Master Thesis:

Exploring Emotional Intelligence Through Behavioural Manifestations: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, where technology handles more tasks we used to do, such as analysis, decision-making, or problem-solving, soft skills like emotional intelligence (EI) are more important than ever in jobs where human connection and communication are most crucial. This thesis examines how EI is expressed through both verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Although EI has been widely researched, much of the existing work relies on self-report questionnaires, which often fail to capture the complexity of interactions and associated behaviours. This study employs a distinct approach by conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews with professionals whose work relies heavily on interpersonal engagement, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of how EI is applied in practice.

Findings reveal that emotionally intelligent behaviours are often enacted unconsciously and are highly context-sensitive. Participants described specific behaviours, such as reflective questioning, empathetic tone, affirming body language, and adaptive communication, as indicators of EI. These behaviours fell into three overlapping dimensions: verbal expressions, non-verbal signals, and the integrated interplay between the two. The study reveals that emotionally intelligent individuals effectively manage relational dynamics in real-time by co-regulating emotions through language, vocal cues, and embodied presence.

This research advances the conceptualisation of EI by integrating communication and emotional theories to frame it as an observable, relational process. It proposes that EI is not merely a trait but a set of dynamic behaviours that can be coached, assessed, and applied in workplace settings. The study highlights the need for behaviour-based assessment tools and suggests the development of a structured EI codebook to support training, recruitment, and organisational development. By shifting the focus from abstract traits to practical behaviours, this thesis contributes actionable insights for enhancing leadership, team collaboration, and emotionally intelligent communication in modern workplaces.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence (EI), Observable EI Behaviours, Observed EI, Semi-structured Interviews

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure

List of Tables

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Appendix B

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the increasing automation of cognitive tasks through artificial intelligence, the value of soft skills, particularly emotional intelligence (EI), is becoming increasingly essential in roles where empathy, communication and human judgement remain critical (Naithani et al., 2024).

EI has initially been defined as the ability to perceive, manage, and respond to one's own emotions and those of others (Mayer & Salovey, 1990). Mayer and Salovey's original conceptualisation in the 1990s, and later popularised by Goleman (1995), was followed by various ways of defining, conceptualising, and operationalising EI (Law et al., 1998). The most popular one is a tripartition of EI being a developable trait (Dulewicz & Higgs, 1999; Petrides & Furnham, 2001), as a set of abilities (Mayer et al., 2008) and as a mixed model integrating both (Joseph et al., 2014). Across models, scholars agree that EI plays a critical role in several domains, including team management, academic and job performance, and social relationships (Dasborough et al., 2021; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

However, despite this consensus, the current methods for assessing EI have been criticised. Most tools, including the MSCEIT (Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI Test) (Mayer et al., 2003) and the SSEIT (Schutte et al., 1998), rely on self-report or peer ratings, which are vulnerable to social desirability bias, inaccurate self-assessments and fail to capture the contextual complexity of EI. (Davies et al., 1998; McDonald, 2008; and Côté and Miners, 2006). This has led researchers to call for more objective, behaviour-based approaches that better capture the dynamic, interactional nature of EI (Boyatzis, 2018; Davies et al., 1998; Jordan & Troth, 2002). This shift in focus reflects a broader movement in fields, such as psychological safety and behavioural research (O'Donovan et al., 2020), where scholars argue that observed actions, often described through interviews, may provide more reliable indicators of emotional competencies than static survey responses (Zhao et al., 2019). In response, this study focuses on a novel method to assess EI. Hence, it shifts the lens from perception to action; from what people say they feel and do, to how EI is manifested through verbal and non-verbal behaviours during social interactions. To that end, the following research question guides this thesis:

"*How can emotional intelligence be manifested through verbal and non-verbal behaviours?*"

Two sub-questions further explore this domain:

- "*What verbal behaviours are associated with EI?*"
- "*What non-verbal behaviours are associated with EI?"*

Adopting an inductive, qualitative approach, this study employs semi-structured interviews to enable an in-depth exploration of verbal and non-verbal behaviours within social contexts (Kallio et al., 2016). This method provides richer, more nuanced insights into how EI manifests through behaviour, addressing the growing call for context-sensitive, actionable models of EI.

Prior research has already demonstrated that training interventions can enhance EI skills (Dulewicz & Higgs, 1999; Schutte et al., 2013). Building on this foundation, the present research aims to move EI development beyond abstract concepts, making it observable, teachable, and applicable in practical settings such as coaching, recruitment, and training. The findings will be particularly valuable to team leaders, educators, and professionals seeking to improve workplace relationships and leadership effectiveness.

The thesis begins with a theoretical background on EI, including key models of EI, followed by a discussion of the research design and methodology. The results present a framework of observed behaviours, and the thesis concludes with a discussion that reflects on the implications, the limitations of this study, and future research opportunities.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

EI can be defined, conceptualised, and operationalised in many different ways. The original definition dates back to the four-branch model proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1990) breaks EI this into four core abilities: (1) accurately perceiving emotions in oneself and others, (2) using emotions to facilitate thought and problem-solving, (3) understanding and analyse emotional meanings, and (4) regulating emotion in oneself and others.. Their ability-based model, MSCEIT V2.0 (Mayer et al., 2003), positions EI within the domain of cognitive intelligence. Goleman popularised EI and (1995) introduced EI comprising five core domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Later adaptations reorganised these into four broader competencies (1998). Since then, EI research has primarily focused on three conceptual models: ability EI, trait EI, and mixed EI, each grounded in distinct perspectives and measurement strategies (Mayer et al., 2008; Petrides & Furnham, 2001).

- **Ability EI** is measured using performance-based tasks (e.g., MSCEIT) and focuses on the cognitive processing of emotional information. These tools aim to objectively assess an individual's ability to reason about emotions and solve problems related to emotions (Mayer et al., 2003).
- **Trait EI,** as conceptualised by Petrides (2001), reflects self-perceived emotional abilities and behavioural dispositions. It is measured using self-report questionnaires such as the TEIQue, which assesses domains like well-being, emotionality, sociability, and self-control, offering insight into how individuals view their emotional functioning (Petrides & Furnham, 2001)
- **Mixed EI** combines elements of emotional competencies, personality traits, and social skills. Popularised by Goleman (1995) and further developed by Bar-On (2006), this model encompasses attributes such as self-esteem, adaptability, and optimism, and is assessed through 360-degree feedback tools or self-rating instruments, including the EQ-i and ESCI (Bar-On, 2006; Boyatzis, 2008).

While each model offers valuable insights into emotional functioning, they vary considerably in validity and applicability (O'Connor et al., 2019).

EI has gained prominence as a critical factor in leadership, team dynamics, and organisational learning (Mayer et al., 2004; George, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Bar-On, 2006). EI's benefits extend to workplace success, relationship success, and well-being (Goleman, 1995). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals with higher EI exhibit adaptive responses to conflicts (Jordan & Troth, 2002). Research has also shown benefits of leaders' EI positively relating to knowledge transfer within organisations (Decker et al., 2009) and knowledge sharing by fostering a psychological safety climate (Mahmood & Toker, 2022; Hoogeboom et al., 2021), creating an environment where employees feel safe to speak up without fear of negative consequences. High EI leaders are more effective in inspiring and motivating their

teams, building strong relationships, and navigating difficult situations (Goleman, 1998). Meanwhile, Côté and Miners (2006) found that EI interacts with cognitive intelligence in predicting job performance, suggesting that both are necessary for success.

An overview of the three EI models, including their measurement tools and limitations, is presented in Table 1: Comparison of EI Models.

Table 1. Comparison of EI Models

Model	Brief definition	Measurement method	Example Instruments	Disadvantages
Ability EI	Emotion-related cognitive abilities	Performance-based	MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2003); STEM/STEU (MacCann & Roberts, 2008); WEIP-3 (Jordan et al., 2002) and WLEIS (Wong & Law, 2002);	Perceived rather than actual performance; relies on subjective emotional experience
Trait EI	Self-perceptions of emotional abilities and behavioural dispositions	Self-report questionnaires	TEIQue (Petrides, 2009); SREIT/SSEIT (Schutte et al.1998);	Confuses traits and abilities; overly broad
Mixed EI	Competencies combining traits, social skills and personality competencies	Self-rating, peer rating and supervisor rating (360-degree assessment)	EQ-i (Bar-On, 2006); ESCI (Boyatzis, 2008)	Process-oriented, not outcome-oriented; overlaps with other models

In terms of the ability EI tests, their predictive validity, particularly in occupational contexts such as job satisfaction (Miao et al., 2017) and job performance (Joseph et al., 2014), remains modest. While they cannot be faked, these tools often still assess what someone thinks the correct emotional response is, rather than what they do during interactions (O'Connor et al., 2019).

Trait-based and mixed models, in contrast to ability, conceptualise EI as a constellation of self-perceived emotional and social competencies that influence behaviour across settings. Disadvantages of trait EI arise because the tests are primarily based on self-report questionnaires, which measure typical behaviours in emotion-relevant situations (e.g., when an individual is confronted with stress or an upset friend) and are often confused with abilities. Furthermore, trait EI overlaps substantially with personality traits, particularly the Big Five (Davies et al., 1998). Petrides and Furnham (2001) elaborated on trait EI as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies, raising questions about its incremental validity (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004).

Besides, mixed models often blur the lines between traits, ability and behaviours (O'Connor et al., 2019). While some have questioned the conceptual clarity of mixed models of EI, particularly in organisational contexts, where elements such as motivation, leadership style, and interpersonal skills may overlap, these models are still regarded as valuable and reliable tools, especially in areas like coaching and professional development (Boyatzis, 2018). Regardless, even 360-degree assessments can be influenced

by factors such as maintaining positive relationships, limited observation opportunities, misunderstandings, response biases, and a lack of realistic self-awareness, which are common drawbacks of self-reported data (McDonald, 2008). These challenges necessitate exploring alternative avenues for evaluating EI. This comparison highlights the conceptual and methodological diversity within EI research, while also underscoring a critical gap: despite their value, all current models rely heavily on subjective or indirect assessment methods. By drawing parallels with the pursuit of alternative assessment methods in conflict management and psychological safety research (O'Donovan et al., 2020), it is shown that objective, behaviour-based measures offer a more accurate understanding of individuals' EI capabilities, mitigating the shortcomings associated with self-reported measures (Dasborough et al., 2021; Davies et al., 1998; Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Zhao et al. (2019) shed light on the limitations of traditional surveys and proposed using interview methods to gain insights into cognitive and affective perceptions during conflicts. The behavioural approach adopted in this study seeks greater objectivity by identifying specific, verbal and non-verbal behavioural cues through which EI is manifested.

2.2(NON-)VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Traditional EI models often assess internal abilities, traits, or a mix of both. People usually communicate in two main ways: verbally (through talking) and nonverbally (without words), such as through body language or facial expressions. Both ways can reveal how someone is feeling and how well they interact with others (Israelashvili & Fischer, 2023). These behaviours are critical expressions of EI and offer a more objective and observable foundation for its assessment (Hoogeboom et al., 2021).

2.2.1 VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Verbal behaviour refers to spoken or written communication that conveys emotional and social meaning (Boyd & Markowitz, 2025). The way people speak, including their tone, word choice, and the substance of what they say, can reveal important information about how they express emotions and communicate with others (Friedman, 1979).

Previous research has consistently shown a pattern in summarising behaviour research in two to three broadly defined categories, or "meta categories": task, relational, and change behaviour (Yukl et al, 2002; Hoogeboom et al., 2021), providing insight for understanding EI-related behaviours. Although concrete examples are related to leader behaviour (Yukl et al., 2002), links to EI can also be established, given the involvement of emotions in daily interactions or social settings.

Task-oriented leadership involved a strong emphasis on short-term planning, clear communication of objectives and roles, and active monitoring of operations and performance. Relationship-oriented behaviour involves supporting, developing, recognising, consulting and empowering. demonstrates that leaders care about others' feelings, can understand them, and offer support. Change-oriented leadership involves external monitoring, envisioning change, encouraging innovative thinking and taking personal

risks to implement change. Relationship-oriented behaviour highlights interpersonal and emotional aspects of human behaviour (Behrend et al., 2017; Yukl et al., 2002). This aligns with EI, which is about recognising, understanding, managing, and using feelings when interacting with others (Mayer et al., 2004; Salovey).

To study EI behaviour, this research utilises the rules outlined by Yukl et al. (2002). This framework indicates four important requirements when looking at behaviours, which have been related to EI:

1. You have to see the behaviour happen, not just guess what caused it.
2. The behaviour should be something lots of people do, not just one person.
3. Each behaviour should mostly fit into one part of EI, but it can sometimes fit into others, too.
4. The behaviour should be grounded in ideas and evidence from previous research on EI.

Firstly, concerning consulting, this behaviour involves recognising and responding to others' emotional cues, encouraging participation in decision-making, and considering diverse perspectives before taking action (Yukl et al., 2002).

Secondly, through supporting behaviours, such as offering empathy, sympathy, and encouragement during times of stress, EI facilitates the expression of care and responsiveness, which are essential for fostering psychological safety and emotional trust (Goleman, 1998; Piccolo et al., 2012; Yukl et al., 2002).

Thirdly, recognising others for their achievements and contributions requires emotional sensitivity to notice effort and performance, as well as interpersonal sensitivity to deliver praise in a meaningful way, thereby reinforcing motivation and a sense of belonging (Yukl et al., 2002). Jordan and Troth (2002) found that leaders with high EI are better at using verbal communication to manage conflict and reduce tension, particularly by modulating tone and timing.

Fourthly, in developing others, emotionally intelligent leaders demonstrate social sensitivity and coaching competence, noticing and understanding what others say and how they behave and helping individuals grow through empathic feedback and tailored support. This includes reading tone, language subtleties, and understanding social situations, social norms, and roles (Riggio et al., 2003; Yukl et al., 2002).

Finally, empowering behaviours, such as entrusting responsibility and enabling autonomy (Yukl et al., 2002), are crucial. It also includes persuasive speech and motivational storytelling, which help align team goals and foster commitment (Druskat & Wolff, 2001), as well as social expressiveness (Riggio et al., 2003).

