

Feeling as Knowing

Emotions and Epistemology

in Journalism Studies

Johana Kotišová and Richard Stupart

Introduction

Separated by only a few months in 2019, two writers interested in the study of journalism asked a similar question: Was journalism studies in or about to undergo an emotional turn (Kotišová, 2019a; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019a)? For scholars of journalism studies, a turn to “thinking emotionally” promises to help close a gap between what is obvious when studying the practices of journalists firsthand and what is for the most part absent in theorizing about it. Šimunjak (2023, p. 1), for example, opens the very beginning of her recent book with the observation that “journalism textbooks often describe journalism as ‘exciting’,” yet it is rare to encounter research interested in what such “excitement” consists of. In this sense, the emotional turn in journalism studies is an invitation to reappraise spaces and practices with eyes tuned to see something that was perhaps considered too banal to have been noticed before – or perhaps too ill-fitting to the mainstream narrative about journalistic professionalism to have been taken seriously (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019b).

Scholars interested in the practices of journalists working in situations of high stress, such as breaking news, conflict, and disaster reporting, have been among some of the earliest – and loudest – voices arguing for taking seriously the role of emotion in practices of journalism (Kotišová, 2017; Stupart, 2021). This is perhaps unsurprising, given that these subfields of journalism can often be ones where questions of emotion, ethics, and professionalism collide especially forcefully. Yet many of the questions raised there around the role of emotion in journalistic work are not limited in any particular way to journalism about conflict or disaster, and presently, there are enormous opportunities for researchers interested in developing emotional perspectives on virtually all areas of journalism, including local (Waschková Císařová, 2021), investigative (Stupart, 2022), or cultural journalism (Kristensen, 2021).

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Often, researchers in emotion have historically been interested in practices of “not-feeling,” in a sense, trying to understand how such journalists go about trying to avoid being drawn into the emotional intensity of the stories they are called to cover. Work on cynicism (Kotišová, 2017) and “cool-detached” journalism (Jukes, 2017), for example, approached the question of feeling from this point of view, responding to an implied consensus in journalism studies as to the importance of seeming “objective” to being recognized as doing professional journalism.

In this chapter, we shift the perspective and argue that journalism is a bodily practice that inevitably involves feelings of various kinds and show that, somewhat counterintuitively, feelings can “be right”: they point to specific aspects of reality, motivate journalists’ actions, and shape their sense of morality and ethics. However, we also problematize our argument by providing examples of cases when feelings can fail to operate in these ways.

While we are aware of the diverse conceptual distinctions of “emotion,” “affect,” “feeling,” and their methodological implications, in this chapter, we use the term “emotions” and “feelings” interchangeably (see Stupart, 2021, 2022) to refer to biologically predetermined yet culturally defined and shaped practices of feeling and thinking (Kotišová, 2019b). We use the term “affect” wherever we stress the bodily, phenomenological, inner aspect of emotional states (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021; Wetherell, 2012).

The Undoing of the Objectivity/Emotion Binary

One of the signature contributions to “emotional turn” thinking – potentially *the* major contribution to the field since 2019 – has been the development of recent work and the return to attention of older studies that push back against naive conceptions of objectivity that assert (among other things) the value of separating (irrational) emotionality out from the (rational) work of the journalist. This work of questioning or reworking existing ideas of objectivity in the practice of journalism has come from a number of different directions.

For example, an earlier paper that has become a frequent cite in recent work on emotionality is Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2013) return to Tuchman’s (1972) ideas of strategic ritual of objectivity. In it, she argues that far from being unemotional and unattached, Pulitzer prize-winning journalists were in fact dealing heavily with emotion through practices of shifting the work of being angry, grieving, or otherwise showing feeling onto their sources and the subjects they wrote about. Emotion, in such cases, was both present and valued in the reporting, yet was being practically concealed through the sleight-of-hand of having subjects do the work of publicly emoting.

Elsewhere, scholars have since pushed against traditional objectivity/emotionality thinking in even more radical directions. Kotišová (2017), drawing on earlier work on citizen journalism by Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013), argues that emotion is not simply accommodable but may in fact lie at the core of understanding the “paradox of media workers” traditional commitment to objectivity/detachment and witnessing other people’s suffering. From this point of view, journalists’ dedication to undertake work that may be risky, poorly remunerated, and often underappreciated might *only* make sense when understood from an emotional point of view.

