Embracing Kindness: Transforming Difficult Emotions in IR Classroom

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Frustration, anxiety, depression and fear, these are some of the emotions that students in International Relations (IR) named to describe their feelings after studying International Relations for two to three years. Intent on finding solutions to the world's most complex and pertinent problems, such as war, global economic disparity and climate change, they often expressed disappointment with IR as an academic discipline, suggesting that it seemed oddly disinterested in imagining sustainable solutions. What they discovered was that IR was a world of its own, more involved with abstract theorizing, internal debates, and policing the boundaries around what counts as a relevant question to engage with.

For years I tried to make the students fall in love with IR theory, because I had fallen in love with it myself. I could see the beauty and challenge involved in engaging with the range of perspectives that IR offered in order to understand how the world political concretized in everyday lives (Penttinen 2008, 2013). For me the passion was to play with social and political theory as material for creative expression. In this process, especially feminist, queer and postmodernist approaches had opened space in political and social sciences and in IR, to engage fully in the creative process of research (see e.g. Sylvester 2002, Enloe 2004, Weber 2009, Shapiro 2011, Shepherd 2012). I was surprised to find the level of disconnection in the classroom. As a remedy, I tried to introduce more intricate and complex approaches to the study of global restructuring, war and militarism, violence and gender in order to enhance student's understanding of the entanglement of the personal and the political. But nothing worked. I realized that I was doing the students a dis-service, instead of feeding more theory and more creative forms of analysis in IR, I needed to address the real felt sense of disconnection between IR theory, and the suffering of the world that had drawn them into studying this field of inquiry in the first place.

The epiphany for me was when I realized that it was not IR theory or scientific inquiry as such that was the problem, but rather the unquestioned ontological assumptions which drive our inquiry; namely an anti-humanist conceptualization of human beings and problem-oriented world-view (Penttinen 2013 ch 2). In other words, the implicit, unquestioned assumptions of the discipline are that human beings are vulnerable and weak or prone to evil, greed and hatred if not controlled and restrained by government, and these foundations do not leave much room to discuss how human beings are also capable of compassion, friendliness and the experience of great well-being. Moreover, as we focus on what is wrong in the world, and further what is wrong in the analysis of problems, we enter into a cycle of problem-making. It is hard to see beyond the problems and suffering of the world, and in turn we begin to believe that problems are all there is. This is also called the negativity bias, because negative emotions feel more strongly, it seems that they are more real than positive emotions (Fredrickson 2001). Although these beliefs are not actively enforced in IR research as the focus is on macro level politics and not individual subjects, the hidden assumptions are made more powerful by the fact they are not openly discussed, but rather assumed as shared common sense.

Challenging this anti-humanist conception of human beings can open up the possibility of questioning what other personal beliefs or common sense assumptions we hold onto that are not absolutely true about our world, or ourselves. Moreover, it can elucidate how these beliefs and attitudes contribute to suffering in the forms of fear, anxiety and a sense of hopelessness in the IR classroom. Oftentimes I have noticed that students do not lack the

intellectual capacity to make sense of complex theories, but rather it is the fear of criticism, and insecurity as a writer and a creator in IR that prevents them from engaging fully in research projects or discussions in class. These can include fears about speaking in public, not trusting their supervisors to be kind and constructive, and not trusting their ability to write well. However, most importantly, the lack of tools that IR offers to alleviate the suffering and the problems the students care about may result in them losing a sense of meaning and purpose in their studies. If IR is only about abstract theorizing, then why bother, after all the world is going to hell anyway, if that is, we believe what IR is telling us about the state of the world.

In feminist methodology the practice of self-reflectivity (see e.g. Ackerly and True 2010, Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002) refers to the significance of recognizing how our own social situatedness as researchers in terms of gender, race, age, class and cultural backgrounds, influence the practice of research. How we are situated affects how we perceive the world and what we deem as important. In practice this means paying attention to how our class, cultural backgrounds and privileges enable and restrict specific forms of access to information and mobility, or how our own social subjectivity comes to matter in research relationships; for example in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, we would apply reflectivity in the practice of writing and representation of the research data, that is, how we write the lives and experiences of the people and social groups we have studied in ethically sustainable ways.

