

Emotional Literacy and Granularity: Gaps and Opportunities in Business Leadership Frameworks

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) is widely recognised as a cornerstone of leadership and organisational success, yet current frameworks fall short in addressing the nuanced skills of emotional literacy (the ability to identify and label a wide range of emotions) and emotional granularity (the capacity to recognise and respond to subtle emotional distinctions). This review employed a systematic keyword search across seven multidisciplinary databases, including SCOPUS, Web of Science, and JSTOR, prioritising peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2025. Filters were applied to ensure relevance to workplace applications, focusing on emotional literacy and granularity within business and leadership contexts, and further refined using filters for context, peer review, and recency. The review highlights critical gaps in EI frameworks, including their reliance on self-assessment tools and broad emotional categories. By critiquing these frameworks, the article advocates further exploring emotional literacy and granularity as essential components for improving leadership effectiveness, workplace culture, and psychological safety. It outlines the theoretical underpinnings of these concepts and proposes directions for future research, offering fresh insights into their untapped potential for addressing modern workplace challenges.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, emotional granularity, leadership development, organisational behaviour

1. Introduction

Despite widespread acknowledgement by over 90% of HR professionals that emotional intelligence (EI) is critical when hiring for leadership roles, organisational practices often fail to prioritise it during managerial selection processes (Varis & Jolkkonen, 2019; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2018). This disconnect stems, in part, from the lack of clearly defined and measurable components within EI frameworks, which leaves organisations unable to evaluate or apply these skills in leadership contexts consistently. In response to increasing workplace complexity, many organisations have introduced broader constructs such as diversity intelligence (DQ) and spiritual intelligence (SQ) to enhance resilience, inclusion, and purpose in leadership (Hacker & Washington, 2017; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2018). While EI research has explored broad dimensions such as self-awareness and social awareness, its conceptual ambiguity and lack of consensus on the fundamental conceptualisation of EI have left critical, nuanced competencies like emotional literacy—the ability to identify and label a wide range of emotions—and emotional granularity, the capacity to distinguish and respond to subtle emotional nuances – underexplored (Kim & Kim, 2017). Addressing this gap is essential to strengthening the core of EI and ensuring that leadership development initiatives are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of emotional competencies. The article explores these concepts further.

While well-established in therapeutic and psychological contexts, these concepts remain largely absent from organisational training and leadership development (Kashdan et al., 2015; Wilson-Mendenhall & Dunne, 2021). Current EI frameworks often rely on broad, self-assessment-based tools that provide limited insights into emotional literacy, and business training rarely considers emotional granularity (Black et al., 2019; Côté, 2014). This omission leaves managers and employees ill-equipped to operationalise EI meaningfully, reducing core skills like empathy, emotional regulation, and social competence to surface-level applications (Sheldon et al., 2014).

This review critiques emotional intelligence frameworks and proposes integrating emotional literacy and granularity as foundational components for leadership effectiveness. Focusing on theoretical underpinnings and

initial practical applications offers a roadmap for future research into these nuanced competencies.

1.1 Gaps in Emotional Intelligence Frameworks in Business

Despite the widespread adoption of EI frameworks in business (Ackley, 2016), key gaps remain:

- Limited focus on identifying and labelling specific emotions (Côté, 2014; Fiori et al., 2022).
- Reliance on self-assessment tools that lack granularity (Conte, 2005; Fiori et al., 2022).
- Absence of targeted interventions for emotional literacy in leadership development (Fiori et al., 2022; Humphrey et al., 2016).

These gaps highlight the need for theoretical and practical advancements in applying emotional literacy and granularity to business contexts (Conte, 2005; Fiori et al., 2022; Humphrey et al., 2016).

The gaps in EI frameworks underscore the need for a detailed review of existing literature, which reveals the untapped potential of emotional literacy and granularity in business settings. To address these gaps, this review explores the intersection of emotional literacy and granularity within existing EI frameworks and their potential applications in business contexts

2. Methodology

This review systematically examines the integration of emotional intelligence (EI), emotional literacy, and emotional granularity within business leadership contexts. Although EI is widely recognised in organisational development, its application to leadership and workplace dynamics remains underexplored (Ackley, 2016; Carmeli, 2003).

A systematic search process was undertaken to identify and analyse relevant literature. The review prioritised high-quality, peer-reviewed articles to ensure rigour and relevance. Ten journals, identified using the SCImago Journal Rankings (SJR), were selected based on their impact and focus on business, human resources, and organisational behaviour. These included the Academy of Management Journal and the Strategic Management Journal, which are highly regarded for their contributions to leadership research.

The search was conducted across seven multidisciplinary databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest One, EBSCO, PubMed, and PsycINFO. Keywords included "emotional intelligence," "emotional literacy," "emotional granularity," "leadership," and "workplace dynamics." Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were used to refine searches, ensuring coverage of overlapping concepts. Filters limited results to peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2025, written in English, and available in full text.

The exclusion criteria were clearly defined to ensure the review remained focused on the research objectives. Articles addressing general applications of EI—such as in therapy, education, or youth—were excluded unless they explicitly related to leadership, team performance, or workplace dynamics. Additionally, articles were excluded if they lacked methodological rigour, provided insufficient data, or focused on unrelated domains such as healthcare or counselling. Titles and abstracts were assessed to identify studies meeting the inclusion criteria, followed by a full-text review to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Figure 1 illustrates the search and selection process, highlighting the filtering criteria and reasons for exclusion at each stage.

