

A qualitative illuminative evaluation of emotional intelligence training as transformative learning



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Orientation: The study focuses on emotional intelligence (EI) training, which is known to promote socio-emotional competencies and behaviours for business success.

Research purpose: The study seeks to illuminate the extent to which the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme facilitates transformative learning in EI including its spill-over effects in the workplace.

Motivation for the study: Qualitative illuminative research on the transformative learning effect of EI training, and especially its spill-over effect into the workplace, is scant.

Research approach/design and method: The study employed a retrospective qualitative case study design with semi-structured interviews as guided by an illuminative evaluation methodology. The ATLAS.ti software programme was utilised to analyse the data collected from nine training programme participants employed in a mining company situated in Gauteng.

Main findings: The findings illuminated transformative learning pertaining to intrapersonal and interpersonal domains of EI which positively spilled over to social interactions in the working environment. Some aspects of the training methodology appeared to have contributed to the transformative learning effects.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings attest to the value of investing in evidence-based EI training programmes that facilitate transformative learning.

Contribution/value-add: The findings underscore the role of transformative EI training in fostering personal growth and development, positive relationships, effective communication and a conducive work environment for organisational success.

Keywords: emotional intelligence training; emotional competence; illuminative evaluation; self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; social skills; transformative learning.

Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) training interventions are known to bring positive changes in organisational and job performance by empowering individuals with the socio-emotional competencies necessary for cultivating positive relationships, effective communication, teamwork, coping with stress effectively and adapting to organisational changes (Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019; Huda et al., 2021; Smith & Kamm, 2024). Emotional intelligence training facilitates a deeper comprehension of one's emotional states, cognitive capacities and personal strengths, thereby enhancing self-awareness and self-regulation. Moreover, such training fosters improved interpersonal communication by encouraging openness and empathy in interactions, which are critical building blocks for organisational success (Kotsou et al., 2019; Kukah et al., 2023). Knowledge and understanding of specific social and emotional competencies and behaviours are fundamental to improving physical and mental well-being and reaching individual potential (Antonopoulou, 2024; Manjarres et al., 2023). The alignment of personal growth with enhanced communication practices underscores the strategic importance of EI training in workplace settings (Karimi et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2024).

Research provides ample evidence that EI can be learned and developed through systematically designed EI training programmes (Bagshaw, 2000; Cihan & Dilekmen, 2024; Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019; Hodzic et al., 2018; Schutte et al., 2013; Smith & Kamm, 2024; Zijlmans et al., 2015). The content and structure of most EI training programmes are typically grounded in a well-established EI model and assessment framework, such as the mixed model of EI, which is

designed to enhance a range of emotional and social competencies. These competencies are associated with personal growth, improved job performance and enhanced social interaction (Boyatzis, 2009; Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017; Görgens-Ekerman et al., 2015). A consistent theme in programme evaluations, whether utilising quantitative, qualitative or mixed research methodologies, is the focus on assessing changes in EI competencies and behaviours. These evaluations often explore the factors, processes and outcomes of EI training that contribute to these changes (Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017; Hodzic et al., 2018; Schutte et al., 2013). However, more research is needed on the transformative nature and spill-over effects of EI training (Fourie, 2024).

Research objective

The objective of the study is to illuminate the extent to which the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Minnaar, 2014) facilitates transformative learning in EI, including its spill-over effects in the workplace. Guided by illuminative evaluation methodology (Alderman, 2015; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977), this study seeks to describe and interpret participants' subjective experiences (rather than the measurement and prediction) of the transformation in intrapersonal and interpersonal EI competencies and behaviours. To the knowledge of the researchers, the study is unique as it is the first notable South African study to evaluate the effectiveness of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Minnaar, 2014) in enhancing individuals' EI. The study's unique contribution to EI training evaluation is further underscored by its employment of qualitative illuminative evaluation methodology to gain a rich understanding of the transformative EI learning's spill-over effects in the organisation. While some studies have shown positive effects immediately following EI training, there is a need for more illuminative research on the transferability of the learnt socio-emotional competencies to real-world settings. Understanding how individuals apply their EI learning in different contexts and situations can provide valuable insights into the transformative nature of structured EI training interventions (Fourie, 2024; Herland, 2022; Kotsou et al., 2019).

Emotional intelligence training as transformative learning

Effective EI training is recognised for its capacity to drive positive transformations in the workplace by enhancing employees' socio-emotional competencies. The development of EI fosters a supportive and conducive work environment characterised by cooperative, respectful and empathetic relationships. Additionally, improved EI competencies lead to more effective decision-making and problem-solving, thereby contributing to sustained individual, team and organisational performance and success (Schutte et al., 2013). A core focus of EI training is to increase individuals' self-awareness, help them recognise their strengths and weaknesses, accept feedback and use it for personal growth and improvement (Gonzales, 2022;

Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). This emphasis on EI training aligns with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2002), which conceptualises learner-centric adult education as a vehicle for raising consciousness, fostering critical self-reflection and facilitating positive transformations in personal growth, perspectives and communication within social interactions (Andreev, 2024; Dirkx, 1998; Fleming, 2021; Mezirow, 2002). The critical self-reflective and communicative learning process inherent in transformative learner-centric training (such as self-other assessments, feedback, coaching, and group or paired discussions) enhances self-awareness and fosters a deeper understanding of oneself and others. In the training process, individuals learn to replace old ways of self-other meaning-making with behaviour and reasoning that are more appropriate to the demands that they encounter in their daily social environment. The training content, structure and processes help learners reflect on and reconstruct aspects of their experiences with positive spill-over effects to their real-world social milieu. Practical activities and development plans enable individuals to explore, integrate and confidently apply newly acquired knowledge and skills in the real-world milieu (Andreev, 2024; Dirkx, 1998; Fleming, 2021; Mezirow, 2002).