The view that the emotional reward of journalism is a substantial part of the motivation for doing it is now becoming a fundamental assumption among scholars (Perreault & Bélair-Gagnon, 2022; Šimunjak, 2023; Stupart, 2023). Parks, drawing on the Dalai Lama’s dialogues with Desmond Tutu, seeks to locate journalism “along joyful dimensions of perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity” (Parks, 2021, p. 820). Likewise, Perreault (2023) suggests journalists are motivated by several key dimensions of joy,

including the opportunity to provide a different perspective, compassion for their readers, and gratitude for their past.

It is worth adding that academic hand-wringing over emotion as a threat to objectivity has usually been a concern for the set of emotions that tend to track moral judgments (anger, grief or sadness, and sympathy; see, e.g., Kotišová, 2019b; Stupart, 2021, 2022). The large array of moral emotions – such as anger, empathy, grief, but also shame, guilt, sympathy, joy, contempt, disgust, and many more – points to emotional arousal over moral issues (Turner & Stets, 2006). In line with their moral character, anger, pity, compassion, or grief are always attached to (i.e., directed toward or against) someone or something. Some of these emotions, such as sadness or anger (also joy, fear, contempt, surprise, and disgust), are considered “discrete” and believed to influence cognitive processes, decision-making, and behavior; they also play a fundamental role in information processing and judgment (see Igartua, 2026). However, there are many more morally triggered forms of emotional reactions and states; the list of emotions that are ultimately connected to morality is longer and more diverse than we usually think (Turner & Stets, 2006). For example, Stupart (2023) suggests that work in particular morally entangled journalistic beats such as conflict and investigative reporting can be deeply emotionally fulfilling and even joyful.

The concern with emotions is thus selective. There has been little comparable concern with other emotional or affective states such as tiredness, boredom, exhaustion, and stress, which are as or more likely to distort thinking in ways that might threaten objectivity, just in nonmotivated ways. Returning to the previous discussion on the consensus around the importance of happiness, or joy, in journalism, these emotions have also never historically been understood as a threat to objectivity. It is assumed that happy journalists can be objective, for some reason, while angry ones may be suspect (see Mulupi & Steiner, 2026; Kulbaga & Spencer, 2021). One way of understanding this lop-sided concern would be to point to Arpaly’s (2000) distinctions between *hot irrationality* (in which emotion “attaches” its subject’s reason to a particular point of view to an irrational extent) versus *cold irrationality* (in which a feeling, such as tiredness, causes a failure to reason well in general). Although such a distinction might help with discerning how feeling in general might conceivably affect reasoning in different ways, it does not fully account for the field’s overweening concern with “hot irrational” feelings, if the underlying justification is understanding how journalists might achieve something along the lines of “maintaining maximum rationality.” That is, why is anger or empathy a concern, yet exhaustion is not?

The reason why moral feelings are a problem, but exhaustion or hunger are not may lie in the orientation of many forms of journalism toward (suffering) individuals or communities. From the perspective of journalistic professional ideology, this identification with a cause – often a political cause – threatens neutrality and detachment and carries the danger that the journalist who feels these emotions transgresses the sacred boundary between journalism and activism (cf. Barrios, 2026). Emotion, in the case of such attachments, raises concerns that the judgment of the journalist might be taking place on something other than a rational, fact-responsive basis. However, as we will argue, the exclusion of moral emotions from professional journalism is problematic and becomes particularly complicated when journalists or other media professionals, such as fixers or local producers, belong to the communities they report on. More cynically, it would perhaps be unsurprising to the reader that the emotions most often imagined as threatening professional reason are those most directly linked to perceptions around injustice, such as anger or grief: those identified in generations of feminist scholarship (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2021; Lorde, 1997; Mulupi & Steiner, 2026; Srinivasan, 2018) as feelings most frequently used to discredit the person feeling as somehow irrational. All things considered, the relationship between journalistic professionalism and emotionality needs to be thoroughly critically rethought.