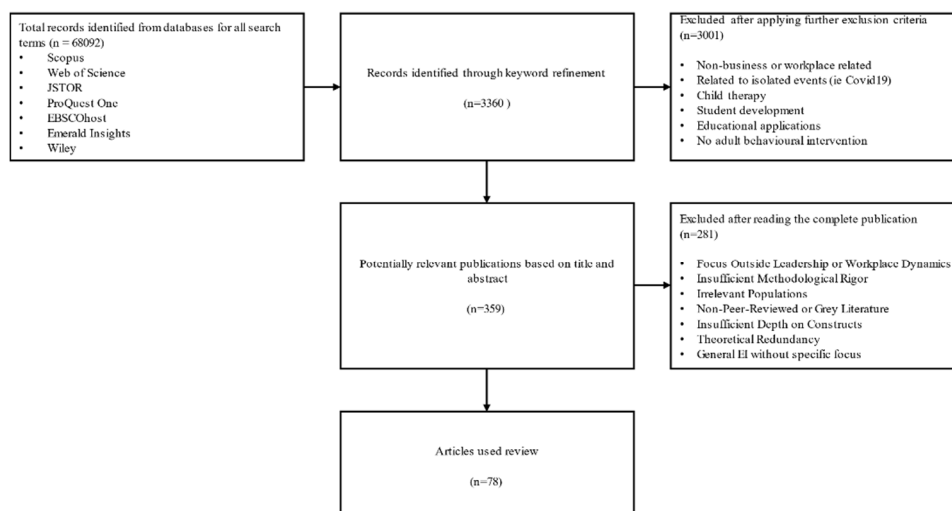


Figure 1. Article Search and Selection

The initial dataset of 68,092 records was refined using keyword searches and Boolean combinations, including terms such as 'emotional intelligence,' 'emotional literacy,' 'emotional granularity,' 'leadership,' and 'workplace dynamics.' Filters limited results to peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2025, written in English, and accessible in full text. Full keyword combinations and Boolean operators are detailed in Appendix A.

A bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to identify thematic clusters within the dataset. Keywords extracted from the references were grouped into clusters based on co-occurrence patterns. These clusters represent distinct thematic areas within the emotional intelligence research landscape, reflecting both conceptual and applied dimensions. A keyword co-occurrence map was generated to visualise the relationships and frequencies of terms, with clusters reflecting major research areas.

The results of this analysis, including the keyword co-occurrence map and a summary of the thematic clusters, are presented in the Results section (see Figure 2 and Table 2).

3. Bibliometric Insights and Thematic Clusters

The bibliometric analysis identified seven thematic clusters within the emotional intelligence research landscape. These clusters, derived from keyword co-occurrence patterns, highlight key areas of focus and interconnected topics in the dataset. The analysis provides a visual representation of the relationships between terms (Figure 2) and a summary of the thematic clusters (Table 1).

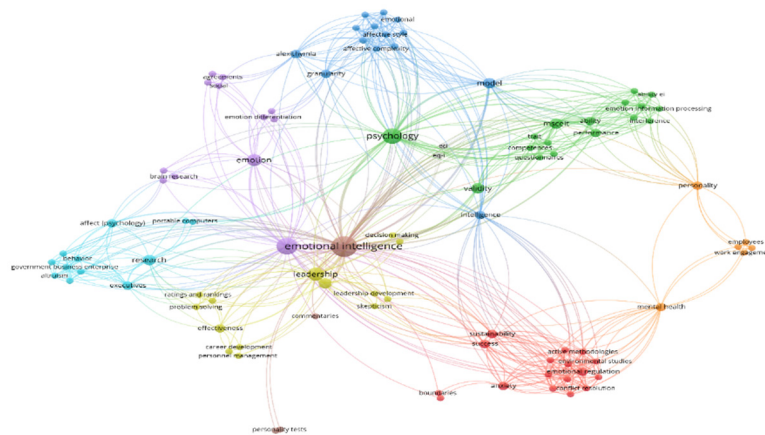


Figure 2. Keyword co-occurrence map generated from bibliometric analysis

Table 1. Summary of thematic clusters identified through bibliometric analysis

Cluster 1: Personal Development and Learning	This cluster emphasizes themes such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, and learning, success, sustainability, and wisdom, particularly in contexts like education and personal growth.
Cluster 2: Psychological Measures and Performance	Key topics include psychological assessments, competencies, stress, performance, and validity, focusing on the intersection of psychology and workplace or individual evaluations.
Cluster 3: Emotional Complexity and Models	This cluster centers on emotional differentiation, granularity, awareness, and psychological construction, highlighting cultural and social dynamics.
Cluster 4: Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness	Topics include leadership development, emotional intelligence, decision-making, and transformational leadership, addressing workplace and leadership methodologies.
Cluster 5: Cognitive and Social Behaviors	Focus areas include cognition, reasoning, brain research, emotions, job satisfaction, and attitudes in professional and social settings.
Cluster 6: Human and Social Sciences	Themes revolve around boundaries, anxiety, self-evaluation, and semantics within social sciences research.
Cluster 7: Workplace Well-being and Engagement	This cluster explores individual differences, mental health, personality, and employee engagement.

The bibliometric analysis identified seven thematic clusters, ranging from personal and educational development to leadership effectiveness and workplace well-being. These clusters provide an organisational framework for the subsequent analysis and discussion of emotional intelligence research and its applications.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Historical Context of Emotional Intelligence

The concept of EI has evolved over several decades, with its roots in psychology and sociology. Early contributions include Weschler's theory of non-cognitive intelligence (Boburka, 2021), Maslow's focus on self-actualization and emotional development as integral to personal growth (Kaufman, 2023), and Gardner's inter- and intrapersonal intelligences (Arteaga-Checa et al., 2023). In 1990, Salovey and Mayer formalised EI as the ability to monitor, discriminate, and use awareness of emotions to guide thinking and action (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003), while Daniel Goleman's popularised model in 1995 categorised it into five core segments: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills (Chandrapal et al., 2022).

In business, EI is widely regarded as a critical factor in team formation, conflict management, leadership, and organisational culture, with higher EI levels within a team correlated with overall team cohesion and performance (Babatunde et al., 2023; Black et al., 2019; Kashdan et al., 2015). However, while anecdotal evidence supports its value, there remains a lack of targeted research and objective methods to operationalise its concepts effectively, with valid evidence of EI measures lagging behind the reliability evidence (Conte, 2005). While many practitioners and academics embrace EI, they do so without clear empirical support (Antonakis, 2004). A fundamental oversight in these frameworks is the limited focus on emotions themselves—both their identification and nuanced application (Fiori & Vesely-Maillefer, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2019).

