Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction

Beyond Virtue

The Politics of Educating Emotions

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Beyond Virtue: The politics of educating for gratitude and humility

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3 VIEWS ON EMOTIONS

WHAT IT MEANS FOR GRATITUDE

WHAT IT MEANS FOR HUMILITY

Discussion flow

3 MAJOR VIEWS OF EMOTIONS

- Psychological
- Philosophical
- Political

Psychological views

From 'mental hygiene' to 'academic emotions'

What is needed to succeed in life or at school

The individual fits into the society

Understanding emotional processes

- Direct observation

- Self or other report

- Experimentation?

" Comparisons between schools and mercantile establishments:

1. The teacher obviously corresponds to planning department, superintendent, manager of a factory.

2. The elements in the enterprise (the workmen, the raw material, and the finished product) are combined in the pupil. The other elements (tools, etc.) are the text books, charts, and apparatus… "

1912 New York City High School Teachers Association Bulletin

Prominent views in education

Emotional intelligence

Positive Psychology

Challenges and limitations

Are the targets beneficial or moral for students in the long run? Or just useful for teachers?
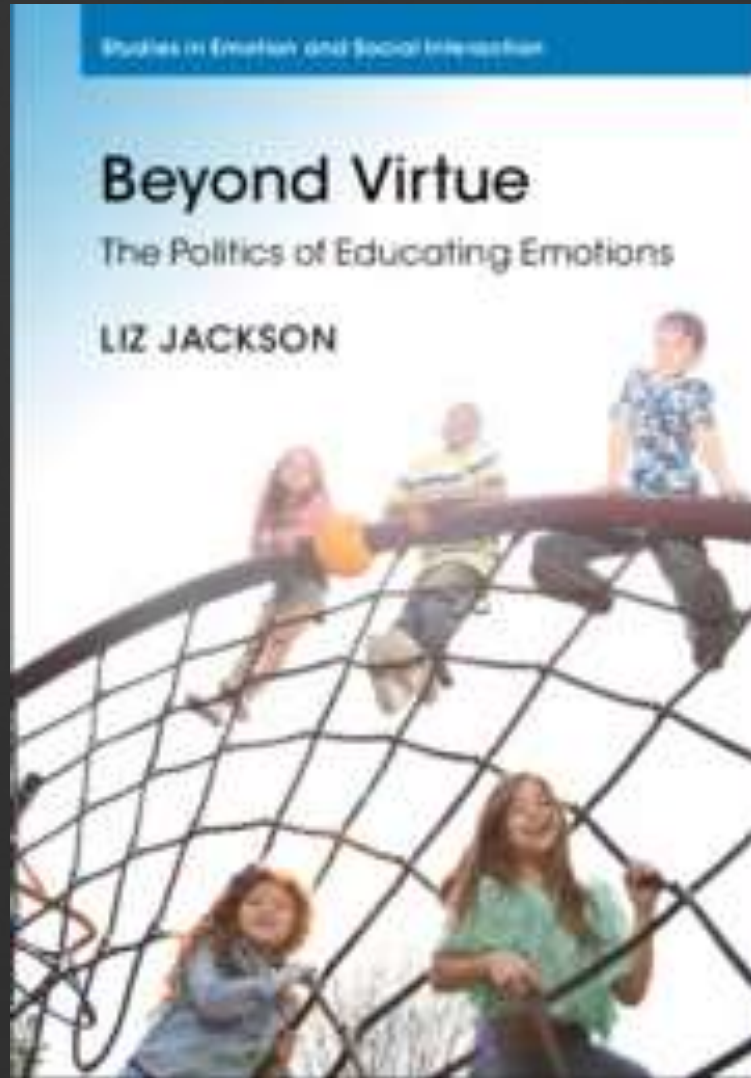
Are the interventions really working?

Coherence of concepts

Are diverse students accounted for?

Governments have made well-being part of their educational agenda in societies such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, favouring and recommending positive psychology and EI approaches to enhance youth well-being. This can be seen as a moral act, in that it helps young people feel (and be) better, particularly if there is a crisis of well-being. On the other hand, from a behavioural, systems-level view, such interventions may also be promoted to keep populations working hard, obedient, docile, and resilient.

Philosophical views

Deontological and utilitarianism

Virtue ethics and care ethics

Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, etc.

