



*Emotions can be thought of as “relational acts between people,” Batja Mesquita writes, rather than as mental states inside us.* Illustration by María Medem

The New Yorker

BOOKS AUGUST 8, 2022 ISSUE

## HOW UNIVERSAL ARE OUR EMOTIONS?

*Psychologists have argued that affect is profoundly shaped by culture. They shouldn't feel so confident.*

By Nikhil Krishnan

August 1, 2022

There's nothing like migration to reveal how things that seem natural may be artifacts of culture. When I left India for college in England, I was surprised to find that pinching my Adam's apple didn't mean, as I had thought it meant everywhere, “on my honor.” I learned to expect only mockery at the side-to-side tilts of the head with which I expressed degrees of agreement or disagreement, and trained myself to keep to the Aristotelian binary of nod and shake.

Around that time, I also learned—from watching the British version of “The Office”—that the word “cringe” could be an adjective, as in the phrase “so cringe.” It turned out that there was a German word for the feeling inspired by David Brent, the cringe-making boss played by Ricky Gervais in the show: *Fremdschämen*—the embarrassment one feels when other people have, perhaps obliviously, embarrassed themselves. Maybe possessing those words—“cringe,” *Fremdschämen*—only gave me labels for a feeling I already knew well. Or maybe learning the words and learning to identify the

feelings were part of the same process. Maybe it wasn't merely my vocabulary but also my emotional range that was being stretched in those early months in England.

Many migrants have such a story. In "Between Us: How Cultures Create Emotions" (Norton), the Dutch psychologist Batja Mesquita describes her puzzlement, before arriving in the United States, at the use of the English word "distress." Was it "closer to the Dutch *angst* ('anxious/afraid')," she wondered, "or closer to the Dutch *verdriet/wanhoop* ('sadness/despair')?" It took her time to feel at home with the word: "I now no longer draw a blank when the word is used. I know both *when* distress is felt, and *what* the experience of distress can feel like. Distress has become an 'emotion' to me."

For Mesquita, this is an instance of a larger, overlooked reality: emotions aren't simply natural upwellings from our psyche—they're constructions we inherit from our communities. She urges us to move beyond the work of earlier researchers who sought to identify a small set of "hard-wired" emotions, which were universal and presumably evolutionarily adaptive. (The usual candidates: anger, fear, disgust, surprise, happiness, sadness.) Mesquita herself once accepted that, as she writes, "people's emotional lives are different, but emotions themselves are the same." Her research initially looked for the differences elsewhere: in the language of emotion, in the forms and the intensity of its expression, in its social meaning.

Over time, though, her conviction began to weaken. "What would it mean that emotions are the same?" she asks. Working with Turkish and Surinamese immigrants to the Netherlands, and later being an immigrant herself, in the United States, she came to believe that the idea of a culturally invariant core of basic emotions was more of an ideology than a scientific truth. For one thing, Mesquita notes, "not all languages have a word for 'emotion' itself."

What about words for particular feelings? "If we were to find words for *anger*, *fear*, *sadness*, and *happiness* everywhere," she writes, "this could be a sign that language 'cuts nature at its joints.'" That last phrase, much beloved of philosophers, echoes a line in Plato's *Phaedrus*. It captures the hope that our human concepts correspond to something "out there," natural kinds that exist independently of whatever we happen to think or say about them. The biologist Ernst Mayr thought that species concepts in biology were joint-carving in this way. He was impressed by the fact that "the Stone Age natives in the mountains of New Guinea recognize as species exactly the same entities of nature as a western scientist." Are "anger" and "fear" like Mayr's examples of chickadees and robins?

Here, Mesquita—joining her sometime co-author Lisa Feldman Barrett and other contemporary constructionists—enlists linguistic data to undermine the universalist view of emotions. Japanese, Mesquita points out, has one word, *haji*, to mean both "shame" and "embarrassment"; in fact, many languages (including my own first language, Tamil) make no such distinction. The Bedouins' word *hasham* covers not only shame and embarrassment but also shyness and respectability. The Ilongot of the Philippines have a word, *bētang*, that touches on all those, plus on awe and obedience.

