

Why Study Emotions in International Relations?

Written by Emma Hutchison

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EMMA HUTCHISON, MAR 8 2018

Looking around the globe today it does not take long to see that world politics is awash with emotions. Nations adopt policy standpoints that suggest an acute anxiety of an untrustworthy and hostile 'outside'. The same countries can be, paradoxically, themselves divided by emotional legacies left by historical grievance and injustice. Military insurgent and extremist groups function through the strategic manipulation of fear and terror. States continue to talk tough, seeking to intimidate and deter 'rogue' counterparts with the threat of sanctions and military action.

Although very different, these are some of the most obvious examples of how emotions permeate the everyday practice of international relations. Meanwhile, emotions are now widely recognized as central to world politics. Prominent theorist Christian Reus-Smit (2014: 568) even recently heralded the study of emotions as one of the field's 'great frontiers'. Probing emotions has, indeed, been shown to shed new light on age-old political phenomena, including diplomacy, statecraft and alliances, sovereignty and intervention, international ethics, peacebuilding, aid and humanitarianism (e.g., Crawford 2000, 2014; Fierke 2013; Hall 2015; Holmes 2018; Jeffery 2014; Mercer 2005, 2010; Petersen 2011; Ross 2014).

But it has only been in the last ten to twenty years that international relations scholarship has begun to take emotions seriously. Before this, emotions were attributed a 'taken-for-granted status': while central to how international relations were conducted, emotions were present only in an assumed or implicit sense (Crawford 2000: 120-123, 116). Consider established theories upon which the discipline has traditionally been conceived of and practiced. From the classical thought of Hobbes and Morgenthau to the post-war structuralism of Kenneth Waltz, political realism has been based upon the presence of influential emotions, most notably anxiety and fear. Amity and trust, by contrast, have played a key role in how liberals conceptualized a more cooperative international order. But until the new wave of research – the discipline's 'emotional turn,' as it has become known – few if any studies systematically focused on how emotions actually operate and whether the assumed roles of particular emotions were accurate or the only way emotions functioned.

Emotions as Social Forces

Early thinking about emotions in politics and international relations was derived of the historical dichotomy that placed emotions in opposition to reason and rationality. In this view, emotions were considered 'passions': they were capricious and 'unruly forces' that impeded effective reasoning and judgment (Dixon 2003: 29, also 52). At best, emotions were seen as irrelevant to politics. At worst, emotions were thought to impair or prevent the impartial judgements needed to develop effective policies and political outcomes. Whichever way, emotions were conceived of as external phenomena that rational decision-makers had to be cautious of, control and ideally eliminate. Emotions were, in short, akin to Robert Jervis' (1976) well-known concept of 'misperceptions'. While acknowledging emotions may permeate political decision-making, Jervis' conception saw emotional inclinations as 'accidents' that interfered with political reasoning (Jervis 1976: 3). Emotions paved the way for erroneous perceptions that obscured the ability to 'perceive the world accurately' (Jervis 1976: 3). The sum of traditional thinking was clear: emotions had to be taken out of the political picture.

Yet, over the last two decades theorizing emotions has been completely transformed. Three shifts are significant:

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First is that emotions are now seen as a fundamental and inescapable part of human life, and by extension of all social and political life. Emotions cannot be removed from politics, because emotions lie at the very core of human existence. Political philosopher Jon Elster (1999: 403) puts this neatly: emotions are 'the stuff of life': '...emotions matter because if we did not have them nothing else would matter'. Without emotions, we would literally function like robots, waiting to be programmed and only then mechanically carrying out our actions.

Following this, and second, is a key shift in understanding the links between emotions and rationality. Crucial here is that the classical vision of an emotion-free rationality has meanwhile been shown to be a chimera (e.g. Elster 1999; Nussbaum 2001). There can be no such thing as a rationality free of emotions. Even if we try to 'hold our emotions at bay,' the ways we feel have always already shaded our inner-most thoughts and perceptions. This means that emotions help to shape what we each conceive of as 'rationality' in the first place. Rationality necessarily contains emotion, just as thinking does feeling.

