

THE REPRESSIVE POLITICS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

*Daniel Goleman's pop-psychology blockbuster, now twenty-five years old,
turned self-control into a corporate management tool.*

By Merve Emre

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Daniel Goleman's best-seller tells us a lot about the era in which it was written. Illustration by Ard Su

 Save this story

My parents did not often concern themselves with my moral education, but, when they did, whatever wisdom or warnings they had to impart were accompanied by books—typically, pop-psychology best-sellers. Two stand out in my memory: “Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls,” by Mary Pipher, and “Emotional Intelligence,” by Daniel Goleman.

The first I read with great satisfaction. None of my transgressions were as alarming or exciting as what Pipher described—no drugs, no clandestine trips to the family liquor cabinet, no sullen application of nail polish—so her tales of bad behavior left me feeling both titillated and smug. The second book I set aside, as I suspected it had been purchased to point out my more common defects. I was an “angry teen-ager,” with a very sharp tongue and a prickly reserve—the armor I believed a girl with a funny name, born in a foreign country, needed to get through the school days in the American suburbs. “Emotional Intelligence” would have allowed no such excuses. “Anyone can become angry—that is easy,” Aristotle proclaims in the book’s epigraph, sounding, in this context, much like my middle-school health teacher. “But to become 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.” I had no interest in a book that urged self-reform. It was not me that was in need of reform, I felt, but something else, though I could not have said what.

This winter, I finally read “Emotional Intelligence,” in its twenty-fifth-anniversary edition (Bantam). In the past quarter century, the book—which promises to teach its readers what emotions are and how to develop the “emotional literacy” needed “to control and channel one’s urges”—has sold more than five million copies worldwide. This figure includes the first edition, in forty languages, and a tenth-anniversary hardback and paperback. It does not include the audiobook, the e-book, or Goleman’s accompanying series of workbooks and

primers; or the *Harvard Business Review's* “Emotional Intelligence Ultimate” boxed set, a handsome collection of fourteen books with such titles as “Empathy,” “Authentic Leadership,” “Resilience,” and “Mindfulness”; or countless spinoff books, some by Goleman, others by policy analysts or life coaches and aimed at more niche demographics, including “Emotional Intelligence for Women,” “Emotional Intelligence for Law Enforcement, Education, Management, and Leadership,” “Emotional Intelligence for Triathletes and Swimmers,” “Emotionally Intelligent Ninja” (for children between the ages of three and eleven).

Nor does the figure reflect a diverse array of emotional-intelligence assessments, chief among them Goleman's Emotional and Social Competence Inventory, a “360-degree survey” priced at two hundred and ninety-five dollars. Purchase the survey, and a team of consultants will distribute a sixty-eight-item questionnaire to your colleagues, managers, peers, and clients. On a scale of 1 (“Never”) to 5 (“Consistently”), they will be asked to rate how often you are able to describe the effect of your feelings on your actions, how often you lose composure under stress, and how often you view the future with hope. Their answers, along with your self-assessment, will determine whether your emotional performance at work is “outstanding” or merely “average” and thus in need of correction.

Emotional intelligence is often framed as an untapped resource, the idle counterpart to I.Q. (which Goleman treats as a self-evidently valid measure of raw intelligence). Unlike an I.Q. test, Goleman's assessment does not produce a number charted on a standardized curve but a lengthy individual “competency profile.” Bar charts in shades of blue lay out one's relative strengths and weaknesses across four key dimensions of conduct: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management. It's not clear how the results are to be used, although, if pressed, any well-trained personnel consultant would assure you that they are a necessary first step toward self-betterment. As the old management adage goes, “If you can't measure it, you can't improve it.”

In the introduction to the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition, Goleman explains

that the term “emotional intelligence” was first proposed by “Peter Salovey, then a junior professor at Yale, and one of his graduate students, John D. Mayer, in an obscure (and by now extinct) psychology journal.” The journal, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, is, in fact, still extant, and Salovey and Mayer have become, respectively, the president of Yale and a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire. It is revealing to see how much Goleman drew from the original article, and how faithfully. For Salovey and Mayer, emotional intelligence was “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions,” and “to discriminate among them” by speaking a meta-language of emotion. Their interest was in how people spoke about emotions, and how they were conditioned to speak about them—by their families, their workplaces, the psychiatric profession, and other social institutions. Such institutions cultivated a discourse of emotion in which people acquired lifelong fluency.

