

BOOK REVIEW

Book review: How Emotions are Made: the Secret Life of the Brain

*Sam Farmer*¹

Title: How Emotions are Made: the Secret Life of the Brain

Author: Lisa Feldman Barrett

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Corresponding author

Sam Farmer
Director
Enhance Facilitation Ltd
PO Box 32-360, North Shore City,
0744 New Zealand
email: sam@enhanceltd.co.nz

Affiliations

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From the outset, it is clear that Lisa Feldman Barrett intends to challenge some long-accepted views about how emotions are perceived and expressed. She starts by putting the final nail in the coffin of the Basic Emotion Method photos that are still used by some professionals today to assess whether people can accurately interpret emotions. Referring to her own, and others' research, which included Facial Electromyography, she demonstrates how cultural and individual differences, as well as social and time contexts can influence how people perceive and express emotions.

Barrett moves on to challenge psychologists (including myself) and others who have found the model of the Triune Brain (Sagan, 1977) a useful way to explain trauma reactions to clients. Using the term "degeneracy" to describe the versatility and diversity of neurophysiology, she refers to her own, and others', research demonstrating that different combinations of neurons in different parts of

the brain can produce the same emotion."

Overall, the first half of Barrett's book provides a clear and refreshing invitation to question our views about how emotions are presented and interpreted. The evidence she uses to inform her suggestion that the way emotions are experienced are influenced by our individual development gives an excellent and plausible grounding to her Theory of Constructed Emotion. In this theory, she argues that the brain predicts – rather than reacts: it tells you how to feel, using the interpretation of current interoceptive (internal sensory) processes which are informed by past experience. Based on this information, a "body budget" then determines the emotional response. Because the "body budget" is influenced by past experience, Barrett argues that it sometimes misjudges the resources needed for the type or degree of emotional expression.

In the second half of "How Emotions are Made ...", Barrett attempts to use her Theory

of Constructed Emotion to explain how emotion can influence societal as well as individual physical health. However, compared to the first part of the book, she presents little that is new to challenge current discourse in this area. Furthermore, given the significance attributed to the influence of early life experience in other theories of human behaviour – such as Narrative Theory, Schema Theory, Social Learning Theory – it is surprising that no reference is made to these. If emotions are considered to be learned, one would also anticipate some reference to Cognitive Learning Theory – even if only to differentiate it from a Theory of Constructed Emotion. Instead, using emotion-, rather than cognitive-, based explanations, Barrett provides numerous examples of how individually held “concepts” (a cognitive term in itself) are socially acquired and can be changed (by the individual if they choose).¹ As an example, she reports how Israelis felt less angry and more supportive toward Palestinians once the former had been trained “*to think* about various negative events ... and re-categorise them as less negative” (italics added, p155).

In summary, and notwithstanding frequent anecdotal Americo-centric examples (including those relating to her own family members), the strength of “How emotions are made ...” lies in its explicit encouragement to those who continue to want to stretch their understanding of what drives human behaviour and how. Specifically, Barrett:

- Introduces the Theory of Constructed Emotion
- Challenges those who argue for the universality of human emotion, convincingly demonstrating that each of us, at a given time can express an emotion in a different way, depending upon our learning, the current context, the people around us, and the perceived consequences of expressing that emotion – amongst other factors. And she argues that we have the potential to train our emotions and be more choiceful about how we express them
- Counters the belief that emotions are located in a specific part

of the brain. Instead, Barrett promotes the concept of “degeneracy”, where diverse neurons in different brain regions can work together to produce emotions; and that their combinations can be different for the same emotion, depending on the context. ■

¹In Appendix D, Barrett gives an extensive explanation of her “Evidence for the Concept Cascade”. Given the significance of this idea to her theory, it might have been better to have given it a chapter of its own earlier in the book

Reference

Sagan, C. (1977). *The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence*. Random House: New York

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Biography

Sam Farmer is Director of Enhance Facilitation Limited and a coaching psychologist. Based in Auckland, New Zealand, his areas of specialism are in leadership coaching, professional supervision and psychosocial support – particularly in high emotional impact contexts. His practice is influenced by Acceptance and Commitment Training and other strength-based approaches.



<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9217-7046>