Learning from the Philosophy and Epistemology of Emotion

The emotional turn in journalism studies has meant a revisiting of previous work in the field and also concerted efforts to look outside of it for thinkers and concepts that might form the basis of new approaches to studying emotion in the practice of journalism. Work drawing from analytic philosophy on the interactions of emotion and epistemology is perhaps the most radical element in this search for new insights. Rather than seeing objectivity as a matter of managing appearances by journalists, or entertaining a dichotomy between emotion and reason, work in this emerging tradition is interested in the epistemic value of emotion. That is, rather than seeing emotion as an impediment to knowing facts about the world, it asks what role emotion plays in this knowing. It is this more radical break from previous assumptions about feeling and reason that the remainder of this chapter will sketch out in more detail.

Rational Feelings

One route into seeing emotion and reason as connected, rather than in tension, comes from drawing on work in different branches of philosophy, such as that by Arpaly (2000), Scarantino and de Sousa (2021), and Strawson (2013), including feminist philosophy by Srinivasan (2018), Lorde (1997), and others. Strawson, Arpaly, Scarantino, and de Sousa all develop arguments taken up by journalism studies scholars pushing back against an objectivity/emotion binary. In Strawson's (2013) case, his observation that certain emotions (such as anger, pride, indignation, love, and forgiveness) in fact track moral assessments of the world has been especially generative. On his account, feeling angry or frustrated is not so much a failure to deliberate rationally as it is a feeling that a moral norm (about which one felt especially strongly) has been betrayed. Strawson terms these feelings *reactive attitudes* and seeing them in this light – as tracking reactions to moral norms being honored or broken – allows for seeing many of these feelings differently in the work of journalists. Anger, for example, becomes legible as a form of felt moral judgment by investigative reporters rather than a failure of objectivity (Stupart, 2022). The same applies to sorrow and frustration: they, too, can be seen as legible as forms of judgment pointing to the transgression of certain moral norms such as human rights violations or war crimes (see Kotišová & Van der Velden, 2023).

Along similar lines, Arpaly (2000) suggested that many cases of apparently hot irrationality might be better understood as our attention being brought to matters that are important to us; yet, for one reason or another, we fail to appreciate in our attempts at rational deliberation. To illustrate the idea, Arpaly gives the example of “Sam the student” who decides, after extensive deliberation, that what matters most to him in the short term is his academic performance. In light of this, Sam cancels his social life to focus on studies, but finds himself (emotionally) unsatisfied and drawn to hanging out with his friends after a short time. For Arpaly, someone thinking in terms of an emotion/reason binary would explain Sam's actions as a kind of emotional failure, a form of *akrasia* that is undermining what he has decided is rationally best for him. She disagrees, however, arguing that emotion in cases like this is better understood as drawing Sam's attention to something that he does in fact value, yet which he has failed to include in his all-things-considered judgment about what he ought to prioritize in his life. For Arpaly (2000), it is clear that Sam in fact values sociality to some extent, and his feelings are tracking these facts. Emotions, on this account, can point us to things we value, yet which we have failed to account for in our attempts at rational, reasonable appraisal of a situation.

This failure can be attributed to taking emotions as a black box. Opening this black box and analyzing what emotions are and what components they have, Scarantino and de Sousa (2021) suggest that emotions entail not only phenomenological inner states or affections but also cognitive evaluations. This means they either *are* or *are caused by* cognitive evaluations. Moreover, they also entail behavioral desires. The affective and physiological, cognitive, behavioral, and expressive components of emotions have porous boundaries and are not necessarily coherent: a person can feel a certain way, name their emotion in a certain way, but think and behave differently. This inconsistency is translated into journalism practice as journalists' emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983): the manipulation of what emotion one expresses (surface acting) or even feels (deep acting). Thus, journalists are not necessarily dragged around by their affects but perform emotional labor to work with (or against) feeling in different ways and satisfy professional requirements of their roles (see also Šimunjak, 2026).

Scarantino and de Sousa (2021) argue that emotions can be understood as rational in two ways. First, they may have cognitive rationality: the ability to represent the world as it is and to point to events in the world. Second, they may have strategic rationality: the ability to motivate and lead to actions that promote one's interests (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021). For example, a journalist can be agitated by her colleague's disregard for historical facts (cognitive rationality), and this agitation can eventually motivate her to argue about these facts (strategic rationality; see Kotišová, 2024).

