

# Movie Review

## Inside Out

Western culture has a long history of emotional anxiety (anxiety about emotions). Thinkers from the classical period to the modern have pitted emotion against reason as opposing forces vying for the mind's control. An emotional person was seen as weak giving in to the path of least resistance to base desires ruled by capricious feelings. The strong on the other hand would rule their emotions with reason. Disney personified this struggle in a short 8-minute cartoon from 1993 called, aptly, "Reason and Emotion". The short movie is a lightly disguised propaganda piece hardening Americans against the fear tactics used by the axis powers in World War 2. But it was nonetheless a point of reference for the Pixar (movie production) team led by director Pete Docter, responsible for the film "Inside Out".

The movie is about an 11-year-old girl, Riley, originally from Minnesota, who moves to San Francisco with her parents. The leading characters of the movie, however, aren't Riley and her family, but Riley's primary emotions: Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust. These emotions demonstrate what it might be like in the mind of an 11-year-old girl who struggles with having to move to a different city, away from her friends, away from her hockey league, and has a hard time pretending to be happy for her parents. What's really powerful about this film is how accurate it is to cognitive, developmental, and clinical psychology.

The film "Inside Out" is a far more nuanced take on the inner workings of the mind, appropriate for a post-40 and post-culture evolution age where we're encouraged, ostensibly at least, to embrace emotions rather than urge to master them. The film tells the story of the eleven-year-old Riley as she navigates a move across the country and, more centrally, how five emotions – Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust and Anger balance the control of her mind from a mission control-like headquarters.

Of all 5 of Riley's emotions, Joy seems to be the leader, she keeps the others in check but reminds the viewers that all of them have an important function. She states that Disgust keeps Riley safe from being poisoned, Fear keeps her safe from a catastrophe by imagining worst-case scenarios, Anger protects her from others and also allows her to be a better hockey player, while Joy ensures that Riley is happy. However, Joy fails to see the importance of Sadness and tries to shoo Sadness away from anything Riley-related, forbidding this emotion in every way possible. She even draws a circle on the floor and makes Sadness stay inside it, forbidding her to leave or to touch any of Riley's memories, so as not to taint them with sad memories.

In this model, each day consists of discrete moments coloured by one of the five emotions which are sent during sleep to a vast archive of long-term memories. Very rarely, an experience is so formative that it creates a core memory which goes on to form the basis of Riley's personality imagined as theme park islands. When Joy and Sadness are accidentally ejected from the Headquarters, the film chronicles their cathartic journey through several other mental regions including Imagination Land, a Dream Production Company that looks like the Paramount Lab, Abstract Thought and a Subconscious Jail. The catharsis comes when Joy realises that Sadness is not only useful but essential, perhaps even more essential than she is; to Riley's harmonious mental functioning and overall happiness.

The film itself and its message to embrace sadness, to feel what needs feeling is surely a token of progress against our long-standing emotional anxiety.

But is this model of the mind and its emotions an accurate one?

"Inside Out" bases its theory of emotions in large part on the work of Paul Ekman, an influential scientist in the Psychology of emotion. Ekman posits that there are seven basic emotions with universal facial signals, the five emotions featured in the film plus two other emotions – surprise and contempt. These basic emotions are ubiquitous, the world over, Ekman says and can be read on the faces of anyone, whether that's by an astute listener or facial recognition software like those Ekman has helped develop controversially for security and marketing uses. Ekman and other

consultants on the film have praised *Inside Out* for providing a model for kids that is engaging as well as scientifically sound.

“*Inside Out*” seems to suggest that a child’s experience will be defined by whichever emotion is at the helm. What’s more that overall personality determined by coloured core memories has an emotional driver. This model stands opposite to the key insights of psychoanalysis, for example, emotions can be transferred, transformed or distorted expressions of unconscious ideas and repressed experiences. In other words, feelings of sadness or joy or fear, are frequently far removed from their causes. Understanding them as specific entities is a troublesome task because they are often not they seem to be, which is to say that understanding emotion as the driver and not the expression of ideas and experience may ignore underlying causes. Indeed, the idea that emotions or memories can be separate or discrete in any way is a dubious one. The film itself begins to challenge this at the end, when the control panel in Headquarters is expanded to fit all the emotions and when the memory orbs start to reflect mixed experience. But a sense that experience can be quantified, pervades the film. And, like anything, that may reflect more about our culture at the moment than the science itself.

For Joy and Sadness, the scariest place in the film isn’t the subconscious prison that houses Riley’s worst fears, but a giant pit in the centre of Riley’s mind where memories are forgotten forever without any hope of recall (dementia). In an increasingly data-driven culture, where more data equals more truth, the greatest anxiety of all is the loss of information. And the headquarters of Riley’s mind does feel a bit managerial with its control panel and user manuals, and Riley a bit like an automaton controlled by a highly sophisticated technocratic operation. The decision-making process is a bit wonky too since the latest neuroscience tells us that the frontal lobe enacts a kind of executive function that mediates between the emotions in the limbic system, and higher cognitive functions like reflection and critical thinking, obviously not always in favour of the latter.

Other concepts displayed in this movie included the conversion of short to long-term memory. When memory is seen as salient or relevant enough to us, or when it has been repeated enough times, the brain messengers, dopamine and glutamate, ensure the long-term encoding of that memory. Think of these messengers as computer coders or awesome IT support team – they write the code to ensure that our brain-computer is up to date with the new information.

## **MORALS**

- 1) Happiness is not just about joy.
- 2) Don't try to force happiness.
- 3) Sadness is vital to our well-being.
- 4) Mindfully embrace tough emotions rather than suppressing them.

## **REFERENCES**

**[1]** Four Lessons from “Inside Out” to Discuss With Kids

([https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four\\_lessons\\_from\\_inside\\_out\\_to\\_discuss\\_with\\_kids](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_lessons_from_inside_out_to_discuss_with_kids))

**[2]** Inside Out: Emotional Truths by Way of Pixar (Dr Travis Langley, professor at Henderson State University)