The practice of self-reflectivity which I propose in *Joy and International Relations: a New Methodology* (2013), takes this process one step further. In light of recent research in positive psychology (Seligman and Chiksentmihaliy 2000, Fredrickson 2001) and scientific study of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2003, Brown &al 2007a, 2007b) our own thoughts, emotions, feelings states and implicit assumptions matter in what we perceive and how we react to others, and to the different situations in which we find ourselves. Acknowledging this in a class room situation can be incredibly helpful as in academia we are expected to be rational and efficient and denounce how our own feelings matter in social interactions. In academia we approach life as something which happens to other people and academics are supposed to be able to be above the messiness of it all. It can be thus confusing for students and researchers alike, when reading disturbing materials about war and violence do actually disturb us, or the dystopian world-view of security studies (Eric Van Rythoven) induces a sense of hopelessness within us, or when keeping up with the evermore increasing demands for efficiency and productivity induces stress and anxiety. This is also an ethical question for me as a teacher and author. Do I want to continue the practices in academia which increase the suffering just because that is the culture I am conditioned into and have to compete in? Or do I dare to do something different for the purpose of alleviating this suffering in the way I can by openly addressing the difficult emotions, and by assisting in the practice of holding these emotions, thoughts and feelings with compassion, allow them to transform into a sense of relief and perhaps even into joy and eagerness.

This practice requires indeed that we no longer suppress our anger, fear and anxiety, for it will only turn into hostility towards others and create more of the same. If we bring open-hearted, non-judgmental awareness to these feeling states they begin to dissolve. As the spiritual leader and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2012) instructs, the processing of fear begins by detonating the bomb that ticks within ourselves, after which we can help others to detonate the bombs of anger and fear that tick within them. This is what practice of mindfulness meditation is about.

Mindfulness involves the practice of being present in an open-hearted curiosity. It is a way of befriending the present moment and letting whatever is there to be there. In other words, it is a practice in which we welcome the present moment without pushing away the negative emotions, sensations, or feeling states or without clinging on to positive emotions. This practice of paying attention to the movement of the breath, physical sensations, emotions, feelings, thoughts and sounds, is done with the intention of compassion, and without any agenda or goal to achieve anything particular, such as relaxation or feeling good. With practice, it is possible to come to a deep realization of the continuous change and movement of feelings and thoughts and thus open more space around the difficult sensation. The practice of mindfulness is indeed a great paradox (Kabat-Zinn 2003). In practicing non-judgmental awareness without force it is possible to gain clarity and act mindfully in changing circumstances. In letting go of demands that the present moment should be different or more to our liking, we can see all the possibilities that are already there.

I have integrated moments of mindfulness practice in classroom settings teaching International Relations and research methodologies. In these contexts I have been able to observe the shift that takes place even after a few

minutes of sitting. The practice enhances the quality of the communication between the students as well as their problem solving capabilities, insightfulness and self-confidence. Cultivating present moment awareness begins by an invitation to sit in a way that embodies dignity, self-appreciation and compassion. This invitation is already radical, as I invite the students to sit in a way that signifies dignity to them in this moment, and thus to take a different posture to that which the implicit cultural and gendered assumptions direct students to embody in a space such as a classroom or a lecture hall. In a short period of sitting with dignity and paying attention to the breath moving in and out of the body, the movement of emotions, feelings and bodily sensations, decreases the stress levels and brings harmony and presence. This transformation is tangible. The mind that was elsewhere in the past or in the future is brought into the present moment, the topic at hand and in the interaction with the people who are really physically there. Restlessness and anxiousness are gone. The practice of giving appreciation to oneself generates appreciation for others. It flows into the way conversations about difficult issues are formed and how students respond to each other, even when they disagree.

I want to emphasize here in line with Kabat-Zinn (2003) that compassion and cultivation of mindfulness is not simply a great idea, or a matter of intellectual understanding. The benefits of mindfulness meditation and cultivation of loving –kindness have been widely documented across health, neuro-sciences and psychology (e.g. Brown & al 2003, Cohn &al 2009, Hölzel & al 2011, Fredrickson and Losada 2005). It is the practice of mindfulness meditation, mindful listening, and mindful communication which yields the real results. Practicing meditation and cultivation of positive emotions does not mean happiness ever after. Yet what can be expected is the sense of space around the difficult and often conflicting emotions and experience. It is possible to breathe into the pain and embrace it like a loving parent embraces and angry or fearful child. Holding painful emotions with love instead of pushing them away allows for these emotions to run their course and perhaps transform them into a sense of ease and relief.

Being present with ourselves is a radical act of love (Kabat-Zinn 2005). It is in opening of the heart that enables us to embrace our own fears and anger with compassion, relieving the need to hurt others. From a place of loving kindness we can recognize how we are already entangled with the world and that everything we say and do counts. Cynicism instead feeds into denial of our own agency and responsibility to others. It brings with it false sense of disconnection from those who are sitting next to us in the classroom or who are far away from in distant places. The practice of mindfulness enables us to recognize our inherent inter-being and inter-connectedness with others (Kwee 2012). Thus, the practice is not just about individual well-being and peace of mind. By practicing compassion and kindness to ourselves, we can meet the suffering and fear of others with compassion and thus generate greater social harmony. The way I see it, this practice can also enable us to connect to the meaning and purpose of studying and researching IR since it is a desire to understand the causes of war, conflict and economic disparity that lie at the heart of this discipline.

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