Similar ideas are to be found in neuroscience and sociological theory. In his seminal work *Descartes' Error*, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994: xiii) develops and illustrates a thesis that "certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality" and that the capacity of humans for reason depends on emotions and bodily processes. The social theorist Gabe Ignatow (2007) carries out a similar "bodily turn" in sociological theory and suggests we should stop theorizing away the bodily foundations of knowledge.

Returning to the world of journalism studies, what Strawson, Arpaly, Scarantino, and de Sousa make clear is that there is good reason to see emotion as tracking facts about the world and ourselves rather than as an "irrational" failure to reason. Where journalists feel angry, proud, empathetic, pitying, and so on, journalism scholars ought to look beyond the surface concerns of how these emotions are accommodated within objectivity norms to find the deeper normative values that underlie them.

Thus, a part of the recent body of research working with interviewing and ethnographic methods describes emotions as potentially appropriate, relevant, valuable, and vital to ethical journalism. This research claims that emotions are inherent and can be *beneficial* to newsmaking processes. For example, Glück (2016) illustrates that empathy, the capacity to understand and feel others' emotions, forms a central quality for good journalistic storytelling and career development. Stupart (2022) argues that emotions of journalists can be understood in terms of Srinivasan's (2018) distinction between aptness and prudence. Studying investigative journalists, he takes the example of anger that, as a moral feeling, can serve as a productive "fuel" and provide energy that drives journalists and point to moral judgments that are an inherent feeling of investigative journalists' work (which is also a good example of the strategic rationality of emotions). Elsewhere, Stupart (2021) illustrates that emotion is vital to practical ethical reasoning. His research dismisses prevailing notions of journalistic practice that (1) emotional attachments felt by journalists are irrational, or they (2) distract journalists from the truth. In the same vein, Kotišová (2024), studying the collaboration between foreign and local media professionals in Israel, Palestine, and Ukraine, argues that the reporting community often values local media professionals' emotional involvement in events they cover as embodied knowledge that is attentive to the nuance, accuracy, and ethics of journalistic practices and outcomes (see below). Finally, Kotišová and Van der Velden (2023) show how frustration and sorrow can motivate media professionals' engagement in war crime investigations.

Within work in the emotional turn, scholars studying moral injury – the particular harms that derive from gravely betraying one’s own strongly held moral norms – are firmly based upon a theoretical foundation of this kind. This work, besides being especially practically valuable – as feelings of guilt are among the strongest predictors of journalists’ mental well-being issues (Flannery, 2022) – has made clear that there are important connections between ethics and emotion in the profession around which much more remains to be said.

Emotion-Related Epistemic Injustice in Transnational Journalism

In feminist philosophy, Srinivasan (2018) and earlier writers, such as Lorde (1997), have drawn attention to the political effects of emotions such as anger, and how it can be both apt (in the sense of correctly tracking moral evaluations) and (counter) productive (see Mulupi & Steiner, 2026). Anger in particular can provide the energy needed to persist in difficult endeavors, yet can also be used to delegitimize individuals as irrational. This delegitimization, Srinivasan observes, tends to fall along unsurprisingly familiar lines of inequality. The anger of black women, for example, may be used against them, whereas the anger of white men – all else being equal – may come to be understood in terms of righteousness (Manne, 2017).

This “outrage epistemology” – a way of knowing through active, reflective awareness of injustice – was recently brought into communication studies by Kulbaga and Spencer (2021). Based on an analysis of the last three years of published articles in top communication journals and a review of previous scholarship about the publication process, the authors argue that publication standards in the field adhere to “epistemics of restraint, reason, and respectability and favor intellectual knowledge over body knowledge” (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2021, p. 286). The authors argue that the requirement to police anger – but also disgust, complaints, unhappiness, pessimism, depression, and empathy – is a problem of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), reproducing the epistemic privileges (i.e., credibility excess) of white men.