The sociologist Erving Goffman, in “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1956), described this fluency as essential to “the arts of impression management,” the techniques by which people calibrate their self-comportment to the rules of ritually organized social interactions. In his analysis of how social encounters are regulated, Goffman wrote that an individual “is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact, and a certain amount of poise.” Salovey and Mayer’s idea of emotional intelligence employs the resources of cognitive and behavioral psychology to build on Goffman’s insights, in the measured tones of serious researchers. So, too, does the work of academic psychologists they have inspired.

Although it is surely true, as Goleman writes in the introduction, that his book “made the concept famous,” it also made it over—into a prescriptive art of management. Armed with the cocktail chatter of more glamorous disciplines—neurobiology’s excitable circuits, psychoanalysis’s theories of attunement—and with stirring quotes from great literature, he transformed emotional intelligence from a specialist term into a marquee billing, capable of drawing as many readers as there are personal problems in the world.

Goleman's version of the concept proves endlessly adaptable. Sometimes, as in his discussion of the "remarkable" scholastic and professional achievements of Asian-Americans, emotional intelligence indicates how "a strong cultural work ethic translates into higher motivation, zeal, and persistence—an emotional edge." At other times, as in his discussion of the ability to concentrate, emotional intelligence is "flow," apparent enough when one is writing with ferocious absorption or banging away at the piano or meditating, but "perhaps best captured by ecstatic lovemaking, the merging of two into a fluidly harmonious one." (For those who cannot attain flow, in lovemaking or otherwise, a "milder microflow" may be a more manageable target.) In one chapter, emotional intelligence is the refusal to wallow in one's sadness and to embrace, instead, the "power of positive thinking." In another, on workplace diversity, emotional intelligence enables companies to "appreciate people from diverse cultures (and markets) but also turn that appreciation to competitive advantage." And in the book's final section, which insists on the importance of emotional intelligence in early-childhood education, it becomes the "foundation of democratic societies" and the bedrock of "the virtuous life."

The introduction to the anniversary edition is the only significant update to "Emotional Intelligence." To read the book today is to unearth a time capsule, polished to a fine gleam, and to recall an era when a journalist like Goleman could still speak with untroubled optimism about the power of self-control and compassion to overcome "an onslaught of mean-spirited impulse running amok." What some have called "the long nineteen-nineties" was a time when conversations about respectability and family values, the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy were ascendant. To Goleman, however, the promise of America at the end of the Cold War was threatened by "emotional ineptitude, desperation, and recklessness," the evidence of which was all over the morning news. A nine-year-old had gone "on a rampage," splashing paint on desks and computers after some classmates called him a "baby." An accidental shove had led to a shooting outside a "Manhattan rap club." Children were being fatally beaten for blocking the television when their parents were watching their favorite show. How to make "sense of the senselessness"? Goleman wondered. How to plumb "the realm of the irrational" from which these behaviors had sprung?

At this distance, Goleman's denunciation of irrational and "mean-spirited impulses" looks like a refusal to acknowledge concrete societal factors that were right before his eyes. "All pain, no gain for most workers," authors at the Economic Policy Institute announced in a 1996 report, concluding, in language that was unusually agitated for Washington economists, that, since the seventies, an erosion of wages, a loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs, and greater job insecurity had had a catastrophic effect on the middle class. The pain had intensified with the winnowing away of social services, and even progressive politicians were more concerned with demonstrating their bona fides as business-friendly than with affirming their concern for the working class, Blacks, immigrants, or women. "Mean-spirited" seems too gentle a word for the era's distinctive retreat from progressive struggles. Who could forget Rodney King's beating at the hands of police, the disbelief of the politicians who interrogated Anita Hill, or the empty chairs of the women whom Congress had refused to call as witnesses in support of her testimony?

The answer is Goleman, who seems as oblivious of social injustice now as he was back then. For him, the issue is a decline in morality and an "emotional malaise" that is the price we have paid for living a "modern life" filled with "postmodern dilemmas." The introduction sets high stakes, but the rest of the book chronicles more prosaic forms of dissatisfaction resulting from a lack of emotional intelligence: unemployment, divorce, depression, anxiety, drifting boredom. How to navigate skirmishes with your colleagues, so that no one squanders precious hours of the working day grandstanding or sulking or crafting passive-aggressive e-mails or weeping in a bathroom stall? How to quarrel with your spouse so that no one raises a hand or threatens to leave? "Those who are at the mercy of impulse—who lack self-control—suffer a moral deficiency," Goleman writes. "The question is, how can we bring intelligence to our emotions—and civility to our streets and caring to our communal life?"

Gradually, one sees why the concept of emotional intelligence won such wide acceptance. It is not a quality or even an attribute but a regimen of restraint. It is a collection of practices—assessment, feedback, coaching, meditation—for monitoring yourself and others, in a way that marries the promise of total self-

actualization to the perils of absolute social deprivation. For all its righteous proclamations about what ails the modern world, its goals are straightforwardly conservative: to encourage people to stay in school, to secure stable employment, to bind themselves to their work, to have families and keep them intact, and to raise their children to repeat this same cycle of productive activity.

