

# Creativity and the Study of Emotions

A Perspective of an International Relations Scholar

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## Abstract

The article discusses creativity from a methodological perspective. It takes the point of view of an International Relations scholar commenting on the constraints and possibilities of creativity in incorporating emotions, the sublime and subliminal in academic research. The article uses examples from a study of violence and compassion in Chechnya and examines emotions and open-mindedness as means to tap into something deeper than what the intellectualist model of thinking encourages. It is argued that by welcoming emotions into the field of human sciences the researcher can better harness creative sensibilities.

**Keywords** Chechnya, compassion, emotions, International Relations, mindfulness, politics, sublime, subliminal, war

## Cultivating and Expressing Creativity

It is a warm August evening in Helsinki in 2013. I am waiting for *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds* to come on stage at the Flow Festival. Finally the show begins and it does not take long for the serene atmosphere to transform into one of pure drama. The audience looks hyp-

noticed as the singing and playing intensifies by the second. “Can you feel my heartbeat?” Cave cries out and reaches to the front row of the audience with his hand. Cave is terribly convincing and that is terribly inspiring. I never expected that the social scientist in me would be awakened by the concert but it happens and I can see something clearly. I see the artistic creativity represented by Cave’s performance as something to strive for in science. The concert reinforces for me the view that science is in fact a form of art.

Creativity goes hand in hand with courage. This means that in order to move people, one should be concerned not only with cultivating creativity, but also with performing it, sharing one’s innovations. Unfortunately the academic world does not always eagerly embrace passionate outbursts that which place trust not only in the head but also in the heart. Tim Ingold (2013), in a recent interview, stated that “much academic writing has become soulless, devoid of passion and feeling”. He continues:

Worse still, many colleagues feel bullied by the pressures of research assessment and peer review into adopting such sterile forms of writing, for fear that their work will not otherwise be accepted. This pressure has been compounded by the tyranny of ever-lengthening bibliographies. [...] As for impact and indexing, the whole point of research in the humanities and the social sciences is that it can transform lives. That is where its impact lies.

I work in the field of International Relations (IR), in which scholars are trapped in judgemental evaluations and interdisciplinary hostility and competition. IR is probably not the only discipline where hostility breeds. Then how does the competitive environment influence our performance? Does fear and anxiety encourage creativity? Do the pressures of following a school of thought or hiding behind the big names of science encourage innovative and creative research? I believe not. Elina Penttinen (2013) reflects on the matter in terms of *mindfulness* as a practice of scholarly work – alignment with the present moment (instead of ego), open-hearted curiosity and nonjudgmental awareness; this contrasts with *mindlessness* – judgement based on an evaluation, acting on our beliefs rather than that which arises of the present moment, confusion and hos-

tility towards other researchers. Judgmental attitude which springs from one's constructed belief system can easily kill creativity, especially in the case of young researchers, who then then turn to pleasing the reviewers.

Now that I have pointed out the challenges posed by the academic world to the researcher who tries to be creative, I will continue to encourage the researcher to harness her creative sensibilities. What I propose is a research agenda which emerges from an open-minded approach and taps levels of consciousness beyond the conscious mind. I refer to the study of emotions and the concepts of the *sublime* and the *subliminal*. I do not discuss the meaning of creativity at length, but remain at a very practical level, putting forward ideas on how to inspire and be inspired in research in the social sciences.

### On Emotions

I use the study of emotions as an example of a research topic which challenges the intellectualist model of thinking and suggests an entanglement of the researcher and the world she studies. I have been studying the two wars and their aftermaths in Chechnya which took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. What I have come to understand in a study which concerns themes such as compassion and violence is that as much as emotions matter in politics, they matter every bit as much in research. Emotions are in fact the very basis of our conscious minds: our self-perception, thinking and decision-making<sup>2</sup>. Emotions in research affect the individual's imagination and sensibility, and they are at the very heart of the question of creativity and the cranial processes from which both originate: the *subliminal*, that is below the threshold of conscious perception. To use Floyd Merrell's (2003, p. xiii) words, this means *subjective qualitative sensing* which springs from the fact that the world is every bit ambiguous and characterised by non-linear processes.

In IR the study of emotions is only beginning to gain ground<sup>3</sup>. According to Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison (2008, p. 387), "Although the role of emotions has been debated extensively among philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, few if any of these insights have entered the study of politics and reconciliation". One reason why emotions have been largely ignored in IR is the difficulty of inter-disciplinary dialogue, which would be

necessary if the rationality model of human behaviour is to be challenged. There are exceptions, such as the study of *neuropolitics* by William E. Connolly (2002), a daring venture into the neurosciences by a political scientist. I will come back to neuropolitics later.

