

doi:10.1017/S175297191400027X

## Emotion and intentionality

K. M. FIERKE

*University of St Andrews, UK*

E-mail: kf30st@andrews.ac.uk

The essays by Neta Crawford and Jonathan Mercer explore the link between individual and collective emotion, on the one hand, and the physiological experience of emotion and its social expression, on the other. Addressing these links is crucial for moving away from the prevalent assumption that emotion is purely subjective to engagement with questions regarding the role of emotion in politics and international relations. In what follows, I draw out the significance of a further link within their essays between emotion and intention. Like emotion, intention is usually assumed to be inside the mind of individuals. By contrast, the two essays position emotion and intent within a relational field in which they are no longer a property of individuals or states but a constitutive condition of the institutional structures of a culture. For instance, conflict often arises from a clash of cultural meaning and emotion, which may arise from or constitute an attribution of ill intent by others. In politics, the intention expressed through action shapes the emotional response of various audiences, rather than the intent of the agent *per se*. An exploration of the linkage between, and the mutual constitution of emotion and intention, reveals the central role of culture, institutions, and other reservoirs of shared meaning.

The authors claim that emotions are institutionalized (Crawford 2014, 535–57) and regulated by culture (Mercer 2014, 515–35). Culture and institutions rest on pre-existing beliefs that are ‘powerful, pervasive, and irreducible to individuals’ (Mercer 2014, 515–35). But they are also a part of a relationship to others, in so far as decisionmakers attribute causes and motives to the actions of others, as well as to their future intentions, which may grow out of pre-existing beliefs as well as fear (Crawford 2014, 535–57). Emotions underpin an internal group relationship, and this internal relation shapes the attribution of intention to others. Both authors make a connection between emotion and intentionality but are less explicit about the nature of intention.

The purpose of this commentary is to begin to unpack the relational field of emotion and intention. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s claim that intention is ‘embedded in its situation, in human customs, uses and institutions’ (1958, 337), I argue that thoughts, beliefs and intentions, like emotion, are

neither purely internal to the individual nor divorced from a background and social context. I start by reflecting on the emotion–intention nexus and then proceed to a brief analysis of their significance for how we undertake the analysis of emotion at the international level.

### **The relational field of emotion and intention**

There are at least three ways in which emotion and intention are intrinsically linked. First, individuals or states may, for instance, intend to do harm, but this intention is often an expression of institutions, uses, and customs. Genocide is a practice that by definition involves intent to destroy a people. While this intent may be in the head of an individual, such as Hitler, its realization in practice involves a large number of people acting on emotional assumptions about the identity of victims and emotions towards them, which may justify their actions, as, for instance, when Nazi's depicted Jews as rats or mice or when radio broadcasts in Rwanda prior to and during the genocide claimed Tutsis to be vermin. Psychologists such as Kelman (1973) have demonstrated that training soldiers to kill requires dehumanizing the enemy and instilling emotions of threat and fear, while suppressing emotions of compassion for fellow humans.

Second, there may be a disjuncture between individual intent and the intention that is expressed through an action. Mercer (2014, 515–35) uses the example of the increasing rate of murders of NATO soldiers by Afghan soldiers, which was attributed to offensive behaviour by the former. A NATO representative stated that the soldiers did not mean to be offensive. However, intent was expressed in acts such as showing the soles of their shoes in an Arab culture or acting in certain ways towards women, such as patting the back and behind or winking. These acts rest on a set of *unexamined* assumptions about appropriate behaviour within the culture of the soldiers. The intent was not to offend, it was claimed, but intent to offend was nonetheless expressed through the soldiers' actions, which evoked an emotional response from the recipients. Intent in this case, and the emotions associated with it, were largely a matter of attribution and cultural perspective.

Third, politics, and international politics in particular, often revolves around contending attributions of intent, which are underpinned by assumptions about the collective self and other. My recent study of political self-sacrifice, mentioned in the introduction, does not deal explicitly with the question of intent, but does make this point (Fierke 2013). In each of the culturally diverse cases, the self-sacrifice was followed by contestation between various audiences over the identity of agent as a criminal/terrorist

or martyr and the nature of the act as a suicide or martyrdom. The audience attributed intention to the agent, that is, he or she either intended to harm the self, and potentially others, or intended to be a witness to injustice. The two attributions evoke very different emotions in the audience, from disgust to admiration. The individual intention of the agent was of less significance in understanding the act, and how the scenario further unfolded, than the intent *communicated* by the act itself. An act that inflicts harm (for instance, the human bomb) communicates an intent to inflict harm, to the self and others. While this may be attached to widely shared emotions associated with martyrdom by the in-group, the act is more likely to give rise to negative emotions by the powers that be or distant observers. By contrast, a sacrifice that arises from retaliation by authorities for a refusal to cooperate with an unjust order more clearly expresses intent to communicate the suffering of a community. The key question is the degree to which the attribution of intent, in the circulation of emotion attached to it, divides the audience or consolidates it, and provides an answer to the question of whether the agent or the authorities are the deviants.

