****

Relational Wellbeing Collaborative

**Blog**

Power: the missing element in cultures of emotion? A conversation with Batja Mesquita’s (2022) *Between Us, how cultures create emotions,*

New York: W. M. Norton & co.

Sarah C. White 7 March 2023

Batja Mesquita’s recent book, *Between Us, how cultures create emotions,* rests on a fundamental contrast between two views of emotions. In the first, (‘MINE’), emotions are believed to be mental events which happen within a person. This is the dominant view in Western industrialised countries. In the second, (‘OURS’), emotions are seen as forms of action oriented towards social and relational ends, which take different shapes as they arise within different situated contexts. Mesquita sees this as the dominant view in much of the rest of the world.

The book is accessibly written in a conversational style, drawing extensively on Mesquita’s own experience of having to learn a new emotional culture on shifting from the Netherlands, with its emphasis on equality and not setting yourself apart from others, to the United States, with its celebration of each person’s unique contribution and valuing pride in one’s own achievements. This personal narrative complements scientific data from studies undertaken by Mesquita and other cultural psychologists, along with several key works from the anthropology of the emotions. Overall, the book is positioned as part self-help (‘understand yourself and your relationships better’), part business/management primer (‘do business more effectively in a cross-cultural world), and part as a think-piece for the intellectually engaged (presumptively White middle class North American or perhaps European) general reader.

At one level, the book travels the well-trodden ground of a basic difference between ‘individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ cultures. It is easy to see how the inner/outer mental/relational contrast maps on to this. But Mesquita’s aim is a broader one: to question the normalisation of the first view in Western culture, and to argue that *both* the mental/individual *and* the action/relational view of emotions are culturally constructed, taught through the everyday interactions of parents and children, friends and co-workers, host and immigrant communities.

This chimes with the [relational approach to wellbeing](https://rwb-collab.co/aboutrwb) (RWB) that my colleague, Shreya Jha, and I have developed. The dominant approaches to wellbeing that we critique rest on the individualist, psychological and universalist assumptions that Mesquita identifies in the ‘MINE’ model of emotions. Our mixed method social research in rural India and Zambia shows conclusively that in those communities relationships are central to wellbeing, both subjectively, in giving life meaning, and materially, in helping people get by and get on.  We therefore validated the model generated in an earlier international research programme in which I was involved, which found that wellbeing is composed of three interlinked dimensions, material, relational and subjective (Gough and McGregor 2007, White 2010). But with RWB we also go beyond this, to explore the underlying personal, societal, and environmental conditions, or drivers, that promote or undermine wellbeing, and the ways these interact to produce specific outcomes.

With respect to emotion, our research in some ways confirms and in others challenges Mesquita’s analysis. Perhaps inevitably, given our ethnographic research experience, some of Mesquita’s claims seem a little broad brush. Generalisations that ‘Japanese parents’ do this, while ‘German parents’ do that, sit rather uneasily with me. Conversations with friends also make me question whether all her claims about the absence of certain words in different languages (like ‘disgust’ in Polish) are empirically valid. Perhaps more importantly, however, I would like to see a rather more systematic investigation of the interactions between culture and power. Mesquita mentions power at times, but overall it is culture that plays the central role. In her discussion of emotional acculturation amongst immigrant communities, for example, there is barely any mention of racism, or how this might shape cultures within minority groups across the generations. There is, tellingly, barely any discussion of African American experience.

In our RWB research, we found people – as Mesquita would expect – persistently resisted talking directly about emotions; questions about feelings brought answers about actions. In India, for example, when we asked a woman about her experience of love and support in her family, she responded in three ways. First, she said she always worried about her husband going to another village at night, that he would drink there and maybe have a fall and then what would happen to him? If her husband were at home she would have cooked for him and known he was safe. Second, she said she was married in front of several people. Finally, – in some exasperation with us – she said surely he loved her since they had been living together so long and had had five children together! (Jha and White 2016).

Our quantitative analysis also supports Mesquita’s claim that constructions of emotion differ by culture. For example, in the Indian villages we studied, the assumption that close relationships involve verbal intimacy, which is standard in psychological wellbeing and relationship science questionnaires, just did not hold. Statistical analysis showed that our question asking whether people had someone to talk to when things were difficult persistently failed to correlate with the other close relationships items. For this community, close relationships were about sharing work, responsibilities, and mutual support, not about intimate thoughts and feelings.

