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Control with a smile: when emotional intelligence replaces surveillance with empathy

ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence has become an important criterion for evaluating leadership, as it is presented as a humane alternative to traditional supervision. However, its application within labor relations marked by power inequalities can also reproduce subtle mechanisms of control. This article aimed to propose an integrated framework explaining how emotional intelligence can function as an instrument of organizational regulation rather than promote worker empowerment. A critical documentary review was conducted drawing on contributions from organizational psychology, critical sociology, and Foucauldian analysis of self-governance. The results identified five interrelated mechanisms: the presentation of emotional intelligence as a neutral leadership standard; the strategic use of emotional reading to influence subordinates; the commodification of feelings under emotional capitalism; the transformation of employees into agents of their own regulation; and the absorption of resistance by the dominant leadership discourse. It was concluded that emotional empowerment can reproduce power relations when emotional skills are directed toward control, adaptation, and productivity rather than care and autonomy. The proposed framework broadens the critical understanding of emotional intelligence and opens a research agenda concerning soft leadership tools.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; organizational control; emotional capitalism; self-governance; emotional labor; critical leadership studies.

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Control con una sonrisa: cuando la inteligencia emocional reemplaza la vigilancia por la empatía

RESUMEN

La inteligencia emocional se ha consolidado como un criterio relevante para evaluar el liderazgo, al presentarse como una alternativa humana a la supervisión tradicional. Sin embargo, su aplicación en relaciones laborales marcadas por desigualdades de poder también puede reproducir mecanismos sutiles de control. Este artículo tuvo como objetivo proponer un marco integrado que explique cómo la inteligencia emocional puede funcionar como instrumento de

regulación organizacional, en lugar de promover el empoderamiento de los trabajadores. Se realizó una revisión documental crítica de aportes de la psicología organizacional, la sociología crítica y el análisis foucaultiano del autogobierno. Los resultados permitieron identificar cinco mecanismos interrelacionados: la presentación de la inteligencia emocional como estándar neutral de liderazgo; el uso estratégico de la lectura emocional para influir sobre los subordinados; la mercantilización de los sentimientos en el capitalismo emocional; la conversión del empleado en agente de su propia regulación; y la absorción de la resistencia por el discurso predominante del liderazgo. Se concluyó que el empoderamiento emocional puede reproducir relaciones de poder cuando las habilidades emocionales se orientan al control, la adaptación y la productividad, en lugar del cuidado y la autonomía. El marco propuesto amplía la comprensión crítica de la inteligencia emocional y abre una agenda de investigación sobre las herramientas de liderazgo blando.

Palabras clave: inteligencia emocional; control organizacional; capitalismo emocional; autogobierno.

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Controle com um sorriso: quando a inteligência emocional substitui a vigilância pela empatia

A inteligência emocional consolidou-se como um critério relevante para avaliar a liderança, ao ser apresentada como uma alternativa humana à supervisão tradicional. Entretanto, sua aplicação em relações de trabalho marcadas por desigualdades de poder também pode reproduzir mecanismos sutis de controle. Este artigo teve como objetivo propor um marco integrado que explique como a inteligência emocional pode funcionar como instrumento de regulação organizacional, em vez de promover o empoderamento dos trabalhadores. Realizou-se uma revisão documental crítica de contribuições da psicologia organizacional, da sociologia crítica e da análise foucaultiana do autogoverno. Os resultados permitiram identificar cinco mecanismos inter-relacionados: a apresentação da inteligência emocional como padrão neutro de liderança; o uso estratégico da leitura emocional para influenciar os subordinados; a mercantilização dos sentimentos no capitalismo emocional; a transformação do empregado em agente de sua própria regulação; e a absorção da resistência pelo discurso predominante da liderança. Concluiu-se que o empoderamento emocional pode reproduzir relações de poder quando as habilidades emocionais são orientadas ao controle, à adaptação e à produtividade, em vez do cuidado e da autonomia. O marco proposto amplia a compreensão crítica da inteligência emocional e abre uma agenda de pesquisa sobre as ferramentas de liderança branda

