Appraisal and expression of emotion of self and other which can be both verbal and non-verbal.
2. Regulation of emotion in self and in other.
3. Utilisation of emotion which include flexible planning, creative thinking, redirected attention, and motivation (p. 190).

Furthermore, Salovey and Mayer (1990) suggested that a degree of ability to appraise and express emotion is crucial for adequate social functioning. The possession of these skills enables individuals to perceive and respond to their own emotions and the emotions of others more accurately. Regarding regulation of emotion, Salovey

and Mayer (1990) further suggested that the individual's ability to adapt and reinforce mood states has a strong correlation with their EI. Moreover, emotionally intelligent individuals go through the process of adaptation and reinforcement of their mood states with specific goals in mind; they may positively improve their own and other's mood and motivate others or, conversely, may influence manipulative behaviours. Once the emotionally intelligent individuals can regulate their emotions, they utilise emotions to solve problems by identifying and framing the problems and choosing some possible solutions.

Similarly, Goleman (1996) described EI as the ability to appropriately manage distressing moods, control impulses and persist in the face of frustrations. He contends that EI is both a social skill and an empathy which can be learned, to some extent, by most people. He added that it is necessary to emphasise they are learned through the individual's interaction with other people—he called the set of skills *emotional literacy*. The emphasis of his concept of EI is exercising self-control.

Another significant contribution to the concept of EI is from the work of Bar-On (2006) who argued that it is more accurate to refer to the construct of the concept as *emotional-social intelligence* (ESI) due to the combination of intelligences based on both intrapersonal (emotional) intelligence and interpersonal (social) intelligence. At a glimpse, Bar-On's model can be summarised as "a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands" (p. 2). Bar-On's study was conducted in a period of approximately 2 decades based on his experience as a clinical psychologist, empirical research, and review of literature.

In the context of social work, Weld (2006) described EI as a collection of emotional and

social knowledge and skills that impact the social worker's ability to effectively work with clients. Weld argued that the possession of EI is crucial for social workers. She has also identified the necessity of EI in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Further to the area of social work supervision, O'Donoghue (2021) specified that the possession of EI is necessary for supervisor, supervisee, and the organisation.

The relevance of EI in social work practice was also highlighted by Ingram (2013) with an emphasis on the social work relationship. Ingram contends that the key elements of EI relevant to social work are self-awareness, managing emotions, motivation, empathy, and relationships. He included service user involvement and perspectives in the concept which involves social worker's therapeutic and procedural roles. The relevance of EI for social workers to relate positively with others, enhance self-care and ultimately improve the effectiveness of social work practice cannot be emphasised enough.

### **The relevance of EI in social work practice and education**

The role of EI in social work practice and education has been studied by many researchers such as Clarke et al. (2016), Grant et al. (2014) and Horne (2017). It is also important to highlight that the benefits of developing these skills for social work practitioners and students is not only about developing emotional understanding, but also about building resilience (Howe, 2008; Munford, 2021). Moreover, Salovey and Mayer (1990) argued that the benefit of developing EI is to learn how to handle the complex relationships necessary in the social work arena. Additionally, the study findings by Clarke et al. (2016) showed that the possession of EI by social workers and social work students has the potential to prevent feeling overwhelmed by stressful case scenarios. The study also found that it is not enough to provide social work students with relevant knowledge and protocols such

as theories and ethics. Furthermore, social work education should also aim to help students to learn about their beliefs, identity, and emotions.

In regard to the area of social work field education, Hay (2019) conducted a study on quality field education that involved interviews with agency managers, academic staff and students. The study examined their perspectives on the key components that contribute to quality field education and found that one of the key aspects identified by academic staff was the need for students to have EI. Further to the area of field education, according to Grant et al. (2014), there is evidence that students frequently find their field placement demanding and stressful. The study suggested that EI may help students manage their emotional reactions more effectively during placements and support their career aspirations. Moreover, Grant et al.'s (2014) research involving students in the undergraduate social work programme showed EI had been associated with many positive outcomes of considerable relevance to social work, such as enhanced professional judgement and decision-making abilities, more flexible negotiation skills, and greater confidence, optimism, cooperation and trust. The findings of the study also provided evidence that carefully planned interventions involving experiential learning and emotional writing have the potential to enhance emotional literacy and associated competencies such as reflective ability and empathy in social work students. Furthermore, the study found that such interventions may also improve levels of psychological wellbeing. In contrast, a research study conducted by Horne (2017) involving students in a Master of Social Work (MSW) programme found that students' level of EI was not a significant predictor of student success up to the conclusion of the first year of study in an MSW programme. In fact, the participants' level of EI declined over the course of completing one year of coursework.

It appears from the literature reviewed to date that EI may play an important role in social work students' preparation for beginners' competencies and practitioners' capabilities to practice. Emotions are also necessary in relation to practitioners' decision-making processes. Moreover, the nature of social work profession requires a high level of moral priorities and professional relationship with clients; emotions help social workers in moral thought and decision-making processes by utilising emotions concerning what is right or wrong. Therefore, social work practitioners and education providers should pay more attention to developing skills in EI on an ongoing basis. Also, supervision and professional development activities should include an ongoing enhancement of practitioners' EI.

In my experience teaching undergraduate social work students, I argue that although the significance of EI has been considered by academics (Adamson et al., 2014; Hay, 2019; Howe, 2008; Munford, 2021; O'Donoghue, 2021; Rankine & Beddoe, 2020; Weld, 2006) and studied (Clarke et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2014; Horne, 2017), further discussions amongst social work practitioners and students need to be enhanced (Clarke et al., 2016). I am referring to EI as looking at a situation, speaking clearly about relevant emotions, regulating and utilising those emotions to continuously develop motivation and critical thinking (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). As with any profession involving human beings, without emotions, social work practitioners may not be able to deliver their practice empathically.

An important component to note is the educators' belief in the ability of the students to grow (Clarke et al., 2016) both emotionally and socially (Bar-On, 2006). Moreover, the educators need to be responsive to students' learning needs and the learning process of the learning itself. Another crucial element is a professional relationship between educators and students with great respect and trust, so

the students can safely discuss about their emotions in an honest and open forum. For example, how students' emotions and moods can be used to motivate (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and assist performance in complex case scenarios (Howe, 2008) and how mood states may be utilised to generate and better prepare students to take advantage of future opportunities. That said, despite the possibilities of EI in enhancing the effectiveness of social work practice and education, it is not without challenges. One of the problems I identified is that EI is not easy to measure and there has been relatively little research study and publication about EI in relation to social work practice (Morrison, 2007) and education. Furthermore, although the importance of EI has been discussed in the social work profession (Howe, 2008), this seems to have more application for the social work recruitment process than the learning process (Clarke et al., 2016). I believe that the development of EI can, and should, take place throughout students' learning journey and practitioners' professional development. I suggest a possible solution that includes curriculum designs that explicitly capture EI as part of the social work students' learning development. Also, social workers should continue to take part in workshops to assist them in reflecting on their moral identity and work that uses their emotions; including the opportunity to clearly appraise, regulate and utilise their emotions in their work.

## Conclusion

The role of EI in human relations is crucial, and its evidence has been confirmed in research studies that have been conducted around the world. EI individuals should have sufficient skills to appraise, regulate and utilise their emotions to motivate others and lower stress. It is also evident that EI has been identified as a significant contributing factor to effective social worker practice. However, the presence of EI in publications and research studies is lacking and should be enhanced.

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