Fear in International Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/11/01/fear-in-international-relations/

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This article is the first in a two part series. Read the second piece here.

Anarchy is said to be the foundational condition of the international system. Its equivalent at the level of individual human experience is the emotion of *fear*. Classical realists like Thomas Hobbes believed fear played a crucial role in creating our social institutions; Machiavelli advised the Prince that it was much safer to be 'feared than loved' because the 'dread of punishment' never fails; and Thucydides before them suspected that 'prestige, fear, and self-interest' are indeed the most powerful motives of political actors.

Focussing on fear, this article presents a short review of the state of emotion research in International Relations (IR) and introduces pathways to apply theories of emotion in foreign policy analysis. As part of the 'affective turn' in the social sciences, scholars in politics and IR have once again turned their attention to fear, anger, and other distinct emotions. The renewed interest is sparked, in part, by contributions from psychology and the life sciences, which have added new facets to our understanding of emotions. Most importantly, the work of Antonio Damasio (1994) and others has shown that the traditional dichotomy between emotion and cognition is no longer tenable. This has hardly made affective phenomena easier to grasp. However, the complexity of emotion should not discourage attempts to integrate them in our research. In fact, it might be *because* of their versatility, that emotions may offer analytical leverage and a new approach to working on familiar issues in the discipline: making theory more applicable to cases, linking actors and structures, and integrating the process and results of foreign policy-making.

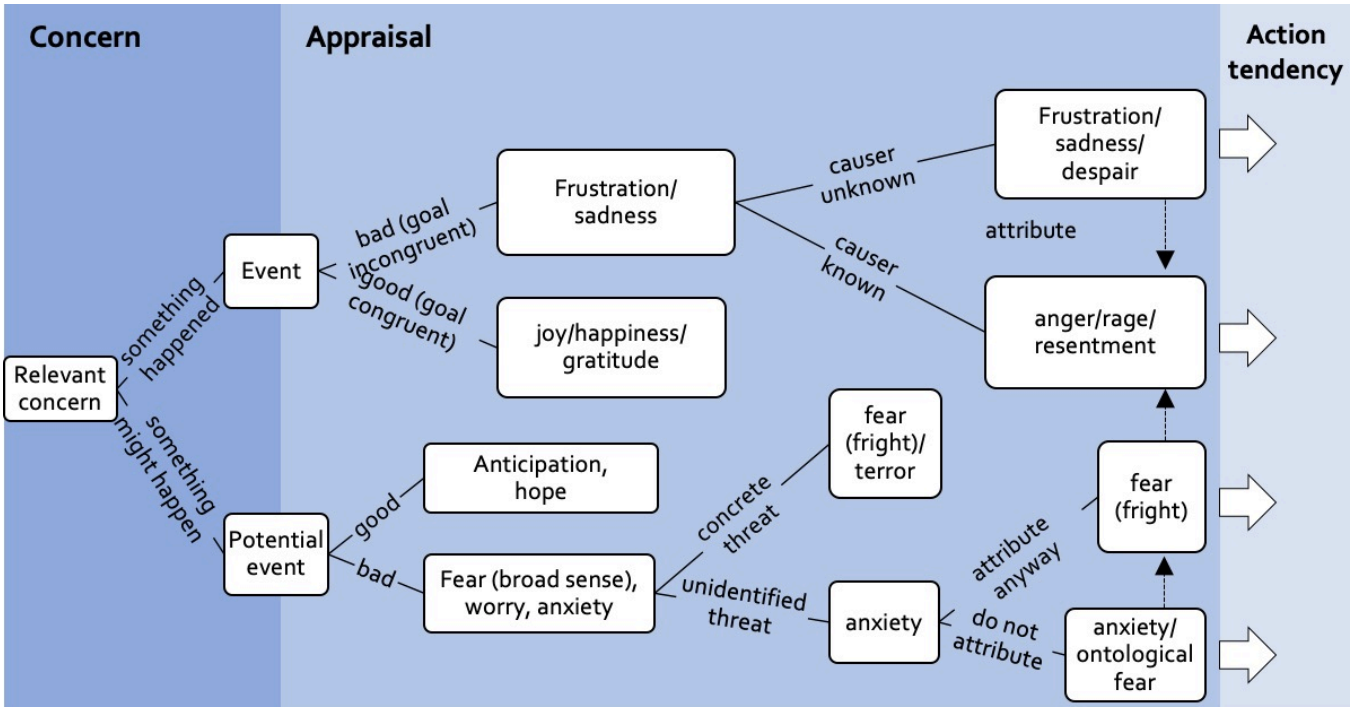
Applying affective science to IR requires carving out a workable definition and conceptualisation of emotion. First, we need to distinguish between different phenomena. *Affect* is an umbrella term, encompassing emotions, feelings, or moods. They all refer to ways in which embodied mental processes and the felt dimensions of human experience influence thought and behaviour (Damasio 2010: 174-75). Feelings are best understood as a subjective representation of emotions, private to the individual experiencing them. Moods are more diffuse affective states that generally last longer and are less intense. The term *emotion* is typically reserved for an affective response that has a distinct cognitive profile and a socially recognisable expression such as 'anger' or 'fear.' Outside of affective neuroscience and adjacent fields, the two terms are commonly used interchangeably.