Research alludes to the transformative nature of EI training with empirical evidence suggesting that EI training enhances cohesion among employees by improving their socio-emotional self-regulation and communication skills, thereby facilitating idea-sharing, conflict resolution, decision-making and active listening (Bethari, 2024; Ehigie et al., 2023). The self-awareness and emotion regulation skills individuals develop improve their impulse control through them learning to regulate their emotions for positive and constructive engagement and communication in social interactions (Kastberg et al., 2020; Kukah et al., 2023). Generally, the positive transformation in EI is linked to higher job satisfaction, positive employee morale, lower stress levels, higher emotional well-being and self-esteem, more positive moods coupled with reduced negative affective emotions, and the cultivation of respectful and trusting interpersonal relationships (Kaur, 2024; Roellyanti, 2024; Schlaegel et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2024).

Theoretical foundation and structure of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme

The Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014) is a standardised EI training programme that has been active since 1986 in assisting major South African companies in increasing productivity through the acquisition and the development of EI (Fourie, 2024). The EI training programme applies to workers, managers and leaders who want to improve their performance at work and be happy, effective and successful while maintaining healthy relationships with others (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014).

The emotional and social competence model (ESC), also called the mixed model of EI (Goleman et al., 2002; Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017), forms the theoretical basis for the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Minnaar, 2014). The ESC model of EI refers to interrelated emotional and social behaviours and competencies that facilitate and determine how effectively individuals understand and monitor their own and other's feelings and emotions, and how they use that information to guide their thinking and actions in relating to others and coping with daily emotional demands (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Double et al., 2022). Boyatzis (2009) argued that ESC can be developed in adults as predictors of their professional, management and leadership success and performance.

The Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014) focuses on assessing and developing individuals' innate capacity and observable preferred patterns (also called emotional quotient: EQ) to intentionally utilise a set of interrelated intrapersonal and interpersonal EI behaviours and competencies for building and maintaining constructive relationships, coping with emotional challenges and making effective decisions (Fourie, 2024; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022).

The main objective of the training programme is to raise each participant's level of self-awareness through the understanding of emotions, self-assessment of personal strengths, weaknesses and triggers, and mindfulness techniques to increase present-moment awareness and self-reflection (Fourie, 2024). Each learner is assessed on a broad range of intrapersonal and interpersonal (social) EI competencies to create an awareness of individual strengths and identify possible areas for growth. Intrapersonal EI competencies pertain to individuals' level of self-acceptance, self-insight, locus of control, satisfaction of personal values, ability to do self-disclosure, frustration tolerance, nature of stress management and anger management skills (Minnaar, 2014). The interpersonal EI competencies include individuals' level of acceptance of others, communication and listening skills, assertiveness, conflict management skills and the ability to build trust and offer emotional support to others (Minnaar, 2014).

The core outcomes of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme allude to individuals' ability to expand their comfort zones, thereby enhancing their capacity to adapt to life changes. Participants also demonstrate an increased propensity for self-disclosure, which contributes to greater transparency and interpersonal trust. Additionally, they develop a more realistic assessment of their strengths and areas for growth, recognising the significance of EI and self-awareness for workplace success. Participants achieve a deeper understanding and acceptance of themselves and others. Furthermore, they are better equipped to provide emotional support to colleagues and significant others in both professional and personal settings

(Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014). Each participant receives a report on completion of the module that not only indicates the participant's overall EI percentage but also suffices as a personal development plan identifying areas where further training is needed. Participants can be re-assessed to ascertain personal growth and to determine the effectiveness of the targeted EI development interventions (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014).

The training programme is a two-day venue-based workshop involving formal lectures, introspective and practical exercises, buddy sessions, group discussions, assessments with individual feedback and coaching on 12 training modules delivered through group-based, in-person sessions: module 1 (self-awareness), module 2 (improving self-esteem), module 3 (stress management), module 4 (internal locus of control), module 5 (anger management), module 6 (listening skills), module 7 (assertiveness skills), module 8 (conflict management), module 9 (building trust), module 10 (the art of self-disclosure), module 11 (offering emotional support) and module 12 (re-evaluation) (Fourie, 2024).

The programme employs learner-centric strategies for managing and controlling emotions effectively, techniques for coping with stress and building resilience, enhancing adaptability through developing flexibility and embracing change, as well as exercises to minimise impulsive reactions and increase thoughtful responses. The programme strategies further foster individuals' ability to recognise and understand the emotions of others, engage in perspective-taking by stepping into another person's shoes for greater empathy and social awareness, develop skills to guide and support others, and pick up nonverbal cues and body language including trust-building strategies. Modules of communication skills consist of techniques to build effective communication, active listening and assertiveness, and strategies for constructively managing and resolving conflicts while collaborating and inspiring others (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014).

The training programme draws from the constructivist perspective of transformative adult learning, which posits that individuals actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world around them through their experiences and interactions with that world (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 2002; Miller-First & Ballard, 2017; Shah & Kumar, 2019). Individuals do not passively receive information, but instead actively build their own internal schemas and mental models based on their observations and interactive experiences in the training programme and transfer these into their daily social interactions in the work environment (Fourie, 2024; Mezirow, 2002; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2017).

The illuminative evaluation framework for evaluating the effectiveness of a training programme acknowledges the subjective experiences and perceptions of learners rather than merely the outcomes of training (Alderman, 2015;

Gunio, 2021). Illuminative evaluation methodology allows evaluators to delve into the subjective views and perceptions of learners to illuminate the underlying thoughts, emotions and complex interplay of factors that influence individuals' learning experiences, which also contribute to the transformative effectiveness of training programmes. Such illuminations gathered from the evaluation process can then inform future implementation and improvement of the training programme (Gunio, 2021; Palermo & Thomson, 2019).