It gets worse. According to Mesquita, "There is no good translation for self-esteem in Chinese." It gets worse. According to Mesquita, "There is no good translation for self-esteem in Chinese."

it gets worse. According to Mesquita, there is no good translation for self-esteem in Chinese. Native speakers of Luganda, in East Africa, she tells us, “use the same word, *okusungurwala*, for ‘anger’ and ‘sadness.’” Japanese people, she says, are shocked to learn that English has no word that’s equivalent to *amae*: “a complete dependence on the nurturant indulgence of their caregiver.” When the Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi told a colleague about this inexplicable lacuna, the colleague exclaimed, “Why, even a puppy does it.” Mesquita concludes that “languages organize the domain very differently, and make both different kinds as well as different numbers of distinctions.”

In Mesquita’s book, Westerners have succumbed to a mode of thinking sufficiently widespread to be the subject of a Pixar film. In “Inside Out,” a little girl, Riley, is shown as having a mind populated by five emotions—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger—each assigned an avatar. Anger is, of course, red. A heated conversation between Riley and her parents is represented as similar red figures being activated in each of them. “Inside Out” captures, with some visual flair, what Mesquita calls the MINE model of emotion, a model in which emotions are “Mental, INside the person, and Essentialist”—that is, always having the same properties.

In a passage where she sets out her working methods, she tells us about some empirical results that had puzzled her. Asked to list “emotion words,” her respondents from Turkish and Surinamese families were especially inclined to list words that referred to behaviors. And so words for “laughing” appeared more often than “joy,” and “crying” more often than “sadness.” Some thought terms for “yelling” and “helping” were emotion words. What all this established, for Mesquita, is that “cultural differences go beyond semantics”; that emotions lived “‘between’ people rather than ‘within.’”

Mesquita wants us to consider this alternative model. Instead of treating emotions as mental and “inner,” perhaps we should conceive of them “as acts happening between people: acts that are being adjusted to the situation at hand,” rather than “as mental states within an individual.” Instead of seeing emotions as bequeathed by biology, we might see them as learned: “instilled in us by our parents and other cultural agents,” or “conditioned by recurrent experiences within our cultures.” In this model of emotions, they are “OUtside the person, Relational, and Situated”—OURS.

For Mesquita, the MINE model of emotion goes naturally with the individualist orientation of the West, while the “globally more common” OURS model belongs to the collectivist approach of non-Western, non-industrialized societies. As you might expect, the contrast is very much to the West’s disfavor. Japanese athletes interviewed after competing “reported many more emotions in the context of relationships,” compared with American athletes. Western societies, by placing emotions on the inside rather than on the outside, have made it difficult to understand, let alone sympathize with, other ways of having, or “doing,” emotion.

One reason people resist the notion that emotions might be different in different cultures, Mesquita acknowledges, is a desire for inclusivity: the worry is that “to say that people from other groups or cultures have different emotions is equivalent to denying their humanity.” On the contrary, she argues: it’s the insistence on cultural invariance that has the tendency to exclude. The MINE model, by obscuring non-Western ways of talking about and conceiving of emotions, ends up implying that

what non-Western people have must really be something other than emotion. And so the inclusivists, she contends, end up treating those who are different as effectively nonhuman. Only by accepting that emotions are culturally specific, she thinks, can we truly understand the people with whom we share this planet. Accordingly, she offers a prescription: “Do not assume that a person who does not behave the way you expect is suppressing their authentic, real emotion. Ask.”

**T**he critical tendency that Mesquita’s book represents has cast a long shadow over the intellectual culture of the West in the past century. Where we naïvely supposed there to be human universals, the critics—anthropologists, philosophers, and now, it seems, psychologists—urge us to see diversity, relativity, “incommensurable paradigms,” and “radical alterity.” Translation between the emotional lexicons of different languages, which we’d thought was an everyday activity, comes to seem an impossible endeavor. Not even our deepest feelings turn out to be free of the shaping hand of language and convention.

Mesquita’s psychological research, like the earlier work in anthropology and sociolinguistics she draws on, is clearly intended to overturn orthodox theories of emotion, both academic theories and the “folk theory” that’s implicit in the way we talk about our emotions. And there *is* something confused in those theories. It’s just that constructionists like Mesquita, captive to their own theory, may be offering the wrong diagnosis—and the wrong course of treatment.

