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The body doesn't lie: a somatic approach to the study of emotions in world politics

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The role of emotion in politics has typically been characterized in opposition to reason, or what psychologists might have traditionally measured as 'cognition'. Much of this approach clearly emanated from the work of early political philosophers going back to Aristotle, through Hume, and most famously captured in Descartes' famous dictum, 'I think, therefore

I am' in a statement truly staggering in its exclusion of all somatic and emotive influence or value. In such renderings, the forces of reason and emotion were not only constructed in unexamined opposition, but reason was assumed superior.

There was not a lot of evidence contradicting this argument in the empirical psychological literature until the mid-1990s, when the introduction of magnetic resonance imaging technology sparked a genuine new fascination with the role of emotion in increasingly integrated models of cognition. Damasio's (1994) somatic marker hypothesis, locating the origins of emotion in physical and somatic experience, represented a powerful alternative model for synthesizing the role of body and mind in the experience of both emotion and decision making. This argument suggests that what most people understand as optimal 'rational' judgment in fact depends, fundamentally, on an emotional system, which informs us, physically, about how we feel about the choices we confront. The inherently physical system on which emotion appears to rely, at least in part, provides a window into an interesting and more empirically supported theoretical structure for developing models that inform our understanding of the role of emotion in the political world.

The purpose of this commentary is to highlight the importance of this somatic recognition for the arguments put forth in this Forum. The core of a somatic approach lies in recognizing the primacy of the physical body in both experiencing and conveying emotions. All other aspects, including historical and cultural influences, are secondary to this somatic experience.

Theorizing the body and emotions in world politics

Hutchison and Bleiker (2014, 491–514) identify four very important challenges in seeking to theorize more systematically about the role of emotions in politics. I discuss the implications of their second challenge: 'the role of the body' in theorizing political emotions. In light of previous work that has been conducted in neuroscience (Davidson, Jackson, and Kalin 2000), it becomes compelling to concentrate on the role of *trait*-based emotional variance in political outcomes and preferences. Why is this important? Because, for example, some people are simply born with a greater genetic propensity to experience fear (Hatemi *et al.* 2013). This does not mean that the environment has no impact on them or that developmental factors do not affect particular expressions. Quite the contrary, such forces provide the impetus and triggers, which either instigate or ameliorate behavior, that might result from such predispositions. However, it does mean that certain individuals, simply by virtue of their natural disposition,

will be more likely to experience fear and other specific emotions more quickly and easily than others; such individuals may require less evidence from leaders who present potential threats. Importantly, such predispositions do seem to correlate with particular political ideologies, offering one potential avenue by which emotions divide political opponents.

Such differences in genetic variance and biological expression can help explain both why emotions emerge at all, as well as how they manifest the way that they do in particular contexts. An understanding rooted in existing genotypic and phenotypic differences between and among individuals provides a basis for understanding systematic difference between people without having to rely solely on cultural differences or historical institutions to explain their origin. Again, it is not that such historical and cultural forces remain irrelevant. Indeed, such factors are critical in structuring the occurrence and representation of emotion. However, the recognition that cultural forces co-constitute emotion with biological ones means that each side of the equation brings equal power, and physical incentives cannot, and should not, be subsumed to societally generated ones. Indeed, focusing only on social and cultural forces to the exclusion of physical one provides only an incomplete picture of the ontology of emotion.

Social emotions

Jon Mercer (2014, 515–35) makes a quite provocative argument that emotions are social and serve a fundamentally social function in the political world. I find the argument regarding social contagion to be the most persuasive in his argument regarding the potential mechanisms, which help transfer emotion from individual to group. Freud called such behavior ‘mass hysteria’. However, it is not clear that this means that the phenomena are different and not merely manifestations of the same experience at different levels of analysis, akin to the difference between Decision and Game Theory, where the underlying calculation of utility and probability stays the same, but the behavior may shift based on calibrations of what is possible in light of another’s preferences and behavior. The most likely empirically demonstrated mechanism by which individual emotions become contagious is through the operation of mirror neurons, which allow learning through vicarious observation (Kohler *et al.* 2002). Similarly, group emotion emerges as people recognize that others share their interests and motivations and need not necessarily reflect an independent collective social emotion. To be sure, Mercer recognizes this levels of analysis problem, but it is not clear that such an experience renders individuals subservient to the group in the generation of emotion.