Seen through the lens of illuminative evaluation methodology, the training programme is treated as an innovative intervention within the organisational socio-cultural system. Illuminative evaluation acknowledges that the programme introduces new ideas, approaches or techniques that can potentially bring about positive changes in individuals' worldviews, behaviours and competencies with positive spill-over effects for social interaction and performance in the broader work milieu (Esau et al., 2020; Palermo & Thomson, 2019; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). In this regard, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did the EI training change individuals' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills?

RQ2: To what extent did the EI competencies and skills set gained through the training spill-over to the social work environment?

Research design

Research approach

The study employed a retrospective single case study design, with an emphasis on illuminative evaluation methodology as a qualitative, interpretivist and inductive research approach (Alderman, 2015; Esau et al., 2020; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977) to assess the extent to which the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme enhanced participants' EI in the work setting. Inductive reasoning processes were utilised to interpret and structure meanings derived from the semi-structured interview data. Inferences made from the analytical interpretation of the data were retroductive (i.e. had contextual uniqueness) and were not necessarily suitable for the generalisation of the programme's effects to other organisational contexts (Alderman, 2015).

Research setting

The research involved a global South African mining organisation situated in Gauteng. The company implemented the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme to equip its employees with essential EI competencies for improved self-awareness, stress management, conflict management, constructive interpersonal relationships and general well-being and productivity.

Entrée and establishing the researcher's role

The primary researcher fulfilled the dual roles of qualitative, interpretivist researcher and training facilitator, aiming to understand and interpret the subjective experiences and meanings articulated by the participants in a collaborative and respectful manner. Having the role of self-as-instrument, the primary researcher engaged in reflexivity to monitor the extent to which her personal characteristics, beliefs, biases and experiences could potentially influence the research process and outcomes. Understanding her positionality helped her to navigate power dynamics and interpret data in a culturally sensitive manner. She further practised EI, empathy and sensitivity to create a safe, trusting, supportive and respectful research environment. She maintained transparency and authenticity throughout the research process, clearly communicating her intentions, methods and potential biases to participants. Ethical guidelines helped protect participants' rights and ensured that the research was conducted responsibly and with integrity. By recognising and embracing her own subjectivity, she enhanced the credibility, validity and richness of her research findings while navigating the complexities of human interaction through meaningful dialogue and collaborative partnerships with participants (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Participants and sampling

Non-probability, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used in this study to select individuals who met the criteria of having completed the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme in the years 2020 and 2022. Additional inclusion criteria required the participants to be full-time employees of the company, aged between 18 and 65 years, and willing and available to participate voluntarily in interviews. Furthermore, participants were required to provide informed consent for the use of their data for research purposes. To ensure the adequacy of the final sample size, the researchers employed an iterative approach, oscillating between data collection and analysis. This approach continued until the point of thematic saturation was reached, where no further data or new themes emerged (Hennink et al., 2020).

The final sample ($N = 9$) consisted of five participants who were in a core business line function position (management) and four participants who were in a non-core support function (administrative and technical). Out of the nine participants, five participants had undergone training in the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme in the year 2020 and four participants had undergone the training in the year 2022.

Data collection procedure

The primary researcher employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted through the MS Teams platform, following a structured interview protocol (refer to Appendix 1 Table 1-A1), to gather reliable data regarding participants' experiences of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme. The use of triangulation as a data-gathering

technique enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the conclusions drawn from the analysed data (Babbie, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021).

Illuminative evaluation seeks to enquire and illuminate a complex array of questions pertaining to an 'innovatory' educational or training programme that is seen to affect participants' perceptions, behaviours and skillsets (as perceived by those directly involved in the programme) including the perceived spill-over effect in the wider learning milieu context (Esau et al., 2020; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). The data collection process involved exploratory, descriptive research across five predominant stages of illuminative evaluation.

During stage 1 (explore), the researchers become knowledgeable about the programme aims, processes, content, the participants and their wider social (learning) milieu or environment in which they function, and the research aims, questions and research proposition. Stage 2 involves designing the evaluation by ensuring that the research (interview) questions are clear and that the data sets will support the research questions (see Appendix 1, Table 1-A1, for the structured interview questions). In stage 3 (enquiry), the researchers collect relevant data to narrow and focus the study by applying the appropriate scientific data collection protocols of qualitative, interpretivist research. In stage 4, the researchers interpret and explain the data by applying the appropriate scientific data analysis protocols. Stage 5 entails the composition of the evaluation report, which involves identifying and articulating the critical findings pertinent to the research questions posed in the study. The researchers assess both the intended and unintended outcomes of the programme's implementation and formulate recommendations for decision-makers based on these findings (Alderman, 2015; Esau et al., 2020; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977).

Recording and transcription of data

The primary researcher recorded the interviews using the recording function of Microsoft Teams with the consent of the participants. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Bracketing was employed, wherein the researcher endeavoured to set aside personal biases, concentrating solely on the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Charron & Singh, 2022). Additionally, various measures were implemented to safeguard participant confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms and the omission of any references to individuals' names or locations during the interviews. The primary researcher ensured that adequate provisions were made for the protection of the confidentiality of data through coding, destruction of identifying information and allowing limited access to data (only researchers).

