

Feeling For the Game: How Emotions Shape Listening in Peacebuilding Partnerships

Written by Pernilla Johansson

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“Most painful [in the partnership evaluation], was to hear that we don’t ask their [local partners’] advice, because we think we do it all the time, and base everything we do on what they tell us.” – INGO practitioner during staff discussion on partnership”.^[1] This quote from a professional practitioner in an international non-governmental organization (INGO) expresses both a central peacebuilding norm and the difficulty of its implementation. The norm is that of equal partnerships between international actors and their local partners^[2], in which local ownership is key. In other words, internationals should listen to their partners’ advice and “base everything [they] do” on what locals tell them. The difficulty is that their local peacebuilding partners do not experience being listened to. On the contrary, they think internationals do not care for their expertise or opinions. In this paper, I address the gap between the norm and its implementation by examining what may have been overlooked by the reader, the beginning of the quote.

There, the speaker states that this gap is nothing less than “painful”. Just as this expression of emotion may have been overlooked by the reader, it was ignored by the practitioners themselves– and pushed aside by my interviewees and me – as beside the “real” point in conversations about partnership. Experiencing and interpreting emotions are simply not considered relevant to being a competent peacebuilding practitioner. On the contrary, I argue that paying attention to the emotions practitioners experience during their daily doings helps us understand the implementation gap and to identify obstacles to *receptive listening*, that is, listening likely to be felt by their local partners. This is because emotions affect how one perceives things and can process what is heard. To make this argument, I draw on new cognitive research combining social science and neuroscience to understand listening in political dialogue. Finally, I use this to analyze empirical data from interviews and observation with nineteen practitioners from three peacebuilding INGOs and their donors. Analyzing the tensions, exhaustion and anxiety experienced by practitioners reveals contradictions and taboos that they must navigate daily, as well as characteristics of the peacebuilding field affecting the “game”^[3] played by practitioners through their everyday practices. These findings help us understand how to facilitate receptive listening, which can contribute to equalizing partnerships and thus to more effective peacebuilding.

Why Such Bad Listeners?

That local ownership is needed for peacebuilding success is a consensus finding across opposing research strands. Research criticizing “liberal peacebuilding” has shown that local responses to interventions are strong enough to produce “hybrid” rather than “liberal” forms of peace, partly because of internationals’ lack of contextual knowledge, unrealistic time frames, and weak legitimacy (Richmond and Mitchell 2012). Meanwhile, liberal peacebuilding’s proponents acknowledge that local buy-in shapes the effects of post-conflict elections and other measures, as interventions often reproduce colonial relations (Paris 2004).

This consensus also characterizes policy. Local ownership has been a priority of high-level conferences on development funding since Rome 2002, as “aid was not producing (sic!) the development results everyone wanted

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to see” (OECD 2017). The present process is even called a “Global Partnership”, with the most recent outcome document from Nairobi 2016 specifying that “the donor-recipient relationships of the past have been replaced by approaches that view all stakeholders as equal and interdependent partners” (UNDP 2017).

Finally, there is strong evidence that practitioners are also on board. In the tellingly named report *Time to Listen* (Anderson et al. 2012), where thousands of development and peacebuilding practitioners are interviewed, as well as in the ethnography *Peaceland* of hundreds of peacebuilding internationals (Autessere 2014), the norm is never questioned. More in-depth investigations confirm this norm as explicitly held (Cohen 2013), including my own, where all the INGO practitioners I interviewed, as well as their three organizations, strive for equal partnerships with local actors.

Despite this overwhelming normative support, simply willing partnerships to be equal does not make them so in practice. As the introductory quote illustrates, while this practitioner thinks they “base everything we do on what [local partners] tell us”, their partners think that the INGO is uninterested in their advice. This is not a unique case. In fact, all three studies of practitioners cited above find that the greatest concern of local actors is the perceived disinterest of their international partners to take their knowledge and experience seriously, that is, to *listen* to them and take what they say into account.

