

# Towards Heartfelt Positivity as a New Approach for (Feminist) IR

Written by Elina Penttinen

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ELINA PENTTINEN, JUN 10 2013

It begins with a small shift, really, with a very simple turnaround. A simple thought inspired by a sense of curiosity. What if I were to look for how people heal, how they live or even how they thrive in hard times? Is there a possibility for us as IR scholars to also see what is working well in the world, instead of zooming in only on the things that are wrong in the world? Can we ease up a little bit on our problem-oriented approach, or better yet, from our cynical, critical, cool and distant approach?

### **A New Methodology**

The small shift that I propose is a move towards being just as interested and curious about human potentiality and capacity for love and kindness in extreme conditions as we are about analyzing the gender, race and class intersections of suffering, exploitation and vulnerabilities. It requires becoming aware, as Stephen Chan (2011) argues, of the fact that we are so drawn to spectacular violence that we forget how people live their everyday lives in the midst of extreme conditions, and also questioning why this is so. Cynthia Enloe (2004) invites us to question, at a moment when new curiosity arises, the reasons behind our lack of curiosity before. This leads to, in her view, a recognition of how power-knowledge relations operate in order to limit our perception. In addition, I believe that this process questioning leads us to examine the unquestioned assumptions that have tied us and our research to an ontology of suffering.

Heartfelt positivity or joy as a new methodology (Penttinen 2013), which I propose for feminist International Relations, is twofold in its aims. It is intended first of all as a call to recognize the importance of studying what is working well in the world. It is a call to broaden our scope and understanding of human life in and of this world. We have a lot to learn about human potentiality and we can learn this by studying how human beings thrive, act with compassion and love in extreme conditions, or make sense of their lives and live meaningfully in the midst of constricting conditions.

The second aim of heartfelt positivity as a new methodology is a call to recognize the role of the IR scholar as not only someone who reflects and represents the pains of the world, but as someone who is in active engagement with the world. In other words, we do not only write about the world out there, but we create the world through our writing. Personally, I did not want to increase any more suffering in the world by writing cynical texts about exploitation and suffering; I wanted to write about war experience, but in a way that recognized that there is more to life and war than suffering, and that suffering is not the full truth about life.

Yet the practice that I propose is also more personal. Drawing from the scientific study of mindfulness and research on the relevance of positive emotions, I want to draw attention to our research and writing as a practice much like sports or arts, and recognize that our emotional states, unquestioned beliefs and assumptions affect the quality of our work. As such, heartfelt positivity is a matter of intense self-reflexivity, not only in terms of how we are situated in the world as knowing subjects, but how we are in active engagement with the world. Or rather, in terms of posthumanist philosophy, we are part of the world in its continuous reconfiguration, already entangled with it and, as such, what we choose to create and how we choose to interact with the world has concrete material consequences (Barad 2007, Bennett 2010).

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And so, while the shift I propose – to look for joy as we look for pain – may be small, it requires that we question the validity of the common-sense assumptions we have about human beings, life and the world. In doing so, I combine posthumanist philosophy, positive psychology and the scientific study of mindfulness in order to build a new methodology and ultimately a new form of inquiry for the field of IR.

## **Posthumanism and Positive Psychology**

Posthumanism is a philosophy that compels us to rethink the validity of both anti-humanist and anti-foundationalist world-views that guide both positivist and post-positivist research agendas. Posthumanism creates a new onto-epistemology by building on the philosophical implications of new physics and new biology (Coole and Frost 2010) and brings us back to metaphysical questions of the nature of matter as well as nature of knowing and being. What Posthumanism does is challenge the anthropocentric idea that human beings are in the world having the sole birthright for knowledge. Instead, it calls for seeing the aliveness and pluripotency of matter, seeing nature in a process of active engagement of knowing and being of the world. Thus, knowing is understood as an active engagement, or communication of the world between its parts, which need not be human (Barad 2007). In creating heartfelt positivity as a new methodology, I draw on Barad's conceptualization of agential realism, which states that human beings are part of the intra-activity of the world and not independent particles or situated subjects in the world that is somehow ontologically separate or different. Yet, there is aliveness to the intra-activity of the world, an agency of the world that never ends.