Third – and delving deeper into the nature and roles of emotions in social and political life – is the notion that emotions are intrinsically linked to, and imbued within, the discourses and social structures that underpin societies and their politics (Barbalet 2001; Scheff 1990). Rather than conceiving of emotions as innate, biological forces that arrive pre-formed in individuals, research shows that emotions are socially and culturally constituted (e.g. Lutz 1988). Emotions are embedded within and structured by particular social and cultural environments and are, as such, interwoven with the dominant interests, values and aspirations of those environments. This means that the shape of our emotions is contingent upon context, upon time and space. Importantly, the reverse is also true. The very social systems and structures through which politics – whether it is decision-making, policy development, practices of cooperation or resistance – are likewise constituted through prevailing (yet also perpetually shifting) emotional registers that frame how and for what and whom individuals and communities have been socialized to feel.

What, Then, Can Emotions Tell Us About World Politics?

At first glance, these three points may seem detached from the study of international relations – in theory and practice. But, as I have suggested previously (Hutchison 2016; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014), insights into the nature of emotions can fundamentally reshape how we think about world politics. Appreciating the pervasive and social nature of emotions helps to further develop, but also challenge established approaches to international relations theorizing.

Consider, for instance, customary approaches to conceptualizing global politics. World politics continues to be seen as a realm where precision, instrumentality and a technical rationality must prevail. International relations thus seems to play out through a deliberate assessment of gain and risk – whether understood to be bound by considerations of hard or soft power in a world of anarchy, or by increasing liberal interdependence and cooperation with globalization, or even a world in which actors possessing power dictate legitimacy and order and those without it are rendered to play along in the margins.

But what happens when we recognize that emotions permeate not only such immediate, short-term assessments, but also the historical and contemporary understandings that underpin our fundamental ideas about how is it that the global political sphere – and the practice of international relations – works?

Once we see that emotions are embedded within all of our political worldviews, we realize that emotional perceptions have helped to shape the nature of international relations theorizing itself. However, so far little research has looked at how emotions bear out in international relations theorizing itself, as phenomena that can themselves shape political standpoints and actions. I and others have begun to do so through illuminating the social nature of emotion and showing how emotion functions socially and collectively in world politics (Hutchison 2014, 2016; see also Crawford 2000, 2014; Fierke 2013; Mercer 2014; Ross 2014).

By appreciating the far-reaching significance of emotions, not only in developing international relations theory, but also in shaping the perceptions, motivations and intentions of political actors, we can approach and understand world politics in a whole new, more holistic light. Far from a hindrance, we see, rather, that emotions tell us things –

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important things that we could not otherwise have known. Emotions permeate the complex, often overlapping social structures that underpin decision-making and collective actions in world politics. And while often hidden and inaudible, and typically neglected and refuted, when emotions are uncovered and taken seriously, the political insights they provide are invaluable. Recognizing that emotions are social and political – and thus lie beneath all political perceptions – reshapes how we think about the global realm, about society, politics and the formation of policy. Indeed, a turn to emotions provides critical clues as to why international actors, individually and collectively, think what they think, and respond in the ways they do.

The pervasive social roles of emotions in society and politics has far-reaching implications for the study of international relations: they force us to rethink dominant conceptions of world politics in theory and practice. In my next instalment on emotions and international relations here at E-IR, I explore this more closely. Titled 'Affective Communities and World Politics' and drawn from my recent book (Hutchison 2016), I show how an appreciation of social, collective and political nature of emotions helps not only to understand collective decision-making and political action, but also to conceptualize emotions as forms of agency capable of prompting political change.

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Emma Hutchison is a Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. Her research focuses on emotions and trauma in world politics, particularly in relation to security, humanitarianism and international aid. She has published widely on these topics in a range of scholarly journals and books. Together with Professor Roland Bleiker, Dr Hutchison edited the Forum on 'Emotions and World Politics' in *International Theory* in 2014. Her recent book, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions After Trauma* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) was awarded the British International Studies Association Susan Strange Prize for 2017.