Bleiker and Hutchison (2008, p. 387) write about the need to study the role of emotions in order to establish a culture of healing and reconciliation, arguing that “there is evidence to suggest that an active engagement with emotions can actually be a source of political imagination, inspiration and hope”. When studying emotions in a violent conflict such as that in Chechnya, compassion is not the first thing that comes to mind, but rather emotions such as fear, anger and resentment (see Petersen 2011). Moreover, experiences in war are most often understood in terms of trauma. Ordinary people are described as traumatised and fragile, but often so are the soldiers, rebels and criminals who perpetrate violent acts. But even if trauma is the dominant experience of war, this does not mean there is no room for compassion. By confining human experience in war to trauma and anger, we reinforce a very limited view of human capacities and ignore the power of self-healing and healing through compassionate exchanges. This is how the murdered journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya (2003) describes a compassionate encounter in the midst of war in Chechnya:

Rosita was taken from her home at dawn, while everyone was sleeping. Her home was surrounded and she wasn't given time to dress properly. They threw her into a pit on the military base.

“They shoved and kicked you?”

“Yes, just as they always do.”

Her legs drawn up under herself, Rosita sat on the earthen floor of the pit for twelve days. The soldier guarding the pit took pity on her one night and threw her a piece of carpet.

“I put it under me. That soldier is a human being too.”  
Rosita's lips barely move. (Politkovskaya 2003, p. 48)

In this account, humanity is restored for an instant: the soldier feels pity, gives a piece of carpet to the prisoner, and Rosita sees a human being. This is an encounter that is not only personal but has wider social and political significance. Compassion is a central social emotion. Social emotions have had an evolutionary role for the human-kind in maintaining a sociocultural homeostasis, that is, structures of care and community that have been valuable for the species (see Damasio 2012, pp. 27, 292–293; Goetz et al. 2010, pp. 4–6). Compassion as a social emotion is not only a cognitive layer of consciousness. Rather, it is a corporeal experience in which mirror neurons are activated enabling a simulation of other person's body state (Damasio 2012; 126, pp. 103–104). Compassion physically *moves* us.

Rosita's story, as a representation of the social emotion of compassion, is politically produced by the war and the Russian anti-terrorist operation, and it is politically represented as an example of the realities of war. It is also a hope-inspiring story, which can be read by Russians. Also Chechens can have access to this experience through Politkovskaya's book and it can become a part of their memory. Chosen by Politkovskaya for a book that tells a very sad story, these gestures of compassion are thus exposed to the public, and remarked on by Georgi Derluguian (2003, p. 25) in the very last and most intensive words of the foreword to Politkovskaya's book: "[...] she shows us how complex and contradictory the war is – exceedingly cruel and violent yet there are sublime moments of human effort to just stay humane". The societal implications of sharing survival stories are significant, because just like memories of hatred can spread like disease so can stories of healing, forgiving and helping.

Creativity and courage are also needed when choosing the research material. For me the choice has been aesthetics, which approaches politics as *representation* in the form of images, narratives and sounds (see Bleiker 2001). When we move beyond discursive representation, such as in the example above, we can observe sound, silence and movement and use our senses more fully in the interpretative process. Using film as research material made me notice Chechen dance as a repeated theme expressing compassion as an internal and interpersonal dialogue – movement as a form of knowing through being, empowering and encouraging. Chechen dance is not a dance of war, but of peace. I saw dignity in those strong movements; dignity arising from within when, on the outside, the person

has been stripped of any semblance of it. I saw silence. There is so much expression in silence, and when it is fused with the dignified dance it creates appreciation for life. The reason why such expressions in war often go unnoticed is, first, because IR has not yet fully began appreciating aesthetics, and second, because we focus our attention more on acts of violence or acts which seem to represent reason and logic, so much that we easily miss other forms of politically significant activity. Dance might not be rational, or even consciously politically oriented, but its representations are *politics*.

Penttinen (2013, p. 13) argues that the world is not broken and waiting to be fixed: the world already contains everything. For Penttinen (2013, p. 34) the wholeness of human experience in war is best studied with an open-hearted approach to the world, one that enhances clarity, creativity and informed action. In war, human experience is not only about suffering but also joy, compassion and even humour. As a researcher I can choose to either offer advice on how to fix the world or to bring forth *possibilities and potential*, reinforcing their existence and making them visible to provide hope and inspiration. I have chosen the latter.

