

[Q&A]

PW TALKS WITH BATJA MESQUITA

Learning How to Feel

In *Between Us* (Norton, July; reviewed on p. 56), psychology professor Mesquita explores the social origins of emotions.

You discuss how Western cultures tend to view emotion as an internal state, while other cultures think about emotion as more external. Why do you think this is?

I would explain it by saying that in Western cultures, it has been increasingly important to decide what you want because the structure of our society is less prescriptive. We as individuals need to make a lot of decisions, and where else can you look but inside when you are part of a culture that emphasizes the individual and in which traditional rules and norms exert a diminished influence? But make no mistake: What people in Western cultures learn to feel is equally dependent on what we have experienced in our surroundings and environment as what people in non-Western cultures learn. In Western cultures, parents ask their kids how they feel, what they would like, why they like it. We're constantly asked to focus on our insides, but it's the outside that provides the context within which it becomes important to look at your insides.

How does your focus on culture's role in creating emotions play into the nature vs. nurture debate?

The brain learns from experience, from its environment. The brain is an organ that wires itself over the course of a lifetime. And so when your social context is different, your experiences are different, and the brain develops differently. It is our nature is to get

nurtured, so to say. Our nature is that we become part of social environments and we become wired to be fit for those particular environments.

In the book, you provide a "toolbox for unpacking emotional episodes." Can you elaborate on that?

The toolbox helps one become aware of the ways in which emotions can differ



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across cultures, and can be used to unpack the meaning of multicultural interactions. First, examine how or why what happened mattered. Emotional episodes are always about something that matters, but we cannot presume to know why it matters. What goals, values, or expectations are at stake? Next, examine the meaning of the "emotion word" that describes the situation best. Often people label an emotional episode, but we cannot be sure that the experience or the implications of the label are similar to our own culture. Because emotion words do not translate very well across different languages, we have to examine what the emotion means in the cultural context of our interaction. Finally, examine what the consequences are.

Depending on their meaning, emotions will run a different course. Ask, "What does the emotion try to accomplish?" or "How will others likely respond?" In a multicultural world, it is useful to not see your own emotions as normative or universal. By the same token, expect to have to explain your own emotions to people from other cultures.

—RYAN DRADZYNSKI

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