Most EI models fail to define, or even mention, specific emotions let alone provide tools for recognising and responding to emotional nuances with traditional models failing to test the complexity of daily life emotions and context (Coppini et al., 2023). Popular assessments often rely on subjective self-evaluation, offering generalised insights that rarely go beyond surface-level concepts. Without the ability to label and understand a wide range of emotions, it is challenging for leaders to demonstrate empathy, foster psychological safety, or build high-performing teams. Most EI studies opt for self-assessment frameworks due to time and cost at the expense of assessment validity (Chandrapal et al., 2022).

This section critically examines the existing literature on EI, organised under subheadings to provide depth and focus on the key gaps in its application to business contexts.

4.2 Emotional Intelligence in Business and Leadership

Emotional intelligence has been widely studied, highlighting its positive correlation with organisational success. For instance, higher levels of EI have been shown to enhance team cohesion and improve performance, suggesting that greater self-efficacy contributes to increased self-awareness (Black et al., 2019). Similarly, it has been demonstrated that senior managers with higher EI displayed more positive attitudes toward work and fostered stronger teamwork (Carmeli, 2003). It has also been noted that managers with higher EI are perceived as more effective by their teams and establish more inspiring and impactful relationships (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). Additionally, significant improvements were observed in participants' EI following a targeted training program, measured through pre- and post-training self-assessments (Chandrapal et al., 2022).

Despite these promising outcomes, critics argue that the impact of EI is often overstated. Research suggests that personality traits and cognitive intelligence may play a more significant role in driving performance, with EI adding minimal explanatory power once these factors are accounted for (Ackley, 2016; Conte, 2005). Moreover, decision-making, adaptability, and transformational leadership often benefit more from contextual factors, such as access to relevant information, trust-based environments, and skills training, rather than EI alone. EI measures also add little predictive value once cognitive intelligence and personality traits are considered (Harms & Credé, 2010). These findings challenge the universality of EI as a critical driver of success across all contexts.

Measuring EI also presents challenges, particularly with the widespread use of self-rating assessments. Such tools are prone to biases, including overconfidence and outright lying, which can distort results. It has been shown that self-rating assessments can be manipulated by participants if choosing to answer the questions for different contexts (such as answering honestly compared to answering as if they were applying for a job), once again highlighting that the EI profile differs from the ability to recognise and regulate emotions with volition (Day & Carroll, 2008). Managers who overestimate their emotional ability skills also tend to lack self-awareness and misperceive their strengths and weaknesses (Bratton et al., 2011). Furthermore, high performance and positive relationships are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including personality, professional

experience, education, mental health, work-life balance, and environmental conditions (Mount et al., 1998; Tisu et al., 2020). As a result, it is often difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between EI and organisational outcomes, underscoring the need for more rigorous and context-specific research, especially when those models that utilise self-rating frameworks build on well-established personality dimensions (Conte, 2005; Santhi, 2023).

4.3 Emotional Intelligence Models in Business

Several prominent EI models have been applied in business contexts, each offering unique insights while facing specific critiques. This section examines three key models—Goleman’s, Mayer-Salovey, and Bar-On—focusing on their relevance to leadership and workplace dynamics and their limitations in addressing emotional literacy and granularity.

4.3.1 Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence Model

Goleman’s model is one of the most widely adopted in business, emphasising the practical benefits of EI for leadership, culture, and performance. It combines personality traits, social competence, and leadership behaviours with self-assessment tools like the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI) to measure EI (Goleman & Cherniss, 2024). However, these tools often rely on subjective reflections, asking individuals to evaluate their ability to manage stress, recognise emotional triggers, or resolve conflicts.

Critics argue that such assessments focus on vague, surface-level concepts, offering limited insight into the nuanced emotional skills required for effective leadership (Doe et al., 2015). While the model specifically identifies awareness and self-regulation as critical measures of EI, it fails to introduce more than a couple of specific emotions in its assessments and framework. This absence of emotional literacy and the weak scientific method behind its initial research hinders the model’s depth and applicability in complex organisational contexts (Ackley, 2016; Hoemann, Khan, et al., 2021). While Goleman’s model lacks depth in emotional granularity, its emphasis on self-awareness and empathy provides a practical entry point for introducing EI concepts in leadership training (Doe et al., 2015).

4.3.2 The Mayer-Salovey Model

The Mayer-Salovey model, often called the ability model, defines EI as a set of measurable cognitive abilities, including perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions. Unlike Goleman’s framework, this model emphasises the use of emotional information in decision-making and includes tools like the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), which assesses the identification and interpretation of specific emotions (Boburka, 2021). While this approach offers greater emotional nuance and is grounded in psychological research, critics highlight its rigidity. The model’s narrow focus on cognitive processes overlooks other significant drivers of behaviour, such as personality traits and environmental factors (Conte, 2005). Additionally, the MSCEIT’s reliance on Ekman’s basic emotion theory (BET) reflects a broader limitation inherent in BET, which historically emphasised a narrow set of emotions at the expense of exploring emotional granularity (Hutto et al., 2018). Although MSCEIT’s focus on basic emotions limits its granularity, its cognitive approach provides a structured way to introduce EI in analytical and data-driven workplace environments.

4.3.3 The Bar-On Model

The Bar-On model takes a holistic approach, integrating emotional, social, and stress-management competencies to enhance personal well-being and adaptability. It incorporates broad emotional concepts such as self-regard, empathy, and stress tolerance, making it versatile for leadership development and workplace performance (Bar-On & Fiedeldej-Van Dijk, 2022). However, like Goleman’s model, the Bar-On framework relies heavily on self-reported skills, leading to subjective bias and a lack of precision (Conte, 2005; Odukoya et al., 2020; Petrides, 2010). Crucially, it does not emphasise emotional literacy or granularity, limiting its effectiveness in contexts requiring detailed emotional insights (Razzaq et al., 2016). This omission makes the Bar-On model better suited for general well-being applications than for addressing the nuanced emotional challenges of modern business environments.

Table 2 summarises the strengths and limitations of key EI models, underscoring their shared gaps in addressing emotional literacy and granularity.

Table 2. Comparison of Popular Emotional Intelligence Models in Business.