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns (recurring themes)

within the data. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the research question or phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After the initial data and theme screening, ATLAS.ti (a computer-aided data analysis tool) was employed to analyse the data. ATLAS.ti is a code-based theory builder designed to become an extension of the researcher herself (Soratto et al., 2020). Following the development of the coding frame, the primary researcher gained a comprehensive overview of the data. This thorough understanding was achieved by repeatedly reading and refining the codes through multiple reviews of the data. The codes were grouped into meaningful patterns in relation to the research questions. The primary researcher delineated each theme individually and connected related themes by collapsing or expanding them and reassigning codes among them (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). To enhance the rigour of the analyses, triangulation was employed, with all three researchers collaboratively reviewing and reaching a consensus on the final set of themes. Finally, the researchers wove the analytic narrative together, adding extracts from the data to be able to tell the reader a coherent and compelling story. In writing the report, all ATLAS.ti memos were exported and inserted into a Word document. The data analysis revealed that thematic saturation was achieved and that the sample size was adequate for capturing the diversity, depth and nuances of the transformative effect of the training programme. Accordingly, the data themes had content validity (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

The researchers upheld the integrity, trustworthiness, transferability, dependability and credibility of the data through systematic and rigorous methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. As a significant area of enquiry, the study introduced novel data that contributed valuable insights, despite the scarcity of existing data (Tracy, 2019). The researchers' approach was earnest, considering not only their own research objectives but also the needs of the participants, readers and potential audiences.

Reporting

The findings present the themes in a narrative form with supporting illustrative quotes or examples from the data. This approach allows for a rich and descriptive presentation of the themes (Lochmiller, 2021).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, HRM Ethics Review Committee (reference no.: 2022_HRM_015). The primary researcher upheld the fundamental principles of ethical research throughout the research process, encompassing data collection, analysis and interpretation. These ethical standards were rigorously maintained to ensure the integrity of the research and included respecting participants' right to privacy; ensuring fair treatment; providing full disclosure and debriefing; safeguarding participants from harm and exploitation;

minimising risks while maximising benefits; treating participants with respect, human dignity and justice; obtaining informed consent for voluntary participation; and upholding participants' privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Babbie, 2020).

Results

We approached the findings in terms of answering the research questions and illuminating the core themes and insights we deduced from the participants' responses.

Research question 1: To what extent did the emotional intelligence training change individuals' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills?

Overall, the themes revealed that the EI training facilitated transformative learning across intrapersonal and interpersonal (social) domains of behaviour and social interaction.

Transformative learning in the intrapersonal domain

In the intrapersonal domain, participants highlighted increased confidence in new self-aware behaviour and preferred emotional behavioural patterns pertaining to agentic emotion regulation including self-exploration, self-management, mindfulness, personal mastery of locus of control and emotion regulation, assertiveness and social adaptability, stress management, and personal development and growth.

Self-awareness, self-development, self-management and social adaptability: Participants highlighted the value of change in EI self-awareness of strengths and growth areas for personal development and agentic emotion self-regulation. Some participants explained the value of EI self-awareness training for personal development as follows:

'... You become aware of your strengths and your limitations regarding yourself on a more interpersonal level, but also on an intrapersonal level.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

'... it's also to basically like a self-awareness, so that one can let's say, when you are not taking a critical look at yourself, attending something like this will actually assist you in terms of developing yourself, figuring out what the positives and negatives sides, to basically help you to improve as a person and in terms of your overall being.' (Participant 3, Male, Management)

Participant 6 described training in EI self-awareness as a journey of self-discovery and personal mastery in understanding and managing one's emotions, thoughts and behaviour in social interactions. EI self-awareness seemed to contribute to a greater appreciation of one's inner world of emotions and greater acceptance of self and others:

'... I think probably the fact that the training takes you through a journey of self-discovery. I think it just made me more aware of the fact that I need to continuously be aware of my own emotions, my own thoughts, my own views, and how it impacts the way that I see situations. It enriched my emotional world because it made me more aware of my emotions and it also

helps me to regulate my own emotions better because I'm more aware of it. And people find it hard in the working environment to have those conversations because we constantly covering and hiding the things that we feel sensitive about. And I think this workshop really helps people to come to terms with who they are and who they not.' (Participant 6, Female, Management)

The awareness and acceptance of one's inner world of emotions through EI self-awareness training seemed to promote new insights into recognising, understanding and mastering one's emotion-directed behavioural patterns and triggers (e.g. frustration and anger) to transform daily social interactions for the better. Participant 5 explained this transformative insight regarding the value of emotional self-awareness for personal growth in social interactions as follows:

'... I think I was more aware of, for example, let's use frustration. So, being aware of that, and maybe then asking myself, why do I feel frustrated or angry? And then process that to really try and determine if it's reason for cause or reason for frustration. I'm working with people on a daily basis, so this course, really from looking at yourself and while your relationship with yourself and relationship with others, it really gives you a broad frame of reference to work from and we are more able to recognise our own strengths and weaknesses which in turn leads to personal growth and a better understanding of yourself as well.' (Participant 5, Female, Management)

EI training seems to empower individuals with the self-management skills and behaviours they need for greater adaptability in social interactions. Participant 1 described the value of conscious emotion self-regulation for enhanced social adaptability as follows:

'... And you learn more with regards to yourself, how you see yourself at the moment and what would the ideal self-look like. Oh yes, I've definitely benefitted in that way, because you become aware, that's what the self-awareness is all about and the effects of your response to other people and to your own emotions. And you also learn that your emotions, you can control it. You are not controlled by emotions you can take charge. I think that's very important and, in this process, it makes you more adaptable you know, and you are able guide your actions in a positive, constructive manner in any situation. Definitely so, yes. Well, we know that thoughts trigger our emotions and if you can take control and think before you respond to your emotions, then you can come over more factual or more to the point, rather than becoming emotional and saying things and doing things that afterwards you will regret. Adaptability.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

The newly learnt emotion regulation skills and behaviour further contributed to an internal locus of control and a greater capacity to manage personal stress, as pointed out by Participant 2 and Participant 3:

'... What really was an eye opener for me at that stage, was the internal locus of control thing. I think after that I adapted even my language, to be able to make it part of my behaviour. The fact that you can have control over your emotions, you don't have to, if somebody is in a conflicting situation with you, you don't need to respond in a conflicting way. So, I think the locus of control

and especially the internal locus of control have really grasped me.’ (Participant 2, Male, Management)

‘... Then it is stress management and then frustration tolerance and also anger, how to manage your stress more effectively.’ (Participant 3, Male, Management)

Transformative learning in the interpersonal (social) domain

In the interpersonal domain, participants highlighted a new open-mindedness towards preferred patterns of behaviour pertaining to social awareness in interactions, empathetic and respectful engagement, assertive communication and listening skills, and constructive relationship and conflict management.