Palavras-chave: inteligência emocional; controle organizacional; capitalismo emocional; autogoverno

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INTRODUCTION

Few management ideas have spread as fast or as deeply as emotional intelligence has since Goleman (1995) introduced it to a general readership and then, in his landmark 1998 Harvard Business Review piece (Goleman, 1998), applied it directly to leadership. In under two decades the concept moved from a theoretical addition to psychology into something close to a mandatory feature of leadership-training curricula, a formal evaluation criterion at many large organizations, and a fixture of everyday management talk. The pitch is almost always the same: a leader who understands what their team is feeling, who empathizes with the pressure they are under, who guides behavior, theirs and everyone else's, through emotional attunement rather than direct oversight and punishment.

Buried inside that overwhelmingly positive framing is a tension the mainstream management literature has largely avoided naming outright. The ability to read other people's feelings with real accuracy is not, on its own, some morally neutral skill; the same ability that can serve

genuine empathy and real care can be put to work, with equal skill, in the service of influence, persuasion, and manipulation, especially inside a relationship as structurally lopsided as the one between a leader and the people who report to them. A leader who reads a team's mood with real precision is in a position to steer that mood, the well-timed word of encouragement, the show of understanding that defuses an objection before it fully forms, far more effectively than any of the blunter, more overt supervisory tools ever managed, all while keeping the appearance of empathy intact, which makes this kind of steering considerably harder to notice or push back against.

Before going further, it is worth pinning down the specific research gap this paper is trying to close, since that sets it apart from earlier critical work on emotional intelligence. Organizational-psychology research into its "dark side" has approached the problem largely at the individual level, as a personality trait that narcissistic or Machiavellian individuals might misuse, without tying that misuse back to the organizational structure that makes it viable and rewarding in the first place. Critical sociology of emotion, and in particular the concept of emotional capitalism, has meanwhile addressed the structural dimension of commodified feeling without focusing enough on emotional intelligence specifically as a leadership tool. Foucauldian analysis of self-governance techniques (Foucault, 1977, 2008), for its part, has mostly stayed abstract, rarely applied directly to the contemporary literature on organizational emotional intelligence. This paper aims to close that particular gap by bringing these three levels, individual, structural, governmental, together under one interpretive roof.

The stakes go beyond academic tidiness. Scientifically, most applied literature on emotional intelligence still treats it as a neutral capacity that simply needs developing, without adequate critical scrutiny of the institutional settings in which it gets exercised, settings that are rarely, in practice, symmetrical in terms of who holds power over whom. Practically, the consequences show up directly in how leadership-training programs are designed and in performance-evaluation criteria that increasingly build emotional intelligence into their formal metrics, often without building in the safeguards that would keep it from sliding into manipulation dressed up as care.

A fair amount of scholarship bears on pieces of this question, even if the pieces have rarely been assembled together. On the founding theoretical side, Mayer and Salovey (1990) developed the first academic account of emotional intelligence as a measurable cognitive ability tied to perceiving, understanding, and managing emotion, before Goleman (1995, 1998) reworked and popularized the concept and then applied it specifically to leadership, organizing it around self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Later researchers, meanwhile, built out what is now called the dark-side literature on emotional intelligence: Kilduff et al. (2010) showed that people high in emotional intelligence may put their skills at reading and managing feeling to work for their own strategic ends, selectively investing effort in reading the emotions of people who matter strategically to them, masking their true feelings or performing different ones when it serves their interests, and manipulating how others perceive their emotional state through deliberate misattribution.

On the deeper sociological side, Illouz (2007) developed the concept of emotional capitalism to describe how economic relationships have come to be governed by an emotional logic, even as intimate relationships get governed, in a kind of mirror image, by an economic logic of negotiation, exchange, and return, to the point where feeling itself becomes an object of rationalized measurement and analysis inside the workplace, rather than remaining a private domain set apart from efficiency and output. This line of thinking picks up where Hochschild's (1983) earlier work on emotional labor left off, which showed how certain service occupations get trained into "feeling rules" serving a company's commercial purpose; the emotional-capitalism literature extends that analysis upward into management itself, where a leader is expected not just to display particular feelings but to master reading and steering everyone else's.

