

Emotional Awareness and Social Insight

Stephanie L. Rojas, Heidi A. Johanson, Brian Brehman, and Kimberly A. Barchard
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Contact Information: Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.nevada.edu

Abstract

Emotional awareness is defined as the ability to understand emotional concepts. It is often measured using an open-ended test in which respondents describe how they would feel in hypothetical situations. Respondents obtain higher scores if they can clearly describe the emotional reactions of themselves and others (Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990). Social insight is the ability to understand and predict the actions of people in various social situations. It can be measured using multiple-choice tests, in which respondents must select the most insightful explanation for an action or the wisest course of action in a particular situation (Gough, 1965, 1993). Both emotional awareness and social insight require understanding of what emotions are evoked in social scenarios. These concepts are theoretically related, but are they empirically related? Is the ability to clearly describe emotions related to the ability to accurately predict others' actions?

A total of 858 participants completed the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane et al., 1990) and the Chapin Social Insight Test (Gough, 1965, 1993) as part of a larger study. The correlation between these two scales was positive and significant but small. Contrary to the hypothesis, these two constructs appear to have little relationship with each other. The ability to describe emotions clearly is not the same as the ability to describe emotions accurately, and thus does not guarantee the ability to accurately explain or predict behavior. Respondents may provide detailed descriptions that are simply wrong.

These results suggest that therapeutic techniques that ask people to predict how they would act in various situations will not be very effective. Those clients who can provide clear descriptions will not be much more accurate than those who are unable to provide clear descriptions. Instead, therapies that ask clients to act out situations and describe their emotions may be more promising.

Introduction

Emotional awareness is defined as the ability to understand emotional concepts. Emotional awareness is often measured using the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990), which is an open-ended test in which participants describe how they would feel in various hypothetical situations. The LEAS was developed to measure the depth and breadth of understanding of emotion words. It contains 20 different emotionally evocative scenarios, each involving two people. After the situation is described, the participant must respond to two questions, "How would you feel?" and "How would the other person feel?" The emotion words that the participants use are then scored on based on their emotional complexity. Participants obtain higher scores on the test if they can clearly describe the emotional reactions of themselves and others, even if the emotions expressed are not justifiable given the presented situation (Lane et al, 1990).

Social insight is described as the ability to evaluate others and to predict what may happen in interpersonal and social interactions (Chapin, 1939). It can be measured using multiple choice tests, in which participants must select the most insightful explanation for an action or the best course of action in hypothetical situations. One measure of social insight is the Chapin Social Insight Test. The difference between the Chapin Social Insight Test and other social intelligence measures is that it measures a given social situation in terms of others behavior rather than an individual's own feelings (Gough, 1965, 1993). The Chapin Social Insight Test focuses more on the participants' awareness of other's emotions and the meaning behind them rather than their own emotions (Sakowski & Woodward, 1980).

Both emotional awareness and social insight are related to the reactions and emotions of individuals. But does being aware of people's emotions mean you are more socially insightful? Is the ability to clearly describe emotions related to the ability to accurately predict others' actions? We hypothesized that individuals who receive a high LEAS score will also have a high social insight score, because both constructs are related to awareness of emotions.

Method

Participants

A total of 858 (546 female, 312 male) undergraduate students from a large western university participated in return for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 (mean 20.61, standard deviation 5.18). In terms of ethnicity, 61.0% identified themselves as White, 12.2% Asian, 10.5% Hispanic, 7.6% Black, 0.7% Native, and 7.9% other.

Measures

The Chapin Social Insight Test (Gough, 1965, 1993) is a 25-item test which asks questions involving social situations. The questions ask how others would feel in those situations. For each item, correct answers receive scores from 1 to 3, with different values given to different items. This study used an 11-item short form with unit-weighting (for all items, correct answers received a score of 1, and incorrect answers get a score of 0). The items that were included were the ones where correct answers received a score of 2 or 3 in the original scoring key.

The LEAS is designed to measure emotional awareness. It consists of twenty situations that each involve two individuals. Participants describe how they would feel and how the other person in the situation would feel. Each scenario is designed to elicit one of four emotions: happiness, anger, sadness, or fear. Responses are scored based upon the complexity of the emotion words used. Scores are not affected by the "correctness" of the emotional response. Instead, scores are based entirely up on the complexity of the emotion words used. If there is no response or the participant didn't use any emotion words, then a score of 0 is given. A score of 1 would be assigned for a description of a physical response (e.g., "I would feel sick") or a statement that the person would not feel an emotional response (e.g., "I would feel nothing"). A level 2 reflects a more generalized statement (e.g. "I would feel good"). Level 3 responses reflect more specific, complex emotions (e.g., "I would feel happy"). Level 4 responses show more complex awareness (e.g., "I would feel depressed and angry"). The top score for one item is a 5, participants receive this score by getting a 4 on both how they would feel and how the other person would feel. Because there are 20 items on the LEAS, the highest possible score is 100.

Procedures

Participants completed the LEAS and Chapin Social Insight Test as during supervised group testing sessions.

Results

There was a weak but significant positive correlation between social insight and emotional awareness ($r(856) = .104, p = .002$).

Conclusions

This study examined the correlation between social insight and emotional awareness. We hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between these two variables. Our results showed a small positive correlation between social insight and emotional awareness. Because our correlation is small, we conclude that people who are aware of emotions may not be able to predict how others will think and react in various situations. This has implications for clinical therapy. If a therapist asks a client how they would feel in certain situations, they may not be accurate. They might provide a detailed and clear description that is simply wrong. Therapists should instead use role plays, to help clients understand how they and others will think and react in different situations. If the client is able to act out the situation and become emotionally provoked, they will better understand how they would feel in that situation. The therapist and client can then work together to develop behavioral strategies that may be appropriate.

References

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