I believe in the methodology of Penttinen, just as I believed Nick Cave in that concert, because it touched me, not only intellectually but also on a deeper level. Mindfulness can help one to overcome the soulless research of which Ingold warns. The sort of open-mindedness Penttinen advocates gave me courage to step out of the comfort of disciplinary limitations and search for the personal, neurological and aesthetic. I became to utilise those emotions that were stirred up in me as a human being when analysing the research materials in order to broaden my vision. I was reassured that the emotions of the researcher are significant in the creative process. Rather than suppressing them for the sake of objectivity, the researcher should welcome them and take advantage of her sensibilities.

### **The Sublime and the Subliminal**

In order to better grasp the emotional states (such as trauma and compassion) relevant for research in human sciences I utilise Roland Bleiker and Martin Leet's (2011) discussion of the sublime and the subliminal in aesthetics. Referring to Kant and Burke, Bleiker and Leet explain that where beauty is associated with pleasure and comfort, the sublime refers to excitement and astonishment as well as to

awe and respect and even pain and terror. Sublime triggers powerful emotions. They cite the example of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the associated global visual representations of pain and suffering, which “superseded our understanding of the real, or at least our conception of what could, conceivably, happen”. They continue:

Terrorist attacks and other major events give rise to a range of political legitimisations that are made possible by the highly emotional and seemingly contradictory nature of the sublime. Sublime occurrences constitute a break in the normal course of affairs. They create opportunities and evoke strong responses. (Bleiker and Leet 2011, p. 719)

The sublime experience shocks us to the core, and it can be utilised in legitimising retaliation against incomprehensible evil, such as in the case of terrorism, but it can also empower us by creating a sensation of having survived a tragedy of great magnitude (see Bleiker et al. 2011, p. 721). Analogues can be found in the case of Chechnya: the hostage siege, which began on October 23 2002 at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow, was an event where spectators close and far away were shocked and amazed by what was taking place. Armed Chechens took more than 800 hostages in the theatre, demanding an end to the Second Chechen War. Yet this did not prompt as much astonishment among the public as the fact that some 130 people died – most not by the hands of the Chechen militants, but by the chemical gas pumped into the ventilation system by Russian armed forces. This is an example of experiencing a sublime sense of shock internationally caused by the drastic measures Russian authorities took to end the siege. Chechens who have directly experienced war, and survived, have gone on to live in an environment of the most horrific human rights violations. War is traumatising, but there can also be a sense of relief at having survived, as a spectator to death. People can even cease to fear death and find a sense of mission in a hostile environment, as I observed was the case for the human rights activists presented in the documentary film *Coca: the Dove from Chechnya* (Bergkraut 2005). If we take the sublime experience to represent not a fragmented view but a human experience in its wholeness, it means that even pain and terror can be empowering. This is not to justify the causing of

suffering and pain, but to try to understand the human capacities for healing.

We are challenged to interpret and understand this sublime dimension – ours and others alike when faced with events and their representations. Epistemologically we are moving in uncertain territory, yet in the realm of creativity and innovation. For Bleiker and Leet (2011, p. 722),

[t]he sublime is about events that are too overwhelming, too awe-inspiring to be adequately represented. [...] But out of this confrontation with the limits of our cognition, frightening as it may well be, emerges insight into the very nature of representation. We are forced to confront the fact that all objects and events, small or big, spectacular or daily, cannot be known as they are.

For Bleiker and Leet, a focus on the sublime is somewhat problematic, because it entails preoccupation with dramatic events and masculine and heroic features. They propose a sense of the subliminal which focuses on a more everyday enchantment with the world<sup>4</sup>. In other words, we can wonder about the world without dramatic events and shocks in our search for answers to the pressing world political challenges (Bleiker and Leet 2011, p. 728). Moving from the sublime to the subliminal also means a step beyond “the bright lights of the conscious” to such states as dreaming and wonder (Bleiker and Leet 2011; p. 714, 728). In a dream, one creates an imaginary world which represents the subliminal – life’s hopes and fears, its potential. Since the sublime involves intense emotions it is like the visible form of the mind but the subliminal is more hidden from our observation. Even if more hidden, it is possible to tap one’s own subliminal mind, reaching “beyond the threshold” as Bleiker and Leet (2011, p. 731) phrase it, in order to communicate with the lives one is studying.

The sublime and the subliminal should not be considered as opposites, but as complementary. Both concepts attempt to capture that which the intellectualist model of thinking fails to adequately acknowledge: the power of emotions. Sublime is the more evident and shocking type of emotional experience whereas subliminal is more subtle, less evident. Both are experienced in interaction with



the surrounding world. Even mindfulness as a personal or scholarly practise means cultivating a sense of interconnectedness of life, even when practised in solitude.

