The Evaluation of a Multidisciplinary Approach to Emotional Competence Training: Process and Challenges

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Psychologists have been involved with police training for the past several decades. A great deal of police work consists of dealing with “EDPs” — Emotionally Disturbed Persons — an area about which psychologists have expertise. Traditionally, police-psychology collaborations have involved both didactic and experiential portions. Psychologists first explain the symptoms and presentation of individuals suffering various mental disorders, such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder, to officers. Then, psychologists guide the police officers through various role-playing scenarios on how to work with individuals experiencing mental health crises in a safe and effective manner.

In order to deal with these types of situations successfully, it is important for police officers to recognize their own emotions and those of the individuals they are dealing with — this is what is known as emotional competence. However, emotional competence may be difficult to teach, given the complex nature of understanding emotions. Some feel that this is an innate ability, while others suggest that it is something that can be learned. Assuming that emotional competence is a skill that can be taught, then the question becomes — how does one measure this?

This is precisely the task that we were asked to do. When we joined the project, the program was already developed — which can pose a challenge for program evaluators. Often
times, those evaluating the program are involved in the initial design in order to help identify the constructs being taught and how to operationalize and measure the constructs. This program, however, was unique, as it was a collaboration between theater and policing – one of the first of its kind that we are aware of. The collaboration between theater, policing, and psychology was an interesting one. Individuals in these fields attend to the world through different lenses and communicate using different languages. We were faced with several challenges as we learned to speak one another’s language. The first challenge we faced was how to define the construct of emotional competence.

In psychology we rely on tests and standardized measures — and in particular, thorough self-report questionnaires. Thus, we first determined the constructs we wanted assessed, such as self-monitoring, perspective taking, personality plasticity, self-esteem, self-regulation, self-compassion, mindfulness, empathy, and autonomy. We then were tasked with finding questionnaire measures to assess these constructs that had been utilized in past research. However, when constructs become less tangible, measuring them becomes much harder. Thus, the constructs become what the questionnaires measure. Not all questionnaires are created equally, and while we may have found measures of these constructs — many of them lacked rigorous scrutiny as to their psychometric properties — such as reliability and validity. In this case, the construct validity would be particularly important — does the questionnaire measure what it says it will be measure? Since many of the questionnaires lacked evidence of strong construct validity, we were left assuming the measures targeted areas related to emotional competence.

Once we decided upon a list of constructs and corresponding questionnaires, we needed to develop an assessment strategy. One of the most common types of designs for program evaluation when teaching new skills is a pre/post design. Using this design, we administer the questionnaires before, and again after the training, to see if there is a change
in the measures. The degree to which those measures change from the beginning to the end of the course would in theory reflect the degree to which the trainees “learned” those skills. This strategy, however, is not the ideal way to assess skill acquisition, as we would ideally want to examine the ecological validity and the degree to which the course impacted real world behaviors. This strategy itself comes with a new set of challenges – what behaviors would one expect to see in the field if someone was emotionally competent? Given that in essence this was a pilot test of the training, we decided upon the pre/post design, followed by a questionnaire at the completion of the course to assess participant satisfaction. While in psychology we do not consider satisfaction to be sufficient to determine if a program has achieved its goals, it is important to assess stakeholder buy-in, and participant satisfaction is considered one of those metrics.

Once we received ethics approval from the University ethics committee to administer these questionnaires to participants, the next step was the actual implementation of the evaluative strategy. This is where we once again had a challenge and a clash of disciplinary cultures. As mentioned — in psychology we rely heavily on questionnaires. Much of our research involves studies where we give individuals dozens and even hundreds of questions. While we note participant fatigue as a possible limitation of this methodology, we do not feel that it significantly impacts the overall findings of the study. For this program evaluation, there were about 200 individual questions, which is not considered particularly onerous in psychology studies, and we anticipated that they would take the participants approximately 20 minutes to complete. We were then quite surprised to hear that it took some participants over one hour and that there were complaints about the number of questions. We took this to represent a cultural difference between disciplines. We hypothesize that perhaps the program evaluation aspect of the training was seen as a separate task, not as part of the program itself, making the questionnaire cumbersome. Alternatively, it could
mean that indeed there were too many questions — and thus we may need to reconceptualize how we assess change in future studies.

When we initially proposed the evaluative strategy, we also discussed doing some more thematic analyses of the learning process. As the trainees were required to complete various experiential exercises, we had hoped that they would write about their experiences and then we could analyze these writings for themes that related to the constructs that these experimental exercises were trying to teach. However, due to time restraints the students did not write about their experiences consistently, and thus we could not evaluate this aspect of the program. Often times in program evaluation pilot studies, there may be unforeseen barriers that arise through the course of program implementation that limit the evaluative process.

At the conclusion of the program, we administered the post-training questionnaires, which were identical to the ones administered at the start of the program. These were again met with some resistance from the participants, leading to some participants declining to take the questionnaires. In addition to the post course questionnaires, we also administered the satisfaction questionnaire at this time. When we analyzed the results we found no change in the pre/post questionnaire measures. However, the trainees all reported satisfaction with the program — with the only negative being the length of the questionnaires!

This is the first time for us that a program evaluation was viewed so negatively by the participants, and it led us to question why. We also questioned why we did not find any changes in the constructs we were measuring. We came up with a few possible explanations.

The first, and most likely explanation, was that the constructs being taught were not the constructs we were measuring — therefore, it may have been inevitable that we saw no changes. It is possible that we did not define the construct of emotional competence well and, thus, our measures were not
accurately targeting what the training sought to teach. It is also possible that the construct was well defined, but that our measures were not valid. It may also be that the participants were not engaged in the process, leading to their responses not accurately reflecting their feelings and perceptions. Given the high level of overall engagement and satisfaction with the program, it is likely that the trainees did benefit from the experiential methods — yet the only way to determine this would be to examine their skills in the field. For us, this means going back to the drawing board, with input from our collaborators, in order to re-evaluate what we are seeking to measure, and how!