ASPECT	MAYER-SALOVEY MODEL (ABILITY MODEL)	GOLEMAN'S MODEL (MIXED MODEL)	BAR-ON MODEL (MIXED MODEL)
DEFINITION	EI as measurable abilities: perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions.	EI as a mix of emotional skills, personality traits, and leadership behaviours.	EI as emotional and social competencies influencing well-being and performance.
STRUCTURE	4 Branches: Perceiving, Using, Understanding, Managing.	5 Components: Self-awareness, Self-regulation, Motivation, Empathy, Social Skills.	5 Domains: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Adaptability, Stress Management, General Mood.
MEASUREMENT TOOLS	MSCEIT: Objective measure based on performance tasks.	ESCI: Self-assessment and generalised reflections.	EQ-i: Self-assessment with subjective reporting of emotional and social competencies.
SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION	Strong psychological and emotional research base.	Combines scientific and applied concepts; business-focused.	Broad scope; overlaps with personality constructs.
DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL LITERACY	Moderate: Focuses on basic universals (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger).	Low: Focuses on broad, surface-level concepts rather than specific emotions.	Minimal: Primarily targets broad emotional categories, lacking specificity.
DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL GRANULARITY	Moderate: Recognises emotional nuances within measurable abilities but limited to a narrow focus.	Low: Relies on self-assessment of generalised skills with limited attention to nuances.	Minimal: Emphasises general emotional categories without addressing subtle distinctions.
STRENGTHS IN BUSINESS CONTEXTS	Provides clear frameworks for training emotional skills such as regulation and understanding.	Practical, widely recognised in leadership training programs.	Holistic approach useful for overall well-being and adaptability in leadership.
CRITIQUES IN BUSINESS CONTEXTS	Limited applicability to real-world business dynamics; overly cognitive focus ignores behavioural aspects.	Lacks depth in emotional literacy and granularity; relies heavily on subjective assessments.	Broad and unspecific, leading to limited actionable insights in nuanced business scenarios.

Source. (Ackley, 2016; Conte, 2005; Fiori et al., 2014; Fiori et al., 2022; Leonidou et al., 2019; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; Santhi, 2023).

4.4 Gaps in Emotional Intelligence Models

As Table 2 illustrates that while each model offers valuable insights, their shared limitations—particularly the lack of emphasis on emotional literacy and granularity, combined with the self-assessment of generalised concepts—underscore the need for more comprehensive frameworks that address nuanced emotional dynamics in business contexts.

While the three models reviewed offer varying levels of emotional assessment, they lack a comprehensive understanding of the scope and depth required for effective emotional literacy and granularity. In business environments, EI frameworks are particularly deficient in addressing these critical dimensions, which are essential for understanding individual behaviour, reactions, and underlying neurological drivers.

The absence of these elements in EI models limits their practical application in leadership and organisational contexts. Effective EI requires nuanced responses that consider the specific emotion, its context, and the psychological factors influencing it (Hoemann, Nielson, et al., 2021; Ybarra et al., 2013). Without these capabilities, EI frameworks risk remaining superficial, focusing on specific negative behaviours and failing to provide actionable insights for managing complex interpersonal dynamics or fostering psychological safety in

the workplace (McClellan & DiClementi, 2017).

These critiques highlight a significant gap in existing EI models: while they provide foundational insights for leadership effectiveness, their limited emphasis on nuanced emotional competencies, such as emotional literacy and granularity, reduces their applicability in complex organisational contexts (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; McCleskey, 2014). To advance EI in business, future frameworks must incorporate tools for identifying and responding to a broader spectrum of emotions, enabling leaders to better navigate complex interpersonal dynamics and foster more inclusive and psychologically safe workplaces. While these models lack depth in emotional granularity, they provide foundational frameworks for introducing EI in leadership training.

4.5 Introduction to Emotional Literacy and Granularity: Key Concepts

Emotional literacy and emotional granularity are firmly established in psychology, and are linked to better emotional regulation, interpersonal understanding, and behavioural outcomes (Tan et al., 2022; Yoon et al., 2013). Despite their significant potential, emotional literacy and granularity remain underutilised in business contexts, where they could enhance leadership, team dynamics, and organisational culture.

Emotional literacy allows individuals to move beyond broad terms like happiness or sadness, distinguishing between joy, gratitude, pride, or excitement, and between disappointment, grief, loneliness, or hopelessness. Emotional granularity further builds on this foundation by helping individuals recognise the subtle distinctions among emotions such as embarrassment, humiliation, shame, and guilt (Brown, 2012; Cutright, 2014; Gibson, 2018). These distinctions matter as they guide tailored responses to behaviours, allowing managers and leaders to address the underlying psychological and situational drivers influencing their teams.

To understand emotional literacy and granularity, it's useful to examine key models of emotion that have shaped our understanding of this field. While these models rarely reference emotional literacy or granularity explicitly, they offer insights into how emotions are categorised and experienced:

- **Paul Ekman's Basic Emotions Model:** One of the most widely recognised frameworks, Ekman identifies six core emotions—happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, fear, and surprise—based on universal facial expressions. While foundational, this model is limited in scope, offering little room for emotional nuance or complexity (Coppini et al., 2023).
- **Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions:** This model expands on Ekman's work, proposing eight primary bipolar emotions—joy/sadness, trust/disgust, fear/anger, and surprise/anticipation—that combine to form up to 32 secondary emotions. While it introduces some granularity, it still views emotions as relatively fixed categories (Hoemann, Nielson, et al., 2021).
- **Cowen and Keltner's 27 Emotion Categories:** This framework moves away from rigid categories, presenting a continuum of 27 blended emotional states. It reflects the complexity of emotional experiences but lacks precise boundaries, making it harder to operationalise in structured environments like business (Cowen & Keltner, 2017).
- **Lisa Feldman Barrett's Theory of Constructed Emotion:** Barrett shifts the focus from fixed emotions to the idea that the brain constructs emotions based on physiological states, prior experiences, and conceptual knowledge. This theory aligns closely with emotional granularity, viewing emotions as dynamic and context-dependent rather than predefined (Barrett, 2017; Dreisbach, 2023).
- **Brené Brown's Atlas of the Heart:** Based on extensive research, Brown identifies 87 unique emotions, arguing that the ability to name and interpret these nuances directly affects emotional regulation and interpersonal responses. Her work emphasises the real-world importance of distinguishing between emotions like envy, jealousy, admiration, and covetousness, each of which has unique drivers and implications (Bernard, 2023; Brown, 2012, 2022).