2.2.2 NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Non-verbal behaviour encompasses all unspoken aspects of communication, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact, and vocal tone (Burgoon et al., 2016). These cues often

operate subconsciously and can convey emotional states more authentically than verbal communications. For example, subtle facial expressions and body movements often reveal emotions that may be masked or not as apparent in spoken language (Mehrabian, 1967a;) with variations in awareness and intentionality showing unintended movements as well as posture, proxemity, clothing, touch, smells, tastes, and non-linguistic sounds (Allwood, 2002)

Studies show that when people communicate face-to-face, most of the meaning comes from aspects beyond words, such as tone of voice and facial expressions (Burgoon et al., 2016). One famous idea, known as "Mehrabian's rule" (1967), suggests that when we convey feelings, only about 7% of the message comes from words, 38% from our tone of voice, and 55% from our facial expressions. Ekman (1972) found that certain emotions, such as happiness, anger, sadness, fear, surprise, and disgust, are consistently expressed by people worldwide, highlighting the importance of nonverbal communication. Retrieving these non-verbal signs is crucial for EI because they provide clues about how people are feeling internally (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). These kinds of actions demonstrate how EI helps teams trust one another, remain resilient, and work effectively together (Hoogeboom et al., 2021; Troth et al., 2017). This is particularly important for leaders, as their actions, such as body language, eye contact, and maintaining composure, can convey confidence and care (Riggio et al., 2003).

Together, verbal and non-verbal behaviours serve as the primary vehicles through which EI is manifested. These behaviours, when contextually analysed, provide insight into an individual's emotional awareness, empathy, and regulation, which are core aspects of EI that go beyond internal traits or abilities.

2.3EI AND BEHAVIOUR

While EI is traditionally conceptualised through internal traits and abilities, its manifestation is dynamic, context-dependent, and socially shaped. This study emphasises that EI is not merely about recognising verbal and non-verbal emotional cues; it is also about how individuals regulate, adapt, and respond emotionally in interactions. Drawing from theories such as Emotions as Social Information (EASI) (Van Kleef, 2009; A'yuninnisa et al., 2024) and Emotional Contagion (Barsade, 2002; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), EI is increasingly understood as a socially constructed, relational process that is observable through behaviour. EASI (Van Kleef, 2009) and Emotional Contagion (Barsade, 2002; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021) suggest that others' emotional expressions can influence how individuals feel, behave, and perform. The EASI (Van Kleef, 2009; A'yuninnisa et al., 2024) and Emotional Contagion theories (Barsade, 2002; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021) highlight the role of emotional contagion, emotional climate, and the collective emotional experience of team members in shaping team dynamics and performance. Jordan et al., (2006) showed that emotions ripple through teams. As exemplified by Jordan et al., (2006) team members may learn a thing or two from each other by observing behaviour during interactions. For example, if someone stays calm when things get tough,

it can help the whole team feel better and safer. This explains how EI may be contagious and how observers mimic the emotions of their leader (A'yuninnisa et al., 2024). Likewise, they may be influenced by an emotional outburst from another individual and notice that they are sensitive to picking up those behavioural cues in a more negative light as well. By closely examining behaviour, individuals can gain valuable information about emotional responses and triggers, as well as improve their communication and social interaction abilities (Jordan et al., 2006). Moreover, EI behaviours that foster positive emotions can broaden attention and thinking, as well as resilience, trust, and collaboration, in line with the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001). Observing emotionally intelligent behaviours in others (e.g., composed responses, empathetic gestures) can enhance self-awareness and EI skill development within a group (Van Kleef, 2009). George (2000) argues that emotionally intelligent leaders who can effectively manage the emotions of their employees can elicit positive employee emotions, such as enthusiasm and confidence. These positive emotions can then be leveraged to establish a commitment to the vision and foster a collective identity. This perspective aligns with Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which views emotional experiences and expressions as key to understanding workplace behaviour. This approach aligns with the recognition of the significance of affective behaviours and events in understanding employees' reactions to their work environment.

In sum, the manifestation of EI is deeply context-dependent, driven not only by the ability to read emotional cues but also by the capacity to regulate, adapt, and respond within complex emotional climates. Identifying and analysing these behaviours, especially during emotionally charged moments, can reveal how EI is enacted, learned, and shared in organisations (Troth et al., 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative, inductive research design aimed at exploring how EI manifests through observable behaviour. Qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their social contexts and is well-suited for investigating EI beyond self-report measures, which have been criticised for their limited objectivity and contextual sensitivity (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Gioia et al., 2012). Inductive theory starts with specific observations and relies on comparisons between them to infer possible generalisations (Eisenhardt, 1989). This study follows Tracy's (2010) quality criteria for qualitative research, ensuring that the inquiry is relevant, rich theoretical and methodological grounding, transparent analysis, resonant with participants, ethically sound, and coherent in its overall narrative.

3.2 SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to identify professionals with direct experience and awareness of EI as demonstrated in communication-intensive environments (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This was essential to ensure that data captured behavioural manifestations of EI rather than superficial or theoretical understandings. Among these roles were coaching, teaching, management, leadership, sales, and team collaboration. The participants were approached through LinkedIn posts and via email.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Understanding of EI: ability to distinguish EI from other forms of intelligence, such as IQ, to prevent blur in results and an understanding of EI as a behavioural construct.
- Professional experience: experience in roles requiring frequent interpersonal communication and emotional engagement.
- Direct observation of EI behaviour: experience observing or demonstrating EI through verbal and non-verbal behaviours in practical settings.
- Diversity: representing various industries and organisational contexts to capture a broad range of EI manifestations.

To achieve a sufficient and diverse sample, snowball sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling, where initial participants recommended colleagues who also met the inclusion criteria. This method expanded access to relevant participants while maintaining focus on those with EI expertise. The sample diversity enabled the capture of multiple perspectives on EI behaviours across various contexts. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached, the point at which additional interviews yielded no new themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Seventeen interviews had been scheduled to reach data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Demographic and professional background information was

collected to identify potential influence between EI behaviours and variables such as gender, culture, professional, and academic background, as outlined in Table 2. This information was used to contextualise how EI was expressed across diverse participant profiles.

Table 2 Participant Overview

Participant	Cultural Background	Gender	Working Field	Position	Years of Experience	Study Field
I1	Romanian	F	Research	Head of publications	>15	Psychology
I2	Armenian	M	Engineering	Traffic Advisor	>5	Civil Engineering
I3	Dutch	F	HR/Research	Lean Program Coordinator	>20	Psychology
I4	Romanian	F	Education/Research	Trainer & Consultant, Associate Lecturer	>10	Consultancy/Business
I5	Dutch	F	Coach	Policy Advisor	>4	Psychology
I6	Syrian	F	Education	Teacher Math	>3	Math
I7	Romanian	F	Research	Technical Director	>10	Data Analysis
I8	Portuguese	M	Operations/Data Analysis	Head of Last Mile Operations	>5	Data Analysis
I9	Dutch	M	Coaching/Education	Consultant	>20	Sales/Business
I10	French	M	Education/Research	Senior researcher diversity board	>20	Consultancy/Business
I11	British	M	Education	Lecturer Cultural Management	>20	Consultancy/Business
I12	Armenian	F	HR/Municipality	Junior HRM Advisor	>1	HR
I13	Congolese	F	Operations/HR	HR Operations Specialist	>5	HR/Data
I14	Armenian	M	Municipality/Research	Informationspecialist/UI Researcher	>5	Applied Psychology
I15	Dutch	M	Education/Research	Lecturer and curriculum developer	>5	Business Administration
I16	Dutch	F	Education/Research	Lecturer Science of Happiness	>15	Business Administration
I17	Dutch	M	Education/Research	Lecturer Civil Engineering	>20	Civil Engineering

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

The primary data collection method employed a semi-structured approach, which strikes a balance between guiding the discussion and allowing participants to respond openly and freely (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide (Appendix A, table A1) for the semi-structured interviews was developed drawing on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to elicit rich, experience-based narratives. Additionally, it was pilot-tested with three participants who matched the target profile of the main study (I5, I13, I14). The practice interviews helped identify problems with the flow of the interview and reduced the need for probing. Using the feedback, minor changes were made concerning the wording to ensure the final questions helped people articulate more clearly how they demonstrate and recognise EI.

Interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face to capture non-verbal cues and create a natural conversational environment. However, online interviews via video conferencing were used when necessary due to distance. Potential challenges, such as connectivity issues, were mitigated through pre-call technical checks. Any unexpected challenges, such as technical failures or scheduling conflicts, were promptly addressed by rescheduling, adjusting locations, or modifying communication platforms as needed. All interviews were recorded through Microsoft Teams with participants' informed consent and stored in a secure environment on the University's OneDrive.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, although some were shorter or longer depending on the participant's level of engagement. Moreover, the interview questions were not provided in advance, and some participants required additional time to reflect and share their experiences. To support open and comfortable communication, participants were given the option to be interviewed in either Dutch or English.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data was repeatedly analysed to help clarify the study's focus. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) along with the Gioia-method guidelines, a proper structure for the data has been composed (Gioia et al., 2012). The data analysis process began with reviewing Microsoft Teams' initial transcription to ensure accurate verbatim transcription and multiple readings of the interview data, a necessary step for preserving the exact wording and context of participant responses. All transcripts were reviewed and edited manually to ensure accuracy. Participants were anonymised using labels such as [Interviewee-01] or [I1], as documented in the participant overview. First-order codes, closely reflecting participants' language (in vivo coding), were generated. These informed the development of second-order themes, which were then reviewed, refined, and named (Gioia et al., 2012). Finally, three aggregate dimensions emerged, forming the theoretical foundation for understanding how EI manifests through behaviour. The study utilised exact quotes from the interviewees to support these ideas and highlight key points in the results chapter. Participants' views

were interpreted in context and structured to create a final emergent framework (Gioia et al., 2012). This combined method ensures interpretation grounded in participant perspectives and consistent with qualitative best practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al., 2012).

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research of the University of Twente. Ethical Approval was obtained from the BMS Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their rights through an information sheet and consent form prior to participation (Byrne, 2001). Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by anonymising transcripts and securely storing data. Participants could withdraw at any stage without consequences. The data was safely stored in the BMS store to protect sensitive information and to ensure ongoing consent, recognising the dynamic nature of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

4. RESULTS

The findings on how EI was manifested through behaviour, focusing specifically on both verbal and non-verbal manifestations, can be found in this section. The findings from the qualitative data analysis resulted from a thematic analysis using the Gioia methodology. The data were systematically coded into first-order concepts, which were kept as close as possible to the participants' words, and then grouped into second-order themes. Ultimately, the data were organised into three aggregate dimensions, which formed the structure of this chapter, representing the behavioural manifestations of EI. Based on an iterative thematic coding process, three aggregate dimensions emerged:

1. Verbal Behavioural Manifestations of EI
2. Non-Verbal Behavioural Manifestations of EI
3. Interplay of Verbal and Non-verbal behaviour (only when verbal and non-verbal are indistinguishably interrelated)

Figure 1 illustrates the data structure summarising the analysis process based on the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2012). Additional quotes from the data structure are expanded further through specific exemplary quotes for the first-order in Appendix B, 'Exemplary Quotes from First-Order Codes'.

Participants revealed both explicit and repeated actions that demonstrated EI, as well as instances where it was lacking or insincere. Instead of viewing EI as a fixed trait, the information revealed that it adapts to the situation and is demonstrated through real actions and relationships, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in overt ways. This research identified common patterns in EI behaviour and its expression, as visualised in the data structure (Figure 1).

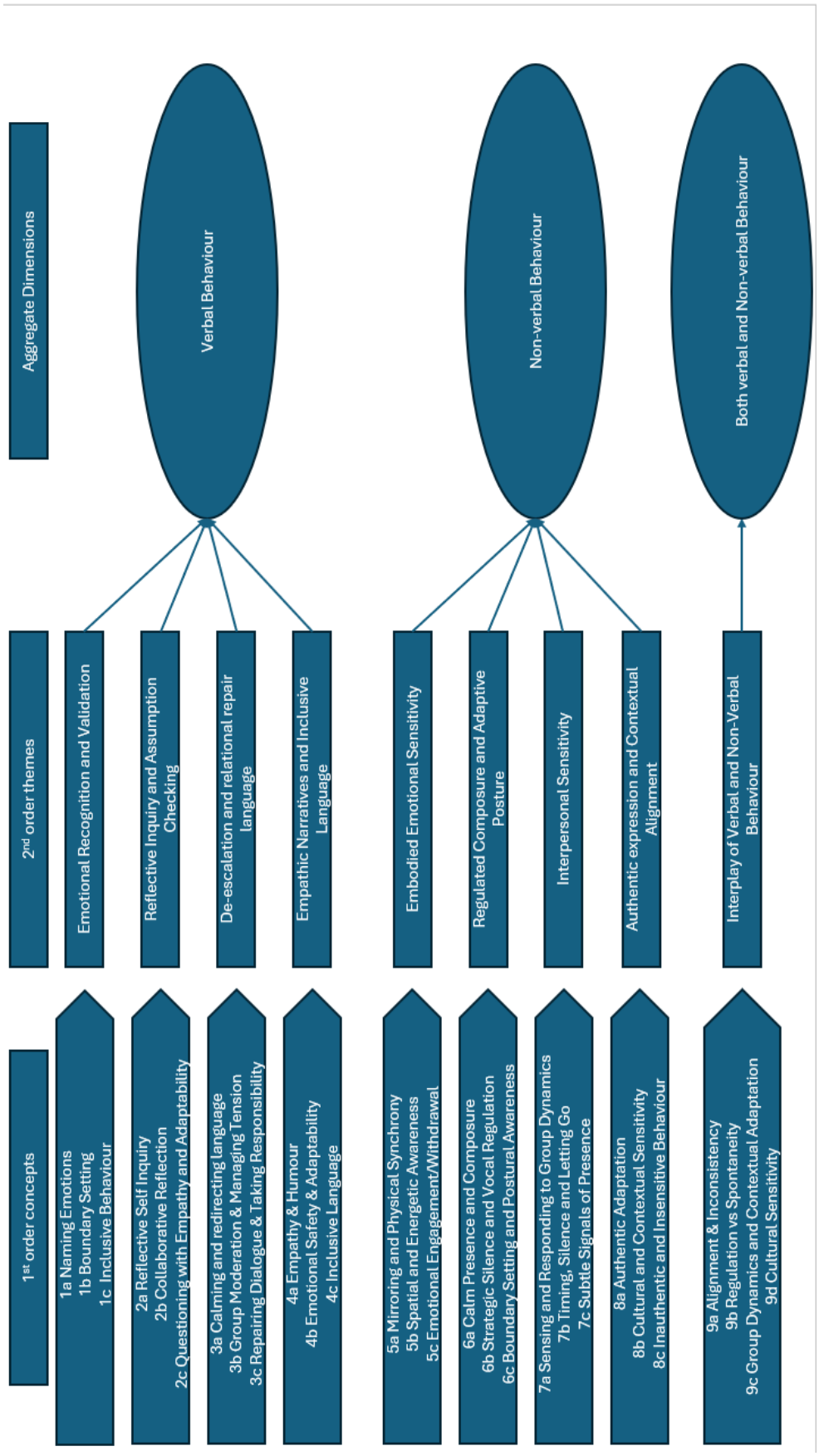

Figure 1: Data Structure

4.1VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

In analysing data related to participants' perceptions of verbal EI behaviour, four second-order themes emerged, namely:

1. Emotional Recognition and Validation
2. Reflective Inquiry and Assumption Checking
3. De-escalation and Relational Repair Language
4. Empathic Narratives and Inclusive Language

This dimension relates to the explicit linguistic and communicative strategies used to convey emotional understanding, manage interpersonal situations, and co-regulate emotions.