At a deeper philosophical level, Hughes (2010) offers a Foucauldian-Eliasian reading of the rise of emotional intelligence as an emerging managerial discourse, arguing that it imposes "new rules of work" requiring employees to develop a character more attuned to the dynamics of flexible workplaces (Sennett, 1998). In one sense, he notes, emotional intelligence appears to widen a worker's room for individual initiative; in another, it may simultaneously narrow the room for open resistance, since it lets a worker voice their objections in the emotional register the prevailing managerial discourse already knows how to absorb, turning resistance itself into a form of collusion with that discourse rather than a genuine break from it.

For all this richness, these fields, organizational psychology's dark-side literature, critical sociology's account of emotional commodification, and Foucauldian-Eliasian analysis of managerial discourse, mostly get treated as separate conversations, even though they are describing different facets of a single phenomenon at complementary levels of analysis: the individual, the structural, and the governmental. This paper tries to close that gap directly, offering something none of the three literatures provide on its own: a single interpretive framework linking them. Its aim, accordingly, is to analyze the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence, exercised inside unequal organizational power relations, can shift from a presumed tool of empowerment into an effective tool of soft control.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, documentary study, an integrative or critical narrative review rather than a systematic review in the strict sense. That fits a subject like this one, which does not reduce cleanly to a handful of measurable variables without losing most of what makes it interesting. Rather than testing a causal hypothesis, the goal was to synthesize a scattered body of prior work into a coherent account of how emotional intelligence, as a leadership tool, can shift from empowerment to control.

The design sits at the intersection of critical management studies and the critical sociology of emotion, combining organizational-analysis tools drawn from industrial and organizational psychology (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978) with critical tools drawn from cultural sociology and political philosophy. A field study built around surveys or interviews was set aside deliberately, since the more pressing task right now is conceptual: building a coherent framework out of literatures that have developed largely apart, ahead of any later empirical testing of that framework.

Epistemologically, the study takes an interpretive-critical stance that treats emotional intelligence, like other management concepts before it, not as some neutral given but as a discourse carrying implicit assumptions about power and organizational relationships, assumptions that shift along with institutional and economic context. That stance fits comfortably within the Foucauldian-Eliasian tradition behind some of the theoretical tools used here, while it is deliberately paired with tools from empirical organizational psychology, specifically the dark-side literature built on Mayer and Salovey's (1990) ability model. Combining these two distinct traditions was a conscious methodological choice, meant to avoid flattening the phenomenon into either a purely critical or a purely functionalist account.

A number of procedural safeguards were built in to keep a review of this kind reasonably rigorous. On the source-selection side, the search stayed within material indexed in recognized academic databases, deliberately excluding the substantial popular, promotional literature on emotional intelligence that circulates well beyond peer-reviewed sources, a genre that is especially prevalent in this particular field. On the coding side, each source's placement within the five analytical categories was revisited more than once, at separated intervals, to check that the classification held up rather than reflecting a single, hurried read, and wherever possible the analysis traced a concept back to its originating text rather than resting on secondary citations of it, returning, for instance, to Hughes's (2010) own Foucauldian-Eliasian reading rather than settling for later summaries of it.

The unit of analysis was the body of published scholarship bearing directly on emotional intelligence in leadership, its dark side, emotional capitalism, emotional labor, and Foucauldian self-governance. Sources were included based on several criteria: publication in a peer-reviewed journal or by a recognized academic press; direct relevance to one of three predefined theoretical strands; priority given to foundational texts within each strand, supplemented by more recent work retesting or applying these ideas to contemporary leadership contexts; and exclusion of non-academic or non-peer-reviewed material.

