

How Universal Are Our Emotions?

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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.

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