To summarise and answer the sub-question, "What verbal behaviours are associated with emotional intelligence?" a few examples are provided in an overview, which can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of EI Verbal Behaviour

Theme	Description	Example Behaviours/Quotes
Emotional Recognition & Validation	Recognising, naming, and affirming one's own and others' emotions verbally; providing space for emotional expression and co-regulation.	Empathetic phrases: "I hear you," "I understand you" Validating feelings and achievements ("It is good what you did...") Supportive boundary recognition ("It's okay to express your boundaries…") Metacommunication: naming emotions, dynamics, or behaviours ("Naming the elephant in the room") Recognising quieter voices with inclusive prompts
Reflective Inquiry & Assumption Checking	Asking thoughtful, open-ended, clarifying questions; checking assumptions; encouraging self-reflection and group dialogue; communicating with humility.	Asking: "What could have triggered that reaction?" or "How do you think it went?" and Collaborative reflection in group settings, Seeking and giving feedback supportively Clarifying assumptions before reacting
De-escalation & Relational Repair Language	Using calming language to de-escalate tension, signal openness and care; validating emotional states; pausing or redirecting conversations; taking responsibility to repair ruptures.	Slowing speech, softening tone, and pausing to reduce emotional intensity Reframing or shifting focus calmly, avoiding defensive language, Naming emotions non-threateningly ("I sense this is getting emotional; do you want to pause?") Verbal accountability: apologizing, clarifying intentions "If I came across wrong, that was not my intention." (I6) Using humour and lightness appropriately to relieve tension Moderating group dynamics with phrases like "Shall we summarise and move forward?"
Empathic Narratives & Inclusive Language	Sharing personal stories to normalise emotions and using affirming and inclusive language that encourages connection.	Sharing vulnerability to normalize emotions ("I was also sitting on the couch crying") Adjusting language style to fit the receiver Expressing encouragement and trust ("I know you can do it") Using inclusive pronouns like "we" to promote unity Respectful addressing, including correct pronunciation of names Connecting comments and affirming others' contributions ("I agree with what you said"), EI Feedback: praising strengths, giving actionable suggestions

4.1.1 EMOTIONAL RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION

People often say that emotionally intelligent individuals can recognise and understand their feelings as well as those of others when interacting with them. They described this approach as careful and thoughtful, which helps everyone feel safe and comfortable sharing their thoughts. Participants noted that emotionally intelligent colleagues used empathetic phrasing or reflective questions to acknowledge others' feelings. Phrases such as "*I understand you*" or "*I hear you*" (I4) were cited as examples that helped to defuse emotional tension and create a sense of being heard and understood. Others described validation through specific encouragement or support, including recognition of identity, achievements, or respect for personal boundaries:

> "*Hey, it is okay to express your boundaries with me... I will support you*." (I13)

> "*It is good what you did, especially with your experience*." (I6) A quote was said to a novice teacher.

Some participants highlighted the impact of proactively including quieter group members.

> "*By explicitly inviting quieter group members to speak, through naming, observing their non-verbal cues, or using open prompts, you create space for everyone to feel heard, valued, and included, encouraging thoughtful participation even from more reserved individuals*." *(*I6)

These behaviours demonstrated group awareness and emotional sensitivity.

Several participants also noted the use of emotional vocabulary and described the practice of metacommunication, naming emotions, behaviours, and group dynamics explicitly to promote clarity and reduce stress:

> "*That is what you call metacommunication, and that is like naming what is going on, like the elephant in the room, naming the elephant in the room. Like that and then just being really concrete with naming your emotions, naming the other emotions of others, naming their behaviour, influencing your behaviour, naming and um the dynamics in between.*" (I14)

> "*Hey, you are so enthusiastic that you are telling all your stories, but I did not have a chance to respond, do you know that?*" (I6)

However, some participants recounted moments when emotional recognition was lacking or misapplied. In one example, a manager's response during a colleague's illness left a negative impression:

> "*Well, can you not just be sick at another time?*" Followed by "*Oh, well, can we then do this at another time?*" (I13)

Another participant shared a well-meaning but poorly timed feedback that unintentionally caused emotional distress.

"*There was a former student who was working with us one day a week, and I thought he was stuck and not making progress. I told him that maybe he should stop teaching and focus on other things, but he almost started crying because teaching was the only thing he enjoyed in life.*" (I17)

Conversely, small verbal recognitions were often reported as powerful. Even light-hearted or enthusiastic acknowledgements can positively shift group dynamics and increase engagement, provided the speaker remains aware of the effect of their tone and timing.

"*Hey, super, this was an amazing performance.*" (I8)

Most participants thought it was important to name and acknowledge emotions, but one person warned against reading too much into a single emotional moment.

"*An emotional outburst may just be a snapshot, not indicative of overall EI.*" (I6)

These examples illustrate how emotionally intelligent communication involves not just empathy and validation but also timing, tone, and awareness of group dynamics, all of which contribute to a psychologically safe and inclusive environment.

4.1.2 REFLECTIVE INQUIRY AND ASSUMPTION CHECKING

Participants noticed that emotionally intelligent behaviour often showed up when people asked thoughtful and curious questions. This helped them understand others better and also learn about themselves. In many interviews, people agreed that those with good emotional skills usually ask open-ended questions, check their ideas, and try to understand before judging. These kinds of questions helped conversations go deeper and showed they wanted to see other people's points of view.

"*Asking questions reassures others they have been heard and reduces confusion*." (I10)

"*Yes, do not judge so much. Uh, dare to stand up for their own opinion, dare to be vulnerable.*" (I16)

The participants said this means moving from just reacting to asking questions, choosing to be curious instead of judging right away. One participant explained that instead of jumping to conclusions, emotionally intelligent individuals would ask:

"*What could have triggered that reaction?*" (I4)

"*How do you think it went?*" (I3)

This type of questioning was perceived as a method to reduce miscommunication and create space for constructive dialogue. Participants described it not as a one-off strategy but as a consistent approach to communication, especially in emotionally complex interactions.

Many interviewees emphasised that emotionally intelligent individuals regularly used inquiry to reflect on their responses and to encourage others to do the same. At least two participants recounted how they would ask themselves, "*What triggered my response?*" (I4), highlighting the link between questioning and self-regulation. Others noted that these individuals often demonstrated vulnerability by acknowledging when their assumptions were incorrect and actively seeking feedback.

> "*Self-awareness is demonstrated by the ability to reflect on one's actions and seek feedback.*" (I7)

> "*My first assumption was completely wrong, I could have just asked.*" (I17)

In addition to individual reflection, participants identified collaborative reflection as an emotionally intelligent behaviour. Several interviews described instances where colleagues encouraged open dialogue in group settings, prompting others to reflect on shared behaviour or emotional responses. This was often facilitated by naming specific behaviours, exploring their impact, and inviting discussion.

> "*Reflecting together on behaviour during group exercises.*" (I3)

> "*Encouraging others to reflect by naming behaviour, explaining its impact, and asking targeted questions.*" (I5)

One participant shared how self-reflection helped manage frustration during teamwork breakdowns:

> "*A strong emotional trigger for me is frustration, especially when teamwork breaks down and progress stalls despite many people being involved, while my first reaction might be to take over and fix it alone, I usually follow up with a conversation to reflect on what went wrong and how to improve collaboration.*" (I7)

Participants also observed that how questions were asked mattered as much as what was asked. Emotionally intelligent individuals adapted their phrasing and tone to suit the context, striking a balance between directness and sensitivity. In contrast, less emotionally aware behaviours were associated with questioning that felt performative or judgmental, such as asking without

genuine interest, using questioning as a tool for gossip, or shutting down further reflection (I15, I11).

> "*You know, I It has always been more you know people are enjoy that, that, that emotional care that is given or being seen or being read, maybe eh when it is positive and not use you know if you use that information to go and gossip then it will be horrible, but you know the actual element of going that extra mile to care, to listen to, to observe, ehm has always been a positive. In my case, I have never, never seen a negative side of it.*" (I11)

> "*Effective communication with students requires transparency about intentions and fostering a supportive environment where trial-and-error approaches are embraced; through ongoing reflection, feedback, and consultation with colleagues, educators can adapt strategies to meet individual needs while normalising responsibility and learning from failure.*" (I15)

Overall, participants described emotionally intelligent questioning as a skill that benefits both individuals and relationships. It enables people to manage their own emotions, understand others better, and create a space where open and thoughtful conversations can occur. These ideas demonstrated how EI manifests through thoughtful, kind questions that avoid judgment.

4.1.3 DE-ESCALATION AND REPAIR LANGUAGE

Participants consistently described how emotionally intelligent people use their words, particularly during challenging times, such as arguments or periods of stress. These individuals help calm things down by speaking slowly, using a softer voice, or taking a pause to lower the tension and maintain a peaceful atmosphere for the group.

A common strategy involved gently reframing or shifting the conversation's focus. Instead of reacting defensively or trying to persuade, individuals with high EI typically opt for calm and constructive responses. Participants highlighted how they signalled openness by saying things like "*Let me think about that*" (I1) or "*Instead of saying 'but' which can make people defensive, try saying, 'I can see that perspective, 'and' I also wonder if there is another way to look at it.'.*" (I17) which helped prevent escalation. I2 and I9 both reflected on how acknowledging disagreement without fuelling conflict helped maintain dialogue under pressure.

> "*When it is getting heated, I lower my voice and slow my words. It is like signalling I am not going to fight you. That usually helps them come down too.*" (I9)

"*There are people who, when something intense is said, they do not react right away. They reflect on it, like, 'That is strong language, can you explain more?', that kind of response cools things.*" (I2)

Participants emphasised that these behaviours were not about avoiding conflict but about creating space for reflection and collaboration. Offering people a choice, such as pausing or continuing a difficult conversation, was seen as a subtle yet powerful act that reduced defensiveness and encouraged mutual understanding.

"*It is about knowing when to let things go and when to intervene. Sometimes, if a person seems closed off, pushing harder will not work; it is better to pause and try again later. It also concerns how a person makes their decisions and their standards and values.*" (I17)

"*It is okay to let each other go for a moment, focus on the root cause of the issue, rather than lashing out at each other; it may have a different cause.*" (I13)

Another important way emotionally intelligent people use words is by naming feelings or tensions without making others feel threatened. Participants said that these individuals do not ignore the emotions under the surface but talk about them carefully and kindly:

"*I sense this is getting emotional, do you want to pause or continue?*" (I11) "*I can see this matters a lot to you*", or "*That sounded like it hit a nerve, do you want to talk more about it?*" (I5)

These phrases were perceived as disarming and supportive, as they validated emotional experiences without escalating them. Participants also highlighted the importance of verbal accountability in repairing relationships. They valued behaviours like apologising, clarifying intentions, or acknowledging misunderstandings.

"*I might have misunderstood you, can we start again?*" (I6)

"*If I came across wrong, that was not my intention*" (I6)

Several participants mentioned the role of humour and lightness in relieving emotional tension. When used appropriately, humour signalled safety and perspective:

"*People who have some sort of sense of emotional intelligence are able to, even in the midst of the biggest problems, still crack jokes, right? We just want to solve the issue*

*and be able to stop the flow, rather than taking an aggressive stance and cracking jokes. Making comments or small talk or some whatever **** it is.*" (I8)

"*I really think humour at the right moments is the highest form of intelligence.*" (I16)

Finally, emotionally intelligent verbal behaviour was evident in how participants moderated or redirected group dynamics. When discussions became emotionally charged or unproductive, they used phrases like:

"*We have three more agenda items; shall we summarise and move forward?*" (I17)

They also emphasised the importance of knowing when to intervene, when to remain silent, and when to follow up later.

In short, participants saw conflict de-escalation and relationship repair as important manifestations. This included the careful selection of words to ease tension, recognising feelings, and maintaining respectful conversations, which helps everyone feel safe and keeps relationships strong.

4.1.4 EMPATHIC NARRATIVES AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Participants highlighted how sharing personal experiences helped normalise vulnerability and fostered emotional resonance among team members. These narratives built human connection, particularly in professional spaces where emotions were often suppressed. Empathic storytelling, according to participants, helped others feel seen and less alone in their experiences. One participant recalled, "*A colleague said, 'Oh yes, I was also sitting on the couch crying this afternoon.' He said exactly the same thing. As you can see, I am not the only one who thinks that. So that already helps in the whole*." (I5) Similarly, I6 noted, "*She shows that crying is not bad, that it is actually good to cry*."