Emotional intelligence, in other words, is a self-help doctrine deeply indebted to the moralizing ideology of neoliberalism. The word “neoliberalism,” with its critics and counter-critics, is now used so casually as to have become almost meaningless, so it’s worth going back to a definition offered by Michel Foucault, one of the first theorists to discuss the term. In a series of lectures he delivered in 1979—a few months before Margaret Thatcher took office in Britain and a year before Ronald Reagan was elected President—Foucault described neoliberal ideology as the application of an economic model to “every social actor in general insofar as he or she gets married, for example, or commits a crime, or raises children, gives affection and spends time with the kids.” Any of these actions could be seen as entailing certain costs and benefits, certain risks and rewards, which, if calculated properly, would result in the “optimal allocation of scarce resources to alternative ends.” The subject shaped by this model, *Homo economicus*, pledged himself to the pursuit of absolute personal freedom and responded to any changes in his environment with rational self-interest. To anything that lay outside his self-interest, he remained “blind,” Foucault claimed.

In pop psychology, such blindness is elevated to the first principle of craft, in a way that conceals the link between the psychological and the political. The genre’s preferred method of narration is the parable. An arresting example of human behavior is clipped from a newspaper article or a research paper. Stripped of the social and historical detail that might give it depth and complexity, it furnishes a readily digestible lesson about right and wrong, or, in Goleman’s case, productive and unproductive allocations of emotion in the “subterranean economy of the psyche.”

The method invariably leaves traces, and, reading “Emotional Intelligence,” one begins to sense that Goleman’s examples are telling only half the story. For a book

whose ultimate goal is to urge people to ingratiate themselves with their colleagues or be a little less shouty in their marriages, a startling number of chapters feature tales of capricious killings and casual violence. A father, inexplicably armed and overwhelmed by his evolutionary fight-or-flight instinct, shoots his daughter when she jumps out of a closet to frighten him. A heroin addict on parole goes “bananas,” as he later puts it, robbing an apartment and killing two young women. A star student stabs his high-school physics teacher in the neck, providing Goleman with dramatic evidence that high I.Q. and good grades do not determine success.

Looking up Goleman’s sources, one soon discerns a pattern in what has been left out. The father who shot his daughter? At the time, in 1994, he was living in West Monroe, Louisiana; the state had the highest rate of poverty in the country, and the city’s residents were telling reporters that they couldn’t even visit a shopping mall without the fear of being robbed in the parking lot. The chief deputy on duty that night, interviewed by the Associated Press after the shooting, said that it revealed “how scared people are in their homes these days.” The heroin addict who killed the two young women? The example is an older one, from 1963, and a more familiar story than Goleman lets on. The heroin addict, who was white, was not caught for more than a year, while the police arrested and extracted a confession from a young Black man, George Whitmore, Jr.; the Supreme Court later called the case the country’s “most conspicuous example” of police coercion. And the boy who stabbed his physics teacher? He was a Jamaican immigrant living in southern Florida who allegedly tried to kill himself along with his teacher. A judge found the boy to be temporarily insane owing to “his obsession with academic excellence” and his conviction that he would rather die than fail to attend Harvard Medical School. American elite higher education remained, for him, the key that would unlock the good life.

Start to slot in cities and dates, to fill in the gaps in history, and Goleman’s diagnoses seem beside the point. This failing is inherent in the self-help genre, whose premise is that the capacity for change always lies within ourselves. Goleman promises to show his readers how to free themselves from the “emotional hijacking” of the brain by biochemical surges, the body’s unwitting

tendency to set off its own “neural tripwire.” This language, with its hints of terrorism and home invasion, encourages readers to stay alert, continually monitoring their reactions in order to bring them in line with accepted rituals of emotional expression.

It is a vision of personal freedom achieved, paradoxically, through constant self-regulation. “Emotional Intelligence” imagines a world constituted of little more than a series of civil interactions between employer and employee, husband and wife, friend and neighbor. People are linked by nothing more than, as Foucault summarized, the “instinct, sentiment, and sympathy” that underwrite their mutual success and their shared “repugnance for the misfortune of individuals” who cannot get a grip on their inner lives.

