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EMOTION HAS FASCINATED PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR ELIZABETH LEMERISE SINCE EARLY IN HER STUDIES: WORKING AT AN INFANT LAB, WHERE SHE STUDIED INFANTS' VISION AND PERCEPTION, SHE FOUND THAT THE INFANTS' EMOTIONS MADE THAT KIND OF WORK DIFFICULT. FROM THAT EXPERIENCE CAME A DESIRE TO FOCUS ON THE STUDY OF EMOTION, BUT IT WAS ALSO IMPORTANT TO LEMERISE TO CONSIDER HOW COGNITION AND EMOTION FUNCTION TOGETHER.

These days, when she studies children who find themselves in provoking situations — like having someone cut ahead of them in line — she doesn't just look at what

those children are thinking. "If a situation is provoking, it doesn't just provoke cognition," she says with a laugh. "It also provokes emotion."

The two used to be studied as discrete processes, with cognition receiving greater attention, and emotion, a "messier" area of inquiry, being relegated to the role of "stepchild." Lemerise studies both, and sees her work as part of a larger trend in psychology, and the sciences as a whole, of taking what she calls a "cross-area" approach to the complicated task of understanding human beings. The relationship between emotion and cognition lies at the heart of her research, and throughout her career, she has sought to understand how those

different processes affect one another by looking specifically at the social competence of children between the ages of 3 and 12.

First, Lemerise gauges the social popularity of children as a measure of their social competence; children who are better at negotiating social situations with their peers also tend to be more popular. A peer-based measure helps Lemerise ascertain a child's level of social popularity. Children are asked to fill out questionnaires, in which they indicate how well they like each member of a classroom, thus demonstrating a child's overall acceptance by his or her peers; the children also have the opportunity to nominate individuals as "best

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the Emotions

BY JEANNE SOKOLOWSKI

liked” or “aggressive” or “shy.” Lemerise is then able to assess the children she observes in her research with reference to their scores on this measure of social popularity. Lemerise notes the accuracy and usefulness of this measure. “If we take a measure done like this for children who are eight years old,” she says, “it’s the single best predictors of adult outcomes. It’s better than parent report, it’s better than teacher report.”

The Social Information Processing (SIP) model then helps Lemerise explain the individual differences between children in their levels of social competence. The SIP model itself contains six steps which help researchers understand how

situations are processed, and is primarily cognitive in focus; the model includes steps such as reading the cues of one’s social partner, and making decisions about how to respond. Her contribution to the field has been to investigate how emotion complicates the picture and affects certain stages of this process. Lemerise’s position holds that emotion is a significant element in this process, and her work has integrated emotion into the extant SIP model. She has researched, for example, how, in provoking situations, the emotion or mood expressed by a child’s peer can influence how that child interprets the situation, as well as his or her decisions about how to act.

Though her research examines the entire range of individual differences in social competence in children, Lemerise has done work specifically on children at one extreme: those who have difficulty regulating their emotions. Sometimes this manifests as aggression, which Lemerise explains as having two causes. “In at least some percentage of those children, that problem arises from having difficulty regulating those



emotions. There's another small group of children who are aggressive who suffer from the opposite problem: they aren't emotional enough, they aren't empathic, they don't feel other people's pain."

Feelings of empathy, says Lemerise, are at the root of moral behaviors. Like the separation between the study of emotion and cognition by psychologists, theorizing on emotions and moral reasoning has also taken place without much dialogue between the two, a situation that Lemerise seeks to correct. Her recent research includes an edited collection of essays which is now under contract entitled *Emotions, Aggression, and Morality: Bridging Development and Psychopathology*. In that volume, the contributors, which include academics from various countries, consider emotions as a motivating element in moral behavior. While many people may believe that children are deterred from certain behaviors for fear of punishment, Lemerise says the research shows that's not really the case; rather, it is an "empathic orientation" that allows children to imagine how their behavior would impact others. As the recent nomination of Sonia Sotomayor for Supreme Court Justice has demonstrated, some people downplay the importance of empathy in our society, but, as Lemerise notes, "empathy is a basic human trait, and when it doesn't develop appropriately, this has some very bad implications for society."

Lemerise's expertise with the social development of children prompted another question: have children — their emotions and behaviors — changed over the past few decades? Are they more or less able to regulate their emotions now? "I don't think I've really seen any changes, I really don't," she

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said, and asserted that parenting still plays a large role in the social development of children. When asked what the biggest parental factors that encourage the development of social competence, Lemerise had this to say: "I think it starts very early, with infancy. Parents who are sensitive and accepting and engaged with their infants have infants who form strong relationships with their parents, and that actually helps infants regulate their emotions." As children get older, she continued, parents have to adapt. For parents of pre-school age children, Lemerise stressed that it is especially important to label the child's emotions and give him or her strategies for coping in order for children to learn how to read emotions in themselves and others, and to regulate them.

Though, as a basic researcher, Lemerise doesn't work with children as a practitioner, her research has very practical implications, and, in fact, she notes that more than half of the people who cite her research are child psychologists or school counselors who use her work to create interventions. She is also an active mentor, having

been involved in the past with the National Science Foundation's program, Research Experiences for Undergraduates, and currently works with numerous undergraduate students, both psychology majors who assist her with her research, and students writing their honors theses. She also feels gratified that so many of her former students have gone on to receive terminal degrees. An article that she is currently revising for publication is being co-written with one of those success stories: Bridgette Harper, who received her MA from Western Kentucky University in 2001, is now an assistant professor at Auburn University at Montgomery. Finally, just when you think she must have more hours in the day than the rest of us, Lemerise mentions an additional responsibility, and a prestigious one at that: since 2006, she has been co-editor of the international journal *Social Development*. What's next for this University Distinguished Professor? With a smile of regret, Dr. Lemerise admits that she has more ideas for potential research than she'll probably ever be able to find the time to carry out. ■

