

## Book Review

### **Between Us: How Cultures Create Emotions**

**By Batja Mesquita** WW Norton & Co 2022, Pages: 304, USA, Price: Rs 2116 ISBN-13: 978-1324002444

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The book delves into understanding the relationship between emotions and communities and resolving issues arising out of it. It demonstrates how individuals engage with their emotions. Emotions connect individuals with the communities within which they live. The author claims that to understand emotions, one should not only look inward but also examine the society in which we live in. As a migrant author in the United States (US), coming from a Dutch family that survived the Nazi genocide, the author realized that her emotions were shaped by her native Dutch culture, giving her an edge over others. However, upon moving to a new foreign culture, she had to reorient herself to new realities. This realization that many questions about emotions are found in the social context leads to the insight of looking outward to answer the question of emotions. Thus, the author embarked on an outward journey by introspecting the values, goals, and practices of Dutch social and cultural environment, which is beautifully narrated in Chapter 8 of the book.

Chapter 1 of the book has been titled "Lost in Translation." In this chapter, the author emphasizes that across cultures,

people talk differently about emotions. Further in the chapter, this difference has been explained with the help of examples and some personal experiences of the author. Brain wiring of emotions is learned. Emotions are an individual's adjusted response to his/her community and culture. An individual's experience effectively programs the brain when it comes to socio-cultural contexts. This plasticity of the brain is the reason for adjustment and maladjustment. Emotions convey the message that the event in an individual's life is new and has some meaning. Emotions are a signal for reorientation, preparation for action, and realignment to face the extraordinary event. The community sets the expectations, understanding, relationships, morals, values, and goals of the individual in the environment in which he lives. This may, in turn, also shape emotions. The lesson learned from this is that emotional differences should be considered while communicating. As the differences have a logic, they become explicit when delving into the context by understanding norms, values, and goals.

Chapter 2 is titled “Emotions: Mine or Ours?” The primary force of emotion can lie either inside or outside the individual. The author introduces the concept of “MINE” and “OURS” features of emotions. Emotions have both mental and relational components. Cultures vary in terms of the locus of emotions; in societies where emotions are internal, the focus is placed on inner feelings, internal sensations, and bodily symptoms, whereas in societies where emotions are external, the focus is on actions, relationships, and situations. Further into the chapter, the author provides examples of American and Japanese athletes to bring in more conceptual clarity.

Chapter 3 is titled “To Raise Your Child.” The essence of the chapter is that emotions help us in becoming part of the culture. Being a part of a culture is about the ability to display emotions attuned to cultural norms. While raising children, parents focus on this aspect, and it is visible in the form of the ability to live life according to cultural norms, values, and expectations. Some communities value positive self-image, whereas some others value shame, fear, or calm. Socializing agents, including parents, take the responsibility of inducing emotions as per cultural norms by creating experience opportunities. In this chapter, to drive home the point, the author cites and analyzes examples of child-raising behavior as practiced in different cultures. Children born in cultures emphasizing achievement are trained to feel good about themselves. Communities valuing obedience often instill a sense of fear in children so that they understand that the

world is a dangerous place. As such, nothing is good or bad; it is the goal of rearing that decides what is right or wrong. For example, in general, beating and inducing will not be considered wrong, but it is only applicable in a culture that values self-confidence. Emotions initially begin as relational acts between people and gradually evolve as mental states within an individual.

Cultures that value relational autonomy will encourage the virtue of pride in their children, which is the essence of Chapter 4, titled “Right and wrong emotions”. A proud child is supposed to display a strong and independent position in relationships. On the other hand, cultures valuing harmony as a virtue will value empathy and deference. When a child born and brought up in a culture where pride is the virtue migrates to a culture where harmony is the value, he will have difficulty negotiating his way. In this new culture, the values of the old culture will be termed as wrong, as the child has failed to fit in on account of failure to meet certain norms. Depending on the culture, certain emotions are termed as right and wrong. Cultures reward and punish right and wrong emotions. Later in the chapter, the author delves into two emotions—anger and shame—which are universal to all cultures, but their treatment is different. These emotions unfold differently in different cultures. For instance, anger has been found to be rewarded in the US.

Chapter 5 is titled “The Essence of Being Connected and Feeling Good.” The term “connections” refers to relat-

ing oneself to others, which often results in the generation of positive emotions and a sense of belonging to a group. The author opines that connectedness is universally associated with flourishing. Positive emotions such as love and happiness contribute to the building of social connections. Love functions as an adhesive, bonding individuals together. Love is felt when the parties involved suffice each other's psychological and physical needs. Security and trust in the relationship also help in fostering love and sustaining the relationship. Another positive emotion discussed in the chapter is happiness, which enables individuals to make choices. Different cultures attribute varying values to happiness. The author proves this point by reporting an experiment in which, experience sampling was used as a methodology. In this experiment, Asians reported being less happy than Americans. Additionally, the chapter discusses calm as an emotion that contributes to feeling good.