Virtue ethics

Emotions are outputs of virtues

Interplay of emotions and rationality in phronesis

Learning the virtues

✔ Emulation and habituation

🧑‍🏫 Instruction

✏ Practice

✖ Accept imperfection and striving

" If I identify that I am in the survival zone and that my adrenaline levels are high, this tells me that if I want to move zones, I need to do something to reduce my adrenaline (e.g. mindful breathing) or something to increase my serotonin (e.g. time with good friends, or seeing something funny), or both. By building up a repertoire of activities which I know to affect my emotions in predictable ways, I can start to become more skilful in the way that I experience emotion. "

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham

Challenges and limitations

People's roles and relations to others are not considered
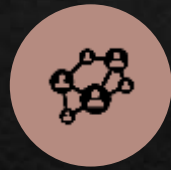
Identity factors in social contexts

Cross-cultural differences

Oriented toward the self, not others or the world

Fitzgerald (1998) argues that people should follow the Dalai Lama in striving to cultivate gratitude when they have been severely harmed, physically abused, or politically oppressed, because anyone, or all people, can cultivate gratitude, even in such cases of extreme harm.

The politics of emotions

- A sociological and sociocultural view (Durkheim, Marx, Foucault)

- Societies do not function for certain individuals within them

- Society and its structures influences our emotions in a less than ideal state

The politics of educating emotions

- Students learn to feel belonging or alienation within schools
- Teachers may act on bias
- People learn different expectations about their emotions in school and life

Girls and women are expected, in workplaces, schools, and elsewhere in society, to be happy as caregivers for others, and seen as naturally better at caring, and happiest when caring, compared to men. Such gender stereotypes, even if related to empirically based generalisations, ignore or dismiss diverse women's dispositions, and interests and capacities in various fields, and they can be used to justify gender differences in professional opportunities and achievements. Such stereotypes can encourage girls and women to express happiness they do not feel, potentially enabling in them a sense of alienation, rather than enhancing their emotional states.

Gratitude

◈ A feeling of good will, thankfulness, favour, appreciation for a gift freely given