Social awareness and relationship management: Emotional intelligence self-awareness and emotional self-management training positively influenced participants’ social awareness and their management of interpersonal relationships. Participant 5 explained that EI self-awareness training enhanced their social awareness and promoted greater trust in interpersonal relationships which also facilitated personal growth:

‘... I’m working with people on a daily basis, so this course, really from looking at yourself and while your relationship with yourself and relationship with others, it really gives you a broad frame of reference to work from and we are more able to recognise our own strengths and weaknesses which in turn leads to personal growth. A better understanding of the people you work with, and trust between people will also form, the trust is so important in your personal life and within the working environment.’ (Participant 5, Female, Management)

The EI training seemed to enhance participants’ capacity to confidently apply the newly learned EI self-awareness and self-management skills and behaviours in the workplace. Participant 9 pointed out how the newly learned social skills increased their sense of inner security and self-confidence, which positively transformed their interactions with others in the workplace:

‘With the self-awareness, the training made me realise how young and insecure I was, especially in the business world and especially as well as in the relationships and the work environment. How quickly I always jumped to conclusions and try to defend myself even if it didn’t have anything to do with me, it made me look more deeply into why I was reacting the way I was reacting. In certain aspects, yes. It’s helped me especially when, let me just think of how to say this. When you work with people that’s in higher levels as you are, to be able to approach them, to be able to converse with them without feeling inadequate. So yes, it definitely improved that part of my, instead of where it was a weakness where I would have shyed away and give the opportunity to someone else, I didn’t feel the need to be insecure about it and approach anyone or on any level. I think it definitely influenced my ability to use the self-awareness.’ (Participant 9, Male, Administrative)

‘... It also provided me with the social skills. It gave me the confidence to approach a manager or something, especially if you’re thrown in the deep side, you’ve been given a project and you have to figure out where to start and where to finish and what is the expectations and stuff and to have the confidence to

pick up the phone and call people, you know in that sense building their networks as well and giving you the sense of being able to achieve something without feeling insecure or incompetent or something, you know.’

Open-mindedness, empathy and mutual respect: The EI training seemed to facilitate an open-mindedness towards self, others and one’s social interactions. Participant 3 described the positive transformative learning experienced through the EI training as follows:

‘... You tend to think what I always thought, that I was seeing things out of the box, but I realised the box is much bigger after attending the training. I think it’s very, very important that more people attend the training. I mean, it sort of opens up your mind in terms of, it influences or it’s not actually influences but it’ll help you be a better person in terms of how you think, how you apply yourself, how you are receptive to others, how you address people, how to sort of improve relationships with people, be it your colleagues, I mean, socially, your friends, your family, your management team, whoever it is. Definitely by more people attending it, I think it will actually open up a whole new realm for them in terms of thinking and understanding in terms. To see the bigger picture, it would be important not only at management level but at all levels.’ (Participant 3, Male, Management)

Training in EI self-awareness, self-regulation and social awareness further seemed to cultivate self-respect and empathy towards others for developing mutually respectful relationships. Participant 8 and Participant 6 described the value of such an inner positive transformative orientation towards self and others for improved decision-making in social interactions as follows:

‘... I’d almost say, the way that you realise that you do not have to be the monster in the room to be successful when you work with people, but that you are entitled to your own point of view as well as the other person. And in the mutual respect, respect to the sense that if I am in an upper hand position that I do not abuse that situation to the detriment of another person and it made me more aware to be concerned about the person who may not be all that comfortable in that position and you almost reach out and protect their situation as well so that you have that, almost empathy with that individual, not in a belittling way, but more in an encouragement way that you can assist that person to do whatever is possible to build a bit of self-confidence in that interaction. And then I think if people have the opportunity to take informed decisions, or have a process where they can consider just a few steps ahead than where they are at the moment, I think it would be beneficial to firstly the individual, but as a collective also that sort of building on self-respect and respect for others.’ (Participant 8, Female, Administration)

‘... And because of that, I became more able to put myself in another person’s shoes, listen more effectively to hear, how they perceive it, whereas before the training, I think I would much more naturally just fall into my own emotions and dealing with my own emotions without the ability to see it from someone else’s perspective. But also be empathetic where I need to be empathetic.’ (Participant 6, Female, Management)

Assertive communication skills and conflict management: The participants gained new insights into social interaction style preferences, assertive communication and conflict

management skills for constructive social interactions, as pointed out by Participant 2, Participant 6, Participant 8 and Participant 1:

'... I think that people's reactions towards how I after the course, dealt with them, brought up a much better platform for conflict handling and communication, and I think I also made a lot of people think very deeply about their own emotions and how they can control that. I think I deal with situations much better, I know when to be assertive and how to be assertive and not be aggressive. I know how to better deal with conflict, to get into a more kind of win-win situation instead of a win-lose, so that you don't have to, so it's not just compromise for the sake of compromise. It's compromised for the sake of respecting the person that you're dealing with and their emotions versus your emotions and your thoughts and your thinking. So, I think the conflict handling is better, I am definitely a better listener after that because I practice it. Yes, definitely conflict handling, that you *[do not]* always try to be in the winning position and other people losing.' (Participant 2, Male, Management)