Chapter 6 is titled "What's in a Word." Words and emotions are intricately related and have a deep impact on our emotions. Words representing an emotion shape the world around us. In this chapter, the author provides examples of how different cultures treat emotions. This difference in treating emotions by cultures makes reading both interesting and insightful. Furthermore, the author highlights that the beauty of emotion lies in the compulsion to react, as not reacting is not an option. The reaction of an individual to emotion is influenced by their self-perception of the situation. Emotions also play a role in judging others, and one

has to pay a cost for misjudgment. At the end of the chapter, the author underscores that emotional concepts are a series of episodes that have their base in a culture. Thus, to understand an individual, it is necessary to understand an individual's cultural context. Emotions are an outcome of an individual's interaction with their environment. This particular aspect of emotion adds to workplace diversity.

Chapter 7 is by far one of the best chapters of the book, titled "Learning the Waltz." The chapter begins with the author sharing her experience of migrating to the US. At the time of migration, she thought she was well prepared to face the ensuing challenges of the country of opportunities. However, she found that her preparations were not sufficient. She had overlooked emotional preparation for the new culture and now recognizes its necessity. Emotions varied from her country of origin to the newly adopted country and did not complement communication in steering interactions. A study conducted by the author found that the first generation had the lowest matching with emotion profiles, but with each passing generation, it improved. Later in the chapter, the author raises and answers a very interesting and pertinent question: does learning about new emotions result in forgetting older ways? The answer is negative; in fact, the individual emerges to be a better person, being able to relate better.

Chapter 8, titled "Emotions in the Multicultural World," begins with an emotional episode of Ta-Nehisi Coates, an author and journalist, setting the tone of

the chapter. When Coates's teacher yells at him, he threatens her with dire consequences. The author describes Coates's behavior as a desperate measure to claim dignity, which the teacher failed to understand. According to the author, to understand Coates's behavior, it is necessary to unpack the emotional episodes. The teacher failed to recognize the difference in emotional display on account of cultural factors as he came from a different sociocultural background than the teacher. Understanding these differences will help build a good teacher-student relationship, as teachers generally help in ironing out the differences while finding common ground. The book emphasizes the importance of emotional literacy programs. These programs should teach people to observe others' feelings and understand their differences. Another key lesson is that emotions congruent with the adopted country's culture can help in building relationships, resolving conflicts, and enhancing teamwork. Finally, it will help people, especially children from different cultures, to socialize with their school's emotional culture. Finally, summarizing the book in the afterword section, the author mentions that the endeavor has been to encourage the exploration of emotions from the inner world to the outer. Citing neuroscience research, the author states that it has been a proven fact that the brain synchronizes itself with the world, not the other way around. We are the product of the society in which we live. Society shapes the emotions in an individual. It is important to observe emotions in an unbiased manner. To make us sensitive and develop our ability to understand differ-

ent emotions in others, researchers must focus on finding ways to build social organizations such as schools and Workplaces.

It is a rare book on emotional realities that convincingly handles the topic of emotion and culture with numerous amusing examples in the form of cases and interviews. As the nature of work continuously changes with the inclusion of employees from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and geographies, it mandates better collaboration among team members. One key learning from the book is that cross-cultural training programs must also consider the emotional preparation of migrants. Emotions vary between cultures and are crucial in terms of communication, as they steer interactions. Non-synchronous emotions result in the breakdown of communication and hamper the ability of interacting parties to read non-verbal cues, creating a communication gap. The book can also be used by scholars and researchers to identify new areas of research, although it does not provide future research directions.

As the book provides new insights, which in itself provide path-breaking ideas, if pursued, could open new vistas of research. In fact, the author mentions "What's in a Word" in one of the chapters. This phrase could be converted into a research idea, as the author tries to prove that words and emotions are intricately related through examples. Communication teachers in B-schools could also incorporate certain concepts from the chapters or the book into course delivery. Students would definitely find this

aspect interesting, as it would enhance their understanding of human behavior and improve their communication skills. While the book is captivating, one major shortcoming is that it is written in the form of narration rather than being based on theoretical literature. This makes it challenging to connect it with existing literature to build understanding and organize thoughts in an orderly manner. Additionally, the book lacks empirical support, ei-

ther qualitative or quantitative. Both methods are necessary to build an understanding of constructs, and relationships, and provide deeper insights into the concepts. A book based on strong, concrete empirical studies would have made it more authentic.

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