The turnaround which positive psychology proposes, on the other hand, does not as such require a new epistemology, but it shares the same conviction as posthumanism that we have a lot to gain when we let go of a cynical attitude to life, politics and the world. The basic idea of positive psychology is that we should systematically study human well-being and what makes individuals and societies thrive, as well as create new understandings of happiness. As such, Posthumanist philosophy and positive psychology share the same understanding that we have been too quick to give up on human nature and that our analysis is misguided if we see (human) life as ontologically frail, vulnerable and linearly constricted by outside conditions.

Positive psychology also creates new understanding of what happiness and well-being are. In feminist IR we also tend to hold onto outdated and under-theorized conceptualizations of happiness and well-being. These include, for example, the action-tendency theory of emotions which sees positive emotions leading to inactivity (and thus not important), or psychoanalytical conceptualizations of happiness, which sees happiness and joy as a form of ignorance (and thus some form of denial of the hard reality of life). However, if we hold onto these beliefs, we stop our inquiry and create a limited or even slightly lopsided picture of human life. We believe somehow that suffering is more real and more important, and that joy is only fluff or a dangerous diversion (Peterson 2006).

Yet the pioneering work of Barbara Fredrickson (2001) shows how the above common-sense assumptions about positive emotions are fundamentally flawed. According to her extensive studies of the relevance of positive emotions, she has shown that cultivating emotions such as joy, amusement, compassion, serenity and love broadens and builds life experience in the longer term. Cultivating positive emotions through the practice of loving-kindness meditation, the cultivation of an open-hearted positive approach to life, and the practice of gratitude enhances creativity, clarity and the ability for novel insight, while building resilience and relationships. Thus the practice of positive emotions enables one to bounce back from life's challenges more easily and increases overall well-being.

## **Heartfelt Positivity**

Heartfelt positivity is indeed about heartfelt positivity and not 'positive thinking'. In other words, it does not mean that only positive things happens, or that cultivating positive emotions leads to getting what we (think) we want. Quite the contrary, it is like the practice of mindfulness, a matter of befriending the present moment in an active way (Kabat-Zinn 2003). It is a matter of being open to the present moment with a sense of presence and acceptance, instead of mindlessly reacting to the present moment based on past conditioning or a belief of how things should be. The great paradox of an open-hearted approach to the present moment is that this allows for better, more efficient and ethical

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action.

In *Joy and IR*, I show how joy, amusement, forgiveness and heartfelt positivity are lived and experienced in war-time situations. Through a range of materials such as testimonies, biographies, fiction and film I show how positive emotions matter and what kind of action a heartfelt positive approach to life allows in extreme conditions. We have a lot to learn from the experiences of people who thrive in hard times and who act ethically with compassion and kindness in situations which we believe are paralyzing or constricting. We can begin to redesign our research questions, when we allow ourselves to recognize the fullness of life experience. We could, for example, study the gender-specificity of ethical action in war and crisis management, instead of focusing only on gender-specificity of failure. We could create our research design so that it focuses on how people are able to create meaningful lives and new communities when outside conditions such as war, neoliberalist restructuring or climate change, lead to a fundamental change of the 'local'.

## Conclusion

Taking the first steps to shift our line of inquiry towards recognizing the fullness of human experience, the inherent aliveness and pluripotency of life, may take a bit of courage, as it requires also letting go of the familiar anti-humanist assumptions that have tied us into an ontology of suffering, frailty and scarcity. Although this old paradigm has limited our perception, it may still provide a comfortable and safe place for an academic to be. However, we have a lot to gain when we open ourselves to the fullness of life and the world in its continuous reconfiguration. As we begin to cultivate an open-hearted and curious approach to our research, we will be able to create more ethical and responsible scholarship, engage mindfully in our scholarly communication and perhaps, in small ways, also ease suffering in and of the world.

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Elina Penttinen is a University Lecturer specializing in International Relations at the School of Management, University of Tampere, Finland. Her recent publications include *Joy and International Relations: a new methodology* (Routledge 2013), *Posthumanism and Feminist International Relations, in Politics and Gender, March 2013*, and "Heartfelt positivity as an orthogonal approach to gender, agency and political violence: reading of the film *Stormheart*." In Åhäll, Linda and Laura J. Shepherd (eds.) *Gender, Agency and Political Violence. Palgrave (2012)*. Her research interests include posthumanist philosophy, feminist theory, war and security studies as well as global political economy. Elina Penttinen is also active in creating new practices for academic scholarship, by teaching how the practice of mindfulness can enhance academic research. Her workshops on creative analytic writing have been highly appreciated by post-graduate students.

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