'... I've definitely started to deal with conflict in different ways because I understood where I came from and why I behaved in certain ways. It enabled me to have a new perspective and also empowered me with new strategies in terms of how to deal with conflict in a more constructive way. The ability to speak and not be offended and therefore be better at conflict management.' (Participant 6, Female, Management)

'... I think one of the things in the programme was also identifying your specific social style and it basically confirmed that I was operating in the style that I was the strongest in. Which sort of came naturally without me even realising that it is my preference social style, but it also made me aware of that other people have different social styles that could actually collaborate, and if used together, you could actually get better results if *[you are]* busy in a team and there's certain planning to be done or strategies to work out and things like that.' (Participant 8, Female, Administrative)

'... Listening skills, if you improve your listening skills, just that it's going to have a huge effect not only in the company but also in your personal life. And I think you will also be able to manage it more effectively to listen more effectively, to what else can I say, accept other people standing up for your rights, not violating others' rights.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

Research question 2: To what extent did the emotional intelligence competencies and skills set gained through training spill-over to the social work environment?

We found that most of the participants confirmed the positive spill-over effect of the transformative EI learning they experienced in the two-day workshop. Participants felt that the EI skills, techniques and behaviours they developed because of the training improved workplace and social relationships and interactions which seemingly positively influenced organisational culture, leadership, teamwork, goal setting, productivity and staff morale.

Improved relationships, social and communication skills

Participants perceived the EI competencies and social and communication skills and techniques as universal tools for improving relationships and communication across all spheres of life. Participant 4, Participant 9 and Participant 1 noted this spill-over effect as follows:

'... Positively, because it's a tool that we not only can use in the workplace, it's actually universal. *[It is]* workplace and family, friends, socialising and that aspect, I think *[it is]* in all forms and all types of relationships, not just one dimension.' (Participant 4, Male, Technical)

'I think the social skills has definitely developed. In the environment where I work, you must be able to communicate from the lowest level of personnel to the highest level of management, so this training has definitely assisted in developing the confidence to approach anyone. The way you approach people to also consider that and not just come up and say to the person, listen, I think this and this was how you were supposed to do it, you did it incorrectly. I think it definitely gave me the fundamentals of how to approach people without them feeling threatened. So, I definitely think it worked.' (Participant 9, Male, Administrative)

'The communication has also improved. You would be able to communicate more effectively and to get more out of them and talk to them on a level where they understand and where they are comfortable with.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

Business goals and productivity

Participant 6 perceived the EI training to have contributed to clearer goal setting and improved productivity and staff well-being:

'... I think it definitely guided us in thinking about where we're going and what we want to achieve in our business. It definitely contributed if you look at productivity, revenue and diversification, and through that you will also be able to increase the organisations, income productivity and overall staff happiness. I think it's a key component of organisational training and development. I think organisations should do this as a stock standard.' (Participant 6, Female, Management)

Organisational culture, leadership, teamwork and staff morale

Participants 1, 4, 2 and 3 noted the spill-over effect of the EI training in creating a positive organisational culture and improving leadership and teamwork. These spill-over effects seemed to nurture a positive work atmosphere that contributes to greater productivity and staff morale:

'It also contributes to a positive organisational culture, because when you attend the emotional intelligence training, you don't work with individuals, you work with people in the group. And preferably you work with the group of people in the same office who have to work together and you can just imagine them learning more about your own strengths and your own limitations, and you learn about them. Yes, I'm very sure that it contributes towards that, because it depends on where the people are who are exposed to it. If its management being exposed to it, yes, it's going to help them to manage and lead people more effectively and to understand one another more effectively. If they want to have leadership roles, it will definitely also help with increased productivity.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

'... It actually has also created a positive organisational culture, because I'll give you an example, we were working on a project and everyone just wanted to be together and work together and the people were taking feedback as a positive, you know, and not as criticism. So that was very nice to see and experience. I could test my knowledge about the programme out on unknown people, and it worked!.' (Participant 4, Male, Technical)

'So I definitely think it has a very positive effect. Because sometimes, people don't, they expect me to behave in a certain way, and now all of a sudden, I behave rather differently. So, I think it's sometimes puzzling, but I think the whole atmosphere is actually more comfortable, it's more comfortable and if you can deal with things quicker in a better way and other people can also, that other people don't take things too personally, you know that kind of thing, it creates like an improved culture. If I can say that definitely in the department where I work, there's much more of a maturity in dealing with people and their emotions and your emotions, etcetera. So yes, I think definitely positive. Employee satisfaction will definitely improve.' (Participant 2, Male, Management)

'I think employee satisfaction and employee morale will actually be influenced as well. And I think just your general wellness, overall wellness of yourself as an individual will improve if you obviously really apply [*what is*] being taught to you, it can actually make a big difference for people to attend such training if the organisation really wants to improve overall morale, productivity, things like that, empowerment, if you want to call it that as well, because it definitely empowers you when you see things from an outside perspective.' (Participant 3, Male, Management)

Training methodology aspects that contributed to transformative learning

The data illuminated several training factors that contributed to transformative EI learning and its spill-over effects on the social work environment. These training factors included the EI competencies assessments, mindfulness for personal mastery of emotion-directed behavioural patterns and triggers, self-reflections on strengths and weaknesses identified from the assessments, emotional support from group discussions and buddy sessions, communication skills and emotion regulation tools and techniques. The practical nature of the training further facilitated the transfer of the learning to the workplace.