Start with her parade of sociolinguistic examples. Mesquita’s interpretation of them courts what in similar connections has been termed the “lexical fallacy.” What are we supposed to take away from the fact that another language doesn’t have different words for shame and embarrassment? That its speakers have no way of knowing which situations call for which emotions? Does my embarrassment at an undone zipper turn into shame when I am around other Tamil speakers? Is my shame at forgetting my mother’s birthday modulated into embarrassment? Do all my English friends, for that matter, have a firm grasp on the distinction? (Try to make it yourself.)

English has a single word for homesickness. So does German (*Heimweh*). But French doesn’t. Does that make the pain a French emigrant feels at an underbaked croissant any less acute than the pain of an Englishman in New York faced with a lukewarm cup of tea?

Mesquita makes much of the claim that Luganda has a single word that refers to anger and sadness. Doesn’t the English term “upset” have the same range? (Luganda speakers dispute her account, and note that the language readily marks the distinction between the two.) The English word “modesty” covers much the same range as the Bedouins’ *hasham*, and a clever translator can find ways of getting us to see the range of the Ilongot’s *bētang*, which can be used to connote an “I’m not worthy!” sense of bashfulness or submission. The practice of translation—undertaken daily by millions of migrants talking about their experiences—should leave us with more hope for what we can say with the words we have.

Some translations of this sort will end up being more like paraphrases. But even if my language needs two or three words where yours needs only one, it hardly follows that we cannot understand

NEEDS TWO OR THREE WORDS WHERE YOURS NEEDS ONLY ONE, IT HARDLY FOLLOWS THAT WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND each other without first learning the other's language. The temptation to be resisted is to take as a starting point the emotion words indigenous to a particular language. (When they *are* indigenous:

the noun *amae*, in the sense Mesquita invokes, was given currency by Takeo Doi, as part of a psychoanalytic theory about the Japanese psyche.)

What's an alternative approach? Alan Fiske, a psychological anthropologist at U.C.L.A., has proposed that we begin with a made-up term that can be given a precise theoretical definition, and then look to the linguistic evidence to see what the words of natural languages have in common with our construction. As an example, Fiske appropriates a Sanskrit term, *kama muta*, to refer to "the emotion evoked by sudden intensification of communal sharing," and then proceeds to see whether and how it relates to such terms as "heart warming, moving, touching, collective pride, tender, nostalgic, sentimental, Awww—so cute!"

Along these lines, we might do better to look at clusters of words related by meaning rather than at words in isolation. Mesquita briskly reports that Polish has no word for disgust. In fact, it has a cluster of words related to disgust, just as English does; we simply shouldn't expect precise lexical correspondences between the clusters. There are differences of usage among English terms such as "disgusting," "revolting," "repulsive," "distasteful," and "repugnant," and, as Polish speakers tell us, their terms, too, have particular niceties of usage. Given that cross-cultural understanding has always required a holistic attention to larger structures of significance, it's curious that Mesquita's approach is so atomistic, proceeding as if essences embodied in individual words were the ultimate source of meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein saw a common fallacy here. Highly abstract questions such as "What is meaning?," he said, tend to "produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something." He went on, "We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive"—a noun—"makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it."

Suppose speakers of a certain language were able to say, "I want," "I wish," "I prefer," and "I'm hungry," but lacked a noun that could be translated as "desire"? Should we conclude that the concept of desire wasn't readily accessible to these speakers? Suppose, for that matter, that a language had no word equivalent to the English "intention," but people could talk about their plans for the weekend, say that they'd meant to wash the dishes but forgot or that they broke someone's cup "accidentally." Are these really people who don't have the concept of intention? Or do they just have different ways of expressing that they have it?

“**M**any people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them,” the philosopher Gilbert Ryle once remarked. They use the concepts, “but they cannot state the logical regulations governing their use.” The challenge, as Ryle’s student Bernard Williams once summarized it, is to draw “a firm line between what we think and what we merely think that we

think.”

That distinction is helpful when it comes to assessing Mesquita’s larger claim—about the MINE model of the benighted West and the OURS model favored by the rest. Start with that word “emotion.” As Mesquita has noticed, many communities seem to manage fine without a lexical equivalent. But, if her research is to have a stable subject matter, she can hardly do without it. So she treats “emotions” as referring to *something*, and devotes herself to finding a location for that something: either the “inside” or the “outside.”

