

The Role of Emotional Literacy in Public Health

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Lisa Feldman Barrett (left) and John B. Jammott III (second from left) testify on research relating to health policy.

APS Fellow Lisa Feldman Barrett recently testified on Capitol Hill about her research on emotional granularity — the ability to experience distinctly different emotional states — and the importance of emotional literacy training programs to health and even the economy.

Barrett, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory at Boston College, spoke to the Subcommittee of Research and Science Education of the US House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology. The occasion was a hearing on the role of the social, behavioral, and economic sciences in public health, specifically aimed at improving health and well-being while reducing the cost of health care. Subcommittee Chair Rep. Brian Baird (D-WA), who holds a PhD in clinical psychology, presided over the hearing.

Barrett's research focuses on the study of emotion from psychological and neuroscience perspectives. Her past research has shown that individuals' emotional articulations are highly varied: some experience distinct feelings of anger, sadness and fear, whereas others use these words interchangeably to indicate they are experiencing a general feeling of unpleasantness.

Further, Barrett's research has shown that those who are better at describing their feelings function at a higher level; they are better at regulating their emotions and live more emotionally stable lives. On the other hand, those who struggle to accurately describe the subtle differences in their emotional states are more greatly affected by their emotions, often living much more tumultuous lives.

She noted that these findings are already being used to develop emotional literacy programs for children. Drawing on the work of Marc Brackett from Yale University, she described how children who can accurately label and describe their emotions are at lower risk for clinical symptoms, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. They also have better social and leadership skills and achieve higher grades in math, science, and reading.

Emotional literacy also can be taught to the nation's aging population. For example, Barrett explains that anecdotal evidence indicates that the decision to retire is often made impulsively, perhaps after a bad day at work, according to the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College. She notes that although most people say they plan to retire at 65, the average age of retirement is actually 63. Emotional literacy training might help prevent aging adults from making that emotion-driven decision to retire early, thereby saving on social security and health care benefits.

Barrett sees her research as having enormous potential for practical application in the future. She sees emotional literacy as a means of improving interpersonal relationships including marriage and parent-child relationships. She even sees a possible application to training immigrants in the emotional vocabulary of Americans to limit the mental health problems associated with immigration.

Despite the applied value Barrett sees for her research, she stresses that applied solutions are not always immediately apparent. Her research on emotional granularity was not explicitly motivated by questions of health. Instead, her research is motivated by the desire to understand the nature of emotion. “Science is about exploration, risk, and discovery,” she pointed out. “This means that you cannot run scientific discovery like a business, where you set a tangible goal and try to meet it on a strict timeline.” She sees science like a food chain, with basic researchers at the base, feeding applied research and service providers. She stresses the importance of a healthy base of research that can be translated later into concrete solutions, even if the applied value of the basic research is not immediately apparent at the outset.

She added that “we also need basic science education for the public so that they understand the need for investments in science. Hearings like this one educate people (including members of Congress) about how science works for them. [Hearings] also can be used to demonstrate how risky it is not to invest in science for the future.”

Barrett also made two other points about the importance of basic research in the scientific enterprise. For science to realize its full potential in the service of the country’s needs, Barrett argued, we need several things to succeed: a well-trained scientific workforce of sufficient expertise and diversity (who are paid well enough that it is worth their while to make a career in science), advanced technology that is suited to the scientific questions we want to ask (whether or not they have an applied value that is immediately obvious), an adequate level of research funds to see our best (and perhaps riskiest) ideas forward, and open minds that are not mired in the habits or agendas of the past. She also suggested that at the frontiers of science, nothing speeds basic scientific progress like the clash of competing viewpoints. Key scientific discoveries are often made during such times, but ironically, federal funding agencies tend to invest their research money in projects that avoid such conflict.

Also testifying at the hearing was APS Member John B. Jemmott III, who presented his work on the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS. Jemmott’s research seeks to identify underlying socio-psychological factors in HIV/STD (sexually transmitted disease) risk behavior among urban youth, and develop effective interventions based on that knowledge that can help reduce that risky behavior and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Jemmott’s research program has developed a wide range of interventions. Some stress abstinence, some stress condom use, and some integrate the two approaches. The interventions rely heavily on social cognitive theory and the theory of reasoned action to achieve behavior change.

Barrett and Jemmott have both succeeded in contributing practical applications for psychological research that improve the well-being of the people in our society, illustrating the value of both basic and applied research to the health of the nation. By testifying in Congress, they have brought that message to those with the power to translate it into policy. ?