Emotional intelligence assessment

Participant 5 noted the usefulness of the assessments for objective self-reflection on one's EI skills and behaviour and for developing greater self-awareness in social interactions:

'So, I've used Doctor Minnaar's emotional intelligence assessment and I was quite intrigued with that and then when I heard they are offering this course I really wanted to explore that. Well, I think the questionnaires, I think that's really great, because it gives you a view objectively of yourself, so you may have a perception of let's say, your emotional intelligence and so on, but by completing those questionnaires, I think it really give you the right indication of your yourself and your emotional intelligence. So, I thoroughly enjoyed and found the questionnaires useful. Well for me, I think if I can speak holistically or generally, I love training and I love learning new things. So, for me, not only being more self-aware and thinking about the impact of self-awareness on emotional intelligence, but also when I interact with others trying to understand their frame of reference or where they come from.' (Participant 5, Female, Management)

Feedback and emotional support from group and buddy discussions

Participant 1 recounted how the group and buddy discussions offered personal growth feedback and emotional support, which helped them engage in self-disclosure and active listening in their journey of EI self-discovery:

'Emotional support, and then, with regards to the group discussions or buddy ratings or buddy discussions, we had to look at how good you are with regards to self-disclosure. Are you able to open up, and on the other hand as a listener.' (Participant 1, Male, Management)

Communication skills and tools

Participant 2 recalled how they benefitted from tools and techniques for confidently exhibiting assertive communication behaviour and skills:

'Then other things like, if I can recall things like communication, assertiveness and the tools to be assertive and the difference like between aggression and assertiveness, I think sometimes I could come over quite harsh and so I even changed the way I talk to people nowadays and always the result. So, I think it benefitted quite extraordinary, to say the least.' (Participant 2, Male, Management)

Emotion regulation techniques

Participant 4 explained how they benefitted from learning mindfulness and other emotion regulation techniques, such as fogging for constructive self-other management in social interactions:

'... also, more control and also how to express my emotions as well. We were given steps on how to express our emotions as well. Yes, I think not only flexible also in control as well, because in the workplace you have a lot of people that can push your limits and a lot of people who can test your boundaries and if you don't know techniques like fogging, then you're going to sweat like a mother.' (Participant 4, Male, Technical)

Practical nature of the training

Participant 6 highlighted the practical nature of the training process which helped them to translate the academic (theoretical) content into practical self-aware application through a process of self-discovery and transformative learning:

'Well, I am not sure whether I would really exclude anything, I think probably the fact that the training takes you through a journey of self-discovery and you continuously learn more about yourself. It's not just academic, it's practical and especially I think the questionnaires really helped me to develop insight into my own styles and the way that I think and behave. Probably the academic content, because I'm familiar with it.' (Participant 6, Female, Management)

Discussion

In alignment with the principles of transformative learning (Andreev, 2024; Dirkx, 1998; Fleming, 2021; Mezirow, 2002), the findings indicate that the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme engendered multilevel transformative learning. This was achieved through a combination of theoretical content presentations, EI competency assessments,

critical reflection and self-reflection on values and emotional triggers, mindfulness and emotion regulation techniques, interactive group discourse and the experiential practical application of theoretical content (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014). Building upon transformative learning theory (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 2002), the practical approach of learner-centric training effectively bolstered participants' intrinsic motivation, enabling them to confidently apply newly acquired socio-emotional competencies within their social interactions.

The processes and techniques of the EI training programme appear to have prompted a transformative shift in participants' perspectives. The acquired EI competencies provided a new lens through which participants perceived and understood themselves and their environments. This practical nature of the training also facilitated the transfer of learning to the workplace, enhancing not only individual well-being but also contributing to a positive work culture characterised by empathy, self-awareness and effective decision-making (Neong et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2024).

In alignment with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2002), participants described the training as a journey of self-discovery and personal growth, emphasising that the insights and skills gained were meaningful and actively facilitated shifts in their frame of reference, assumptions and approaches to problem-solving in social interactions. Mastery of both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills significantly contributes to an individual's overall well-being, success and satisfaction in both personal and professional realms (Tiwari et al., 2020).

The illuminative evaluation process revealed evidence of transformation in participants' locus of control, self-confidence and emotional self-regulation, which further promoted perspective shifts and enhanced communicative abilities in social interactions. These findings illustrate that the training transformed participants' habitual beliefs, assumptions, experiences and behaviours into emotionally competent, constructive and empathetic expressions that benefitted both the individuals involved and the organisation. The positive spill-over effects of transformative learning were evident in improved workplace and social relationships and interactions, which in turn positively influenced organisational culture, leadership, teamwork, goal setting, productivity and staff morale (Drigas et al., 2023; Kaur, 2024).

The participants' narratives highlighted the critical role of self-awareness and mindfulness in managing the intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviours that underpin EI mastery, growth and development. Self-awareness enables individuals to recognise their motivations, strengths and weaknesses, fostering deeper personal insights and growth (Gonzales, 2022). These findings support existing research that improved self-and-other awareness facilitates more effective emotion regulation, enhancing life quality and interpersonal relationships (Chung et al., 2023).

Additionally, the training helped participants develop essential intrapersonal and interpersonal EI competencies,

such as social awareness, adaptability and skills for managing stress, conflict and constructive interpersonal relationships. The study findings extend empirical evidence suggesting that EI training equips individuals with critical skills like active listening, empathy and assertive communication, which are vital for effective conflict resolution and relationship management (Čavlin et al., 2024; Guerola-Navarro et al., 2024; Zhang & Adegbola, 2022). These socio-emotional competencies foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding, crucial for organisational harmony and productivity (Čavlin et al., 2024; Guerola-Navarro et al., 2024).