There is some debate over the attribute that sets emotion apart from affect – whether individual emotions can, in fact, be categorised or distinguished. Making this determination is crucial to any attempt at placing emotions in the context of 'traditional' IR-theoretical paradigms. The pertinent literature leaves nothing to be desired in terms of pointing to the complexity and opacity of emotion: it is a broad term, denoting 'interrelated causal effects' consisting of 'situational cues,' 'physiological changes,' 'emotion labels,' and 'expressive gestures' (Thoits, 1990). Emotions are situated between nature and nurture, as 'a large set of differentiated, biologically-based complex(es) that are constituted, at the very least, by *mutually transformative interactions* among biological systems (e.g., cognition, physiology, psychology) and physical and sociocultural ones' (McDermott 2004: 692). Their complexity may be part of the reason why IR appears to have met the challenge of integrating emotions 'by dodging it,' as Janice Bially Mattern (2011: 63) charges. There are few conceptualizations of emotion, let alone categorizations of distinct ones, that may be readily applied to the work of the social scientist.

One exception is appraisal theory, first formulated by Richard Lazarus (1991). *Appraisal* refers to the process of

constructing emotional meaning within the relationship of the individual and their environment. The basic premise is that emotions are adaptive responses indicative of the appraisal of environmental conditions for the individual's 'well-being.' Well-being, in turn, depends on whether individuals consider objects or events as being conducive to, or obstructing, their *concerns.* A concern denotes an 'enduring disposition to prefer particular states of the world' (Frijda 1988: 351), including the individual's needs, attachments, values, current goals, and beliefs. Appraisal also determines the intensity and quality of resulting feelings, action tendencies, physiological responses, and ultimately, behaviour. Lazarus' work was ground-breaking, because it specified the role of cognition in generating an emotional response. Appraisal theory also introduced agency, allowing for the vital distinction as to an event caused by oneself, someone else, interpersonal circumstances, or environmental factors outside anyone's control.

Each emotion is defined by a unique relational meaning, summarizing personal harms and benefits residing in the specific 'person-environment relationship.' If someone feels that an event might harm or benefit them – relative to what they were expecting – innate 'action tendencies' and 'coping processes' are set off (Lazarus 1991). Depending on attribution, the same concern can elicit different emotions, as is illustrated in the figure below. As new information is appraised by the individual, the emotional response may shift between variants of 'fear,' 'anger,' or other elaborations (i.e. combinations) of emotions. The figure is based on the emotion theories of Lazarus (1991) and Theodore Kemper and Randall Collins (1990).



Schematic representation of the generation of different negative emotional responses

Appraisal theories have been criticized on the grounds of not allowing for enough cultural variation. Anna Wierzbicka, for example, argues that Lazarus underestimated the problem of language. He had not properly defined central emotional phenomena such as 'anger.' Even if his interpretation did fit the use of the word anger in English, 'there would still be no reason to regard the emotion identified by this word as one that has universal significance – over and above those identified by emotion terms in other languages' (Wierzbicka 1995: 248).

