

Emotions in International Relations

Written by Brent Sasley

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BRENT SASLEY, JUN 12 2013

The “emotional” turn (including specific emotions like anger or sorrow, conditions like affect or trust, and related processes like memory) in International Relations (IR) seems to have arrived. Since the twenty-first century began, books and journal articles studying the role and effects of emotional states in foreign policymaking and international interactions have been coming out regularly; International Studies Association conventions now typically have several panels dedicated to the subject (though the 2013 meeting seems to be an exception); and—this is the real telltale sign—articles on the topic are increasingly less likely to begin by noting that the study of emotions is a recent occurrence in IR and there is more work to be done.

This was a long time coming. After all, early writers on what we would today call international relations—like Aristotle, Thucydides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and others—incorporated emotions into their analyses, arguing that they helped drive human, and therefore international, behavior. And the main theoretical approaches to IR have all built in some way on emotional states: realists emphasize fear, institutionalists trust, Marxists greed, constructivists affect. But it is only recently that scholars have sought to explore the effects of emotional states on international relations more explicitly, coherently, and self-consciously.

Today scholars have done work of a variety of emotional states. Brief, and by no means complete, examples include Todd Hall, who has looked at anger, Paul Saurette on humiliation, Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann on revenge, Mira Sucharov on nostalgia, and my own work on affect. Others ask questions about where emotions fit into the causal process more broadly. Andrew Ross has explored how emotions matter in the construction of the international social world. Jonathan Mercer has sought to make the study of emotions more rigorous through clearly-defined variables and approaches. Ontological security specialists like Brent Steele and Amir Lupovici have emphasized the types of emotional states that characterize state identity, and from there drive foreign policy.

In much of the above work, though, there is an inherent conflict that remains unresolved, and sometimes unrecognized: the tension between emotions as individual experiences and social emotions that condition group behavior. It is not clear whether they are connected, or whether such concerns are case-specific only. This is particularly the case when we consider states as the primary actors in the international system. Jacques Hymans is one of the few who have tried to bridge this tension by tying individual leaders’ specific reactions to broader national identity roles. But more attention to this problem is needed.

In thinking about how to study emotions in IR, there are three approaches a researcher might take. The first is to think about the state as a “person” acting unitarily. This approach does not consider the various politics and other forces that shape interactions between decision-makers or between leaders and the public. As the dominant approach in International Relations—explicitly outlined by Alexander Wendt—this is the easiest method to use, because the tension between individual and group emotions does not have to be addressed. One need only speak of “the United States” being humiliated by September 11, “Israel” getting angry at the Palestinian effort to be recognized as a state, or “China” remembering how it suffered during the era of gunboat diplomacy.

The second approach is to study the individual leaders of a state or collective. As the dominant method in Foreign Policy Analysis, this is also a less-complicated method because the researcher need only consider the specific individual or individuals in power at a given moment.

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The third way of approaching emotions in IR—and the one that Hymans adopts—is to think of states or other collectivities as groups, in which there is a dynamic interaction between all members of the group—including its recognized leaders and decision-makers. In this way, emotions, which certainly are manifested in individuals' biological and mental reactions, can be considered to operate at the group level.

Social psychology provides a ready framework for thinking of state emotions in this way. Intergroup emotions theory (IET) builds on social identity theory and other analyses of collective identities and behavior. It has constructed a four-stage process that helps us understand how emotions become group-level attributes. Certainly not every member of the group reacts or feels the same; some members may react or feel quite the opposite. But when thinking of social or group emotions, there is a critical mass of individual members who do, allowing us to speak of typical group reactions.

In the first stage, individuals begin to identify as part of a group. That is, not just as members of a group but as an integral, even organic, part of it. This identification is typically (but it doesn't have to be) activated by a specific trigger, a precipitating event, something that requires an immediate emotional or psychological reaction. In the case of states, this could be an attack on the homeland, the killing of citizens in another country, a national sports team's loss in international competition, and so on. The process of identification is important, because not all members of the group will be involved in an event that affects other members of the group. But by identifying as the group, individuals who did not participate in the particular trigger converge on a set of shared reactions. Thus is the group created—the whole bigger than the sum of its parts.

