

GENERAL SEMANTICS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

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Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not easy.

Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*

In 1995, Daniel Goleman, a science reporter for the *New York Times*, published the international bestseller *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*. The impetus for the book, according to Goleman, was an article he chanced upon in a small academic journal by two psychologists, John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey. Their piece, published in 1990, contained the first formulation of a concept they labeled *emotional intelligence*. (1)

These days the phrase emotional intelligence is ubiquitous, showing up in the cartoon strips *Dilbert* and *Zippy the Pinhead*, in Roz Chast's art work in *The New Yorker*, in "Social and Emotional Learning" (SEL) programs, and in professional development workshops. (2) *Harvard Business Review* calls "EI" a "ground-breaking, paradigm-shattering idea, one of the most influential business notions in a decade." (3)

This talk will examine some of the key biological and theoretical underpinnings that support the concept of emotional intelligence. In addition, it will show how the tools and formulations of general semantics (GS) can help a person to attain mastery in an area that is redefining what it means to be "smart"—research indicates that IQ accounts for only about 20 percent of career success. (4)

PART I: Emotions and the Brain (5)

Folk wisdom uses the expressions "heart" and "head" to express the difference between "feelings" and "rational thinking" ("I know it in my heart" is different than, and usually more powerful, than knowing through reason). The emotion/thought dichotomy is sometimes also

conceived in terms of an “emotional brain” and a “reasoning brain.” Commenting on the two-part division of reason and emotion, the sixteenth-century humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam said:

“Jupiter has bestowed far more passion than reason—you could calculate the ratio as 24 to one. He set up two raging tyrants to Reason’s solitary power: anger and lust. How far Reason can prevail against the combined forces of these two the common life of man makes quite clear. Reason does the only thing she can and shouts herself hoarse, repeating formulas of virtue, while the other two bid her go hang herself, and are increasingly noisy and offensive, until at last their Ruler is exhausted, gives up, and surrenders.” (6)

To better understand the powerful grasp that emotions have on the “reasoning brain,” and why feelings and thoughts are so often in conflict, let’s examine how the human brain (an organ that is triple in size to our nearest cousins in evolution—nonhuman primates) evolved.

The most primitive part of the human brain, shared with all species that have more than a minimal nervous system, is the brainstem surrounding the spinal cord. It can be thought of as a set of preprogrammed regulators that maintain basic functions of the body. From this most ancient root, and with the arrival of the first mammals, the “limbic system” emerged. It brought “emotions” to the brain’s repertoire. Millions of years later in evolution, a new brain part developed.

Approximately 100 million years ago, mammalian brains had an immense growth spurt. Several new layers of brain cells were added to the ancient brain’s thin two-layered cortex (the regions that plan, comprehend what is sensed, coordinate movement) to form the neocortex. This new gray matter offered an extraordinary intellectual advantage.

The human neocortex, which is much larger than in any other species, is the seat of thought. It helps us put together and understand what the senses perceive. It enables us to think about our feelings and have feelings about ideas and symbolic depictions, like works of art and literature.

The neocortex can influence and moderate limbic system impulses. For example, a person may feel quite angry and want to physically strike someone for doing something that he or she perceives as a great affront. But rational thought (generated in the neocortex) can intervene and keep the aggrieved party from acting in ways that might be deleterious—e.g., hitting or shooting the putative offender.

In some circumstances, rational thought may not be readily available to a person. For example:

- One may not have been taught how to think rationally under pressure.
- One may have learned irrational ways to handle different situations.
- One may be a victim of an “emotional hijacking,” a situation in which the amygdala (a limbic system component, perched above the brainstem, that is involved in emotional processing) reroutes the neural transmissions that typically go from the thalamus to the neocortex, to itself. This detour takes away the ability of the neocortex to apply reason to sensory information.

Fortunately, with proper training, individuals can learn to overcome the aforementioned scenarios and think and behave in an emotionally intelligent manner.

PART II: “Thoughts” and “Feelings”

If passion drives, let reason hold the reins.

Benjamin Franklin, quoted in *Poor Richard's Almanac*

We live in a process world. But our language does not accurately reflect this fact because it allows us to “split” with words what cannot be split in the world “out there.” For example, we talk about the mind and body as if they were separate entities. But that’s not true. Can there be a mind without a body? Lacking a body, there would be no mind. And without the mind, what would the body be? Moreover, the chemical processes of the body affect the mind—that’s why antidepressants work. And the opposite is true. Our mental state can influence our physical condition—worry can aggravate ulcers and other bodily ailments.

General semantics labels our tendency to use words in isolation as *elementalism*. We practice elementalism when we talk about feelings and thoughts as if they were distinct elements that can exist without each other. But the fact is they *do* influence each other. To underscore that idea, GS suggests putting quotation marks around the terms “feelings” and “thoughts.”