Where we differ from Mesquita is in her apparent assumption that what is *said* or even *done* reflects the full story of what *is*. Personal interactions are not just conduits of culture, they are also vectors of power. My colleague Shreya’s PhD, for example, explored the ways in which women in our Indian study villages deployed silence for strategic ends (Jha 2018). People spoke of deciding to talk only about small worries, big worries they would keep to themselves. One cannot understand emotion, and emotional expression, in the absence of power. In India, for example, while it may not be acceptable to express a direct complaint, women will refer indirectly to difficulties they are having through a general exclamation: ‘Ah, the life of a woman!’. Mesquita is certainly right to say that emotions are not experienced in the same way everywhere, and there are very different cultural codes, which are transmitted through relational interactions, that shape both the expression and the experience of emotion. But our research suggests there is much more play between these than Mesquita suggests; people’s thoughts and feelings do not simply conform to cultural scripts about the way they ought to be, or the forms in which it is safe to express them.

In our Zambia research, for example, it was common for children to spend time in the households of wider kin, to allow them to go to better schools, to bring in extra hands to help with household work, or to relieve parents in poverty of an extra mouth to feed (White and Jha 2021). This practice was governed under a strong cultural idiom that this was ‘the African way’ and ‘they are all our children’. Nonetheless, people who had spent time in the households of kin as children frequently spoke of the hardship they endured, and many people admitted, at least implicitly, that in fact it was hard to treat children born to others exactly as you do your own. One father thus reflected how sometimes when his children told him about problems that they were having in the households where they were staying, he had to counsel them to endure and obey their foster parents, rather than forfeit their education by returning home:

‘Sometimes you pretend all is well. Sometimes you have to pretend that certain situations are just ok when they are not.’

It would be possible to interpret this counsel as reflecting a cultural priority of relational harmony, and there is no doubt some truth in this. But the more significant point that he was drawing attention to was that staying put was pragmatically the best long-term option in a context of very limited alternatives.

A further example emphasises the way power is articulated within the play between thoughts and feelings and what is said or done. In this case the man reflects how he had accepted to adopt the children of his cousin who had died, even against his inner wish to say no:

‘It is quite tricky in the sense that support becomes difficult even if you have one child you are taking care of especially looking at the economic situation especially here in [this place]. And then eventually you are not prepared, you are given these children so somehow it becomes difficult although we say it is easy. It is quite difficult to say it is difficult because you feel people might say that you don’t want to look after the children so even though the difficulty is there you say it’s ok because you want to let people see that you want to keep the children, but inwardly you feel that you can’t look after the children.’

Under pressure from the wider kin group, and at risk of forfeiting social status if he does not accede to its demands, he weighs up the competing moral projects of providing adequately for his existing children and taking in those of his cousin, stretching further already stressed economic resources. The sense of social and cultural pressure, and the mixed emotions of compassion, anxiety and frustration that he was experiencing, are quite evident in the twists and turns of the narrative, even though the words are about action.

To conclude then, emotions are indeed enacted, not just felt, as Mesquita suggests, and both feelings and actions differ by context, with norms and practice transmitted relationally. I would want to add, however, that culture, power, and social relations are essentially inter-twined. Life is an exercise of moral navigation, in which (diverse kinds of) people are constantly making judgements as to what can and can’t, must and must not be said, or shown, or done, when and to whom, as they negotiate fields of power transmitted through intimate and broader social relations.

**References**

Gough I. R. and McGregor, J. A. (ed). *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: New Approaches and Research Strategies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jha, S. 2018. [*“Somehow I will learn to do all this work.” A relational view of women’s everyday negotiations of agency in Surguja, India*](https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/187906773/JHA_Shreya_PhD_Thesis_31_01_18_Final.pdf). University of Bath, PhD thesis.

Jha, S. and White, S. C. 2016 “The weight falls on my shoulders”: Close relationships and women’s wellbeing in India. In [*Cultures of Wellbeing: Method, Place, Policy*](https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781137536440). S.C. White, S.C and C. Blackmore (ed). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

White, S.C. 2010. ‘Analysing wellbeing. A framework for development policy and practice.’ *Development in Practice* Vol 20 no 2: 158-172.

White, S.C. 2017. [Relational wellbeing: re-centring the politics of happiness, policy and the self](https://doi.org/10.1332/030557317X14866576265970). *Policy and Politics*, 45 (2) 121-136.

White, S.C. and Jha, S. 2021. [Moral navigation and child fostering in Chiawa, Zambia. *Africa*](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/africa/article/moral-navigation-and-child-fostering-in-chiawa-zambia/0434504DBD45745B94E0AB0EA5E61DBF/share/7081e291b479ae657a006f16ac717dd7b7d62240) 91 (2):249-269.