◈ Targeted (dyadic): supported by most philosophies and psychology

◈ Generalised, propositional, or simply "appreciation": supported by psychology

◈ Mixed views and feelings: Aristotle, Kant, Confucianism

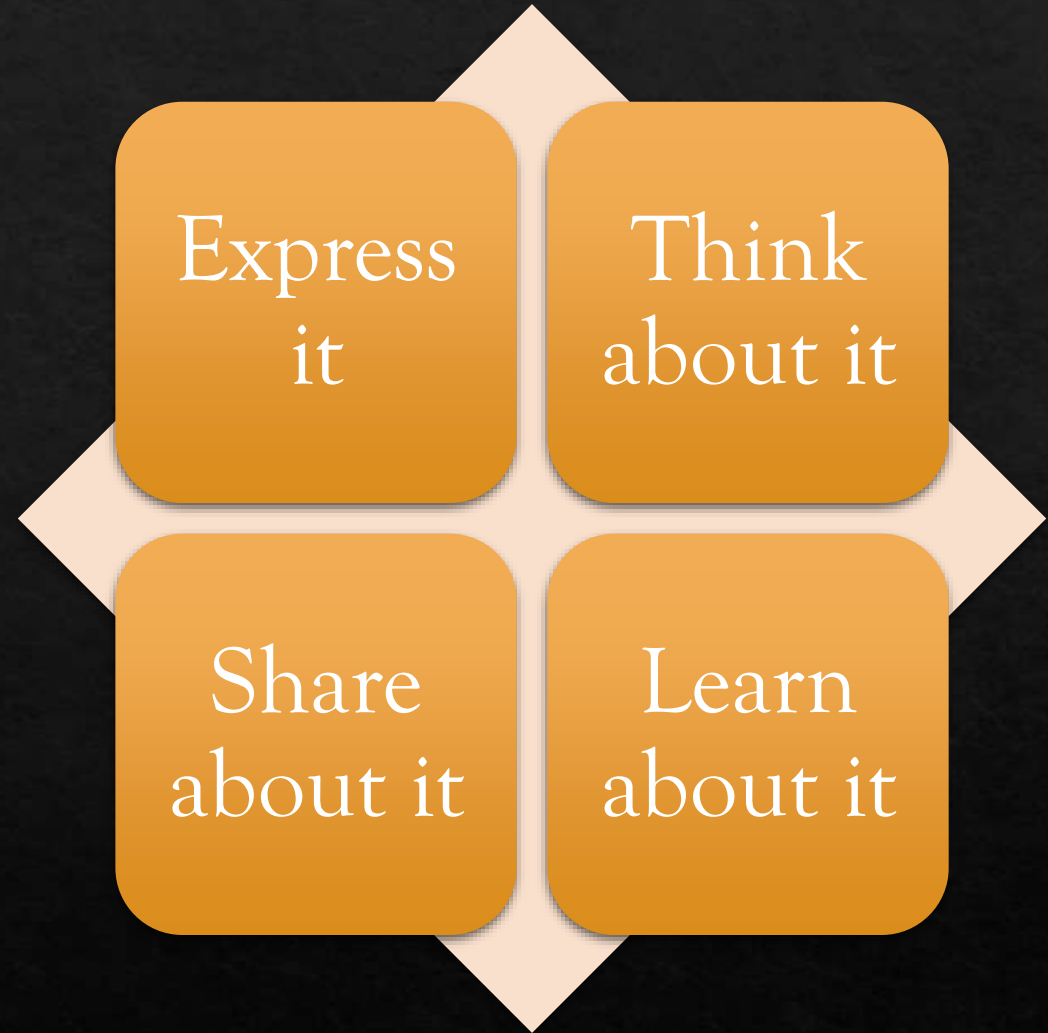◈ Diversity across societies

Kinds of gratitude

Dyadic/Targeted

General appreciation

Thankfulness for things not people

Gratitude for lack of harm or even harm

Learning gratitude

Express it

Think about it
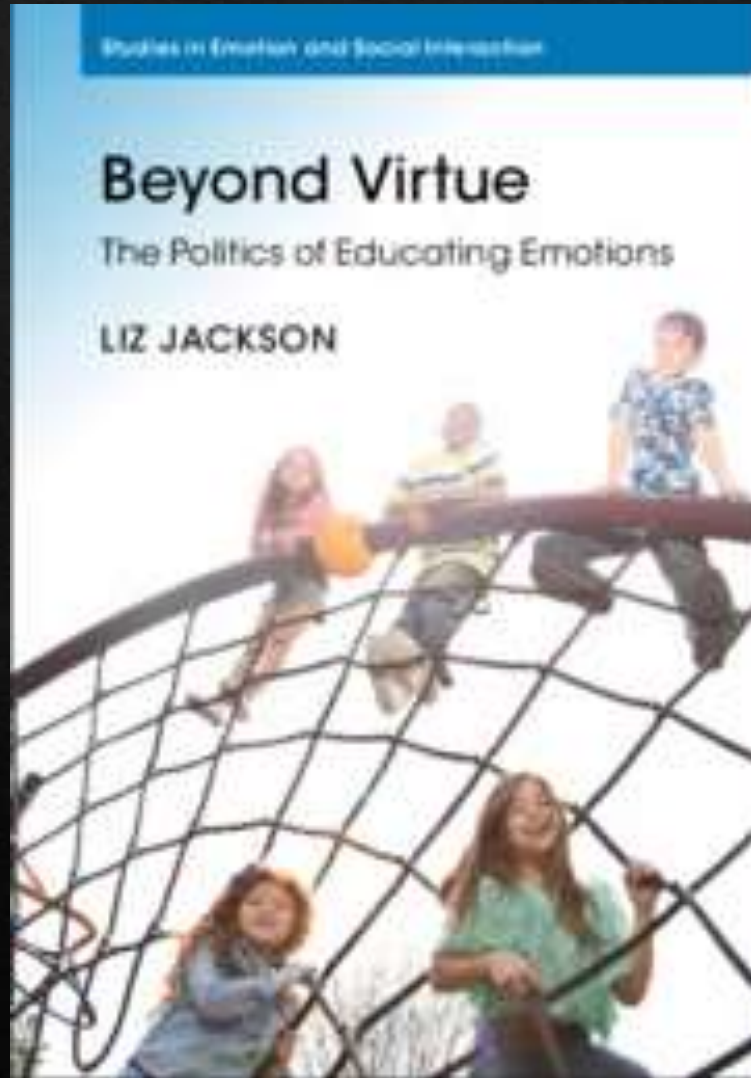
Share about it

Learn about it

Challenges

Culturally bounded
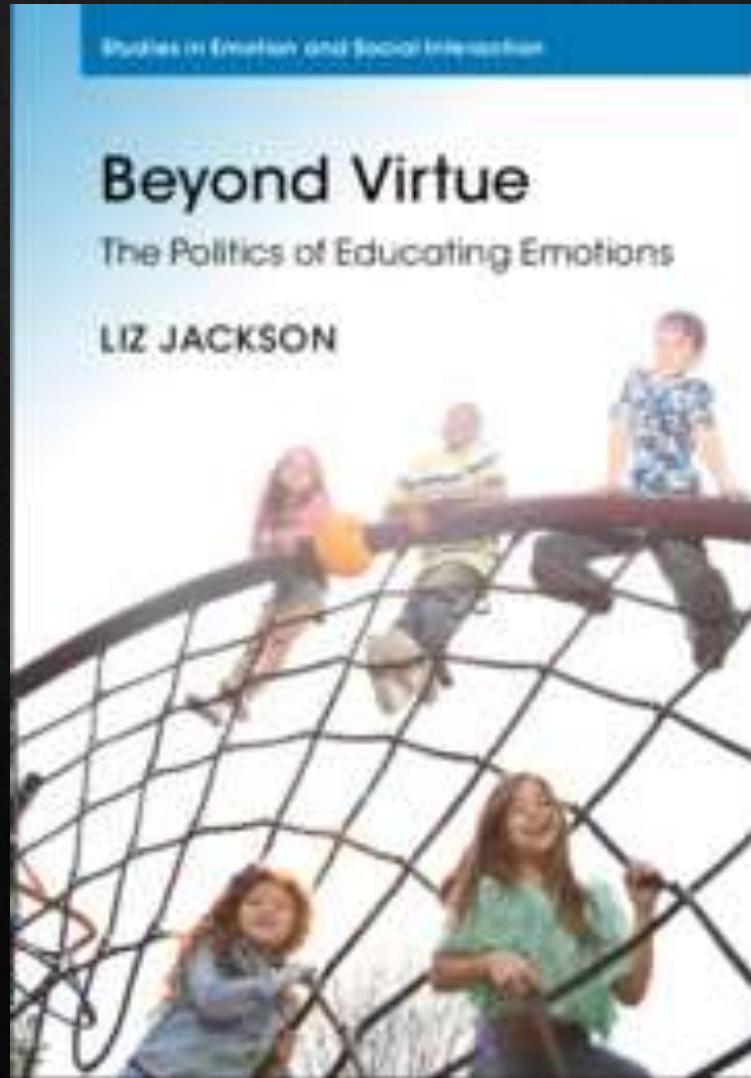
Socialised based on gender, race, religion etc.

Treated as universal and individualised

Can be immoral or pathological

Interventions not very convincing

In a lesson on gratitude, students are asked to describe what a grateful person does, and to indicate that they will as individuals feel and express gratitude ('I will appreciate the people in my life.' 'I will write thank you notes.'). An included 'Gratefulness Story' describes how Abraham Lincoln had gratitude despite the many hardships of his life, such as his sister dying. Another curriculum for gratitude asks students to wear blindfolds and then try to make a simple drawing, to 'point out the benefit of eyesight'.

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Pathologies of gratitude

- Feeling joy about privileges over others
- Accepting injustice and harm
- Challenges for particular groups
- As an approach to society

What can we do

RECOGNISE THE COMPLEX
GRAMMAR OF IT

CONSIDER WHEN IT MAY
NOT BE IDEAL

PREPARE FOR PROBLEM
CASES

Humility

◈ Recognition of one's limitations and particularity

◈ Believed to increase well-being and tolerance of difference

◈ Cultural, civic, or intellectual in framing

◈ A personal state and disposition toward others

Against and for it

Western traditions

- Education seen to decrease it!
- Aristotle, liberals, moderns
- Lack of rationality, self-abasment, underestimation
- Aid in arrogance, pride

Chinese traditions

- Embedded in Confucian view
- Aids hubris, complacence
- Self-cultivation, learn from others
- The self is impeder and seeker

Akin to vulnerability?