IR has been receptive to such criticisms and proceeded cautiously. Too cautiously, one might argue, to make full use of the now extensive body of research on emotion across disciplines. Andrew Ross rightly asserts that emotions are composite phenomena that consist of 'various [individual] emotion types.' While their true 'psychological dimensions' may only be accessible in 'clinical settings', the observation that 'the social world of global politics is too messy for an off-the-shelf application of categories from psychology' (Ross 2014: 3) does not provide sufficient grounds to

abandon terms like ‘anger’ or ‘fear’ altogether. Taking inspiration from mid-twentieth century realists, I suggest that acknowledging the complexity of emotion should not bar us from calling things by their name – socially recognizable affective responses with distinct labels such as ‘fear’ and ‘anger’.

A survey of interdisciplinary research leaves us with four, commonly recognized ‘primary’ emotions: fear, anger, happiness, and sadness (Turner 2000: 68-69). They occur universally across cultures and are even shared by mammals. At first glance, it is striking that three out of the four are negative and thus work against social solidarity. Other researchers have found that eight out of nine ‘major taxonomies of emotion’ privilege negative emotions (Rozin and Royzman 2001: 311). Indeed, evidence suggests that humans, as evolved apes, do not have strong group ‘instincts’ or behavioural propensities (Turner and Maryanski 2005). For hominid group organisation and, by extension, modern societies to work, natural selection had to find a way to mitigate the dissociative power of negative primary emotions. Turner suggests that when they are combined with ‘happiness’ (or ‘satisfaction’), even negative emotions can enable humans to generate tighter social bonds (Turner 2007: 9). The result is what Turner calls ‘elaborations’ of primary emotions, such as gratitude, pride, triumph, hope, or solace. As these more complex elaborations of emotions ‘proved to be a successful adaptation, natural selection continued to enhance this capacity’ (Turner 2007: 8).

There is another reason why evolution may have privileged ‘bad’ feelings. Put simply, social life tends to be a lot more interesting and political decisions more significant when ‘bad’ consequences are looming. The fact that focusing on the negative has proven essential to human evolutionary success, or survival, is part of the reason why political science (and underlying socio-psychological models) have given primacy to negative information, as Johnson and Tierney (2018) argue. Prospect theory, by emphasizing that potential losses weigh much heavier on decision-makers’ minds than potential gains, has already introduced this finding to IR (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, Taliaferro 2010).

Aside from disagreements about what they are, theories of emotion differ between disciplines, depending on the specific aspect of emotionality that is of interest and how it features in the research design. In political science and IR, the following issues have been the most researched since ‘emotion’ appeared on the agenda of researchers in the late 1990s: the implicit affective foundations of traditional theoretical paradigms (for example, Freyberg-Inan 2004, Lebow 2003); the impact of emotions on individuals’ perceptions in rational choice models or on the process of identity-formation (Mercer 2005, Ross 2006); the role of emotions in decision-making (McDermott 2011, Gross Stein 2013); the relationship between emotions and specific key areas of international politics, such as diplomacy and statecraft (Crawford 2014, Holmes 2018), violent conflict (Hutchinson and Bleiker 2008, Ross 2014, Ahäll and Gregory 2015), ethics (Jeffery 2011), or strategy (Mercer 2013); or the intentional and performative display of emotions for strategic reasons (Petersen 2011, Hall 2015).

Researchers working on affect in IR will inevitably have to answer how they intend to distinguish between the deliberate, ‘instrumental’ display of emotion and actors’ spontaneous (and sometimes unintentional) expression, which could reveal their true objectives. Sadly, as long as political leaders are reluctant to undergo brain imaging as they go about their day, there will be no sure-fire way of telling them apart. In the end, as Andrei Tsygankov suggests, ‘both versions agree that emotions should be read in the context of international competition for power, status, and prestige’ (Tsygankov 2014: 347).