Thus, there is a gap between the norm that internationals should listen and its implementation. Examining what practitioners do in their daily work provides pieces of the puzzle, which is why I use this practice-based approach. Autessere, for example, forcefully demonstrates that many ordinary “practices, habits, and narratives” (2014, 1) of international peacebuilders, such as recruiting only international staff as managers and traveling by car instead of by foot, lead to fewer opportunities to listen to local expertise. To such studies of what practitioners say and do, this study adds an examination of how they feel about it and why that matters. My gradual realization that a lot of emotions were expressed in interviews but routinely pushed aside, forced me to dig deeper into what role (if any) emotions could have in listening practices. The next section therefore presents emerging research establishing that emotions are crucial for *receptive listening*, not least across political status divides such as those between international and local actors.

Receptive Listening

Here, I turn to literature on listening in politics and organizations to understand what qualities would enable the (international) listener to not just endure the (local) speaker’s turn, but take in what is said to “understand differently” (Davison 1998, 68). Research shows that this is a rare occurrence. Instead, people tend to process what they hear, even opposing facts and worldviews, in ways that reinforce their beliefs. However, if local ownership is to make peacebuilding more effective in practice, internationals must listen to understand – and do – some things differently. I call this *receptive listening*, drawing on the literature below which establishes that emotions are crucial for facilitating such receptivity. In other words, while pushing emotions aside may be taken for granted by peacebuilding professionals to focus on partnership, doing so may be one reason why this partnership eludes them.

Political theorist Bickford calls listening across differences in status and resources “political listening”, which, unlike listening in private relationships, is “not primarily a caring or amicable practice” but one that “takes conflict and differences seriously and yet allows for joint action” (1996, 2). Bickford reflects that political listening necessarily has a “receptive quality” in the sense of “an active involvement in a joint project (ibid, 144). In a “joint” peacebuilding project, internationals would be open to make changes based on what locals say, not only note their opinions. Bickford admits that receptivity is difficult to observe but insists that “most of us can recall times when we genuinely *felt* heard” (ibid 157, emphasis added). Emotions are thus central to the speaker’s experience of receptive listening across differences in status and resources. Two recent studies particularly examine the emotions of the *listener*.

First, Beausoleil (2014) follows the development of an interactive performance on homelessness, which managed to move seasoned representatives from established institutions out of their rut of ineffective activities into new understandings and cooperative relationships – similar to peacebuilding actors’ aims. Drawing on political theory and neuroscience establishing that affect is a vital part of cognition, Beausoleil argues that the project’s affective

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elements enabled receptive listening, that is, helped *move* participants from their previous positions. She also shows the importance of competent mediation of such elements, as they may otherwise lead to defensiveness and closure.

Second, Romanowska (2014) follows two management courses, one renowned traditional program using standard models and one art-based program exposing managers to (often upsetting) emotional experiences, finding striking differences. While the “traditional” managers afterwards rated themselves as more able to handle complex situations and ethical dilemmas, their co-workers both disagreed in qualitative assessments and exhibited higher levels of stress hormones. On the contrary, the “art” managers rated themselves more humbly than before, while their co-workers both estimated them as more able and likely to act in difficult work situations and exhibited lower levels of stress hormones. The way they experienced and acknowledged affect thus enabled the “art managers” to listen more receptively and act more responsively in relation to their lower-status co-workers, qualities that could shift peacebuilding partnerships towards more equality.

These studies suggest that international peacebuilders can improve their receptivity to local expertise by acknowledging the emotions they already experience and developing strategies of mediating affect. The next section therefore examines some of those emotions in more depth.

Feel for the Game: Which Feelings, Which Game?

Asking peacebuilding practitioners how they go about their day aims to get at their common-sense “dos and don’ts”. Experienced practitioners in any field develop a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1990, 66-68), a practical knowledge, a sense of what you are supposed to do – and not do – to be considered a competent “player” by other actors (ibid 140). Being considered incompetent by partners and donors involve serious risks to INGOs’ abilities to exist and carry out their work. Today, treating emotions as beside the point may be considered competent peacebuilding, which is probably why my participants (and I) did exactly this in our interactions. However, gradually I realized that bubbling up in side comments, coffee talk, and body language, in long sighs, wry smiles, and clenched teeth, winks, laughter, and excited exclamations, seemed to be another story about the feel for the game, that is, about their *feelings* for the game.