The second stage involves the appraisal of a given situation. Here, individuals who identify as the group consider developments (or specific events if they are connected to a particular trigger) in light of how they affect the group. Soccer/football is considered an ideal arena in which to study this phase of the process. Think of how British or Italian citizens react when a member of the national team scores a goal or is injured in an international match.

The third stage follows directly on this: the generation of intergroup emotions. Thus we can say that "Britain" was ecstatic at a win over another group-state. Because most members identify with the group, there is a convergence of these emotional reactions.

The fourth stage is the translation of these emotional reactions into action tendencies or group behavior. For example, "Turkey" was outraged by the deaths of its citizens during the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. The ship was part of a flotilla trying to break Israel's blockade on Hamas-ruled Gaza. Israel sent soldiers to intercept the convoy before it reached shore, and while they boarded the *Mavi Marmara* to disable it, fighting between the activists and the soldiers broke out—leading to nine deaths aboard the ship. Turkey then sought to punish Israel by castigating it in public, taking it to Turkish and international courts, and excluding it from NATO-led programs.

Although IET tells us how to think about group emotions, the connection between group or social emotions and particular foreign policy behavior needs to be explored further. We know that states, like other groups, are led by individuals who make specific decisions about how the state should act. A scholar who focuses on the system as determining behavior need not account for what ties leaders to their populations, but the study of emotions requires that attention be paid to this empirical and theoretical problem. Emotions are defined by the specific mental and physiological reactions they generate within individuals—we know this from clinical psychological studies and neural research. How, then, can we contend that a group or state feels a specific emotion and acts on that basis?

One way is to focus on decision-makers as they reflect and refract the emotions of the group. In the case of states, that means the researcher must account for at least three things: (1) Opinion polls and other data that can tell us how the public feels; (2) authoritative leaders who make statements that reproduce and echo those emotional reactions; (3) the specific foreign policies made by those leaders, which can then be understood as channeling the particular national emotional reactions.

It is more complicated to research and trace the evidence needed for theorizing the process laid out above, because it requires a study of society as well as of the individual leaders who decide for it. As in a focus on individual decision-

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makers (the second approach to thinking of state emotions), there is some difficulty in figuring out how specific leaders, whom researchers may not have access to, react in emotional terms to given events or developments. But it is not an insurmountable problem. The payoff—understanding how emotions, as both individual- and group-level phenomenon, drive state behavior—is worth the effort.

Emotions cannot, of course, explain everything. And there are plenty of ways in which the process discussed above might be clarified. In the case of the recent protests in Turkey, for example, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been playing on a number of emotions he assumes the public holds, including pride, anger at foreign influence, suspicion of provocateurs, fear of instability, contentment with economic growth, and more. But his party, the AKP, was elected in 2011 with just under 50% of the popular vote; and many different segments of the population have come out in support of the demonstrations, including some from his own voting base. Yet in his public speeches, Erdoğan has tried to reflect what he contends is the popular emotional will, emphasizing that the protestors are a small minority of troublemakers. Clearly this is not the case. Moreover, there appears to be a split in the ruling party over how to interpret the protests and what kinds of policies to respond with. How can we account for these gaps and differences of understanding and goals? If Erdoğan only represents part of the popular will, can we still speak of Turkey's emotions? How can we account for different, even conflicting, emotions in this process?

Thinking about emotions in international interactions can provide insight into all kinds of international behavior. The multi-stage process suggested here is only one way to do so. Well-established theoretical approaches, like realism and constructivism, can build on emotions and emotional states, as can the more recent literatures on discourse, memory, and images. We just need to be rigorous in developing our theories and models, and careful in tracing the empirical evidence. Beyond that, emotions should be as “normal” in the study of IR as any other element or variable. What's heartening is that they have increasingly become so.

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Brent E. Sasley is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas at Arlington. His recent publications include “Turkish Leaders and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Lobbying for European Union Membership,” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, and “Theorizing States' Emotions,” in *International Studies Review*. His current projects include an analysis of the hegemony of causal ontology in the study of the Arab-Israeli conflict and a book project on emotions in International Relations.

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