The issue of epistemic injustice was also recently studied in the context of transnational collaborations among media organizations, journalists, and fixers engaged in conflict journalism. Based on her research among reporters and fixers covering the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including Ukrainian and Palestinian fixers and local producers, Kotišová (2024) argues that media professionals’ “affective proximity” (Al-Ghazzi, 2021), usually associated with fixers and producers who are at home in the conflict they cover, is often a source of mistrust or credibility deficit. Local media professionals covering “their own” conflicts often do not feel trusted by their foreign colleagues precisely because they are Ukrainian, Syrian, or Palestinian: because they are local, they are suspected of being too emotional, and, therefore, biased. Kotišová (2024) understands this fear of bias as a case of epistemic injustice based on (combinations of) ethnicity, origin, gender, and (non-)elite professional affiliation.

Importantly, Kotišová (2024) illustrates how local media professionals coming from or living in Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine perform emotional labor. They carefully manage their affective proximity and develop strategies on how to compartmentalize their feelings, opinions, and actions. Thus, their emotional engagement does not necessarily lead to bias and can be seen as (1) cognitively rational, because it increases their sensitivity to local sources, on-the-ground evidence, and the (non) adherence of the warring parties to codified moral norms, such as international humanitarian law or human rights; and (2) strategically rational because it motivates their actions – including getting involved in journalism in the first place.

So, if emotion and reason are to be understood as connected, rather than threatening one another, what else might be said about this relationship? In the remainder of this chapter, we

expand further on some of the principles and limitations of the emotion-as-reasoning approach that we have introduced here.

Can Feelings Be Wrong?

Can we ever be “wrong” in our (journalists, but also researchers) self-assessments of what we are feeling? That is to ask, are there circumstances in which we might (or should) not believe our own feelings or the feelings of others? The question is both an epistemological one (Under what conditions might feeling be a form of knowing?) and a political one (Do claims to be angry or in pain necessarily constitute evidence that the person feeling those emotions has been wronged?). How do we know that the knowledge mediated/constituted by the feeling is accurate, and what credence ought we to give to our own and others’ feelings?

There are (at least) three complications when thinking about the epistemic value of emotions. In the first case, the factual basis for one’s emotions might be incorrect. Disinformation and conspiracy theories trigger strong and genuinely felt emotions – it is the very principle of their functioning – yet these emotions do not have the same informational validity as “righteous anger” based on “true” accounts of a situation. We can be mistaken about the factual circumstances that brought about our anger.

In the second case, we might sincerely raise questions about whether we can correctly identify our feelings. I might be (practically) always and everywhere correct about the fact *that I am feeling something*, but should I be trusted when I identify for myself that I am feeling, say anger, rather than sadness? That is, can we always make the move from affect to emotion (linking a feeling to discourse) in a way that others cannot question?

One scenario where we might question self-assessment of our feelings might be where we compare feelings between two cultural contexts, where a feeling would be “recognized” as an emotion of a certain type in one context but not in another. For example, depression, encompassing emotions such as sadness, hopelessness, ennui, or loss of interest might not be recognized in particularly stoic cultures (such as unhelpful forms of masculinity) or ones that are not especially oriented toward understanding such feelings in nonpathological terms, such as therapeutic discourse (Illouz, 2007). Even within a single cultural/discursive context, there are plausible moments where we might be unclear about what a feeling is/is becoming – the most obvious example of this being the idiom of not knowing whether to laugh or cry about something or, in other situations, whether to cry or be angry (with our actual feelings often stabilizing into emotional repertoires along gendered lines). A reader who has ever found themselves at a crossroads between anger, shame, and sadness in a moment of public embarrassment would quickly grasp the familiarity of this position.

In the third case, we may plausibly be wrong in the moral conclusions we draw in response to our emotional states. Not all anger, for example, should be taken as evidence of injustice: we might be mistaken in the norms we believe have been transgressed, or correct in our normative assessment, but wrong in our application of norms to the anger-inducing event. Less obtusely, examples of the three cases might look something like this:

- I have an incorrect factual basis for my emotion: I am angry that you spilled my coffee when in fact you did no such thing (you were walking by when I happened to trip, and I have incorrectly drawn the conclusion you bumped me). Or, I am angry that a warring party targeted a civilian area, while in fact, it was a false-flag attack – this, however, proves to be the case only several weeks later.
- Mistaken in the norms transgressed: Assuming you *did* spill my coffee, I believe you should buy me a new coffee and pay for dry cleaning, when (for the moral community we are a part

of, broadly speaking) no obligation for causing a coffee spill exists at all. Or, Assuming the army did target a civilian area, I believe the commanders and the whole unit must be held responsible and brought to the International Criminal Court. However, for the moral community we are a part of, it was legitimate to target a formally evacuated civilian area where the enemy assault troops were hiding.