Therefore, below I ask what happens if we treat those emotions as part of the game and the requirement to hide them as an unspoken rule that is taken-for-granted today but may (perhaps must) change tomorrow. What can they reveal about the peacebuilding game, or, the *two games* that I argue INGOs navigate simultaneously, the one existing today and one, partly imagined, of tomorrow? How do they shape the identities of INGOs as players in the game(s)? Below, I analyze three such emotions: The tension of walking a tightrope, exhaustion, and the anxiety of the unsaid, arguing that they derive both from *things INGOs must do* (juggling contradictions) and *things they must not do* (disrupt power taboos) to demonstrate their competence.

Tension of Walking a Tightrope: The Capacity Contradiction

First, INGOs must juggle what I call the *capacity contradiction*. On the one hand, they must constantly praise their local partners’ capacity. Almost all my interviewees said partners have “Lots!” of capacity, or that they “know their villages”, and “have the passion /.../ and the will to change”. Praising their partners shows INGOs as capable players who embrace equal partnership and know how to find “good” locals[4] – a vital skill where inaccessible and violent contexts make it unclear whether local actors are capable, well-meaning, or even fraudulent. Convincing donors your INGO successfully partners with good locals is necessary, as donors increasingly prefer to fund local actors directly to strengthen local ownership.

On the other hand, INGOs must constantly convince donors that they provide “added value” to directly funding locals, usually through capacity building. Unlike locals, INGOs have, as one participant said, “the methods /.../ the capacity, the *how* to change /.../ at a structural level”. To counter common criticisms that internationals bring ready-made modules of “peace from IKEA” (Mac Ginty 2011), INGOs emphasize their long-term partnerships that help them know exactly what locals need. This motivates (more funding for) a substantial presence in the country, or as one participant emphatically exclaimed, “I do *not understand* those working with partners at a distance /.../ how can

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you know /.../ it's so much about the *daily contact*".

In my interpretation, the capacity contradiction makes practitioners tensely walk a tightrope between claiming that partners already have yet still need essential peacebuilding capacity. They handle this by careful wording, but moving along such a narrow path of possibilities is not conducive to receptive listening for what "we" could learn from "them". This is illustrated by the surprised and incoherent answers I got to the question "what can/do/have *you* learn(ed) from your partners". For example, one participant fell silent and then exclaimed "Wow! That was almost hard to answer, because you just take it as a given!" I do not mean that INGOs think that they are superior, on the contrary, that it is unthought, taken for granted, that learning only goes from international to local. Falling off the tightrope, could mean insulting partners by suggesting they know "too little" or losing donor funding if partners know "too much" to need INGOs. Conversely, many participants expressed that long-term commitment and flexibility by donors widen the path for listening and experimentation.

Exhaustion: The Authenticity Contradiction

Second, INGOs must juggle what I call the *authenticity contradiction*. On the one hand, they must demonstrate being authentic representatives of the "grassroots" in conflict-affected countries. Donors expect this of INGOs, saying things like "all our [INGO] partners have their base [local partners] out in the rural areas". Grassroots connections strengthen local ownership, but are also an integral part of many INGOs' identities as civil society organizations mobilizing people and speaking truth to power. In my interviews, INGOs express authenticity by indicating their close relationship with their local partners, by as quoted earlier, "bas[ing] everything we do on what they say" or having "daily contact".

On the other hand, INGOs must demonstrate they are authentically professional, usually by producing a staggering array of bureaucratic documents. Much has been written about the explosion of project management models but perhaps the demands are best conveyed by a participant whom I quote at length:

"I think [donors] generally are getting more and more demanding. They want more of everything. /.../ our resource mobilization strategy, our formats for organizational assessment /.../ a detailed activity plan four years ahead /.../, all the documents, everything has to be documented [but] they don't want to pay anything for the coordination and administration /.../ and then they all have their own online systems too /.../ where our partners also have to fill in the forms and upload the right documents [looks up, smiles a little, sighs] it's micro-management. It's ok that they want to know, but maybe they're asking about the wrong things."

If INGOs handle the capacity contradiction by carefully treading a tightrope, they handle the authenticity contradiction much more brutally and head-on: by doing everything at the same time. The resulting exhaustion is felt across organizations, locations, and positions. One manager in an active conflict zone almost shouted "No! No!" to talking again until I said the magic words "next year". It was mid-November but already "crazy before Christmas." Another, headquarter-based, manager saw his/her main role as lifting the "pain, very real pain" of prioritizing among life-and-death issues from the staff who took turns being on (or over) the brink of burn-out. This contradiction creates many concrete obstacles. Being tired is simply not conducive for being receptive to unexpected information, such as results outside the pre-defined boxes in the detailed reporting formats. When developing "resource mobilization policy" INGOs cannot simultaneously listen to partners – whose actual needs do not matter as INGOs must teach them how to "fill in the forms and upload the right documents". Finally, in an ironic catch 22, professional INGOs look less authentically grassroots, leading donors to fund local NGOs directly although, as one donor said, for "anything that has to do with funds, [INGOs] come in very handy".