4.6 The Case for Emotional Literacy and Granularity in Business Leadership

While emotional literacy and granularity are well-established in therapeutic contexts, their application in business is lacking, despite their potential to transform leadership and team management. For example, recognising the difference between envy and jealousy—whether rooted in desire or fear of loss—allows managers to address specific emotional drivers and mitigate misunderstandings. Similarly, understanding whether a colleague is experiencing embarrassment, humiliation, or shame enables leaders to tailor their responses, shaping how effectively individuals process and recover from challenges.

Most emotional training for managers equips them only to identify broad emotional states, such as whether a team member is unhappy, without delving into the causes or subcategories of that unhappiness (Ackley, 2016; Conte, 2005). Research reveals that many individuals can only label a handful of emotions—usually aligned with

Ekman's six basic emotions—despite experiencing a far broader emotional spectrum throughout their day (Brown, 2022). This lack of specificity limits a manager's ability to foster psychological safety, regulate their own emotions, and support team members effectively. Similarly, Barrett (2017) and the theory of constructed emotion, which posits that emotions are constructed based on physiological and contextual inputs, could inform leadership practices by helping managers identify the underlying causes of team members' emotional responses, fostering more targeted and empathetic interventions.

Differentiating between emotions like jealousy, envy, admiration, and covetousness is critical in business contexts, where underlying emotional drivers significantly impact behaviour and decision-making (Lerner et al., 2015). Brown's findings illustrate how these distinctions influence how individuals process events, regulate their emotions, and respond to challenges. Yet, most EI frameworks fail to equip managers with the tools needed to develop these nuanced skills, leaving a significant gap in leadership training and organisational support (Ackley, 2016; Conte, 2005).

4.6.1 The Role of Emotional Literacy and Granularity in Emotional Regulation, Decision-Making, and Interpersonal Dynamics.

Emotional literacy and granularity are critical components of emotional regulation, interpersonal dynamics, and effective decision-making. While the Mayer-Salovey model highlights the ability to perceive and understand emotions, true emotional literacy emphasises the accurate definition and articulation of emotions. Studies in therapeutic contexts show that clients with higher levels of emotional literacy engage more effectively in interventions and achieve more favourable outcomes (Nyklíček et al., 2015). Similarly, individuals skilled in emotional granularity demonstrate stronger coping mechanisms, greater resilience, and improved mental health by navigating complex emotional situations with precision (Kashdan et al., 2015).

In leadership contexts, the same principles apply. If EI, as per Goleman's model, relies on emotional awareness, regulation, and social skills, then defining and recognising emotions becomes a foundational skill. Leaders who can accurately identify the specific emotions behind a team member's behaviour—whether frustration, disappointment, or insecurity—are better equipped to respond in ways that build trust and foster collaboration (Barrett, 2017; Canon, 2019; Kashdan et al., 2015). Without these insights, empathy and social skills often rely on innate traits rather than skills that can be refined and developed.

The intersection of EI with emotional literacy and granularity highlights a critical gap in current EI frameworks. The inability to define, recognise, and respond to emotional variations undermines key competencies like self-awareness, empathy, and social skills. Emotional granularity is essential for effective self-regulation. When emotions are left undefined, individuals struggle to pinpoint the underlying drivers of their behaviour, limiting their ability to manage emotional responses effectively (Kashdan et al., 2015; Kimhy et al., 2014).

4.6.2 Lessons from Therapy and Education

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of emotional literacy and granularity in therapeutic settings. Hoemann, Khan, et al. (2021) identified a strong correlation between clients' ability to identify and differentiate emotions and improved outcomes, including better emotional regulation, more effective coping strategies, and overall therapeutic success. Similarly, Kim et al. (2017) found that emotional literacy directly supports clients in processing emotionally taxing situations, reducing symptoms of depression and fostering greater emotional stability.

Emotion, as a complex branch of psychology, intersects with neurology, behaviour, and regulation. Adding to this complexity, Fiori et al. (2022) distinguished between a knowledge component (understanding emotions) and a processing component (applying emotional knowledge), aligning with Feldman Barrett's theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2017). Their findings reinforced the positive relationship between emotional literacy, granularity, and performance outcomes.

While business environments differ from therapeutic settings, the goals of coaching, professional development, cultural transformation, and change management parallel therapeutic processes. For leaders, the ability to label, recognise, and differentiate emotions is fundamental to developing genuine EI (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2023; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2018). Without these skills, responses to emotional challenges rely on innate traits rather than informed strategies, limiting their effectiveness.

As workplaces become more complex due to evolving regulations, diversity and inclusion initiatives, technological advancements, and flexible work arrangements, identifying specific emotions and their origins becomes increasingly critical. Managers must understand that emotional responses reflect underlying thought patterns and influence future behaviours. Reeck et al. (2016) proposed the social-regulatory cycle to guide

emotional regulation in others, built on the effective identification and interpretation of specific emotions.

By improving emotional literacy and granularity, leaders can better recognise and regulate their emotions while shaping more constructive team dynamics. While these findings are rooted in therapy, their implications extend to workplace settings, where leaders must navigate complex emotional dynamics to foster psychological safety and team cohesion. Thus, these findings demonstrate the relevance of emotional literacy and granularity in diverse contexts, including business. They suggest significant potential for these skills to enhance leadership by improving emotional regulation, fostering better decision-making, and strengthening team cohesion.

4.7 The Case for Integrating Emotional Literacy and Granularity

Integrating emotional literacy and granularity into leadership frameworks offers an opportunity to address many challenges faced by modern businesses, including managing cultural diversity, fostering psychological safety, and driving effective change (Turtorean, 2016). These skills enable leaders to interpret and respond to nuanced emotional dynamics, improving team cohesion, interpersonal relationships, and workplace outcomes.

While common EI models provide a foundational scaffold, their reliance on self-assessment tools limits their depth and diagnostic value. For instance, EI tests often ask individuals to rate their ability to manage emotions or interpret others' emotional states. Such subjective measures introduce bias and fail to capture the complexity of emotional granularity, where understanding subtle differences in emotions—such as frustration versus insecurity—can significantly affect outcomes (Ackley, 2016). Without evidence-based tools to guide assessment and development, managers and staff are left with superficial insights, reinforcing gaps in emotional understanding rather than addressing them.