Participants stated that emotionally intelligent leaders use language that includes everyone and demonstrates an understanding of feelings. They discussed how effective communication involves adapting the message to be clear, recognising emotional cues, and providing feedback that demonstrates genuine listening and care. One participant explained, "*People trust me when I say 'I know that you can do it, I know that you will find a way.' They trust me because they are genuinely.. I generally prove that I understand where they are by communicating effectively, using examples that demonstrate my comprehension of their ideas. So, it is about trust. I think it helps us build trust between ourselves, and if there is trust, people will go the extra mile, and people and teams will go through hard times much more resiliently.*" (I7)

Inclusive phrasing also influenced group dynamics and team cohesion:

"*Emotionally intelligent people try to bring others along in the conversation. They pick up on good points others have made and connect their comments to them. They nod or confirm when they agree with something, which makes the space safer for others to share.*" (I17)

"*At lunch, a higher-up colleague said about another colleague not present, 'that fat colleague who no one can miss, he made this webpage.' I was like, why describe a colleague like this? It shows no empathy or consideration, which is very important in the workspace.*" (I2)

"*Cultural differences in expressing behaviour do not matter as much. Some people ask blunt questions; once you know their style, it is funny and you set the bar differently.*" (I3)

Participants also shared that these empathic and inclusive behaviours contributed to building relationships through connecting and being willing to know more, which is essential for effective collaboration:

"*There are people who communicate not just to transfer the information but also to connect with you, human to human.*" (I7)

"*Genuinely curious about the other person and listening and wanting to know more about what they are thinking or doing.*" (I11)

Feedback delivered with EI was seen as especially effective by the participants:

"*Giving feedback and answers that indicate you are listening, not just nodding, but also providing similar examples, shows emotional intelligence.*" (I1)

"*Emotional intelligence is visible in how feedback is given, praising strengths first and making suggestions actionable shows you care.*" (I13)

"*If you are working on a report, you are more inclined to approach an emotionally intelligent person for feedback, which helps improve the report and results.*" *(*I2)

Inclusive language also strengthened team cohesion. Several participants mentioned using "we" instead of "I" or "you" to reduce blame and promote unity:

"*Saying 'we' instead of 'you' or 'I' immediately brings a sense of unity. It is not about blaming or judging but about solving things together.*" (I9)

"*This is what I emphasise: we are a team, and we need to make sure that we provide results. And I do not know; we try to balance things so as to achieve the best results possible. If that person had acted individually, most probably this would not have happened. But I mean, he most probably would have refused the task, and no, but for the sake of the I do not know the beliefs and values of our team, he accepted to do so, it was not comfortable.*" (I1)

This inclusive approach was especially evident in group settings, where emotionally intelligent individuals used language that encouraged participation:

> "*If there are mostly emotionally intelligent people in a group, they try to include others rather than exclude them.*" (I11)

> "*The way people pronounce names and address others is a good indicator of emotional intelligence*"(I17)

Participants also described how they modified their language to align with different emotional styles, backgrounds, or professional contexts, an essential indicator of EI. This included decoding feedback, reading the room, and responding to emotional undercurrents. I1 reflected, "F*ocusing on improving the messages that, uh, I was sending to him. And I do not know how to decode the information properly, but it also helped in this situation because I had to carefully choose my words*." Meanwhile, I17 emphasised the importance of adjusting one's message: "*If someone is not responding as expected, that is a signal to change the approach.*"

These reflections show that emotionally intelligent communication is deeply rooted in empathy, inclusion, and adaptability, shaping how trust is built, feedback is delivered, and emotional safety is maintained in diverse team settings.

4.2 NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Non-verbal behaviour was the second aggregate dimension that was identified from the data. Across the interviews, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of body language, spatial awareness, posture, and facial expression in navigating interpersonal dynamics.

> "*Non-verbal, because that is the only thing that actually stands between you and another language. Uhm, that it is the same everywhere. I think that what you radiate, and again, on an energy level. That it is universal. That it has nothing to do with culture. That has nothing to do with language. That has nothing to do with the behavioural norms on behaviour. I think that has everything to do with what I radiate*." (I9)

The analysis revealed four second-order themes within the non-verbal behavioural expression of EI, namely

1. Embodied Emotional Sensitivity
2. Regulated Composure and Adaptive Posture
3. Interpersonal Sensitivity
4. Authentic Expression and Contextual Alignment

Each theme represented a different aspect of how EI is manifested through non-verbal behaviour.

To summarise and answer one of the sub-questions: “What non-verbal behaviours are associated with emotional intelligence?”, a few examples are provided in an overview, which can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Overview of EI Non-Verbal Behaviour

Theme	Description	Example Behaviours/Quotes
Embodied Emotional Sensitivity	Emotional awareness is observed through body movements. Participants described using subtle, intuitive cues to understand others' feelings and group dynamics, without relying on verbal communication.	Mirroring & Physical Synchrony: Matching posture, gestures, facial expressions Spatial & Energetic Awareness: “Reading the room,” sensing energy/vibes Subtle Emotional Cues: Eye contact, posture shifts, breathing patterns Signs of Engagement: Upright posture, nodding, note-taking Signs of Disengagement: Slouching, looking away, eye-rolling, physical withdrawal
Regulated Composure and Adaptive Posture	Emotionally intelligent individuals displayed physical calm, grounded presence, and self-regulation. Calmness was intentional and communicated through controlled posture, voice, and use of silence.	Composed Posture: Relaxed shoulders, uncrossed arms, neutral face Voice Modulation: Calm tone, deliberate pacing, soft volume Use of Silence: Holding space for others, non-reactive presence Postural Adjustments: Leaning forward to show interest, creating distance to preserve energy Emotional Containment: Stillness, controlled gestures, selective interaction
Interpersonal Sensitivity	The ability to detect, interpret, and respond to the emotional climate in real time (being in harmony). Emotionally intelligent individuals demonstrate presence through subtle cues and restraint, aligning their nonverbal behaviour with the group's needs and dynamics.	Scanning and Sensing: “Radar-like” awareness of atmosphere and group emotions Strategic Silence & Timing: Pausing, withholding action to maintain group harmony Presence Cues: Sustained eye contact, open posture, physical orientation toward others Respectful Restraint: Avoiding over-intervention; waiting for the right moment Empathic Adjustment: Matching energy, stepping back in tense situations Contextual Sensitivity: Observing phone use, facial cues, posture, to gauge emotional needs
Authentic Expression and Contextual Alignment	Emotionally intelligent individuals maintain congruence between internal emotional states and external expression. This includes culturally and situationally aware modulation of behaviour, without sacrificing sincerity or authenticity.	Emotionally Congruent Expression: Facial expressions, tone, and gestures aligned with actual emotions Context-Aware Modulation: Adjusting humour, volume, or posture based on the setting Culturally Sensitive Behaviour: Adapting gestures or greetings to fit norms Authentic Mirroring: Matching others' emotional tone genuinely, not performatively Clothing & Appearance Cues: Dressing appropriately to the setting without losing identity Attuned Responsiveness: Soften tone for withdrawn individuals; respond gently to emotional cues (e.g., slumped posture, red eyes)

4.2.1 EMBODIED EMOTIONAL SENSITIVITY

Participants described a physical awareness through which EI manifested beyond words. They referred to mirroring, subtle shifts in posture, eye contact, breathing patterns, or energetic changes (e.g., 'purple' or 'red' energy) as indicators of EI in action. This embodied sensitivity allowed individuals to assess group atmosphere, interpersonal dynamics, or internal states without explicit verbalisation. Based on their reflections, three central themes were identified: mirroring and physical synchrony, spatial and energetic awareness, and signs of emotional engagement or withdrawal.

Participants frequently referred to mirroring behaviour as a subtle yet essential aspect of non-verbal EI. This included adopting similar postures, gestures, or facial expressions, which contributed to a sense of mutual understanding and trust.

For example, I13 described rapport-building s follows:

> "*The biggest non-verbal, well, reassuring feeling would be... Rapport... once you are sitting, you actually, not in a flashy manner, copy the gestures of the person you are talking with*."

An example of the non-flashy manner can be understood as "*If you are crossing your arms and touching your lip a little bit, then I will do the same*." (I13), while I2 reflected that mirroring placed "*the other person on the same frequency or vibe.*"

These moments were generally not perceived as learned techniques, but rather as instinctive, empathic responses that indicated presence and connection.

Participants also noted that the awareness of energy and the physical environment is important because people look at what they can observe:

> "*People look at what happens, not what is said.*" (I17)

> "*People tend to prioritise non-verbal behaviour more*" (I17)

Another participant elaborated:

> "*Read the bags under one's eyes that most people would miss and see that you, you know, you are going through maybe a difficult time or sleeping not well. So, I think it is essential to pick up on those small details, although I know that in some cultures, eye contact is considered rude. I would not rule them out as being high in emotional intelligence. However, I think the eyes speak a lot, key. Yeah. Posture. Yeah. Wow, see again. I rarely notice a posture. Stand straight, be confident. I noticed the eyes, so eye contact will be key for me. Although I know that in some cultures, eye contact is considered rude.*" (I11)

Participants emphasised their ability to 'read the room' by sensing collective energy or subtle spatial cues. This included noticing changes in breathing, posture, eye contact, or '*vibrations'* (I5, I2) in the environment. I14 summarised this as:

> "*Observing, understanding what emotional state someone is in, and how you can adjust your behaviour to that*."

Others, like I3, reported sensing tension in group settings as

> "*A big sign hanging above someone's* head" even without words. Similarly, I6 explained: "*You could feel it a bit in the environment, because uh uhm yes, when you come in, you also have a certain feeling about a person. Alternatively, with a person and um, that is also a bit of an energy, maybe aura.*" (I6)

In emotionally intense group settings, physical synchrony was also reported. Shared emotional states, such as sorrow or appreciation, were bodily experienced across individuals.

> "*Or in my own emotions, sometimes it can be that I suddenly become very emotional, that it is actually not my emotion that I feel, but that is now the group emotion, but the group does not dare to express emotion*." (I5)

> "*With the mirroring behaviour. You can see that on the face, right? When you smile, you can do it with your mouth, or you can smile with your eyes as well. Eh, you are truly happy to find out something, or you are happy for someone else.*" (I10)

However, this embodied sensitivity was not universal. Some participants noted that colleagues or students could detect such cues instinctively, while others' abilities were shaped by neurodivergence or situational focus. For instance:

> "*Some kids had less emotional awareness due to autism or being on the spectrum, affecting social and facial cues.*" (I13)

> "*I think I am hypersensitive, I can sense people and atmosphere very quickly*." (I4)

EI also appeared in subtle cues of engagement, such as upright posture, direct eye contact, nodding or note-taking, all of which were signs of empathy and attentiveness.

> "*At least sitting upright shows an attitude directed at you,*" the participant also mentioned, nodding or making "mmhmm" sounds. (I17)

> "*They write things down to show interest.*" (I17)

By contrast, disengagement was identified through avoidance of eye contact, lack of facial expression, or slouched posture.

"*He never really looks in the eyes, shy, cumbersome expressions, sits low, not an extrovert.*" (I17)

"*If someone sits laid back or half-turned, you can feel they are not fully convinced or engaged.*" (I17)

A lack of mirroring or closed-off posture was often interpreted as emotional detachment, and unsupportive behaviour was also described:

"*People react physically: deviate, check out, turn their phones, become emotional.*" (I15), even "*roll their eyes*" (I9)

"*Look very distracted. Body language, leaning back, yawning, as dull as can be, so that it can really be a very clear body language that they are no longer connected to the group and to the subject. Uhm, that is a very, that is the clearest*" (I3)

"*Unsupportive would be to be completely closed off and not mimic the person... no facial expressions, no eye contact, slight nodding, just acknowledging existence, which feels very unsupportive.*" (I2)

Breathing patterns were also highlighted as subtle cues of emotional presence or tension:

"*Breathing is, of course, an important one. Sometimes you notice that people start breathing more deeply, or well, breathing through the nose can be one reason, or that people say they want to say something, or yes, because then they become more animated*." (I3)

For some, these behaviours reflected temporary disengagement; for others, they were linked to deeper traits such as neurodivergence, introversion, or trauma response. I3 reflected:

"*Regarding autism, communication and learning adequate behaviour, someone is happy when they say, when someone is happy, their eyes are wide open, and the corners of their mouth go up. Very small details, but if you can name them, then you can teach people*" *(I3)*

Others shared observations of how individuals withdrew to protect themselves or others:

"*A quiet girl… strong and feels a lot behind it, does not mix in a group…has a dominant but supporting manager who withdraws and hides away when others blow themselves up. But I think that you would not quickly place yourself on the monkey rock or position yourself in any other way. I just think I can do this, and sometimes you have to take up that space so that someone else who does it less does not have to do it. But I think you would not shout it from the rooftops so quickly, but that you would just be there.*" (I5)

"*People reprogram themselves... the way I see it is that man is actually manipulating himself... to avoid coming into contact with trauma again.*" *(I9)*

These reflections reveal that EI is not only communicated through words but is also deeply embodied, expressed through posture, presence, and physical sensitivity, enabling individuals to perceive and respond to emotional undercurrents in subtle, powerful ways.

4.2.2 REGULATED COMPOSURE AND ADAPTIVE POSTURE

Many participants described emotionally intelligent individuals as exhibiting a physically calm, grounded, and deliberate presence. This calmness was not simply the absence of reactivity, but a purposeful and cultivated state achieved through self-awareness and self-regulation. Maintaining a neutral posture, using steady eye contact, and controlling body tension were seen as ways to create emotional stability both internally and interpersonally.

Participants observed that emotionally intelligent individuals often embodied composure through subtle physical cues, such as relaxed shoulders, uncrossed arms, and a neutral facial expression. These behaviours appeared to foster attraction and a sense of trust and ease in interactions. Importantly, this composure was not interpreted as disengagement, but rather as an intentional act of emotional self-regulation.

> "*You just have a calm, neutral attitude... your eyes are looking at the person, your eyebrows are not frowning*." (I6)

> "*They walk in with low shoulders, calm energy. You want to sit next to them*." (I2)

Participants frequently described that composure in emotionally intense situations is intentional restraint rather than emotional suppression. This reflects both maturity and the ability to manage emotions effectively.

> "*In a meeting with the team, for example, I might not be happy… I might have to restrain myself from expressing my opinion outright; otherwise, in a more informal setting, I would be overly reactive. I have to restrain myself*." (I1)

A repeated indicator of embodied EI was the strategic use of silence and voice modulation. Participants noted that emotionally intelligent individuals communicated presence through fewer words, allowing space for others to speak and process.

> "*Her voice plays with her voice, so to speak, to the extent that if someone is busy or noisy, she starts talking less, more quietly and slowly… You can see when she switches it on and uses it as a tool*." (I5)

> "*You are not raising your voice, you are just talking in a normal way, just in a calm tone… sometimes it is nice if someone speaks softer… no stuttering voice. When you are sad… There is a trembling, that vibration… so that you just have a neutral and stable voice. It is not a monotonous tone… You really emphasised on like how and what and why… and eventually you*

do kind of change the facial expression slowly during the conversation… but he does not have an angry face or anything… just an open face." (I6)

Silence, in this context, was understood as a way of 'holding space', enabling others to feel seen without interruption. Rather than reacting quickly, emotionally intelligent individuals adjusted their tone, breathing, and pacing to give others more space to express themselves. These behaviours indicated sensitivity to interpersonal dynamics and served to de-escalate emotional tension.

"*You show understanding by not expressing shock… letting them talk and letting them be themselves first.*" (I2)

Participants highlighted that when grounded and intentional, silence communicated strength, presence, and maturity. In contrast, discomfort with silence was seen as indicating emotional dysregulation or limited awareness.