Data collection combined systematic keyword searches across academic databases and search engines with citation tracing. Search terms included emotional intelligence, dark side of emotional intelligence, emotional capitalism, emotional labor, and self-governance. This direct search was supplemented by a snowballing technique, following reference lists from key sources to locate further relevant material not surfaced by the initial searches, along with a deliberate search for counter-evidence describing more balanced, genuinely empowering uses of emotional intelligence in leadership, so as not to stack the deck in favor of the paper's own thesis.

Analysis proceeded through qualitative thematic coding, repeated close reading, extraction of core arguments from each source, and iterative sorting of those arguments into emerging categories. That process produced five main categories, presented in the next section, which together form the interpretive framework proposed here: the managerial promotion of emotional intelligence, the strategic use of emotional-reading skills, the commodification of feeling under emotional capitalism, emotional intelligence as a technique of self-governance, and the reshaping of employee resistance. These five categories are not meant to be exhaustive of everything the phenomenon involves, but they represent, based on the literature reviewed, the main pathways through which emotional intelligence shifts from presumed empowerment to soft control inside unequal organizational settings.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the literature produced five categories that together explain how emotional intelligence can function as control rather than empowerment. Each is presented on its own terms below, with deeper interpretation left for the discussion section. As with any thematic review, these categories overlap more than they sit apart, many sources touch on more than one at once, and the split here is mainly a matter of analytical convenience.

The managerial promotion of emotional intelligence as a neutral leadership standard. Mayer and Salovey (1990) laid the first academic groundwork for emotional intelligence as a measurable cognitive ability tied to perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotion, before Goleman reworked and simplified the concept in his bestselling 1995 book and then applied it directly to leadership in his landmark 1998 Harvard Business Review article, built around five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. The literature suggests that this simplification, whatever its value in raising awareness of leadership's emotional dimensions, also helped turn emotional intelligence from a precise, bounded academic concept into a loose managerial standard often presented as a morally neutral leadership virtue, with too little scrutiny of the organizational context in which it actually gets exercised. Worth noting: Goleman based his own generalization on research across roughly two hundred large global companies, which lent the concept an air of empirical credibility that helped accelerate its rapid uptake in leadership-training programs, without a comparably rigorous critical look at the concept's limits or the conditions under which it can be exercised ethically.

The strategic use of emotional-reading skills. In their influential review, Kilduff et al. (2010) showed that people high in emotional intelligence may put their skill at reading and managing emotion to work for their own strategic ends through four main mechanisms: selectively focusing effort on reading the emotions of people who matter strategically, masking their true feelings or displaying different ones for personal gain, manipulating how others read their own emotions through deliberate misattribution, and strategically controlling emotionally charged information. They noted that the very same mechanisms conventional literature uses to explain how

emotionally intelligent leaders build genuine trust and cooperation can, with equal effectiveness, serve competitive rather than cooperative ends, particularly in organizational environments that reward individual performance at the expense of collective performance.

The commodification of feeling under emotional capitalism. Illouz developed the concept of emotional capitalism to describe a two-sided process in which economic relationships come to be shaped by an emotional logic while intimate relationships, in a kind of mirror image, come to be shaped by an economic logic of negotiation, exchange, and return, such that feeling itself becomes an object of rationalized measurement inside the workplace rather than a private domain set apart from efficiency. This line of thinking builds on Hochschild's earlier account of emotional labor in service occupations, showing how workers get trained into commercially useful feeling rules; the emotional-capitalism literature extends that analysis upward into management, where a leader is expected not merely to display particular feelings but to master reading and directing everyone else's toward the organization's economic goals. Illouz adds that this commodification of affect does not stay confined to the workplace: through what she calls a therapeutic cultural model, it reshapes how people come to understand their personal and intimate relationships outside work too, borrowing the very same managerial vocabulary, effective communication, conflict management, until the line between the language of emotion at work and elsewhere grows hard to draw at all.