Placing quotes around the term “emotional response” is also useful, as such a response is an end product of complex psycho-neuro-physiological reactions to internal and external stimuli. In general semantics parlance, a complex reaction like this would be labeled an *evaluational reaction*.

General semantics contains many ideas and formulations that can be used to rectify dysfunctional evaluational reactions and improve functional ones. Some will now be discussed and applied to the five domains of emotional-intelligence.

PART III: Using GS to Enhance Emotional Intelligence

God may forgive your sins, but your nervous system won't.

Alfred Korzybski, quoted in *Familiar Medical Quotations*

Goleman defines EI as encompassing the following five domains: (7)

1. Knowing one's emotions
2. Managing emotions
3. Motivating oneself
4. Recognizing emotions in others (empathy)
5. Handling relationships.

Individuals differ in their EI domain abilities. Some may be more proficient at interpersonal relating, while others may have greater self-awareness. But since the brain is quite plastic, and constantly learning, lapses in emotional skills can be remedied (to a great extent each EI domain represents a body of habit and response that, with the right effort, can be improved on). (8) The following descriptions show how general semantics tools and formulations can assist in that task.

1. Knowing One's Emotions. People who are in touch with their feelings can better understand their impulses to practice certain behaviors. Such knowledge is important, particularly if the impelling forces are negative ones (e.g., anxiety, excessive anger, timidity, etc.).

To be more mindful of one's emotions, general semantics advocates engaging in contemplation, *semantic relaxation* (a process for decreasing muscular tension), and sensory awareness. (9) These nonverbal methods can aid an individual to concentrate his or her whole being on identifying and understanding their feelings as they occur.

Using an *extensional orientation* (focusing on "the facts" rather than on assumptions) is another way to stay attentive to one's emotions, as it encourages analyzing phenomena rather than denying or disputing their existence. The scientific method is a particularly effective extensional approach. Since the time of Galileo, its methodology—observe, experiment, and

evaluate—has brought about numerous advances in many different areas of human endeavor. (Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, used the scientific method to overcome his fear of rejection when he was a college undergraduate. One weekend, he asked over one hundred women he did not know to go out with him. All but one turned him down, and she never showed up for the date, but he saw that he could live through rejection and this gave him confidence to persevere in trying to make contact with the opposite sex. Although practice didn't make perfect, Ellis did have greater amatory success over time.)

2. *Managing One's Emotions.* Those who learn to manage their emotions, tend to tolerate frustration and stress better than those who are ineffective in this area. This gives them an advantage in completing long-term projects and getting along with others.

The *delayed-reaction technique*, a GS tool that involves delaying one's reactions to investigate matters before taking action, can be quite beneficial for emotional self-management. It allows time for rational thought to moderate potentially adverse reactions. *Multi-valued reasoning*, which will be discussed next, is another helpful GS emotional-self-management tool.

There is a longstanding tradition in studying emotions to describe them as positive or negative; contemporary philosophers and psychologists have borrowed a term from chemistry to identify emotions as having *valence*—plus or minus. This is sometimes reduced to the idea of pleasures and pain—or pleasure and no pleasure. But this either/or way of thinking about emotions misses the complexity that is involved with each emotion. *Multi-valued reasoning*, an attitude of “both/and” rather than “either/or,” can capture such complexity.

For example, love is often considered the most positive emotion. But love also frequently leads to pain, jealousy, and anger. Anger is often at the top of the negative emotions,

but Aristotle, who wrote at some length about anger, argues that anger is sometimes exactly the right response. (The assumption is that anger is the right response to the right occasion to the right degree and directed at the right person. In such cases, Aristotle maintains, one would be a fool not to get angry.) And fear, which many people consider a negative emotion, may be our most valuable emotion. Without it we would perish. (We can also enjoy fear, such as when we watch a horror movie.)

Understanding that emotions are complex can help a person to better manage their feelings, as they will not be lead astray by simplistic assumptions regarding the “goodness” or “badness” of an emotion. And, as has been shown, the idea that emotions are complex can come from a multi-valued reasoning process.

3. ***Motivating Oneself.*** Individuals who can marshal their emotions in the service of a goal have increased opportunities for achievement and life successes. Alfred Korzybski’s “*happiness formula*” (realistic goals + hard work = happiness) provides a simple but effective prescription to realize such desired outcomes. Its application can also help one cultivate useful emotional habits, like being patient when things don’t promptly pan out the way you want them to, and avoid the *IFD disease*.