### Techniques of the Mind

The subliminal occupies a central role in the decision-making, perception and thinking of a human being. I want to go back to *Neuropolitics* (2002) by Connolly in order to suggest that the researchers in the human sciences can benefit from different techniques that affect the mind – its subliminal processes. Connolly (2002, p. 12) proposes *thinking* as body/brain/culture network which can be better understood by adding an appreciation of genetic endowment, image, movement, sound, rhythm, smell, touch, technique, trauma, exercise and sensibility in order to complement intellectualist models. *Thought* is multi-layered and affect-imbued, consisting of ideas in movement and energetic assemblages; these are non- or minimally ideational – the unthought (Connolly 2002, p. 111). Creativity in thought is *becoming*, or rather, *becoming with*. Referring to Deleuze, Connolly (2002, pp. 93–94) explains that thinking is an encounter between “new events and established thought-imbued conventions or between those conventions and something mute in the world that has not yet been translated (that is, lifted and altered) onto the register of thought”.

Throughout *Neuropolitics* Connolly implies that creativity and sensibility can be cultivated through techniques. Techniques of thinking which modify the body/brain connections are varied and include brain surgery, drugs, alcohol, music, lightning, studying neuroscience or philosophy, physical exercise, mental exercise and the like. Connolly (2002, p. 16) is particularly excited about studying film as a technique offering a source of insights into the interaction between perception and affective states. As I interpret the approach of Connolly (2002, p. 98), the creative space in thinking lies in cultivating “techniques to extend the fragile zone of indiscernibility in which it [thinking] moves”. The fragile zone is the movement of thinking which is neither cyclical nor lineal but a process where the past and the future meet. This encounter, which Connolly refers to as the “forking of time”, can result in thinking which takes novel and unpredicted directions (Connolly 2002, pp. 96–103). One of the best-known techniques is meditation, in which si-

lencing the constant noise of our minds makes room for new thoughts while also diminishing tension. Another related technique is mindfulness, which I mentioned earlier, where the focus is in the present moment and nonjudgmental awareness.

My argument is that paying attention to the subliminal can encourage innovative thought and help us imagine better futures. Of course, all techniques for mastering the mind require time, patience and perseverance. We are all short of time, but when one develops techniques that enhance creativity and open-minded thinking, one eventually works more efficiently and effortlessly and gains back many times over the time devoted to the training. Letting in non-rational forces means higher-risk research but it also enables a fuller and more encompassing understanding of the research topic. The value created by such an approach is that its results are genuinely undetermined. As Connolly (2002, p. 15) writes, "A little vertigo is indispensable to creative thinking".

### **Engagement with the Environment**

Here is where questions of research ethics may arise. Can creativity go to such extremes that researchers ends up in a corner too far from the scientific core? Can one trust the sensations which arise from the subliminal? I would say yes – if we give up the idea altogether that the knowing mind, the rational, the emotional, the subliminal, and the body are separate entities. I believe creativity is not the problem, but the issue is how and for what purpose it is used. Here the responsibility of the researcher comes to the fore to consider questions of ethics in terms of respect for the lives studied and the objectives set.

Furthermore, just like techniques of the mind affect the emotion-imbued thinking from which creativity springs, so does our external world. In particular the cumulative effect of sensing acoustics, lightning, shapes and colours in the physical and digital environment affects our internal world – our creativity and anxiety (Sjöroos 2014). Thinking back to the Nick Cave concert, as a result of a combination of sense stimuli created by music, lights, atmosphere, people and architecture I experienced the sublime sense of awe and wonder. It was the concert that inspired me to give more thought to creativity and its subliminal origins, and finally write this text. I want to conclude that sensitivity to the intense emotions of a sub-

lime experience and the everyday subliminal insights, along with the mind/body/environment connection is needed within the human sciences, as an enriching addition to the intellectualist tradition and intra-disciplinary competition – and as the means to cultivate creativity.

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### Notes

- 1 I want to thank Emma Hutchison for valuable comments on this article.
- 2 Damasio (2012, pp. 8–9) explains how somatic markers, emotion-based signals, allow the mind to perceive the self. Connolly further elaborates the importance of somatic markers, which make it possible to “perceive and decide in a timely manner”. Somatic markers can lead to both creative and destructive thinking but without them we would have a hard time making up our minds on anything (Connolly 2002, pp. 33–35).
- 3 Some examples on emotions-studies in IR include Ahmed 2004, Bleiker & Leet 2011, Boltanski 1999, Brennan 2004, Craford 2014, Hutchison 2014, Nussbaum 2003, Petersen 2011 and Ure & Frost 2014. On the role of emotions in Feminist IR scholarship, see Sylvester 2011.
- 4 As a term subliminal refers to stimuli beyond the threshold of sensation or consciousness (Oxford Dictionary).