"*If somebody is calm, they have space between their words… that is when you could maybe guess they are in touch with their intuition. The ability to hold space… means that you do not cut the other person out… silences do not bother you if you are in touch with your intuition.*" (I14)

"*If someone is uncomfortable with silence… in a hurry… they will not be able to feel real empathy… they are probably not emotionally intelligent.*" (I14)

A further theme involved the use of posture and physical boundaries to manage emotional energy. Participants described emotionally intelligent individuals as regulating their presence by adjusting proximity and openness.

"*He never really had highly expressive emotions... more closed stance... but in the environment we were in, it was very much needed. To maintain his own energy levels, stress levels... he will interact selectively.*" *(I13)*

Postural changes, such as leaning slightly forward to show interest or maintaining a neutral facial expression, were seen as meaningful, especially in high-pressure or emotionally sensitive settings. At times, this regulation took the form of distancing behaviours, such as crossed arms or stillness, which were not necessarily signs of disconnection but methods of preserving emotional boundaries.

"*Signs of calm are an open attitude. You do not have any crossed arms, but you maintain a calm and relaxed posture. Look at the person and really show interest, not playing with your nails or coming across as nervous. You lean forward a little, look at the person, and really show interest in them by maintaining eye contact. Your mouth is just neutral, your eyes are looking at you… Your eyebrows are not frowning but just neutral. Your mouth is just neutral, your eyes are looking at you… Your eyebrows are not frowning but just neutral*" *(I6)*

Several participants stressed that emotionally intelligent individuals were not always visibly expressive. Instead, their subtle behavioural cues, such as stillness, controlled gestures, or physical containment, reflected an inner clarity and a situationally appropriate emotional response.

> "*My manager... very relaxed person... in terms of posture, he seemed distant, but that helped maintain boundaries. Who he will interact with to maintain his energy levels, stress levels, etc. Which also sometimes could give off the vibe that he would not be as interested in others. Only upon engaging you would see, oh, this person is actually very much involved.*" (I13)

> "*On a personal level, whenever we would share any achievements or milestones, his face would light up… he would have more expressive features, such as raised eyebrows, lighter eyes, a smile… and more open gestures, like open arms. "But at work, he would be more closed, so closed stance, neutral expressions. He is very much reserved, but in the environment we were in, it was also very much needed.*" (I13)

These insights illustrate how emotionally intelligent individuals consciously regulate their physical presence through posture, voice, and silence to foster emotional safety, demonstrate inner steadiness, and navigate the emotional landscape of others respectfully.

4.2.3 INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

This sub-theme captured how EI manifested through participants' ability to read, respond to, and align with the emotional and social atmosphere in real-time. This part illustrates how EI manifests when people can recognise and respond to the feelings and emotions around them promptly. Participants often said that emotionally intelligent people seem to have a kind of "radar" or special sense that helps them pick up on changes in the group and act in the best way. This means they know when to talk, stay quiet, step back, or adjust their tone and body language based on subtle cues from others..

> "*EI is constantly such a radar system and picks things out that are important and looks around, actually constantly, a bit of what is happening, someone grabs, dives into his bag, oh, wouldn't he be paying attention? Wait a minute, he only grabs the eehh.. I think I understand the emotional characteristics, such as boredom, anger, and disappointment. That you react to that sooner than behaviour- eeh, surface behaviour, how do you get disappointment out of it?*" (I3)

> "*You just notice the atmosphere… That part of me really got to me, because I thought,* "*This is just not okay.' If you are not aware that that group, that atmosphere is there, then I think you will have a hard time recognising that someone is steering towards it.*" *(I3)*

Instead of reacting immediately, emotionally intelligent people seemed to think carefully before acting to maintain the group's unity. Many participants said these people often waited before joining in during challenging moments because they knew jumping in too soon could hurt trust or how the group felt. This waiting was not being passive, but a thoughtful way to stay connected with the group's feelings.

"*The highly emotionally intelligent people did not get involved in the delicate areas… they went with the group vibe.*" *(*I4)

"*Why would you have someone who disagrees with you on your team? That is emotionally intelligent, welcoming that friction to get a more accurate picture.*" (I10)

As one participant described, emotionally intelligent individuals were constantly working to cultivate the emotional tone of the group:

"*As soon as you stood in front of a group, you were constantly busy creating atmosphere in the group*" (I3).

Participants emphasised that EI was often expressed through when not to act. Emotional presence involved strategic silence, pausing, or holding back to maintain psychological safety and respect others' readiness. This was especially important in diverse or sensitive settings where acting prematurely might alienate others.

"*You have a group of four speaking Dutch… and one kid in the middle who cannot even speak Dutch… That makes you feel alone, very lonely. You are dedicated to including that person… it is a small sacrifice. You do not go off speaking in your native tongue… That is empathy.*" *(I11)*

"*They had a fear… I noticed that they are not going to be able to be pushed in this situation… so I did not.*" (I4)

Letting go of the need to 'fix' others' emotions was seen as a mature element of interpersonal sensitivity. One participant reflected:

"*Managing other people's emotions... we needed to unlearn that*" (I4)

Instead, EI was seen in the ability to accept others' emotional states without judgment or intrusion. Small, often nonverbal behaviours, such as maintaining eye contact, adopting an open posture, or engaging in a momentary check-in, were interpreted as subtle yet powerful indicators of emotional presence and attentiveness.

"*That proactivity of the manager approaching an employee… shows I am interested in you… those are all the little things… without words*." (I5)

Participants also reflected on how presence was expressed through attentiveness to how others used objects (e.g., phones) or positioned their bodies. These behaviours were not assessed in isolation, but rather interpreted through broader social cues, such as body language, facial expressions, and perceived intent.

"*You can be on your phone in two ways. You can be on your phone, so to speak, and notice that someone needs it as a distraction, as a means of concentration, because they require more*

stimuli to focus. Alternatively, you may also notice, from their body posture, how they are using their phone. Are you doing it to listen or to write something down, or are you just sitting somewhere else with your head? You can see that from the. Eh, the posture. And I think that also plays a role, because, eh, whenever you do that and then, for example, you do not show interest, it affects the other person a little bit and then..." *(I5)*

"*You feel a bit more acceptance… the student participates because they feel seen.*" *(I6)*

Respectful silence, sustained eye contact, and open posture were experienced as concrete manifestations of empathy and connection, subtle yet meaningful signs of EI in action.

4.2.4 AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION AND CONTEXTUAL ALIGNMENT

Participants said that emotionally intelligent people can keep their feelings inside and their body language or actions outside in sync. This was not seen as pretending or acting, but rather as being genuinely aware of what was happening around them. They can adjust their behaviour when needed, but remain true to who they truly are.

A recurring theme was the balance between emotional authenticity and contextual responsiveness. Many participants likened emotionally intelligent individuals to a 'chameleon', not in the sense of being deceptive, but as someone who could adjust their behaviour to the social environment while remaining sincere. This adaptation was framed not as manipulation, but as a sensitive responsiveness that supported interpersonal harmony.

"*You are emotionally intelligent if you understand that because people abroad do not shake hands, you should not do it either… you adapt like a chameleon. That is emotionally intelligent.*" *(I16)*

"*With one person, humour fits, with another, it doesn't, it is about feeling in the moment what is okay.*" *(I16)*

Participants consistently noted that emotionally intelligent behaviour involved the modulation of non-verbal signals, such as facial expressions, vocal tone, posture, and even clothing, to meet situational demands.

"*Facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture were all cited as signals that must align with the emotional or cultural environment.*" *(I12)*

Appearance and attire were also discussed as elements that could influence perception and relational dynamics. Participants highlighted the importance of interpreting and adapting to setting-specific expectations while maintaining a sense of self.

"*What you wear matters; it influences how you are perceived and how you relate to others. In different professional settings, the dress code can shape the nature of interactions. For example, a teacher who wears a suit and responds formally can be interpreted differently. A government official may wear a suit to a formal meeting, but that does not mean they are a closed-off person. It is important to be aware of our assumptions about others based on their appearance and how to behave in a certain environment.*" *(I17)*

Participants emphasised that such behavioural adjustments were most effective when grounded in emotional sincerity. Humour, eye contact, or smiling were perceived as emotionally intelligent only when appropriately timed and sensitive to the emotional states of others.

"*When I laughed, he laughed too, not in a fake way, but it was real.*" *(13)*

"*Because if you are laughing without understanding the joke, I think you giving the other person some chance to be themselves because you think okay, even though I do not know your joke, you cracked a joke, I will laugh with you, so you do not feel embarrassed, so you do not lose face. You need to repeat the joke, it is always less comfortable than that being okay, you know what, I laughed, ha-ha, let us go on to the next topic*" *(I2)*

Cultural and situational awareness was central to this theme. EI involves recognising and adapting to the norms and expectations of a given context, particularly in cross-cultural interactions. Misaligned behaviours,such as exaggerated expressions or informal gestures in formal environments,were often viewed as signs of emotional insensitivity.

"*I think if we were to move it to, for example, Japan, I would be more on the lower end of the emotional intelligence, because my cues would be a bit too flashy… depending on what is culturally accepted in terms of expressing your emotions can really differentiate so much.*" *(I13)*

"*I would use, therefore, my frameworks or understand the understanding social status, eh, languages, Etiquette, eh, things like that, to identify, let us say again, the sum of all the information I have. To create a picture of who that person is. But that is from my perspective. I think I would, by definition, be able to assess their emotional intelligence level because I would pick up on, of course, again their body language and the rest in response to the way I am handling them or the way I am communicating to them, so*" *(I10)*

Participants also described emotionally intelligent individuals as skilled in interpreting subtle cues from others, such as slumped shoulders, hesitant tone and body language. They used this information to adjust their behaviour accordingly. This often meant softening one's tone when someone appeared withdrawn or emotionally overwhelmed, pausing or delaying their response, or showing restraint rather than pushing forward.

> "*If they come to you with uh, a certain, gloomy look, slumped shoulders, uh, not necessarily saying hi in a cheerful tone, no smile, uh, clouded eyes or even red eyes. Because someone could have cried before coming to work, I should not have initially been. Oh, how are you doing? Super upbeat. If somebody is not ready to match that vibe.*" *(I13)*

Conversely, participants were critical of behaviours that appeared emotionally incongruent or insincere. Such actions were viewed as tone-deaf, performative, or manipulative, characteristics that, while superficially appropriate, lacked emotional depth and were not perceived as genuinely emotionally intelligent. This arose when an individual described a situation in which they appeared to mirror others without sincerity or self-awareness, which are outwardly socially acceptable but lack emotional depth and are not perceived as emotionally intelligent.

> "*If I act like that, then it has such an effect. Then I find that manipulative. Then I find that not authentic. Then I do not think that is emotionally intelligent.*" *(I9)*

Importantly, emotionally congruent behaviour was said to establish "*norms of trust and respect*", particularly in team settings (I4).

In summary, EI was closely tied to the ability to convey authenticity and contextual sensitivity through non-verbal expression. This alignment was not about merely "looking appropriate" but about being emotionally sensitive to others while remaining true to oneself.

4.3 INTERPLAY OF VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

To fully address the research question, an additional dimension emerged, with a few examples provided in an overview, which is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Overview of the interplay of verbal and non-verbal behaviour of EI

Theme	Description	Example Behaviours/Quotes
Emotional Congruence & Authenticity	EI is expressed when verbal and non-verbal cues align, reinforcing emotional clarity and authenticity. Skilled individuals can 'perform' emotional intelligence (EI) through verbal and non-verbal mimicry, which may be strategic or manipulative.	Verbal: Clear emotional statements, group aligned phrasing, emotionally relevant language Non-verbal: matching facial expressions (frown, sad eyes), appropriate tone, posture and gesture, echoing group gestures or emotional tones to fit in.
Perceptive listening & response	Emotionally intelligent people ask questions and interpret unspoken cues to respond with empathy and insight.	Verbal: Thoughtful, open-ended questions, paraphrasing, reflective feedback Non-verbal: Active listening posture, eye contact, nodding, mirroring expressions
Situational & cultural adaptation	Emotionally intelligent individuals adapt their communication style to fit different cultural norms, social contexts, or group dynamics. EI is shown in awareness of behavioural norms, such as punctuality, dress code, or communication etiquette, especially in multicultural contexts.	Verbal: Adjusted tone and language per group/context, Apologising for lateness, signalling intent Non-verbal: Modulated, fitting and timely gestures, posture, and (controlled) facial expressions fitting professional/social norms, flexible body language, dressing appropriately;
Emotion Regulation and self-control	High EI involves choose when and how to express emotions appropriately, especially in high-stakes or work settings. Regulating impulsive responses	Verbal: Filtered or delayed responses, thoughtful pauses, assertive, firm yet calm language Non-verbal: Composed posture, steady tone, regulated expressions, deliberate calmness
Social awareness & group sensitivity	EI includes sensing emotional undercurrents in groups and adjusting behaviour to support interpersonal harmony.	Verbal: addressing tension constructively, supportive, private follow-ups ("I noticed something—are you okay?"), Group-inclusive comments, calls for reflection ("Let's pause and check in") Non-verbal: Reading the room, shifting tone, stepping in or back as needed, private reassurance cues, light touch (when appropriate) subtle cues (leaning in, stepping back), timing interventions
Feedback and Flexibility Loops	High EI involves continuously reading social cues and adjusting both verbal and non-verbal communication in real time.	Verbal: Iterative dialogue ("How did that come across?") Non-verbal: Adaptive gestures, tonal shifts, responsiveness to cues

Participants consistently emphasised that EI was most powerfully expressed when verbal and non-verbal behaviours operated in harmony.

> *Emotional intelligence often manifests through a combination of verbal and non-verbal behaviours. For example, when someone gets upset, they might raise their voice or clearly say, 'I do not think this is okay', a direct verbal signal. At the same time, non-verbal cues appear: a frown, widened eyes, or a sad expression where the lips pull slightly to one side. The tone of voice also changes, becoming softer or more sensitive, which reinforces the emotional message. Together, these signals communicate not only what a person feels but also how they manage and express those feelings. Recognising and interpreting this combination is essential in understanding group dynamics, as the mixture of emotional expressions can sometimes feel overwhelming or chaotic if not properly managed through emotional intelligence.*" (*I16)*

> "*Asking many questions shows intrinsic motivation, and your body language should be dynamic and open to discussion, reflecting a positive attitude. This positive body language can drive the flow of conversation and information exchange. Clothing can be a factor, but it does not define emotional ability. It is just one part of the overall impression, which requires further investigation. Clothes do not make the person; it is about observing human behaviour as a whole.*" *(I10)*

Using both types of communication helped people better understand others' feelings, intentions, and needs. Participants said that when someone showed this kind of connection, it often meant they were emotionally in tune with others, which made relationships stronger and feelings more shared.