The relevance of emotional literacy and granularity extends beyond interpersonal interactions. For example, change management remains a persistent challenge in business, with Kotter estimating that nearly 70% of planned change initiatives fail (Jones-Schenk, 2019). While many change strategies focus on operational and strategic elements, they often neglect the emotional and behavioural factors underlying resistance with Hughes (2016) demonstrating that employee behaviours are categorised in broad, negative terms, such as resisters, unwilling, or foot-draggers. By understanding and addressing specific underlying emotional drivers—such as fear of failure, frustration, or mistrust—managers can design more targeted interventions to support individual adaptation and long-term success.

Additionally, questions remain about whether EI genuinely drives behaviour or merely repackages pre-existing attributes like emotional stability, conscientiousness, openness, and empathy (Davis & Nichols, 2016; Fernández-Berrocal & Checa, 2016). These traits, well-established in psychology, may influence how individuals perceive and report their EI, creating a feedback loop where environmental rewards and biases shape behavioural assessments. This ambiguity further underscores the need for emotional literacy and granularity, which offer more precise tools for understanding and addressing the specific emotions driving individual behaviours and organisational outcomes.

By moving beyond surface-level EI models and embracing emotional literacy and granularity, businesses can equip leaders with the skills to navigate the complexities of modern workplaces. These tools provide deeper insights, more effective coaching, and more adaptive organisational cultures.

Building on the theoretical insights from psychology, the next section explores how these concepts can be adapted to meet the demands of modern leadership frameworks.

5. Theoretical Framework

Regardless of the model employed, emotional intelligence depends on the ability to recognise emotions, regulate responses, and apply insights to enhance communication, motivation, and self-awareness. While EI broadly encompasses awareness, regulation, and social skills, emotional literacy and granularity focus on precisely identifying and interpreting nuanced emotional states, providing a deeper foundation for practical applications. The absence of emotional literacy and granularity in most existing frameworks limits their utility in addressing the nuanced challenges of modern workplaces.

Emotional literacy and granularity provide a deeper layer of understanding and application. These skills are particularly relevant in leadership contexts, where managing interpersonal dynamics, driving behavioural change, and fostering team cohesion require more than surface-level emotional awareness.

While the theoretical underpinnings provide a foundation, the following discussion focuses on practical applications that translate these insights into actionable leadership strategies.

5.1 Practical Applications of Emotional Literacy and Granularity

- **Conflict Resolution:** Accurate identification of emotions enables managers to address the root causes of conflict, such as insecurity, unmet expectations, or perceived injustice. For example, a manager recognising frustration rather than anger in a team member allows for interventions like offering resources or adjusting deadlines rather than punitive actions. By tailoring responses to specific emotions, leaders can de-escalate tensions and foster collaborative problem-solving (Kapoor, 2018).
- **Change Management:** Resistance to change often stems from emotions like fear, frustration, or mistrust (Braica, 2013). For example, during organisational change, resistance often stems from emotions like fear of the unknown or frustration with perceived inequity. Future research should investigate the emotional drivers of resistance and how granularity could inform tailored interventions (Hughes, 2016). Without the ability to differentiate between these drivers, managers may implement ineffective, one-size-fits-all strategies, exacerbating resistance and lowering morale. Emotional literacy equips leaders to identify these nuances and design targeted interventions to support individual and team adaptation (Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024).
- **Team Dynamics and Psychological Safety:** Understanding granular emotions fosters empathy, helping leaders create environments where team members feel safe sharing feedback and expressing concerns. This strengthens trust and promotes transparent communication.

5.2 Conceptualising Emotional Literacy and Granularity in Leadership

Broadly applied tools, such as personality profiling, highlight the potential for emotional literacy frameworks to improve workplace communication and collaboration. The ability to define a broader scope of emotions enhances understanding and empathy, enabling leaders to craft more effective interventions (Kashdan et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2013). For instance, emotional granularity allows individuals to better understand internalised fears, doubts, or misinterpretations of events. A person's specific, granular emotional response provides greater insight into their thoughts and interpretations of an event. This, in turn, aligns directly with Goleman's model by promoting genuine emotional awareness, regulation, and empathy (Goleman & Cherniss, 2024).

When paired with effective questioning, coaching, and communication skills, emotional literacy enables managers to guide teams to reflect deeply, uncover root causes, and address biases or faulty interpretations (Jiang et al., 2013). This mirrors results seen in therapeutic settings, where evidence-based approaches to problem-solving foster better emotional regulation and outcomes. For example, identifying the subtle differences between frustration and insecurity can help managers address the true cause of a team member's behaviour (Kashdan et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017).

Emotional literacy also shifts the focus from subjective interpretation to seeking understanding. This reduces the risk of assigning meaning to behaviours based on personal biases and fosters a more empathetic and inclusive approach. These skills are integral to creating psychological safety and transparent feedback cultures within organisations, where individuals feel supported in their personal and professional growth (Singh, 2024).

6. Theoretical Foundations

Integrating emotional literacy and granularity into EI frameworks draws on several key psychological and neurological theories. Through her Theory of Constructed Emotion, Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) demonstrates how emotions are contextually constructed based on physiological states and prior experiences, underscoring the need for granularity in interpreting emotions. Brené Brown's research highlights the critical role of naming emotions in processing and responding effectively, linking emotional literacy directly to leadership practices (Brown, 2012, 2022).

Neurologically, research has shown that the ability to label emotions activates the prefrontal cortex, enhancing emotional regulation and behavioural control. This suggests that emotional literacy is not merely a cognitive skill but also a neurological process that influences decision-making and interpersonal dynamics (Martin & Ochsner, 2016).

6.1 Tools for Assessment and Development

Integrating emotional literacy and granularity into leadership frameworks highlights significant gaps in current assessment and development practices. Popular tools, such as Goleman's Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI), focus on self-assessment and subjective reporting, which may reinforce bias and fail to capture the nuance required for granular emotional understanding. These tools are valuable for introducing EI concepts but lack the depth necessary to address the complexities of modern workplace dynamics (Conte, 2005; Santhi, 2023).