The IFD disease is a GS notion that describes a condition in which a person moves from a state of **I**dealization to **F**rustration to **D**emoralization. At the demoralization stage, it can be difficult to motivate oneself. To prevent IFD disease, GS recommends connecting language with real and specific possibilities. For example, rather than seeking a glorified ideal like “true happiness,” which is vague standard that has no objective referents in the “real world,” one can consider “happiness” as a warm bagel with cream cheese or having your car start in the morning when the temperature is ten degrees. Or, if it is not these things, happiness

is something that you *do* or you can imagine yourself doing, something unambiguous and achievable.

4. ***Empathizing with Others.*** In his book, *The Explosive Child*, Dr. Ross Greene calls empathy the access code to a person’s brain. Those who possess this code have a tremendous edge in interpersonal communications—people who feel understood are likely to reveal more of their deepest thoughts and feelings. (And they may become good customers. Sympathy and empathy are essential elements of capitalism. Contrary to common misperception, Adam Smith was hardly an apostle of selfishness. He observed that the market pays attention to the needs and preferences of its customers as a matter of necessity.)

Since everyone’s nervous system is unique, it can take real effort and concentration to accurately figure out what another person is feeling. GS suggests paying particular attention to non-verbal cues (e.g., tone of voice, posture, facial expression, etc.). Research indicates more than eighty percent of interpersonal communication is nonverbal.

Utilizing the GS notion that humans behave as *organisms-as-wholes-in-environments* (people react in complex ways in various circumstances) can help us to sharpen our empathy skills—because human reactions are complex, finding “emotional common ground” between individuals can be a formidable task. Accepting the idea that human responses are varied and multifaceted can also assist us to be indefatigable and persevering with others if emotional common ground is not immediately found.

5. ***Handling Relationships.*** Individuals who are skilled in handling relationships can resolve conflicts and negotiate disagreements more effectively than those lacking this ability.

The use of *dating*, attaching dates to our evaluations of individuals and situations, can help us to become more skilled in dealing with people by reminding us of the fundamental fact

that human beings and relationships change over time. For example, Mary (this year) is not Mary (last year); my marriage (at this point in time) is not my marriage (twenty years ago); my friend Mark (today) may not be my friend Mark (tomorrow). Because people and relationships change it is important to modify our thinking and behavior to conform to current conditions, rather than using a cookie-cutter approach to interpersonal relations.

The eminent general semanticist Irving J. Lee asserted that “we tend to discriminate against people to the degree that we fail to distinguish among them.” *Indexing*, a GS tool that involves using mathematical subscripts to break down larger categories into their component parts, is a most useful technique for addressing Lee’s concern. (For example, Culture₁ is not Culture₂. In some societies, such as on an Israeli kibbutz, gratitude is considered the glue that holds the society together. It is important to be indebted to others, and debt is even manufactured to engender ties between people. In contrast, most American males find gratitude more humiliating even than fear.)

Finally, to show respect for another’s feelings, general semantics suggests adopting a “*to me*” attitude—employing terms like “I think,” “it seems,” and “to me,” when making statements. Such expressions make it clear that our observations and opinions have definite limits—e.g., “I think New York is the best place to live.” “It seems that it is going to rain today.” “To me, macaroni and cheese is the most delicious food.” The “to me” approach signals to others that we are not speaking with omniscient authority, an unfortunate attitude that all too often provokes annoyance and anger in people.

Conclusion

Since its inception, general semantics has been quite involved with “emotional intelligence.” *Science and Sanity* (1933), the book that launched GS, focused heavily on how to

increase human cooperation and reduce human misery and Wendell Johnson's GS classic *People in Quandaries* (1946), had as its subtitle "The Semantics of Personal Adjustment." S. I. Hayakawa named his book *Language in Action* (1941) and Irving J. Lee wrote texts titled *Language Habits in Human Affairs* (1941) and *The Language of Wisdom and Folly* (1949). In the nineteen fifties, J. Samuel Bois' concern with emotion was evident in the title he chose for his book, *Explorations in Awareness* (1957). Today the tradition continues, with GS volumes such as *Developing Sanity in Human Affairs* (1998), *Drive Yourself Sane* (2001), and *Sensible Thinking for Turbulent Times* (2006), and with IGS seminars that deal with educating people on the complex nature and inter-relatedness of thoughts and feelings.

NOTES

1. Peter D. Salovey and John D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* 9 (1990), 185-211.
2. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: The 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bantam, 2005), ix.
3. *Ibid.*, xii.
4. *Ibid.*, xiii.
5. Information relating to the historical development of the brain has been condensed from "What Are Emotions For?" in Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: The 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bantam, 2005), 3-12.
6. Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly*, trans., Eddie Radice (London: Penguin, 1971), 87.
7. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 43, 44.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. For a more thorough discussion of this subject see Susan Presby Kodish and Bruce I. Kodish, *Drive Yourself Sane: Using the Uncommon Sense of General Semantics*, Revised Second Edition (Pasadena, CA: Extensional Publishing, 2001), 100-111.

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