Describing mental life as “inner” is an old and quite natural way of talking. The contrast is a matter not so much of spatial location as it is of knowledge. I know what burnt toast tastes like to me, how painful my headache is, how urgently I need to use the toilet. I know these things “immediately.” Inner, in other words, means “private.” Outer, by contrast, is “public.”

Emotions are, in an obvious way, not always public. I can be happy (or angry or sad) without doing anything visible—as, for instance, when I look at my cards in a tense game of poker. But surely I *am* happy (or sad or disappointed) when I see them. My happiness, we suppose, must exist somewhere. Where if not “inside” the mind?

That’s what we think we think, anyway. But look closer and the picture changes. Mesquita’s claims about the MINE model are buttressed by a relentless focus on what we might call objectless emotion words: “happy” and “sad,” for instance. Our ways of talking about such moods tend to emphasize what they *feel* like. But many of our emotion words aren’t distinguished by what something feels like. When we’re suspicious, appalled, or possessive, we’ll describe the emotion as involving a relation toward some object or person. Does rage, for instance, feel different from outrage? Can we always tell disgust from repugnance just by the experience? (Which feeling, exactly, does Harvey Weinstein elicit?) The outraged man, but not every angry one, believes that a norm he cherishes has been violated. We can’t individuate the emotion without talking about its social features.

In the West, too, feelings are routinely rendered as exterior. Don’t we claim to *see* that a gurgling baby is happy? Many of our emotion terms are references to states of the body—we’re downcast, bent out of shape, head over heels, shaken up, down in the mouth—which have slowly rigidified into dead metaphor.

Mesquita notes that it wasn’t only her non-Dutch respondents who got muddled when asked to list emotion words. Many of her Dutch-born respondents, she says, “mentioned *gezellig* (the unique Dutch word that describes a social setting and a feeling at the same time) and *aggressief* (‘aggressive’).” That’s an excellent example of people from the West talking OURS sense with their concepts, even if they adopt a MINE model when called on to state their views on emotion in the abstract.

Once we start trading in examples rather than in abstractions, we come closer to learning what we really think. And what we learn is that our language for talking about emotions is already “situated,” already “relational,” already involves a judgment about the world “outside” our minds. Like many

other inventions thought to come from another part of the planet, the OURS model of emotion turns out to be a common human inheritance.

Where does this leave the big civilizational contrast that Mesquita believes she has discovered? Her evidence doesn't show that the West has a mistaken or an impoverished way of having emotions. It shows only that we are bad at theorizing them. But is anyone other than a theorist any good at theorizing anything? Indeed, how good are the theorists at it?

It's worth returning to Mesquita's intercultural imperative: "Do not assume that a person who does not behave the way you expect is suppressing their authentic, real emotion. Ask." Yes, we should be cautious when making assumptions about the psychologies of others. But is asking a sensible solution? What are we to ask, precisely? Can we be sure the asking won't offend or mystify or, indeed, prompt cringey embarrassment? More to the point, if Mesquita is right that people, wherever they come from, can reliably make their emotions intelligible to others, how culturally specific can those emotions really be?

**T**he real moral of all this research may be rather modest. People are complicated, and different from one another. Some of the differences are those among language communities, with their various norms and conventions. Some of them are differences within language communities. Among people who speak English, there are those who (as we say) let it all hang out. Others prize the legendary stiff upper lip. Nothing about speaking English, or thinking in it, tells us which of these attitudes toward emotion people have—which etiquette of emotion governs them. No surprise there.

In learning something about how people in other places "do" emotion, we might indeed come to learn something about how we do it. Our contemporary constructionists are right about this. What matters is what we do—not what we think we think about what we feel. Panicky extrapolations from dictionary discrepancies have to be squared with the unglamorous reality: I have interviewed a student in Kashmir who wanted only to talk about "Squid Game," and have discovered that I shared my appalled fascination at David Brent with Tamil-speaking cousins in Chennai. The sense in which emotions are culturally specific isn't a terribly exciting one. In the real world, differences are commonplace but don't defy understanding. I told a Korean lawyer at a party last month that my "stomach burned" on finding that the coat I'd bought at full price was now on sale for fifty per cent off. I was, I realized a second too late, translating literally a Tamil expression. He paused a moment, perhaps wondering which one of us was guilty of an ignorance of English idiom, then said, "I know the feeling." ♦

*Published in the print edition of the August 8, 2022, issue, with the headline "Affective Disorder."*