- Mistaken in the application of norms: You did spill my coffee, and norms of being responsible for the harm apply, but they are minimal (you should apologize, or at worst buy me a new coffee), and demands for dry cleaning are an unacceptably high demand. In other words, you are “claiming too much” on the basis of the transgression that your feeling of anger is responding to. Part of this may include that the degree of your feeling is out of proportion to the transgression (in the eyes of the broader moral community that you are a part of), where it is tracking your inflated feeling of being wronged. Or, the army did target the civilian area, and the norms of being responsible for the harm apply, but journalists make disproportionate demands (relative to what would be acceptable to the moral community they are a part of), such as demanding the disbanding of the army *in toto*.

The point here is that even in cases where we may have some certainty over what we are feeling (and those feelings are moral emotions), it does not automatically follow that the emotions are correctly tracking a moral situation, in terms of the norms of some or other specific group.

Conclusion: The Uneasy Path from Reality to Emotions

The observation that emotion is so tightly intertwined with journalistic epistemology has two practical implications. First, we urgently need to move beyond the emotional turn, take emotions seriously (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019a), make them an inherent part of thinking about journalism, and actively reconceptualize their role and place in journalistic practices and professionalism. Journalists and researchers alike need to critically assess the role of their emotion in journalistic and research epistemologies, knowledge-building, and fact-finding practices. On the one hand, emotions can provide very productive clues in these practices. For example, they can motivate journalistic practices, be motivated by reality on the ground and available knowledge, serve as a methodological and an epistemological tool, and form a part of reality. They can drive innovations and facilitate team collaboration (see Kotišová & Van der Velden, 2023). On the other hand, emotions can also be based on an incorrect or fake factual basis, misunderstood or mistaken moral norms. Therefore, journalists and researchers alike need to actively search for an additional measure of informational validity. In other words, journalists need to ask further: What is the link to the on-the-ground reality my feeling represents? At the same time, future research needs to dig deeper into the epistemological affordances of emotions and contexts in which emotions can be blinding or illuminating.

At a methodological level, these observations also imply that during (auto)ethnographic work, we need to carefully and continuously assess and reflect upon our own emotions. In dealing with the feelings of others, this compounds existing, familiar problems around whether to believe the testimony of others as factual truth (in a naïve sense) or as a kind of creative performance. For the researcher of emotion, there is also a complicated path to navigate between a sympathetic attentiveness to our feelings and the feelings of others, and a critical understanding that affect becomes translated into emotion and makes claims about reality in contingent ways. The line from *reality* to *feeling* is not straightforward. Equally, there is also no direct and invariant line from *bodily sensation* to *emotion*: the meaning of what I am feeling is a social construction and, because

of this, is open to politics. Focusing on the politics of emotions – which often says much about the “feeler’s” social environment – is probably one of the most interesting part of the whole story for media and journalism scholars. Journalism studies thus need a more profound methodological reflection on how to study emotions.

Politically, choosing to believe that others are mistaken about what they are feeling or are mistaken about the normative basis for those feelings carries a long and problematic history. “Oh, she is not really angry” or “Oh, their anger about X issue is misplaced” are the stock-in-trade of the epistemic tactics of misogyny, racism, and other awful politics (Srinivasan, 2018). Another example is (ab)using public emotions based on incorrect factual or unfounded moral claims as a pretext for violence – confusing feelings of righteousness with actual righteousness, as it were. As researchers, we have the responsibility to point to these cases.

Finally, as journalism and media researchers and educators who seek to take emotions seriously and increase the understanding of their role in knowledge-building practices, we need to promote emotional literacy (Steiner, 1997). Emotionally literate journalists (and researchers) will understand their own emotions, be able to listen to others and empathize with their emotions, and be capable of expressing their emotions productively.

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