Practical implications

The study findings serve as empirical evidence of the transformative learning effect of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme (Fourie, 2024; Minnaar, 2014) in fostering the necessary and desirable socio-emotional competencies and behaviours for personal growth and constructive social interactions in the workplace. Accordingly, the present findings support the future use of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme for individual, leader, team and organisational growth and success. Noteworthy is the training methodology that contributed to the positive spill-over effects of the transformative learning experienced by the participants. Companies that invest in EI training programmes for organisational and team performance improvement should ensure that they garner empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such programmes in facilitating the transformative learning necessary for the self-efficacious application of EI competencies in the workplace. The positive workplace spill-over effects observed from the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme's effectiveness in enhancing participants' EI self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills attest to the value of investing in EI training programmes. The findings support the EI research literature by underscoring the role EI training plays in fostering personal growth and development, positive relationships, effective communication and a conducive work environment for individual and organisational success (Fourie, 2024).

The digital transformation of workspaces necessitates a nuanced understanding and integration of EI within remote or hybrid environments. This study's findings are particularly salient in the digital realm, where virtual interactions often lack the subtle emotional cues present in face-to-face settings (Audrin & Audrin, 2023). Effective EI training programmes like the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme can bridge this gap by enhancing participants' emotional self-awareness and management skills, which are crucial for navigating the complexities of digital communication. By fostering such competencies, organisations can improve team cohesion, reduce misunderstandings and enhance overall communication effectiveness in digital workspaces. Therefore, this research not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge on EI training effectiveness but also provides a foundational

approach for adapting EI competencies to the evolving demands of digital workplace interactions.

Limitations and future research

The qualitative illuminative evaluation design of our research limits the generalisability of the research findings. The study findings are based on the subjective experiences of a small sample of individuals who participated in the EI training programme at one point in time in a single organisation. Future studies must implement the training programme in different companies and across varied business contexts for a richer evaluation of the transformative learning effects of the programme. The cross-sectional and subjective nature of the study data resulted in the researchers relying on retrospective sensemaking of the participants' experiences and perceptions. While the verbatim interview transcription and Atlasti software programme data analysis provided mechanisms to fill any gaps, it is suggested that future research expand on the findings of this research by obtaining longitudinal comparison data across several business sectors. Future research initiatives may also consider engaging in quantitative research such as pre- and post-test designs to empirically validate the change in indicators of EI competencies. Although the findings alluded to aspects of the training methodology that facilitated transformative EI learning, more research is needed to identify which specific aspects of the training were more effective in facilitating the development of desirable EI competencies and behaviours.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study's findings enrich the existing body of knowledge regarding the development of EI through training programmes. The results are promising, indicating that certain aspects of the training methodology employed in the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme effectively facilitate transformative EI learning, yielding beneficial spill-over effects within the workplace. Although this qualitative illuminative evaluation methodology provided deep insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions, further investigation through quantitative research is recommended to derive more definitive conclusions regarding the true transformative impact of the training programme. Evidently, exploring the potential of EI training as a mechanism for transformative learning remains a valuable avenue for future research, with significant implications for organisational success.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, I.L.P.

Disclaimer

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Interview protocol.

QC#	Theme	Questions	Reason for including question (what will be illuminated by the question?)
1	Participant background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the nature of your job? When did you attend the emotional intelligence training? Please specify your age group What is the nature of your function? 	To gain deeper insight into the participant as a social actor within an organisational milieu and to gain deeper insight into the characteristics of the organisation that resonate with the participant
2	Rationale for attending and experience of the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why did you attend the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme? Which aspects of the training benefitted you the most? Give reasons for your answer (why) Which aspects of the training did you benefit the least by? Give reasons for your answer (why) 	To gain deeper insight into how participants experienced the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme
3	Self-awareness: To manage your own emotions more effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your view, did your self-awareness improve after the EI training programme? Provide examples In your personal opinion, did the way you react to your thoughts and emotions change after the EI training? Give a reason or example for your answer 	To determine how or if participants are able to manage their own emotions more effectively after training in the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme
4	Self-management: Our ability to use awareness of our emotions to stay flexible and direct our behaviour positively and constructively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your view, did this EI training influence your ability to use awareness of your emotions to stay flexible and direct your behaviour positively and constructively? Provide examples Did this EI training influence your personal life experience either positively or negatively? Explain how and give reasons for your answer 	To determine how or if participants' ability to use awareness of their emotions to stay flexible and direct their behaviour positively and constructively were affected by the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme
5	Social Awareness: Our ability to understand the emotions of other people (what others are thinking and feeling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did this EI training influence your ability to understand the emotions of other people better? Explain how and give reasons for your answer Did this EI training influence your work environment either positively or negatively? Explain how and give reasons for your answer 	To determine if the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme influenced participants' ability to understand the emotions of other people and if participants' work environment were influenced either positively or negatively
6	Social Skills: To build more satisfactory relationships with other people at all levels and in all walks of life, thereby improving your personal power and productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your view, did the EI training provide you with any social skills relating to your work interactions with colleagues, supervisors, team members and family members? Explain how Did the EI training contribute to the goals in your area of work? Provide examples Did the EI training contribute to overall organisational goals? Provide examples In your opinion, if more people undergo this training, how would the organisation benefit? 	To determine if more satisfactory relationships were built with other people at all levels and in all walks of life, thereby improving participants' personal power and productivity
7	Additional comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there anything you want to add on how you feel about the Self-Awareness Programme? 	To gain deeper insight into how participants feel about the Minnaar EQ Dynamics Self-Awareness Programme

QC#, Question category number; EQ/EI, emotional intelligence.