- A "problem" for individuals or organisations to remedy or resolve

- An ontological characteristic and existential condition

- To admit you care and that you don't know it all; are interdependent

- Openness to others and to being wrong and at risk

Vulnerability as educational

✔ Transformative learning is uncomfortable

👨‍🏫 Uncertainty is often reasonable

✏ Treat diverse others as equals, unknowable

✘ Recognising it as communal not individual

Circulating vulnerability

Provide vulnerability to those who don't normally have it

- Leaders, mainstream
- "Too certain"; not challenged

Protect those who are endlessly vulnerable

- The precarious, 'others', less empowered
- Always on the defence

In discussing whether racial minorities face ongoing harms to self-esteem and rights due to discrimination and racism, racial minorities are more likely to feel stress and anxiety and face a greater emotional and cognitive burden in defending their views, or discussing views commonly held among minorities. In contrast, those from majority groups do not usually feel emotionally burdened discussing such cases, and often defend normalised, mainstream conceptions, such as that society is just, in certainty, without seeing mainstream views as problematic. Likewise, in discussing sexual harassment or sexism, women experience a burden of proof compared to men, who can claim innocence and lack of experience as justifications for not being aware or concerned. Men may feel certain that the issue is not common based on desire for comfort. These situations make vulnerability to questions a burdened virtue, as victims of harm and injustice must explain their views to people who may be incredulous, since their own experiences are not as difficult.

Confidence, certainty, and a peaceful and clearheaded disposition are often regarded in (western) intellectual spaces as indicative of preparedness, achievement, correctness, and cleverness. Yet for those with minority views, they face ongoing stress and pressure related to defending alternative perspectives, which makes the conversations more uncomfortable for them. This means that facilitating challenging conversations across difference exacerbates an emotional experience gap across a diverse group, as some students face more anxiety at the threat of being challenged than others. In this context, putting those with mainstream views 'on edge' emotionally and cognitively, can be seen as equalising the playing field and balancing out vulnerabilities, in discussing social justice issues, where people have divergent experiences and views.
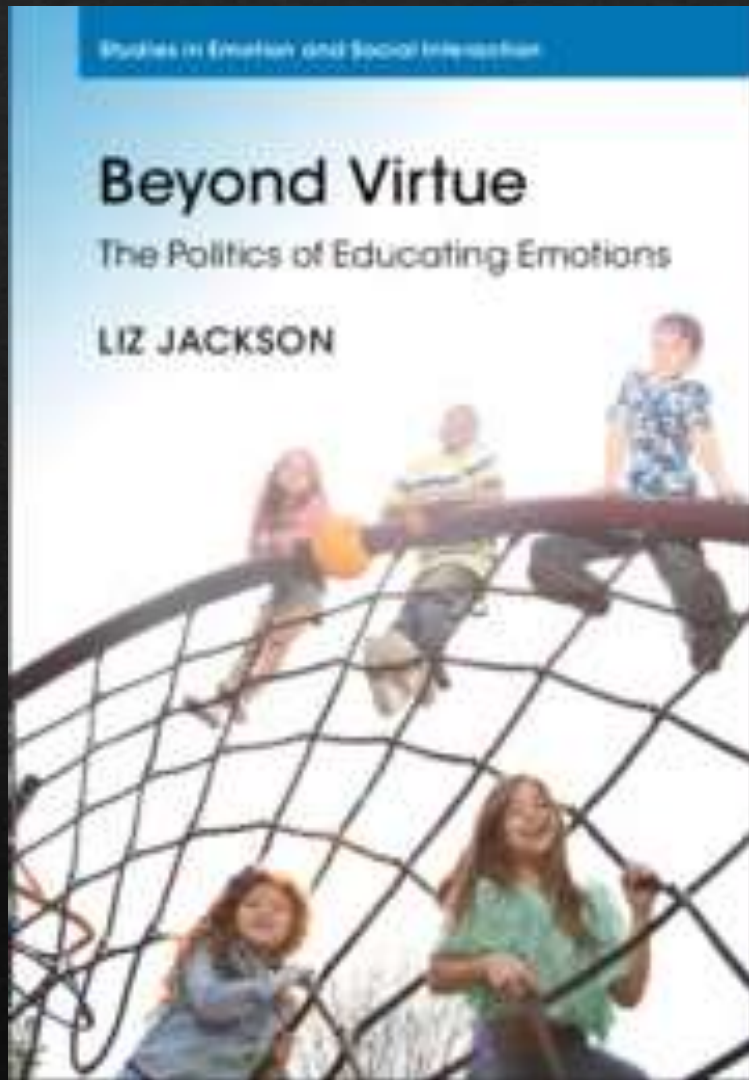
Thank you for listening!

For more discussion you can email me at lizjackson@eduhk.hk