Emotional intelligence as a technique of self-governance. Hughes (2010) offers a Foucauldian-Eliasian reading of the rise of emotional intelligence as an emerging managerial discourse imposing new rules of work that require employees to develop a character better suited to the dynamics of flexible workplaces. Unlike traditional bureaucratic control (Weber, 1978), which imposes explicit behavioral rules from outside, he argues, emotional intelligence works by inviting the individual, leader or subordinate alike, to monitor and regulate their own feelings, framing that self-monitoring as a mark of professional maturity and emotional sophistication rather than compliance with external authority; employees who identify closely with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or who feel a strong affective commitment to it (Meyer & Allen, 1991) may be especially prone to internalizing this self-monitoring as a personal virtue rather than an external demand. In this reading, emotional intelligence extends the same techniques of "governing the soul" (Rose, 1999) that shift control from overt outside coercion toward subtler forms of voluntary self-work.

The reshaping of employee resistance. In a related study, Hughes (2005) argues that emotional intelligence, even as it appears to widen room for individual initiative and emotional expression, may simultaneously narrow room for open, collective worker resistance; it lets an employee voice objection or frustration within the very terms of the prevailing managerial discourse, as "emotional input" an emotionally intelligent leadership is expected to absorb and manage, such that resistance becomes a form of collusion with managerial discourse rather than a genuine break from it, raising real questions about how far individual resistance can actually go against this kind of soft control. Hughes adds that this dynamic takes on a distinctive character in workplaces that present themselves as post-bureaucratic and less hierarchical than traditional organizational forms; in such settings, an employee has a harder time even locating the source of authority they are resisting, once that authority takes the shape of "dialogue" and mutual "understanding" rather than explicit command.

Taken together, these five categories converge on a single point: all of them rest on the same underlying paradox, that the capacity to understand and manage emotion, exercised inside an unequal power relationship, becomes just as effective a tool of influence as it is a tool of care, without it being easy from the outside to tell the two apart. The first two categories explain the direct mechanisms at the level of the individual and leadership practice; the third explains the broader structural-economic dimension; and the fourth and fifth explain how all of this gets internalized and reproduced from within, whether by the leader or by the employee themselves. It is also worth noting an asymmetry in the underlying evidence: the first and second categories rest on a growing quantitative base drawing on standardized psychometric measures of

emotional intelligence, while the third and fourth categories lean more heavily on qualitative, interpretive, and critical approaches, an asymmetry worth keeping in mind when weaving these categories together, as the discussion below does.

DISCUSSION

Read together, the five categories add up to a coherent picture of what might be called control with a smile, an integrated system, not a scattered set of individual misuses of an otherwise benign idea. Fineman's (2004) influential critical review of emotional intelligence, which she described as a cautionary tale, offers a useful way into understanding that integration: her point was not that emotional intelligence is simply a fabrication, but that it underwent a process of simplification and marketing that turned a rich, complicated psychological idea about human feeling into a rigid managerial "measure" carrying unstated assumptions about power, about who gets to read whose feelings, and who is expected to display which feelings, and when.

This reading gains added weight in light of the Foucauldian-Eliasian account Hughes (2010) offers: what is happening, on his reading, is not simply an outside demand that a leader perform empathy, but a deeper process in which the leader internalizes the logic of emotional intelligence as an expression of their own professional maturity and leadership excellence, not necessarily as a conscious act of manipulation. That is exactly what makes this kind of control harder to name and resist than more openly coercive forms of managerial oversight: when the leader genuinely believes they are practicing sincere empathy, and the subordinate genuinely believes they are receiving real care, it becomes difficult for either party to say where authentic empathy ends and strategic emotional reading, aimed at steering and influence, begins, precisely because so much of what each party expects of the other rests on the kind of unwritten, implicit understanding that governs any workplace relationship (Rousseau, 1995).