> "*Just by asking questions and paying attention to non-verbal signals, you can understand what someone needs*." (I17)

> "*I observed a junior consultant who speaks six languages. He moved from Brazil to Romania and learned languages by living in different countries, which required constant adaptation. His ease of communication and ability to integrate into different groups stood out. He instinctively adapts his gestures, tone, and conversation topics to fit in, whether with female colleagues or predominantly male groups. He mirrors verbal and nonverbal cues, picks up key words, and builds on conversations, demonstrating high emotional intelligence. This skill likely developed from his childhood need to fit in and learn languages by observing non-verbal clues. Within a few months, he was able to fully communicate and become part of the group.*" *(I7)*

Participants said that when what people say matches their body language, it makes understanding emotions clearer. For example, asking questions while observing someone's body language helped them determine how that person truly felt. However, when words and actions did not match, it was not very

clear and needed more emotional awareness to understand. Many said they often trusted body language more than words, such as when someone smiles but is feeling sad.

> "*I managed to assess people, not just based on how they used words, but also based on how they acted, their body language, and their tone of voice. Uhm, what I could draw conclusions from, I think, was due to emotions that I could draw conclusions from their potential behaviour based on the interview, and it was not just words. So, what was behind the words and the emotions about it*?" (I4)

> "*You naturally tend to prioritise non-verbal behaviour. If someone says, 'I am happy,' but looks sad, you assume they are not actually happy*." (I17)

At times, verbal expressions were said to carry more weight, especially when tied to health or recovery, but overall, non-verbal cues were viewed as the more revealing source of emotional information. This highlighted the need for EI not only in expressing emotions, but also in decoding mixed emotional signals.

> "*Sometimes people laugh when they are angry because they do not know how to express their emotions properly*." (I17)

> "*There are cases where verbal communication carries more weight, like when someone is recovering from illness and says they feel better, even if they still look unwell*." (I17)

Participants also discussed how cultural norms influenced this alignment. In some cultures, emotional control was valued, making emotional cues more subtle and more complex to read. As such, EI requires constant adjustment and contextual awareness, particularly in multicultural or international environments.

> "*Sometimes it is harder for certain cultures, like I struggled with both Indonesian and Middle Eastern cultures in this sense, because they are very professional when they are talking, like they are controlling their voice, controlling their facial expressions, controlling their body language. They are not as free as we are when we talk; they do not truly express themselves, as self-expression is limited in certain cultures, unlike me. Emotions do not shine through; they invest so that I do not see their emotions. I can see the wall that they are putting up, but I cannot go through it*." (I4)

> "*Chinese students in the class are very modest and closed; they never talk about how they feel, but they feel things*." (I17)

The capacity to regulate emotional expression, whether through tone, body posture, or facial expression, was seen as central to emotionally intelligent behaviour. Participants noted that while some moments

required emotional openness (e.g., during conflict or connection), other contexts demanded a filter, such as when one was exhausted or overstimulated.

> "*Hmm, well, even if you copy the behaviour, uhm, I think it requires much effort to be able to replicate it properly in the right context. Uhm, because talking about emotional intelligence, there are probably times when, as a leader, you need to be empathic and understanding. But there are also times in which you shouldn't. You should be tough. Uhm, you should not be allowing the whining and the complaints to say so, right? So that you keep me, you move on now. Emotional intelligence is actually the ability to understand where the other person is and what is needed to move forward in one way or another. Uhm, so in this case, you can copy the behaviour, but the question is, if you have not trained your true skill, if you have not, done the work to change the way your brain is wired, I do not think you are going to be able to replicate it properly or adapt properly in in the different context that life would give you.*" *(I7)*

People often said that acting without thinking or being too open about feelings, especially at work, was seen as a sign of low EI. On the other hand, those with higher EI seemed to choose carefully when and how to express their emotions, adjusting their communication style according to the situation.

> "*I was very tired, then you should not do that, you know, you can sometimes become oversensitive to something, and then you cannot put it into words properly, so there has to be, I think, certainly in work, there has to be a certain filter in between. And that is also. Yes, that is a conscious choice in behaviour again. You have to be able to make a conscious choice in behaviour. Because I come to people with Down syndrome, you recognise it. In society, it cannot be unfiltered; you have to.*" *(I3)*

Some participants also raised the possibility of EI being used strategically or even manipulatively, suggesting that skilled individuals could fake emotions by mimicking verbal and non-verbal behaviours. This underlined that EI is not only about authenticity but also about consciously modulating self-presentation to navigate social dynamics effectively.

> "*They stay for a drink, but can also be fake. It is, I find, very difficult to recognise from behaviour, because people with high emotional intelligence can also fake it, as they can sense what the group needs. You can mask your emotional intelligence, just like you can mask your IQ. Sometimes you do not mask it; you use it, and only then does the mask become what you act like to be part of the group. But that may be a conscious choice.*" *(I3)*

In group settings, emotionally intelligent individuals were said to perceive and respond to the social-emotional undercurrents, whether through subtle adjustments in tone, active listening, or private follow-up conversations. Participants described emotionally intelligent managers or colleagues as those who could read the room, sense tension, and adapt their communication style to meet the group's needs.

"*Even if you perhaps do observe things, you do not discuss them, which then gives the person the feeling that he does not see those little signs... saying 'I see you' is important.*" *(I5)*

"*Sometimes you take someone aside afterwards and say one-to-one, 'According to me, something just happened. Someone said something to you. It affects you quite a bit. '*" *(I17)*

Flexibility in behaviour was highlighted as a key skill. Several participants noted that EI required constant feedback loops, interpreting signals, adjusting, and checking for alignment. Some participants reflected that group dynamics could become emotionally overwhelming if not properly regulated through timely verbal and non-verbal responses.

"*Emotionally intelligent managers can switch very quickly between management styles because they pick up on cues and learning needs.*" *(I14)*

"*The most emotionally intelligent people in my experience are comedians, because they have a very conscious, very aware understanding of what the boundaries are of groups of people. Um, in the sense of what is acceptable, what is unacceptable and certainly a very nice balance between funny and offensive. And then, that makes you very emotionally intelligent, because you are aware of culture. You are aware of your behaviour and emotions and how that affects others.*" *(I14)*

Participants also noted that individuals with high EI excel at adapting to their surroundings and adjusting their communication style according to the people they are with, regardless of gender, culture, or level of authority. They develop this skill over time, especially if they have lived in different places or worked with diverse groups of people.

"*How will you adapt? If you do not demonstrate flexibility in adapting and reflecting on your behaviours once you are in a new environment, that is a solid indicator that you might not be as emotionally intelligent as you perceive yourself to be. The emotionally intelligent person does research. You first research the place you are going to, what is proper behaviour, and what is improper behaviour. That research leads to your own flexibility.*" *(I13)*

"*Having control over uh your own emotions.. talk when someone asks something of you, so do not babble on.. cultural things of some well good norms and values that you are aware of and act according to.. Whether no one is late in an emotionally intelligent group, it may happen; just how you handle it is to announce that I am going to be late. Or.. sweatpants day. Yes, with expectations, also the norms and cultures. In that sense, emotionally intelligent people will always be aware of what the norm is and act accordingly.*" (I14)

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined how EI is behaviourally expressed through both verbal and non-verbal channels, as well as their interplay. The findings reveal that emotionally intelligent behaviour is context-sensitive and communicated dynamically, adapting to interpersonal and situational needs..

Three dimensions emerged:

- Verbal Behavioural Manifestations of EI: highlighting the use of intentional language to recognise, regulate, and repair emotional dynamics.
- Non-verbal Behavioural Manifestations of EI: capturing embodied and expressive behaviours that signal sensitivity, composure, and authentic emotion.
- Interplay of Verbal and Non-verbal Behaviour, when both ways of communication were indistinguishably emotionally intelligent responses.

5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

First and foremost, traditional EI theories and models, such as ability and trait models of EI (e.g., Mayer et al., 2004; Goleman, 1995), primarily focus on understanding and managing emotions within oneself. This study offers a novel behavioural perspective on EI, moving beyond traditional self-report assessments to understand EI as more interactive. By integrating foundational EI theories (Mayer et al., 2004; Goleman, 1995) with communication theories on verbal behaviour (Yukl et al., 2002), non-verbal behaviour (Mehrabian, 1967), EASI (Van Kleef, 2009) and Emotional Contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), this study reconceptualises EI as a relational and context-dependent construct. Emotionally intelligent individuals actively co-regulate emotions using language, tone, body language, and aimed responses to others. Their behaviour is not fixed but adapts dynamically to interpersonal cues.

Secondly, this study corroborates with communication theories on verbal behaviour (Yukl et al., 2002) and non-verbal behaviour (Mehrabian, 1967). This study reveals alignment with relationship-oriented behaviours of Yukl et al.'s (2002) leadership behaviours, in terms of developing others, coaching, and feedback, which were most effective when leaders were sensitive to emotional signals and responded with well-timed, empathic support. These findings support Riggio et al. (2003), who suggest that socially skilled leaders recognise subtle cues (e.g., tone, body language) to offer growth-oriented feedback in terms of empowering behaviours. Results show that the expression of encouragement and trust established connections, making followers feel capable and committed. This reflects Druskat and Wolff (2001)'s emphasis on emotional competence in group motivation and Riggio et al. (2003)'s model of social expressiveness. For example, when someone was empowered with a task, their leader framed it with confidence in them, using positive storytelling and non-verbal affirmations (e.g., steady eye contact, an encouraging tone). Supporting behaviours are demonstrated through a warm tone and calm speech; these behaviours help others feel safe during stressful interactions. This aligns with Goleman's

(1998) emphasis on social awareness and empathy as core EI competencies and is supported by evidence that such behaviours promote psychological safety. Meaningful recognition is not generic; it requires noticing emotional cues (such as insecurity and disappointment) and delivering praise in a personalised way. The findings further reflect how leaders aimed at emotions using non-verbal signals (a nod, smile, affirmative vocal tone) to reinforce appreciation. This reinforces the sense of belonging and motivation, consistent with Yukl et al. (2002), and also confirms the EASI (Van Kleef, 2009) and Emotional Contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021) theories. Consulting behaviour is recognised through which EI enables leaders to recognise others' emotional cues, such as hesitation, concern, or enthusiasm, and respond appropriately through reassuring words. This responsiveness fosters shared decision-making and empowers individuals to have a stronger voice in the workplace. It confirms the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which posits that small but meaningful moments that shape how individuals feel, think, and behave also influence team morale, psychological safety, and motivation. The findings showed that emotionally intelligent individuals adjust their tone or expressions to invite participation, particularly in moments of tension or uncertainty, and maintain a composed demeanour during conflict, or when colleagues offer emotionally aware praise, not only defusing tension but also affecting how the individuals felt and how the workplace is perceived. EI behaviour was indeed observed using subtle verbal and non-verbal cues, such as micro-expressions or shifts in vocal tone, to direct themselves to team dynamics. The findings suggest that non-verbal empathy is not just nodding, smiling, or making eye contact, but rather a dynamic means to manage the atmosphere, considering specific context, culture, and relationship dynamics. This study indeed reveals that what truly matters is how emotions are conveyed through actions. When what someone says matches how they convey it (through their tone and body language), they appear more genuine and trustworthy, aligning with research on authenticity and other communication theories (Mehrabian, 1967a; Friedman, 1979; Burgoon et al., 2016). If the words and body do not match, people may feel something is off or fake. This study emphasises how people employ subtle behaviours, such as adjusting their tone or facial expressions, to foster connection with their teams and establish trust. This means EI is more than just words or tasks; it requires ongoing emotional tuning with others.

Thirdly, EI is not just internal but also social; it happens *between people*. Findings show that emotionally intelligent individuals facilitate smoother communication, encourage actionable feedback, and contribute to higher-quality collaboration, thereby encouraging others to do the same, confirming the EASI (Van Kleef, 2009; A'yuninnisa). Emotional expressions are not only internal reflections but also social information and learning cues, enhancing others' emotional awareness and skill development, which shape how observers interpret and behave. Findings demonstrate how leaders' emotional expressions, conveyed through voice, posture, or facial cues, significantly influence team climate. This aligns with Emotional Contagion theory (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), which posits that emotions can spread (un)consciously through interpersonal interactions where EI behaviour serves as emotional

transmitters, creating ripples of calm, motivation, or empathy across teams. This concept is directly related to Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory (2001), which posits that positive emotions expand cognitive and social resources over time. The results indicated that EI behaviour does not just "feel good"; it fosters better collaboration, more transparent communication, and greater openness. Emotionally intelligent leaders generate enthusiasm and emotional commitment among employees by managing affective experiences. Emotionally intelligent behaviours "set the tone" for meetings, suggesting that these acts help shape the emotional climate of the team, reinforcing collective identity and group cohesion. These findings reinforce the social and interpersonal elements of EI proposed by Goleman (1995) and align with research on psychological safety and knowledge sharing in leadership (Mahmood & Toker, 2022; Decker et al., 2009).

5.2THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Training EI through Behaviour

The findings have substantial implications for professional development. This study reframes EI as not only a psychological trait but a set of observable and coachable behaviours. While traditional EI training focuses on introspection or emotional awareness, the findings from this research suggest a more concrete and actionable approach, confirming that indeed EI is teachable (Dulewicz & Higgs, 1999; Schutte et al., 2013). EI development programs should move beyond abstract competencies (like "be more self-aware") to focus on specific, visible actions such as:

- Calibrating tone to express empathy or reassurance in tense moments
- Maintaining open posture and consistent eye contact to foster trust
- Practising emotionally intelligent language, such as asking reflective questions or offering context-sensitive encouragement in alignment with (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Riggio et al., 2003).

Such a behavioural focus makes EI measurable, trainable, and culturally adaptable, especially in leadership, customer service, or healthcare. Regular team-based reflection, storytelling of emotional workplace experiences, or peer feedback exercises on "EI in action" could serve as ongoing developmental tools..

Leadership and Communication Practices

Emotionally intelligent leadership is not just about intention; it is about how emotions are communicated and managed in real-time. Leaders who modulate their voice under pressure, respond with composed empathy, or offer supportive feedback during stress are actively creating psychological safety and team resilience. (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Riggio et al., 2003).