To operationalise emotional literacy and granularity effectively, frameworks must evolve to incorporate methods

that identify and measure the subtle distinctions between emotional states. Theoretical advancements, such as those informed by Feldman Barrett's work on constructed emotions, suggest the potential for new approaches that move beyond basic self-evaluative techniques (Hoemann, Nielson, et al., 2021; Kashdan et al., 2015). These approaches would enable a more detailed exploration of emotional drivers, patterns, and behavioural impacts, providing leaders with deeper insights into interpersonal and organisational dynamics.

Integrating emotional literacy and granularity into leadership frameworks provides a pathway to more nuanced and effective EI. By equipping leaders with the tools to interpret and respond to complex emotional dynamics, organisations can foster stronger team cohesion, improve conflict resolution, and navigate the challenges of modern workplaces (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018; Kashdan et al., 2015). Grounded in psychological theory and supported by practical applications, these concepts offer a significant evolution in EI frameworks.

7. Critical Discussion

7.1 Oversimplification of Emotional Granularity

A significant limitation in applying emotional granularity to workplace settings is the reliance on oversimplified models of emotion. Many tools reduce emotions to broad categories, such as "positive" or "negative," failing to account for the complexities of nuanced emotional states. For example, a manager misinterpreting frustration as laziness may overlook inefficiencies in processes, while incorrectly perceiving disappointment as dissatisfaction could lead to inappropriate feedback. Oversimplified frameworks frequently ignore cultural and situational factors, such as how emotions are expressed across demographics or organisational hierarchies, resulting in classifications that fail to reflect workplace realities (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2017; Barrett & Barrett, 2001; Barrett et al., 2001). This lack of precision limits the utility of such tools in addressing individual and team needs effectively (Antonakis, 2004).

7.2 Resistance to Emotional Granularity in Leadership

Leaders often resist integrating emotional granularity into workplace practices, perceiving it as overly theoretical or misaligned with performance-driven environments (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). This perception stems from the lack of clear metrics linking emotional granularity to tangible outcomes and the misconception that nuanced emotional skills are impractical in high-pressure business settings. For example, in customer-facing roles, employees often perform emotional labour, where organisational norms require the suppression or performance of specific emotions. Without tools to identify and address these dynamics, this can exacerbate stress and burnout (Bendell & Little, 2015; Davis & Nichols, 2016).

7.3 Challenges in Measuring and Assessing Emotional Granularity

Assessment methods for emotional granularity face significant obstacles. Many existing tools, such as the MSCEIT, focus on basic emotional recognition tasks that fail to capture the subtle distinctions required for granular emotional understanding. Verbal labelling of emotions, a common method, introduces biases related to language proficiency, cultural norms, and emotional vocabularies, often disadvantaging individuals from underrepresented or non-dominant cultural groups (Barrett, 2017). For instance, an employee from a collectivist culture might underreport certain emotions due to social norms discouraging their expression, leading to skewed assessments.

Non-verbal methods, such as emotion recognition software, similarly fall short by overlooking contextual nuances and relying on universal emotion theories that fail to account for diverse cultural expressions (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2017). Additionally, these tools often overestimate their capacity to deduce emotional states, leading to flawed conclusions and potentially harmful interventions (Antonakis, 2004). These limitations highlight the need for culturally sensitive frameworks capable of accurately capturing the depth and diversity of emotional experiences in workplace settings (Bendell & Little, 2015).

7.4 Practical Implications and Future Directions

Addressing these limitations requires further research into how emotional granularity can be operationalised in organisational contexts. Future studies should explore the development of culturally adaptive frameworks that account for the contextual factors influencing emotional expression (Barrett et al., 2001; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018). Additionally, investigating how psychological safety and transparent communication foster trust in emotional granularity initiatives could provide valuable insights into leadership practices (Bendell & Little, 2015). By advancing research and developing a deeper understanding of these concepts, emotional granularity could move from a theoretical ideal to a more practical consideration, informing leadership practices and workplace dynamics.

8. Future Research Directions

Emotional literacy and granularity offer promising avenues for expanding EI frameworks, yet their application in business and leadership contexts remains largely uncharted. This article identifies critical gaps in current research, particularly regarding their potential influence on leadership effectiveness, organisational dynamics, and workplace culture. Future investigations should consider the theoretical and practical implications of integrating emotional literacy and granularity into broader EI frameworks.

Existing tools for assessing EI, such as self-assessment inventories, fail to capture the nuanced distinctions of emotional literacy and granularity (Conte, 2005). Future research should explore whether current tools can be adapted or entirely new frameworks are needed to evaluate these critical skills.

Further research is needed to clarify how emotional literacy and granularity intersect with established psychological principles, workplace behaviours, and leadership practices. By examining these intersections, researchers may uncover novel insights into the emotional drivers of organisational success, offering a richer understanding of leadership and interpersonal dynamics (Barrett, 2017; Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018; Hoemann, Nielson, et al., 2021; Kashdan et al., 2015).

Finally, addressing resistance to the incorporation of literacy and granularity in business will require further research into how emotional granularity affects team outcomes and leadership effectiveness, offering a foundation for evidence-based strategies to shift organisational mindsets (Antonakis, 2004).

This article emphasises the need to conceptualise emotional literacy and granularity as distinct yet complementary components of EI, rather than as prescriptive solutions. The gaps identified here invite further academic exploration, allowing specialised research to address specific questions and applications.

9. Conclusion

Emotional intelligence is a well-established concept with demonstrated positive correlations to performance, behaviour, and interpersonal outcomes. Across contexts such as therapy, coaching, and workplace performance, EI frameworks have shown their value in fostering improved relationships, decision-making, and resilience. However, these benefits often depend on deeper emotional understanding and contextual insight. In therapeutic settings, for example, effective interventions require the ability to identify and differentiate nuanced emotional states, minimising conflicts caused by variations in interpretation. This precision is critical for guiding individuals through trauma resolution, behavioural change, and interpersonal challenges.