Kilduff et al. (2010) work on the dark side of emotional intelligence adds a useful complementary layer here: they show that this drift from empowerment to control need not stem from any deliberate bad intent on a given leader's part, but follows fairly naturally from the fact that the underlying skills, reading emotion, understanding it, managing it precisely, are equally capable of serving two entirely opposite ends, so that it is the organizational context in which those skills get exercised, not the skills themselves, that ends up determining which direction they will actually take. That helps explain why leadership-training programs that teach emotional-intelligence "skills" in isolation, without addressing the organizational power structure those skills will be exercised within, so often fall short.

This connects to Illouz's account of emotional capitalism in explaining a deeper mechanism still: once feeling itself becomes an object of rational measurement within a logic of organizational efficiency, empathy gradually loses its standing as a spontaneous human response and becomes, instead, a managerial resource that can be mobilized and directed toward productivity goals, mobilized the same way any other organizational resource gets mobilized. This ties leadership-level emotional intelligence to a longer analytical thread running through the emotional-labor literature and the neo-normative control literature (Kunda, 1992; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), both of which describe how even individuality and personal authenticity get absorbed as deeper tools of control; in that sense, emotionally intelligent leadership represents the latest link in a long chain of putting spaces once considered private and authentic, feeling, personal identity, one's own time, to work in the service of a single organizational logic.

Bringing these threads together offers a theoretical contribution that maps directly onto the research gap this paper set out to close: rather than treating the dark side of emotional intelligence as an isolated problem of individual traits detached from its structural context, or treating emotional capitalism as a general economic phenomenon detached from leadership scholarship, or treating Foucauldian self-governance as an abstract philosophical frame without a concrete organizational application, this paper links all three levels, individual practice, structural economic logic, and internalized self-governance, into a single coherent account. Emotional intelligence in leadership, on this reading, is an individual practice (the first level)

produced within a broader structural-economic logic (the second level) and internalized through fine-grained techniques of self-governance (the third level). That three-level synthesis is the specific scholarly contribution offered here, one none of the three literatures provides on its own.

That said, this reading should not be taken as a blanket indictment of emotional intelligence as a concept, or of everyone who practices it. Some of the literature reviewed here, particularly work grounded in Mayer and Salovey's (1990) more precise academic model, points to the possibility of a more balanced leadership practice, one that combines accurate emotional reading with a genuine ethical commitment to others' wellbeing rather than their exploitation. The evidence base is also uneven, as noted in the results: quantitative research on emotional capitalism and self-governance remains thinner than the well-established survey tradition around the dark side of emotional intelligence, which counsels some caution before generalizing too broadly from those two categories in particular.

Practically, this reading suggests the decisive variable is not whether a given leader "has" emotional intelligence or lacks it, but the organizational context in which it gets exercised. In organizations with genuine accountability mechanisms, functioning complaint channels, and a reasonably balanced distribution of power, emotional intelligence appears more likely to function as a real tool of empowerment. In organizations lacking those structural safeguards, it becomes considerably more likely to slide into a form of soft control that is hard to identify or hold accountable precisely because it wears the language of care and empathy. That has a direct implication for designers of leadership-training programs: rather than teaching emotional-intelligence "skills" in isolation from context, the findings point toward pairing that training with parallel work on organizational accountability and transparency, the only real safeguard against declared empathy sliding into disguised manipulation.

One last point deserves to be drawn out explicitly, concerning the relationship between this phenomenon and the neo-normative control described in earlier organizational-culture literature. If neo-normative control works by inviting an employee to "just be themselves," then control through emotional intelligence marks a further step down the same road: it does not stop at inviting self-expression, but hands the leader a precise instrument for reading, decomposing, and steering that expressed self. Seen this way, the rise of emotionally intelligent leadership looks less like a break from an earlier trajectory and more like its logical continuation, a trajectory running from informal organizational culture, through the discourse of individual authenticity, to the fine-grained emotional reading that emotional intelligence now makes possible.