This suggests that leadership development should:

- Include training in emotional expression control (e.g., managing facial expressions and body language during high-stakes moments)
- Emphasise empathic presence, leaders being sensitive to emotional undercurrents and responding in a way that soothes, motivates, or aligns
- Incorporate EI role-plays and feedback, where leaders receive coaching not just on what they say but how they say it

Application in Recruitment and Evaluation

In terms of the practical application for recruiters or managers related to evaluation, this research supports a shift to situational, behavioural assessments that tap into:

- Conflict resolution style and emotional tone in real-life scenarios
- How candidates or employees recognise, respond to, and regulate emotional cues
- Their use of emotionally intelligent communication (e.g., acknowledgement, validation, nonverbal empathy)

For example, the recruiter or manager might ask: "Tell me about a time you had to support a colleague who was struggling emotionally, what did you say and do?"

This allows recruiters and managers to identify not just what the candidate believes about empathy, but how they embody it.

Embedding EI in Organisational Culture

Finally, emotionally intelligent behaviour can act as a cultural catalyst. Your findings suggest that when EI is modelled regularly by team members and leaders through recognition, empathy, careful feedback, and emotional regulation, it becomes normative: expected, shared, and socially reinforced.

To embed EI into workplace culture, organisations might

- Identify emotionally intelligent micro-behaviours as part of core values
- Include EI indicators in 360-degree feedback and performance reviews
- Celebrate emotionally intelligent actions in team meetings or internal communications.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into how EI is expressed through verbal and non-verbal behaviours in professional contexts, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study relied on retrospective storytelling, which introduces the risk of recall bias. Participants were asked to reflect on emotionally significant moments; yet, subtle cues, such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions, are often difficult to recall with precision (Yukl et al., 2002). Emotions may have been unintentionally misremembered, oversimplified, or emotionally reframed, particularly since people tend to recall negative experiences more vividly (Flanagan, 1954). While interviews provided rich insights, they may not fully capture how EI manifests in real-time. Looking back, including a short diary task where participants could write down emotionally important moments soon after they occurred, might have made the findings even more accurate. Future studies could incorporate diary methods, video-based observation, or experience sampling to capture EI better as it unfolds naturally.

Secondly, the findings are based on participants' perceptions, rather than direct observation of EI behaviours. While this approach reveals how emotionally intelligent actions are experienced and interpreted, it limits conclusions about actual behavioural enactment. Individual biases, cultural contexts, and interpersonal dynamics likely shaped participants' interpretations. To enhance objectivity, future research should adopt a triangulated approach, combining self-reports with third-party observation or behavioural analysis, to provide a more accurate and nuanced account of EI in practice.

Finally, the conceptual boundary between verbal and non-verbal behaviours proved difficult to define consistently. Participants often described behaviours like tone of voice, pausing, or active listening as verbal, and at other times as non-verbal. This overlap reflects a lack of shared definitions and highlights the need for more precise categorisation of EI-related behaviours. Future research would benefit from developing a structured EI codebook, grounded in empirical data, to classify verbal and non-verbal manifestations of EI systematically.

7. CONCLUSION

This research offers novel insights into understanding EI, shifting from a view of EI as a static internal trait to a dynamic, context-sensitive skill that is behaviourally expressed. It demonstrates how EI is evident in everyday workplace interactions and shaped by factors such as context, culture, interpersonal dynamics, and modes of communication.

In addressing the main research question: "How can emotional intelligence be manifested through verbal and non-verbal behaviours?" The study found that EI is enacted through a diverse range of expressive strategies that enable individuals to recognise emotions, regulate relational dynamics, and build meaningful connections. Three key dimensions of behavioural EI emerged:

- **Verbal behaviours**, characterised by emotionally sensitive language used to validate others, manage relationships, and support emotional co-regulation;
- **Non-verbal behaviours**, including physical presence, posture, facial expressions, and tone, which conveyed empathy, composure, and authenticity;
- **Interplay of verbal and non-verbal communication**, where emotionally intelligent responses were most impactful when both channels were aligned, creating coherence and trust.

Overall, the study reframes EI as a responsive, evolving process, rather than simply something one possesses, but rather something one does. Through moment-to-moment actions, individuals actively shape emotional climates, build psychological safety, and support collaboration. These findings underscore the value of observing EI in action and encourage future research to focus on how EI plays out in interpersonal settings.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening:

- Introduction and Consent: Thank you for participating in this interview. Before we begin, I would like to introduce the purpose of our discussion and ensure your consent for recording. Your unique perspective will contribute to the diversity of insights gathered, enriching our data, and enabling me to identify key themes and findings to investigate how EI is manifested through behaviour
- Rationale: Your expertise and insights in the field of emotional intelligence are invaluable to our research. We aim to gather real-time opinions and perspectives on EI and its behavioural manifestations.
- Flexibility and Initiative: Throughout our conversation, feel free to share any relevant experiences or examples. I aim to keep the conversation flexible and responsive to your preferences
- Consent and Confidentiality: Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. I encourage honesty and openness in sharing your thoughts and experiences.
- Thank you for signing the consent form. We can now begin recording.

Table A1. Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

Themes	**Main Questions**	**Probing questions**
Introduction	In what ways do you incorporate emotional intelligence into your daily work?	
	Which person do you consider to be emotional intelligent?	What verbal/non-verbal behaviour did the person show? Cues in tone, body language, nods/facial expressions?
Emotional Intelligence Impact	From your perspective, what role does emotional intelligence play in the workplace? position/project	Can you provide examples of how emotional intelligence has contributed to your success or the success of others in your profession?

	Have you encountered challenges in applying emotional intelligence?	Why? How did you address them? What verbal/non-verbal behaviour did the less emotional (if present) intelligent person show, what were the cues in tone, body language, nods/facial expressions? (one by one)
	Can you provide an example of a challenging situation and how emotional intelligence played a role in resolving it?	Can you think of any other influence besides emotional intelligence?
	How does EI manifest in professional settings or leadership roles?	How do you balance emotional intelligence with rational decision-making in your role?
	From your experience, could you provide an example where there was a difference in collective behaviour which may be related to high or low emotional intelligence? Especially in response to different emotional cues or social situations?	What behaviour was demonstrated related to low emotional intelligence? What behaviour was demonstrated related to high emotional intelligence? Why did you pay attention to those behavioural cues? Were there behavioural cues less important? What made the difference in individual or collective behaviour? Cues in tone, body language, nods/facial expressions?
	How do you think emotional intelligence affects team dynamics and collaboration?	What kind of context is needed here? How do you navigate differences in emotional intelligence among team members or colleagues?

Critical Incident	Can you describe a situation where your emotional intelligence skills were tested or challenged?	How did you respond? How did you handle the situation emotionally? Why do you think that your EI skills were put to the test or a challenge? Reflecting on this incident, how do you think it influenced your behaviour and decisions?
	Can you recall a specific work event or situation that triggered strong emotions in you?	How did these emotions influence your subsequent behaviours or decisions? How did you notice that emotions were influencing decisions? What happened before or after?
Cultivation	How do cultural factors influence the expression and interpretation of emotional intelligence behaviours?	Can you provide an example of how cultural differences influenced the understanding or perception of emotional intelligence? Can you share demographic differences that impacted the understanding?
	How do you think emotional intelligence training can be improved in individuals or teams?	Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer to individuals seeking to develop emotional intelligence skills? Means for continuous self-improvement
	What resources or support have you found helpful in developing emotional intelligence capabilities?	
Closing	Do you have anything to add, any further thoughts or questions?	

Closing:

- Thankful: Thank you once again for your participation in this interview. Your contributions will be instrumental in advancing the understanding of emotional intelligence and its practical implications. Your insights will be carefully analysed alongside those of other participants to identify key themes and findings.
- Use: The findings from this research will be used to inform future studies and practical applications of emotional intelligence. I am committed to ensuring that your responses are used ethically and responsibly.
- If you have any further thoughts or questions, please feel free to share them. Your willingness to engage in this dialogue is greatly appreciated, and I look forward to reviewing and analysing your valuable insights.

APPENDIX B: EXEMPLARY QUOTES FROM FIRST-ORDER CODES

Table B1. Exemplary quotes from first-order codes

Theme/Concept	Quote
1a Naming Emotions	I see that you are angry (I1) This affects you (I12) Say, well, I saw that the person sat down like that and went down, and he started scratching on a leaf, those were signals for me (I3) It helps that we can keep naming it; we have also just agreed with each other that we will continue doing so, even if we cannot change anything about it. Yes. I think it is also very important that, if you are more sensitive to this, you remain transparent and communicate with people in the same way (I5)
1b Boundary Setting	(sufficient quotes were mentioned in-text)
1c Inclusion	She made sure even the quiet ones had a chance to talk. That is emotional intelligence (I10, I12)
2a Reflective Self-Inquiry	(sufficient quotes were mentioned in-text)
2b Collaborative Reflection	To distinguish emotions from rationality, I would then ask, for example, what do you think of it so far? And then you get their reaction, and then you can better understand what is behind that feeling… and then you can ask why not and then you can defend that again (I12) Acknowledging someone's viewpoint first before suggesting alternatives makes the conversation more constructive (I7)

2c Questioning with Empathy and Adaptability	How does that make you feel? (I4, I6) You can also ask. Very directly, that is then one thing, and you can hear it through the grapevine that can also still be in the organisation, such as this gossip always travels so fast (I5) Emotionally intelligent people adapt their phrasing and tone to the situation (I10). A sudden shift in behaviour (e.g., disengagement) may signal burnout but requires careful inquiry (I8) While genuine curiosity is valued, it is hard to get people to want to know more genuinely (I7)
3a Calming and Redirecting Language	Turn steps back and say, 'I do not know, okay, I will think about this.' Give me a few minutes to think about this, and I will see your point. I will not jump into arguing, as that might deepen the conflict or escalate it. (I1) You spend all the time trying to persuade for something that does not really matter… instead of putting time into ways to move forward and improve. (I8) “Compassion is what differentiates, because they could have done the same thing, and people would not have spoken up. If you do not offer them, maybe what would have been missing in terms of words to say is that I said that.” (I4) I hear you, but maybe we can try to see it from a different angle. (I3) Exposing it in a way that removes the issue from a disagreement between people to a place where we can actually solve it. (I8) There is no way to move forward if we are looking at the same data and taking different conclusions , if there is no attempt to understand each other. (I8) Can I put it into words in a different way to make it come across less harsh? (I12) More emotionally intelligent people, especially when calm, let that person finish talking. Look at what that person has to say and then decide for yourself what I think about this, and then really, form your opinion and then express that (I12) You do not say, ‘You were wrong.’ You say, ‘I think there is a different way to look at this , can I share it?’ That way, no one feels attacked. (I4) Emotionally intelligent leaders correct without humiliating. They use

	words like, 'I see your point, and maybe we can add this,' instead of saying, 'That is not right.' (I1) In that example of such a proposal, for example, they come back with feedback, say not immediately, and criticise. However, it is more constructive to think about this as well; I do not think it works because something more substantial and controlled is needed. (I12) It is about staying with the person, not reacting too quickly. Sometimes silence or a gentle 'Let me think about that' buys time and prevents damage. (I7) Humour at the right moment might also help (I17)
3b Group Moderation & Managing Tension	People with higher emotional intelligence might use subtle hints to steer the conversation in a productive direction. (I17) Giving a couple of hints that we are running out of time (I2) The real test of leadership is not just exposing problems but staying level-headed and bringing people together to solve them, especially when defensiveness and blame start taking over. (I8) I do not think that happens often, but I also sometimes hear that people get really emotional. That maybe they get sad or that they do not feel heard and uhm someone who just keeps on not letting someone finish talking and keeps on pushing through their point of view. And you might have just one person who has to create order and who says, okay, everyone be quiet now, and one person at a time, but then you also notice that a bit of chaos is created. (I6) "Let us not escalate this. We are all trying our best, and we can figure it out." (I14) It is important that you take your emotions out of it a bit. So, when it gets very fierce, and you see that happening, you really look like, okay, what is happening here? The emotion is running too high. How do I neutralise this again? And that neutralisation can be done by briefly intervening as a trainer and asking another question. It can also be done by naming it. Hey, it is going well, it is going quite fiercely between us, uhm, what is happening here? Yes, and then you take on the role of trainer. It can also be that you stop the exercise at that moment. If it is an exercise, then you simply stop for a moment. Uhm, we are done with this. What have you learned? So, then you intervene in the process. It can also be that you say it is time for coffee, stop, everyone goes outside (I3)

3c Repairing Dialogue & Taking Responsibility	Instead of confronting him head-on, I reflect on why I find him annoying and use that self-awareness to get more done with him. I strike the right tone,still confrontational but from a place of understanding. Even when I do not like someone, I show interest in their struggles (e.g., a divorce) to build rapport. I utilise emotional intelligence to advocate for students, securing leniency from challenging colleagues. Besides emotional intelligence, life experience helps,knowing what works and what backfires. (I16) That shows you care about how you impact others. (I6) He just said, 'It is okay to feel this. Let us figure it out.' That helped a lot. (I16) “Removing the issue from a disagreement between people to a place where it can be solved.” (I9). It takes two unemotional people to create confusion, where both just state their side with no middle ground. (I9)
4a Empathy & Humour	Empathy and compassion are important for leaders. (I1) Understand your fears, understand your motivations, how do you bring things, how do you get people to participate? (I15) You recognise sometimes people say, ‘you cannot do anything about that,’ which is frustrating, so it is about balancing the person’s perspective with group needs. (I3) They said, 'Continue, but send email, put me in cc, so higher authority knows, and they need to be careful with reply.'(I2)
4b Emotional Safety & Adaptability	You go to the person where you feel comfortable. And I felt comfortable with my team leader at that moment, so I went to my team leader. The moment you appear weak, it can actually be a powerful act. Even though you feel weak at that moment, they make you feel strong again. When I have conversations with her, I feel like I am having a really good conversation that helps me move forward. (I6) Even though I react, I tend not to affect other people's emotions. I do not attack the person or take things personally. I tend to focus on behaviours, results, or outputs, not the person. (I1) Once a colleague said, ‘So this is what we are going to do,’ and another person stood up and said, ‘Then I am resigning.’ It was a shock. We took a coffee break to buy time and discuss what was going on and how to deal with it. (I3)