Not One, But Two Peacebuilding Games

Taking emotions seriously thus shows that INGOs are too busy and circumscribed to hear much that needs them to "understand differently". It also shows that what is considered competent peacebuilding is not only defined in a struggle between players within a game, but between *two games*, a present and a future one. In the old, hierarchical game, competent INGOs know more and control partners, whereas in the emerging, more equal game, competent

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INGOs listen to and learn from their partners in joint peacebuilding projects. The need to constantly do the right things to demonstrate competence in the old game hinders INGOs from developing the skills, such as receptive listening, necessary for the future game. In addition, there are also things INGOs must *not do*, such as disrupting what I call power taboos.

Anxiety of the Unsaid: The “How Will I Know?” Power Taboo

On the surface, INGO practitioners readily joked about what money does in partner relations. I only had to mention I was studying the “relationship with partners, connected to money” as I was passing a senior manager in the corridor of an INGO, to hear that person laugh and yell while rushing off “without the money they’re GONE!”. However, the interviews revealed that at another level money issues are infused with tension, creating an anxiety of the unsaid, things that cannot be talked about. They are treated as taboos and handled as if they do not exist, to uphold the appearance of equality demanded by peacebuilding discourse. Disrupting power taboos risks INGOs’ existence as players in peacebuilding. Therefore, INGOs are not likely to be receptive to hear things that may cause such a disruption.

The power taboo presented here, between INGOs and their local partners, is labeled “How will I know?” (after the Whitney Houston song[5]), as it forces INGOs to live with the anxiety of not knowing what partners “really” think. It first appeared in a particular interview. After a long conversation about how the INGO and their local partners had gradually developed a mutual understanding, one participant paused and then said “it would be good if you could talk to our partners, to find out what they think about us”. When I asked why, s/he explained that the partners were always “so positive” which was “not realistic”. I continued to probe, expecting a return to our previous discussion of money/power, but s/he was quiet, and then said that perhaps it was an expression of respect. In another interview, one participant, reasoned back and forth regarding how their INGO could take credit or not: “We might say ‘[Our INGO] and partners have influenced something’...but how did that happen? Did *we* do it, but it sounds better that they were with us, or...did we go to Brussels *together*? Or are we just [joining *them*] to give ourselves credit?” The impossibility of simply asking is characteristic of a taboo; action is restricted by social custom, an unspoken rule of the game.

The “How will I know?” taboo thus causes anxiety about activities as well as about deeper issues of INGOs’ identities. As one participant said “[w]e talk about partners, they talk about donors”. Despite the capacity building and long-term relations, they worried whether locals would even partner with them without the money. When partners are so capable that the partnership is “just money”, INGOs get anxious they are not “adding value” but act like “donors”. Some wished for agreements where locals sign the donor contract, just to find out “if we have any added value – do they want us?” The anxiety experienced in relation to what partners may think but do not say caused participants to stay away from certain discussions, not hearing how they could change peacebuilding to become more effective. The need to act as *if* the new game is already in town makes internationals tip-toe around power taboos, as talking like a donor would reveal the INGOs incompetence under the new rules. Thereby they were not able to learn what their partners thought– from basic things such as “did we [do this] together” to deep identity issues such as if the INGOs even *are* partners rather than donors.

Ambiguous – or Superfluous?

In avoiding power taboos INGOs keep their identity ambiguous between being “donors” and/or “partners”. This allows them to operate simultaneously in the two games. Not committing too strongly to equality enables them to handle the existing old-game rules for material relations. These rules demand that INGOs control how locals use money and run their organizations, even though such practices reproduce the hierarchy that led to ineffective peacebuilding in the first place. The need to competently perform practices from the old game while credibly participating in new-game discourse means an ambiguous identity has advantages.