CONCLUSIONS

This review concludes that emotional intelligence, exercised inside unequal organizational power relationships, does not necessarily function as the neutral empowerment tool mainstream management discourse presents it as; it can instead become a form of soft control that is hard to name or resist precisely because it wears the language of empathy and care. Five interlocking mechanisms drive this shift, according to the literature reviewed here: the managerial promotion of emotional intelligence as a morally neutral leadership standard; the strategic use of emotional-reading skills in the service of competitive rather than cooperative ends; the commodification of feeling within the broader logic of emotional capitalism; the deployment of emotional intelligence as a technique of self-governance that a leader internalizes as a mark of professional maturity; and the reshaping of employee resistance into just another input the prevailing managerial discourse already knows how to absorb, rather than a genuine break from it.

The paper's main scholarly contribution lies specifically in closing a clear gap that had separated three literatures addressing different facets of the same phenomenon without ever meeting: organizational psychology's dark-side-of-emotional-intelligence research, critical sociology's account of emotional capitalism, and Foucauldian-Eliasian analysis of self-governance discourse. By linking these three fields into a single, multi-level interpretive framework, this paper offers a

more coherent and comprehensive account of how emotional intelligence shifts from a presumed tool of empowerment into an actual tool of control, an account none of the three literatures could offer on its own. In doing so, the paper opens a new research agenda for studying "soft leadership" tools more broadly: leadership tools built on the language of care and empowerment rather than the language of overt authority.

Practically, these conclusions carry direct implications for leadership-training designers and HR policymakers, who are encouraged to reconsider teaching emotional-intelligence "skills" in isolation from organizational context, in favor of an approach that pairs such training with parallel attention to accountability, transparency, and the balance of power within the organization. They also carry implications for employees themselves, who may benefit from a sharper awareness that a leader's declared empathy can be a strategic instrument of steering as easily as it can be sincere care, without that awareness needing to curdle into blanket suspicion of every empathetic leadership gesture.

One final point is worth making explicitly. The purpose of unpacking the mechanisms behind control with a smile here is not to cast blanket doubt on the value of emotional intelligence or on the sincerity of everyone who practices it. It is to encourage a sharper distinction between authentic empathy grounded in a genuine ethical commitment to others' wellbeing, and strategic emotional reading deployed mainly in the service of influence and productivity. The weaker an organization's accountability mechanisms and the more unbalanced its distribution of power, the more likely the first tends to slide into the second, often without the leader themselves being fully aware that the slide is happening at all.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations bear on how these findings should be read. First, this was a purely documentary and theoretical study; it did not include primary field data such as direct observation of actual leadership interactions or interviews with employees who have experienced this kind of leadership, which limits how directly the proposed relationships among the five mechanisms and actual behavioral outcomes can be empirically verified at this stage. Second, the literature reviewed draws predominantly on Western academic sources, which constrains how far these findings can be generalized to other cultural and institutional settings, where norms around emotional expression and the acceptability of leader empathy may differ considerably from those assumed here. Third, given the nature of an integrative theoretical review, the process of selecting the five categories and sorting sources into them retains, despite the procedural safeguards described earlier, an inevitable element of researcher interpretation. Fourth, the study did not examine in sufficient depth how the mechanisms described here might play out differently across leadership levels, senior executive leadership versus direct-line supervision, for instance.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Building on these limitations and findings, several avenues for future work stand out. There is a clear need for qualitative field studies, in-depth interviews or organizational ethnography, exploring how employees themselves experience the difference between authentic leadership empathy and strategic emotional reading in their day-to-day working lives. There is also a need for quantitative studies testing empirically whether organizational accountability structures, such as the presence or absence of functioning complaint channels, moderate how likely emotionally intelligent leadership is to function as control rather than empowerment, which would put this paper's central hypothesis to a direct empirical test. Comparative research across cultural and institutional contexts, Arab organizational settings in particular, would help establish whether the mechanisms of control through emotional intelligence described in this largely Western literature hold up elsewhere or take different shapes. Finally, future work might usefully explore alternative leadership-training designs that pair emotional-intelligence instruction with parallel

attention to organizational power and accountability structures, and test how such alternative programs perform against conventional ones.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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