When experiences and cognitive beliefs concerning risks diverge, ‘emotional reactions often drive behaviour’ (Loewenstein et al. 2001: 267). Observations like these should not be construed to suggest that decisions are always ‘made on a whim.’ Rather, the challenge to rationalist approaches lies in the fact that the dichotomy between rational choice and ‘emotionality,’ whereby the term is used to denote ‘irrationality,’ does no longer hold. We now know that emotional responses are a central component in the decision-making process. Information must be emotionally valenced to enable rational thought and decision-making. Neither can emotional responses be generated without preceding cognitive appraisal (Damasio 1994). In spite of this, most of the work on emotion in IR still situates the phenomenon within a rational choice framework and assumes a cognitivist outlook – based on a traditional understanding of computational theories of mind (Putnam 1979) and focussing on factors that can be known and understood. Other aspects of lived experience, if they are considered, are secondary to the assumption of the rational

actor.

Fear and other primary emotions (especially *anger*) have certain features that make them difficult to represent within rationalist paradigms. Rational choice theory has provided no explanations as to why and under what circumstances reacting with fear might fulfil a strategic purpose. One example where fear has an implicit function is Schelling's (1966) 'madmen theory,' insofar as actors might display fear and desperation to signal their readiness to act highly 'irrational.' Loewenstein et al. argue that our traditional 'consequentialist' models are inadequate to describe behaviour in the face of risk well, because of the differences 'between the calculus of objective risk and the determinants of fear,' and the 'extent that fear does play an important part in risk-related behaviours' (Loewenstein et al. 2008: 280). Fear of terrorism, for example, is experienced by the public long after an attack has occurred, even though the actual threat of being harmed by a terrorist attack is always marginal or, due to heightened security measures, even lower than before.

Fear itself is a broad term that encompasses experiences ranging from terror to mild anxiety. Lower-intensity variants of fear may operate on levels below conscious awareness and instil our perceptions, attitudes, and thoughts with subjective valences (Ortony et al., 1988), making them a crucial factor in decision-making. More than simply a passing feeling, this kind of fear does not subside immediately when the perceived threat has disappeared. As neuroscientific research has shown, conditioned fear can last longer than other kinds of learned experience and may even become permanent (Gray 1979: 302, Quirk et al. 2006, Delgado et al. 2008). If fear becomes embedded over time, it can give rise to the condition of hypervigilance.

Either through self-reinforcing mechanisms, or purposely harnessed by political operatives to mould public opinion, fearful experience prompts individuals to be more conscious of potential future threats. In addition to being worse at calculating the costs, risks, and benefits of their choices, 'the fearful' frequently fail to see how their behaviour, even if intended as defensive, might be seen as threatening – 'enhancing what is already a cognitive bias' (Crawford 2009: 278). Humans also have a tendency to categorize all the individual causes that may have evoked a fearful reaction together and treat it as one and the same thing, 'even when they are otherwise perceptually, functionally, and theoretically diverse' (Niedenthal et al. 1999: 338). Experiences that are accompanied by fear produce strong emotional memories. Once conditioned, a fearful response may be triggered by a similar event than the one remembered, even in the absence of an actual threat. Such conditioned reactions are difficult to extinguish and can 'recur spontaneously' or be 'reinstated by stressful experiences' (LeDoux 2002: 396).

What all this means in the context of IR is that 'emotions and charged emotional relationships may permeate the international system and long outlast the initial cause for emotions,' as Crawford (2014: 548) observes. Through narratives of enmity or aggression, fearful environments may become self-sustaining, even though the initial threat has disappeared. Far beyond politically expedient narratives, 'fear and enmity are written on the bodies of individuals in elevated cortisol and other stress hormones, in hyper-arousal, and the tendency to both look for and recall threats and past harm' (ibid). Institutionally, it can become embodied in 'perceptions, routines, expectations, military doctrines, and forces' (ibid). Much like ideology and worldview shape an individual's perceptions and the range of policy options they consider, fear can act as a filter through which institutional actors perceive other institutions or states. Information that runs counter to the established view of the other side and the threat emanating from it is more likely to be filtered out.

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