The concept of emotional intelligence arose when the global economy was undergoing a sharp structural transformation, with the decline of manufacturing and the expansion of the service sector in the world’s largest markets. Anyone who has visited a retail store or sat in a classroom knows that service work is a mode of production organized around communicative interactions. It places Goffman’s arts of impression management—the friendliness of a saleswoman’s voice, the elegance of a teacher’s gesture, the charisma of an executive’s presentation—at the heart of productivity. Arlie Russell Hochschild, in her 1983 book “The Managed Heart,” coined the term “emotional labor” for this kind of work. “Day-care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, airports, stores, call centers, classrooms, social welfare offices, dental offices—in all these workplaces, gladly or reluctantly, brilliantly or poorly, employees do emotional labor,” she wrote. “The poor salesclerk working in an elite clothing boutique manages envy. The Wall Street stock-trader manages panic.”

Since most service work cannot be made more efficient with machines, the productivity of emotional labor can be increased only by encouraging workers to cultivate displays of emotion that are more convincing—both to others and to themselves. As Hochschild notes, “The pinch between a real but disapproved feeling on the one hand and an idealized one on the other” becomes an economic

liability. Emotional labor involves minimizing that pinch, transforming a surface display into a deep conviction.

What appeared in Hochschild as a Marxist feminist critique of alienation among service workers resurfaces in Goleman as earnest advice for what one must do to get ahead, or perhaps simply to survive. By turning “emotional labor” into “emotional intelligence,” Goleman replaces the concrete social relation between an employee and her employer with a vague individual aptitude. Hochschild’s envious, inflexible salesclerk reappears in Goleman’s book, now adapted for his purposes. She has grown irritable and depressed. “Her sales then decline, making her feel like a failure, which feeds her depression,” Goleman explains. His proposed solution is more work, better work, more enthusiastic work, first as a superficial distraction, then as a deep salve: “Sales would be less likely to decline, and the very experience of making a sale might bolster her self-confidence.” Her ability to control and channel her negative emotions will reap both economic and moral rewards. Besides, what choice does she have if she wants to keep her job and make her living?

Emotional labor, estranging workers from their inner feelings, refashions the ostensibly private realm of the self as an extension of social and corporate interests. These incursions raise the question of how much any emotion originates from and belongs solely to the individual. Are people’s natural capacities for empathy and warmth co-opted by the impersonal structures of the market? Or do people reproduce exactly the smiles and lines that are given to them by advertising, training programs, and hospitality scripts? Only one thing seems certain: the more we experience emotional labor as a feigned display rather than as a true feeling, the greater our psychological angst. “When display is required by the job, it is usually feeling that has to change,” Hochschild writes. For the individual worker, there is every reason to believe in the script she recites. She wins nothing and risks everything by asserting her freedom from it.

While keeping certain kinds of workers anxious and pliable, the concept of emotional intelligence also renders the emotional lives and the labor conditions of non-service workers wholly irrelevant. One sees this in the limited range of players in Goleman’s success stories; the emotionally intelligent invariably seem

to be managers, engineers, consultants, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. For him, the only relevant question is who will come out on top: “the manipulative, jungle-fighter boss” or “the virtuoso in interpersonal skills” who embraces “managing with heart.” His implied reader is someone capable of “dropping the small preoccupations—health, bills, even doing well”; someone for whom “going bankrupt” is as unlikely as “a loved one dying in a plane crash.” Never mind that, in some states, the probability of filing for personal bankruptcy is as high as one in two hundred, whereas the probability of losing a loved one in a plane crash is one in eleven million. In Goleman’s universe, both are equally unthinkable.

Time has not been good to “Emotional Intelligence,” and it is now almost too easy a target for criticism. But it is also criticism-proof: the ideas that animate it are everywhere, and their appeal is hard to deny. After all, what could be objectionable in asking people to care for one another and be aware of how their actions affect others?

Perhaps the best response is to reimagine the concept in a form that shows what lies beneath it. Envision “Emotional Intelligence” and the books descended from it as morality plays for a secular era, performed before audiences of mainly white professionals. In a theatre that admits no light or sound from the outside world, the audience watches as poor, begrimed laborers and criminals are pushed onstage to shoot their kids and stab their teachers. Pricked by the masked vices of Rage, Depression, and Anxiety, shamed by the veiled virtues of Empathy, Mindfulness, and Reason, the players have no chance at salvation. The lessons of emotional intelligence are not theirs to learn.

When the curtain falls, the audience members turn to one another to talk softly about how to teach their children to avoid such a fate, how to live happily in a world where one is bound to be inconvenienced by the violent impulses of others. Even from the front row, they cannot see that the masks and veils hide a reality in which they are no freer than the players they condemn. To pull back the mask would be to uncover an impotence they all share. And it might allow the audience and the cast to rise together, becoming angry to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, toward the right people,

who have, for the past twenty-five years, sold them some of the most alluring and quietly repressive ideas in recent history. ♦

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