Despite its prominence in business environments, EI remains constrained by surface-level categories and broad generalisations. Popular frameworks offer practical scaffolding but often lack the tools to address the complexities of emotional literacy and granularity. This limitation creates gaps in understanding, assessment, and application, ultimately restricting the potential of EI to deliver evidence-based insights into workplace dynamics.

This review highlights the untapped potential of emotional literacy and granularity to address these gaps. Leaders who can distinguish between subtle emotional states, such as frustration and insecurity or envy and jealousy, are better equipped to address the root causes of behaviour. While such skills have shown promise in therapeutic and psychological settings, their application in leadership and organisational frameworks remains underexplored.

By integrating emotional literacy and granularity into EI frameworks, businesses can cultivate leaders equipped to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. Future research should prioritise developing tools that assess these nuanced competencies, laying the foundation for more adaptive and inclusive workplace practices. By grounding EI in these principles, researchers and practitioners can advance frameworks beyond generalisations, offering actionable insights into human behaviour, leadership effectiveness, and workplace culture. By synthesising existing research, this review highlights opportunities for further academic exploration of emotional literacy and granularity.

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Appendix 1

The Literature Review – Process

Databases and Journals;

The top 10 business, HR, and organisational behavioural journals were identified based on the SCImago Scientific Journal Rankings (SJR) and focus on business, organisational behaviour, and psychology, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of workplace-relevant studies. These included;

- Academy of Management Annals (SJR: 14.605)
- Academy of Management Journal (SRJ: 8.271)
- Strategic Management Journal (SRJ: 7.82)
- Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior (SRJ: 7.706)
- Organization Science (SRJ: 5.632)
- Organization Studies (SRJ: 5.349)
- Journal of Service Research (SRJ: 4.948)
- International Organization (SRJ: 4.932)
- Journal of International Business Studies (SRJ: 4.6)
- Journal of Human Resources (SRJ: 4.524)

Specific combinations of search terms relating to emotional regularity in business revealed limited responses which could be due to 1) The limited available research undertaken in this field, 2) The chosen journals for publication, or 3) The possibility that the topic is covered in different categories such as psychology or sociology.

To ensure a robust analysis of the current literature, broader high-ranking databases were reviewed to identify databases that included some or all of the 10 priority journals, but that also included broader categories including psychology. Databases also ensured a broader range of sources were captured.

As such, the final literature review and keyword search utilised the following databases;

- SCOPUS
- Web of Science
- JSTOR
- ProQuest One
- EBSCOhost
- Emerald Insights
- Wiley

Keywords/Combinations:

1. "Emotional intelligence" AND "business"
2. "Emotional intelligence" AND "leadership"
3. "Emotional intelligence" AND "emotional literacy"
4. "Emotional intelligence" AND "emotional granularity"
5. "Emotional literacy" AND "business"
6. "Emotional granularity" AND "leadership"
7. "MSCEIT" AND "business"
8. "MSCEIT" AND "leadership"

Insights to Look For:

1. "Lisa Feldman Barrett" AND "emotional granularity"
2. "Brené Brown" AND "emotional literacy"
3. "Therapy" AND "emotional granularity"
4. "Self-assessment EI tools" AND "limitations"

Results

Search Terms/String	Total Results (All Databases)
"Emotional intelligence" AND "business"	33572
"Emotional intelligence" AND "leadership"	31164
"Emotional intelligence" AND "emotional literacy"	770
"Emotional intelligence" AND "emotional granularity"	129
"Emotional literacy" AND "business"	649
"Emotional granularity" AND "leadership"	107
"MSCEIT" AND "business"	734
"MSCEIT" AND "leadership"	753
"Lisa Feldman Barrett" AND "emotional granularity"	20
"Brené Brown" AND "emotional literacy"	5
"Therapy" AND "emotional granularity"	191

Filters

Search terms were refined to exclude studies on non-business contexts, such as child therapy and education, narrowing the focus to adult workplace behaviours. Studies were included if they addressed workplace applications of emotional intelligence, leadership dynamics, or organisational outcomes. Articles focusing on non-adult cohorts or unrelated contexts, such as education or child therapy, were excluded. The review focused on research gaps, practical implications, and opportunities for future investigation. This approach ensures the literature review provides a comprehensive overview of emotional literacy and granularity in business contexts. Search terms were filtered to only include;

- Journal publications (peer reviewed where available)
- Date range between 2014 – 2025
- Language: English (where available)
- Journals relating to Business, management, organisational behaviour and psychology.

The top 50 results (sorted by relevance) were compiled and reviewed with only results aligning with workplace

applications (or all types) or relating to behavioural interventions in adults. Specific unrelated cohorts were omitted (such as specific applications to isolated events (i.e. Covid-19), child therapy, student development, and broader applications of emotional intelligence beyond the workplace).

This resulted in 391 results. With the removal of duplicates, 297 journal articles were included in the final analysis and review.

Glossary

Constructed Emotion Theory

A psychological theory proposed by Lisa Feldman Barrett suggesting that emotions are constructed based on physiological states, prior experiences, and contextual information rather than being innate or universal.

Emotional Granularity

The capacity to distinguish and interpret subtle differences between emotions, leading to more precise emotional responses and self-regulation.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

The ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others to foster effective interpersonal relationships and decision-making.

Emotional Literacy

The skill of accurately identifying, naming, and understanding a wide range of emotions, enabling more nuanced emotional awareness and expression.

Emotional Regulation

The process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to achieve personal or organizational goals.

Leadership Frameworks

Structured models or approaches used to guide leadership practices, decision-making, and interpersonal interactions within organizational contexts.

Operationalisation

The process of defining and implementing a theoretical concept (e.g., emotional literacy) into practical, measurable actions or tools.

Psychological Safety

A workplace climate where individuals feel safe to express opinions, take risks, and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career.

Self-Assessment Tools

Methods or instruments where individuals evaluate their own abilities, traits, or behaviours, often used to measure emotional intelligence but criticised for subjectivity and bias.

Team Cohesion

The degree to which team members feel connected and united in pursuing shared goals, influenced by trust, communication, and interpersonal dynamics.

Therapeutic Contexts

Settings or applications related to psychological therapy, focusing on improving emotional regulation, mental health, and interpersonal outcomes.

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