	When in a tough training, if someone says it is time for coffee, you have to stop because that signals something is happening in the group that must be discussed, or it will go wrong. (I3) People with high emotional intelligence adjust their approach based on the responses they receive, and if I notice someone is not responding as I expected, that is a signal to change my approach. (I17) They repeat key words that someone else used, but in their own way. (I17) If someone makes harsh statements, give feedback and help them reflect on their words. I find it not so nice that you say this. (I17) More about the motivation aspect... it just runs smoothly; you email, you get a response back immediately. You can reach each other easily. You find each other quickly, and that is not the case with every colleague. An emotionally intelligent person they are socially skilled. A lot, yeah, just a good relationship with different colleagues within the team, outside the team. (I12) Mhm, yeah, imagine, yeah, imagine you come with two people with the same question to the leader, two employees come to the manager with the same question. To one, for example, he will be very brief in his explanation, and the other will literally walk the viewer through the whole process and also mention pitfalls. And the difference lies in how much guidance someone receives or does not receive, while they still come with the same question. Purely because he understands how someone is, uh, process-wise or at least, uh, work ethic is the basis of this, so to speak. (I14)
4c Inclusive language	Words to show people you are heard depend on the person's background. Someone with an IT background can convey appreciation differently than someone from a social background. Small things can show you 'get it,' even if they do not say it directly. (I5) Trying to understand better the other standpoint before actually pushing for a different one, and creating unity. (I3) People who are not emotionally intelligent make jokes about cultural differences, but a manager who understands and accepts them is very good. (I2) We had to make it a win-lose situation, giving up some standards to collaborate further. (I1, I7)

	My oldest team member was really disappointed about the output provided by a new teammate and was like, 'This is unacceptable! He should have done this, but he has no chance to rework because he is unavailable. We should discuss this. (I1) Encouraging psychological safety and social support is crucial during innovation and change processes. (I15)
5a Mirroring and Physical Synchrony	When you give someone a mirror image, it also feels familiar. (16) "Having childhood photos in sessions helped break egos and encouraged more personal sharing." (I16) Biological feeling of, ah, if the person follows you, that means they respect you and trust you, because if you lead, that means I am a good leader." (I13)
5b Spatial and Energetic Awareness	An indicator of empathy is if your tone changes, like if somebody is crying and you have suddenly become kinder in tone or on your face, you can see that you feel for the other person. (I4) You want to read if your students are dead bored... that is reading, whether it is working or not. (I11) Yes, if you give a presentation about a new theme, for example, you see that people nod along; that is positive. However, if people look away a lot, with their hands over their arms crossed, then you already realise. Oh, they are not like that. Yeah, this does not affect them that much. Uhm, yes, I think I find that difficult, yes, less emotionally intelligent people are in any case less, yes, uhm, maybe less easy to read, more reserved, but perhaps also less quickly interested, because then you are already one zero behind, you know what I mean? Yes, they seem less open to something new. (I12) You just feel it when someone is really there with you. They do not fidget, they look at you, maybe they nod a bit, not over the top. (I2) Everyone registers differently and with a bit of blinkers on; goal-oriented people might ignore what happens around them. (I15)
5c Emotional Engagement/Withdrawal	If they try it... You see a bit of a hazy look turned inward because then the person is struggling with himself and still wants to be open again. (I9) You can see it in the eyes when someone is not actively listening... You can also see it a little bit in their vibration or posture, tense posture... resistance taking place. (I9) He tried to become small, so he did not want to be noticed at all. (I4, I9)

	I remember his face. I remember that he was sad. I remember that he was down… looking like there was a child. (I4) Hurried, fleeting, evasive, tense... someone is not in the moment... evasive, yes, that someone actually does not want to get involved. (I9) They take the moral and analytical high ground... making fun of colleagues, negative energy, it fuels negative emotions in everyone. (I7) Being left alone and deserted, turning into a bullying phase (I11) Low emotional intelligence… they are distant, less accessible… the interaction happens less, and is more superficial. And People with less emotional intelligence get invited less or are less present at the coffee table. (I2)
6a Calm Presence and Composure	You just have a calm, neutral attitude... facial expression, your mouth is neutral, your eyes are looking at the person, and your eyebrows are not frowning. (I13) Both ways are still staying calm… especially if someone comes at you very aggressively… You stay calm if you are emotionally intelligent. (I6) Colleagues who have a calm appearance… have an open attitude… just standing or sitting calmly in a normal way, for example, not arms crossed but just arms loose… small things. (I2) Some people did show empathy and understanding… how they sat, how they looked , it was very open to let the other person keep talking. (I2) My emotional intelligence was screwed down by my programming... so I reacted very primally... not from my intuition (I9) What I do personally whenever I feel that I cannot regulate is take a step back. (I13) In emotionally intense scenarios, non-verbal strategies were used to down-regulate conflict: slowing down movements, pausing, breathing deeply, or physically stepping back (I13) When I understood the situation, I just stepped back and it is fine, it is OK. I will take what I have to take from that situation and move forward (I1) Maybe a collaboration with a partner or stakeholder that consistently delivers bad outcomes... this somehow generates negative feelings, but I do not manifest them… maybe take some time off and then get back with my smile on my face (I1)

6b Strategic Silence and Vocal Regulation	You stay calm if you are emotionally intelligent… You calm them down, let them talk it out, let that person express his or her feelings. (I4) He just took a deep breath and stayed quiet. That helped the rest of us cool down. (I2) People who do not say anything, I think they are so far the most emotionally intelligent people within this situation. (I2) Let the other person finish speaking and at least show interest... do not talk over someone. (I2) Remain silent,sometimes silence is also an answer. (I13) Emotionally intelligent people do not immediately give advice but create space for others. Forcing yourself to be present without losing yourself in the story. Let the 'owl' behind the wheel,that is your genius personality system (GPS), always in the here and now. (I16)
6c Boundary Setting and Postural Awareness	The posture and the tension that take place. So, if someone is open and calm, then they have a much more open attitude. Are the arms crossed? People who sit like this want to protect themselves. (I9) Not really reserved, but just standing or sitting calmly… not someone who rushes towards you aggressively… then you do not really have the feeling that that person takes your feelings into account. (I6) She has separated it. She can handle her emotions well, which allows her to help others. (I6) When I need to self-regulate and I notice the need to self-regulate, that is a sign that I am emotionally intelligent enough to notice… that I need to stop, that I need to remove myself. (I5) In a team setting with more people, they are more tense, introverted… they sit with their arms crossed or something. But that again could be a sign of their introversion, not a sign of their emotional intelligence. (I4) I changed jobs because of it… I could not regulate with that intensity all the time. (I5) and I14. She left because it was not healthy for her. This sometimes involves major life decisions in response to chronic emotional overwhelm. (I5) The position of your shoulders is important. People do notice your eyebrows, because they give very clear expression, Your attitude, so to speak, so your body posture, to put it mildly, eye contact, which you mentioned earlier, is very important, Well what is very important is clothing too, eh so some cultures find it very important to be dressed

	covered, mhhm in very few cultures is it really okay to be completely naked? Yes, if you can adapt very well to expectations, you are emotionally intelligent (I14).
7a Sensing and Responding to Group Dynamics	The collective behaviour... everyone is looking bored, you know... bringing in some games or fun activities… then there is a collective change (I11) If there is tension in the group, you can see it, as if it were a dog that pricks up its ears, like Oh, boy, something is happening here. (I3) I do not see the colour of people, but I do perceive dynamics in a space, and that sounds very vague, but then it is more than I just feel that on the basis of that, how the eh? And then you actually see that the spaces also flow and how that goes, so to speak, that I immediately feel like, hey, that is good (I5) I observe the audience closely,what are they laughing about, what are they not laughing about? You need to sense what is and is not appropriate in the moment. (I16) It is not that I actively pay attention to it, but I do expect it to count. I cannot turn that on or off either. It is just there. (I5) I do not feel it as a switch. I feel it as eh either you have it and you use it by default, or you don't have it. What I was trying to say is that I also think it is a skill that you can train, and at a certain moment it can become internalised like a reflex in that sense. (I6) That is just not nice, so to speak, you just notice the atmosphere and everyone. (I5) First, you need to feel good in front of the class… Can I teach my material? That is the first step. Once you have that, you gain more insight into individual students, group dynamics, and colleagues. (I6) As soon as you stand in front of a group, you are busy creating atmosphere in the group… that is constant. (I3)
7b Timing, Silence, and Letting Go	Eye contact does, and physical contact like a hug or a pat on the back... empathetic. (I12) You feel like it is not going well… you notice it and do not like it, but then it is up to the other person to intervene. (I3) I needed my emotional detachment to assess that I cannot go to these people and enforce the game; they are not flexible (I4)

7c Subtle Signals of Presence	There is the body language; there is the eye connection... I am not using many words here, but I am here if you want to talk. (I7) Are you paying attention, are you going along, are you doing your own thing, are you distracted? (I5) They have active attention, which would mean that they would like to follow with their eyes. Who talks, who is talking? And there is a curiosity about facial expressions, if they care. But many things like that. Emotionally intelligent people, especially, shield themselves from a lot of stuff. So, if somebody in a meeting is sitting on their phone and not paying attention to the meeting, that could be because it is overwhelming, because there is a conflict in a meeting (I4) You could tell whether someone was still mentally with you just by their posture and where their attention was focused (I5)
8a Authentic Adaptation	Smiling back when appropriate, matching emotional tone, or slightly adjusting one's body posture to reflect the other person's state were common. (I17) At first, I would mimic and then slowly open up… it is such a natural response to really copy the way people are sitting or standing. (I13)
8b Cultural and contextual sensitivity	Less emotionally intelligent people often sit with arms crossed, thinking, 'I do not feel like this, I did not ask for this. (I16) If there is emotional intelligence, you will not allow toxic relationships to go on that can destroy teams and workplaces. (I11)
8c Inauthentic and insensitive behaviour	Those causing toxic relationships probably do not have very deep emotional intelligence… It is almost bullying. (I11, I9) I was shaking with rage and crying after a tone-deaf joke in a meeting… it was very inappropriate. (I13)
9a Alignment & Inconsistency	The first colleague is a funny person, and is always smiling... When he was saying what he was saying, it was with a smile. While the second person was, I do not know, a bit with a smirky face, more, a bit of a higher-up feeling, uh, yeah, maybe that was it. The second person is a very serious person, so they do not show many emotions … (I2) Or a jojo in language, someone says yes or no, and how does one say it? I think that about emotional intelligence, you cannot deduce it directly from behaviour in a meeting. Maybe you see it in the behaviour. Then it goes, when I have some colleagues who wonder, 'Oh, how is this going to go? What is the atmosphere like?' , Those very task-oriented colleagues

	do not do that. So, I think if you want to pre-reflect or deflect, a kind of reflecting with a little anticipation, that is a piece of behaviour you are more likely to see in people with emotional intelligence than in people who are lower in that intelligence. (I3) Actions speak louder than words,non-verbal cues often reveal more than what someone is explicitly saying. (I17) Comfortable in your own skin, you can say whatever you want. (I2) It does not matter if a person is very emotional or reacts very strongly, withdraws or does not respond in respect to give a label whether high or low emotionally intelligent, you do not know if it is circumstances, but you cannot know that either. (I3) Sometimes you recognise insincerity. But how do you recognise it? Is it in the tone, maybe the wording? How do they look? An attitude like someone looking down a little? No idea, but it is interesting. (I3) Getting aggressive, getting angry, raising your voice, standing up and saying, " I do not think it is okay and all that. (I6)
9b Regulation vs Spontaneity	Then you get in the meantime signals of whether you are on the right track or not, and then you have to try, yes, to steer. If it turns out that you are completely wrong, you can always say sorry again. (I6) “I do not know which ones there are, eh, but you have different ones if you very often resolve conflicts in a way of flight behaviour, then it could be that they think lazily, that they think out of fear, I am not going to have this conversation.” (I6) I would put myself a few steps back... depending on the situation, first consult with somebody else because I do not want my own feelings to be on a higher level than my decision-making. Checking in is also for me to share that my emotions were regulated enough. If somebody else says, ‘Wow, that is a pretty rash decision,’ that is a key indicator to take a few steps back. (I13) She created dialogue instead of discussion because she needed much empathy and was flexible in her statements throughout the conversation. (I14) Switching between keeping your composure and also letting go of emotions to let certain people know how bad it can get , that is what I believe really showed my emotional intelligence. (I13)

9c Group Dynamics and contextual adaptation	If you were not there, we would be done, but you are disrupting everything. The person who disrupted the process was a completely different person. That boy just wanted to ask a question or bring his idea... and that was rejected by the group, by the group thrown out, very confronting (I3) Students are highly sensitive to their emotional state,whether confident or insecure,and this is communicated not just through words but also through body language, tone of voice, and eye contact. When standing tall, make steady eye contact, and speak clearly and directly,saying things like, 'You are talking through me, I do not want that',I signal both verbally and non-verbally that certain behaviours are unacceptable (I6, I11) Emotional intelligence often manifests through a combination of verbal and non-verbal behaviours. For example, when someone gets upset, they might raise their voice or clearly say, 'I do not think this is okay',a direct verbal signal. At the same time, non-verbal cues appear: a frown, widened eyes, or a sad expression where the lips pull slightly to one side. The tone of voice also changes, becoming softer or more sensitive, which reinforces the emotional message. Together, these signals communicate not only what a person feels but also how they manage and express those feelings. Recognising and interpreting this combination is essential in understanding group dynamics, as the mixture of emotional expressions can sometimes feel overwhelming or chaotic if not properly managed through emotional intelligence. (I16) "Anticipating, reflecting and then on the dynamics of the group. That might be important. Anticipating group dynamics, reflecting on group dynamics and being able to adapt behaviour based on what you think the group is asking of you, so it is the uh, blending into a group, being able to blend"(I3) Sometimes you accept things, and sometimes you draw a line and do not accept them, and I also say something about it. Sometimes it is also just about knowing how a person is, and the intentions are well-meaning. (I17) He also senses whether to bring a camera or maybe just record sound,it is about feeling what is right in the moment. Not shouting at someone who is dying, but exactly the right things, not saying too much, also sometimes their tears in his eyes, because he has come to love that person so much. (I16)

	The tone should be appropriate,sometimes whispering is better. Tim Hofman, in his show, knows exactly the right tone, when to whisper, when to remain silent, and when to show emotion. (I16)
9d Cultural Sensitivity	A person from the Hoekse Waard behaves differently from someone from Marrakech. (I17) The Dutch are said to be somewhat direct and outspoken, but in other cultures, that is simply antisocial... if it is not attuned, it would not be considered emotionally intelligent. (I5) She can really make a connection there, very easily with others... she can also very easily approach people and quickly respond to that and switch. I think because of her organisational expertise... she knows our world, the support room or HR... she once worked at a faculty... she knows how we are and how we work, how it is here. (I5)