However, this ambiguity also takes its toll as illustrated by the anxiety expressed, not least in the constant back-and-forth on terminology. One participant explicitly demanded “a different name, a hierarchical name because these are not partnerships, but highly structured partnerships (sic!) for delivering /.../ It’s misleading. It assumes partners are

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doing it together. It's a question of clarification and classification." Another succinctly said "we struggle a lot with this, these two hats". While there are advantages of acting as "either-or" depending on the situation, it also risks making INGOs "neither-nor" and completely superfluous: As soon as locals are acceptably trained, donors will fund them directly. Therefore, rather than accepting ambiguity, I argue that reducing it enables INGO to move forward, towards the new game.

Explicitly prioritizing a partner role could better prepare INGOs for the new game they aim to bring about. While ignoring emotions may be a winning strategy for "donors" who do not need to listen to "recipients", the analysis shows that acknowledging and handling emotions are useful skills for equal "partners" in joint peacebuilding projects.

Conclusion: Get Emotional-Political or Get Lost

In this paper, I have addressed the puzzle why peacebuilding internationals are so bad at listening to their local partners even though there is a strong normative consensus that they should. To do so, I have drawn on research establishing the importance of emotions for receptive listening, and analyzed practitioners' experiences of emotions in their everyday work. Today, emotions are rarely seen as part of being a competent peacebuilding professional. This is unfortunate as internationals need to listen to their local partners to make peacebuilding more effective, and receptive listening requires affective elements. Even though my interviews and observations show that practitioners experience a lot of emotions in connection to their daily work, they routinely push this aside as beside the point in discussions about how to be a good partner to local peacebuilding actors.

By doing the opposite, that is, investigating emotions expressed by practitioners, I identify tensions, exhaustion, and anxiety caused by the contradictions and power taboos practitioners must handle and how these daily place concrete obstacles in the way of receptive listening to partners. The analysis also reveals that practitioners are torn between *two* peacebuilding games, where demonstrating competence in the old, hierarchical game hinders them from developing skills, like receptive listening, needed in the emerging, more equal one. In addition, navigating these contradictory games tempts INGOs to keep their identity ambiguous between donor and partner, which this risks making them superfluous players who lose their reason to exist. While some argue that INGOs *should* work themselves out of business, research indicates that today's problems would just be transferred to the local partners who get the donor funding instead. Therefore, I argue that the potential for INGOs as civil society organizations partnering across North-South divides lies in accepting this as an explicitly political role where they take a stand regarding who they are.

Inevitably, getting emotional-political involves risks for INGOs, such as letting go of some control to give space for "understanding differently", or that the change itself may lead to emotional turbulence. However, even this analysis hints that INGOs already have experiences that can help them deal with these risks, like reversed lead roles in formal agreements and more long-term donor relations.

Another objection is that it may seem a silly and "self-absorbed" Western examination (Grovogui 2006) to pay attention to office politics when peacebuilding deals with wars. However, new cognitive research indicates that emotions are vital to the receptive listening necessary to do so effectively. Additionally, problematizing the INGO as the norm-setting actor rather than focus only on the actor supposed to "absorb" norms builds on research on other power hierarchies, such as patriarchy (analyzing masculinity), racism (whiteness), and heteronormativity (straightness).

Acknowledging and mediating emotions is not the only, and perhaps not the most important strategy in improving peacebuilding practice; even this analysis has touched on ideological and material explanations. However, I am proposing that taking emotional experiences seriously provide INGOs with new, indispensable analytical and practical tools to address the lack of listening that is crucial to effective peacebuilding.[6]

Notes

[1] Interviews were carried out in English, French and Swedish. To keep anonymity, I do not note which quotes were

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translated (and I use s/he and him/her).

[2] I use "international" and "local" as distinct categories although this risks reproducing present relations (Richmond and Mitchell 2012).

[3] I use "game" in Bourdieu's (1990) sense, not as playing for fun, but as when social actors are "players" organized around common stakes, trying to achieve their goals and simultaneously struggling for positions and resources in a social "field".

[4] See Kappler 2012 for further discussion on internationals' constructions of "good" and "bad" locals.

[5] The lyrics continue "How will I know if he really loves me?" and then list ways to find out without asking directly, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/whitneyhouston/howwilliknow.html> (last accessed February 15, 2017).

[6] Transparency note: I am on (unpaid) study leave from one of the researched INGOs.

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