Similarly, while Mercer (2014, 515–35) does not go so far as to completely divorce emotion from the body, he does argue that ‘emotion is ontologically irreducible to the body’. The issue of whether attribution of emotion requires physical experience is a long one, going back to debates between William James (1884), who believed that the source of emotion rested in physiological arousal, and Walter Cannon (1927), who argued the opposite. By no means have psychologists reached a consensus on whether the attribution of emotion requires the body, although most now lean in the direction that it is based on recent neuroscientific evidence best delineated by Damasio (1994).

Mercer goes on to argue that experience should be anchored in social identities and not the physical body. This argument seems contrary to one that relies on the existence and release of oxytocin to help produce differences in in-group and out-group effects in ethnocentrism. At this most basic level, individuals literally could not have a social identity if they did not possess a prior physical one. As Mercer suggests, culture certainly contributes to regulating emotion. It can also affect their expression; anxious individuals in the United States tend to report themselves as ‘restless’, whereas those in Indonesia tend to characterize their experience as ‘dizziness’. And certainly as social animals, humans affect each other in ways both myriad and profound, as well as disturbing and comforting. But if we take the neuroscience arguments seriously, emotion must necessarily be grounded in somatic experience in the physical body or it would not exist at all, therefore making subsequent social experience and transformation of such emotional experience impossible. The latter depends, foundationally, on the former.

Institutionalizing passion

Crawford (2014, 535–57) fascinating essay raises important theoretical and empirical challenges for our understanding of the role of emotion in politics. I appreciate Crawford’s care in differentiating the role of specific emotions such as fear and empathy (although there would be some disagreement in psychology about whether empathy constituted an emotion); too much work in political science has tended to lump discrete emotions under larger categories of positive or negative valence in ways that risk analytic confusion. I think it would be helpful to see additional work in the future on the role of other discrete emotions, particularly anger, which seems to play such a huge role in influencing world politics.

I make two comments on issues raised by Crawford’s essay. My thoughts may raise more heat than light, but I do wonder, first, about the implicit

assumption that infuses this discussion that fear is bad and empathy is good, which seems to track the earlier assumptions that implied that reason was good while emotion was bad. I raise three points in this regard. First, there is a real difference between fear and panic. In the right context, fear is healthy. Fear provides the foundational survival mechanism humans have evolved to recognize and remove ourselves from threatening situations of provocation or predation. Individuals may over-generalize from that experience by having all kinds of thoughts about the future, which lead to anxiety, or they may over-react behaviorally in response to fear, but the instinctual experience can be lifesaving. Any decent surfer knows, for example, that fear protects and panic kills. Second, I also wonder about the implicit assumption that empathy constitutes a natural antidote to fear. Why would this necessarily be so? It may be that as I get to know you better and understand your true desires and motivations better, I am likely to become *more* scared of you, or I may come to hate you more, perhaps rightly so. Empathy as an antidote for fear only works, it seems to me, if you assume a world of well-intentioned others. In a world with evil actors, empathy may provide increased, and accurate, fear and anger. Third, and related, I really appreciated Crawford's point about empathy errors. Just because we are empathic does not mean we are accurate; even those unfamiliar with psychoanalytic theory have had the experience of projection skewing their reactions to others, or others reactions to oneself. Not to put too fine a point on it, Mercer notes that identifying with torturers would be obscene. True, unless one is a torturer, when it simply becomes the foundation for the social identity that we praise in other more prosocial contexts.

Second, Crawford partially locates the origins of morality in empathy, but wonders where this capacity might originate. I would suggest, based on evidence in primates, that the capacity for empathy, whether realized or not in any given individual, represents one of the many domain specific, content-laden programs that inhabit human psychological architecture as explored and delineated by recent evolutionary psychologists and biological anthropologists. This is quite distinct from morality in any kind of emotional sense; it remains unclear how emotion and morality become integrated theoretically as it seems possible that, at least, the former can exist without the latter.

Conclusion

Mercer and Crawford seem to have one obvious point of disagreement where Mercer argues that 'group level emotion is powerful, pervasive and irreducible to individuals' while Crawford writes that, 'it would be both

imprecise and perhaps even dangerous to argue that a “group” feels something or even believes something’. This argument is reminiscent of the one raging in evolutionary circles about whether group level selection can exist for certain traits or characteristics, or whether its appearance represents an emergent property of individuals who share particular phenotypic traits. The meaning of the disagreement, of course, reflects both aspects of individual experience (what I believe) as well as social identity (to what group do I belong?). And those distinctions are sure to arouse emotions that may not be subject to rational discourse. However, any empirically supportable work finds that emotions emerge from, and exist within, the realm of the physical body, not least in the architecture of the human brain. Any alternative model must either present support for the foundation of emotional experience in another material form, which would be hard to imagine, or posit an ethereal existence, which enters the realm of the spiritual.

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