Intent is not merely a subjective phenomenon but an intersubjective one, which depends on a correspondence between the intent of the agent, what the act communicates to others and the emotions the act subsequently invokes. Against the backdrop of a globalizing media, cultural differences may visibly come head to head in this process of communication and attribution. When US President Obama bowed to Japanese Emperor Akhito, he intended to communicate respect for Japanese culture. An act that communicates respect generally entails emotions of a positive kind, relating to recognition of the other as equal. However, parts of the American audience attributed a different intent to the act, as a lowering of the world's superpower before a foreign leader, which some viewed as treasonous (The Telegraph 2009), thereby, placing it within a much different emotional field. The individual intent of Obama in this case was far less significant in the unfolding of the interaction than the intent that was expressed by the action to different audiences.

### **Implications for the study of emotions and international relations**

These examples have several methodological implications. The first is that the analyst cannot get inside the head of agents to examine their intent or their emotions, but can observe and analyse the communicative process by which intent is attributed by others, the relationship of expressions of intent to particular emotions, and the contestations by which various audiences give meaning to the identity and practice of agents.

Second, the link between individual physiology or neurology and social meaning, while an essential building block for understanding the political expression of emotion, should not ultimately be the focus of social and political analysis at the international level. How one individual feels emotion or intends to act is of less significance in most cases for understanding international interactions than the intention attributed to actions and the resulting emotions, which are expressions of identity, institutions and customs, and, in a globalizing world, often become a focus of intercultural contestation.

Third, the focus shifts from treating the state or any other collective actor as a person or like a person (see Wendt 2004), to an examination of the cultural or institutional assumptions that are brought into play in any particular emotional interaction. Crawford (2014, 535–57) began by stating that the key to Hitler's success was the institutionalization of emotions. While Hitler, in hindsight, did intend to expand, the materialization of this intent was dependent on a larger political landscape in which these intentions were given 'sense' in relation to the emotional experience of a domestic audience that understood Germany's defeat in World War I as both a betrayal by the Weimar government and a humiliation by the international community at Versailles. The negative emotions constituted a particular collective community of understanding and power, which made expansion possible to the end of making Germany great again (Fierke 2004).

Fourth, the question of whether communities or states have or express emotions is reframed as one of how social emotion constitutes community. Notions of identity, as Mercer correctly states, are the prior condition for the physiological response within distinct individuals, related, for instance, to patriotism, the nation or fear of enemy others. While some emotional responses, such as fear of a snarling animal, may not require a complex identity structure, most social emotions, from joy to humiliation arise out of shared understandings of who we are, the identity of the other and in a context of interaction. Any one interaction at the international level may involve a confrontation between a range of different assumptions and practices, involving multiple agents and audiences. Greater reflexivity and cross-cultural understanding is necessary in both the academic mapping of these emotions or the response to them by practitioners. As Mercer notes, inclusive groups are better at understanding emotions within, and this is precisely because they are more likely to share a language and institutions. In the conflict between different groups, the challenge is how to reduce the attribution of intent and expand the space of dialogue, a claim reinforced by Kelman's (1996, 100) conclusion that within the negotiating process, dialogue about practical is impossible until the emotions have been addressed.

This has significance for analysis of more global conversations in the context of changing power relations, as well as the peace processes of the

1990s. For instance, Shepperd (2013) asked how the United States and China in three different contexts of escalating tension, which could easily have spilled over into a larger conflict, managed to de-escalate and establish a new equilibrium. In her argument, the ability to negotiate the emotional dynamics of conflict was crucial. For example, in the context of the 2001 Spy Plane incident, the Chinese demanded an apology from the United States, while the latter was only willing to express regret. However, the Chinese mistranslated the American statement as an apology to a domestic audience, which transformed the emotional environment and contributed to the restoration of equilibrium.

The emotional dynamics of this exchange was not only between two states, but, much like the Obama–Akhito interaction, involved communication with multiple audiences, which demonstrates that leaders are not merely the rational carriers of intent but must be sensitive to multiple layers of meaning and emotion over which they have little control and which must be negotiated alongside interstate negotiations.

## References

- Crawford, Neta C. 2014. "Institutionalizing Passion in World Politics: Fear and Empathy." *International Theory* 6(3):535–57.
- Fierke, K.M. 2004. "Whereof We can Speak, Thereof We Must Not be Silent: Trauma, Political Solipsism and War." *Review of International Studies* 30(4):471–91.
- . 2013. *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kelman, Herbert C. 1973. "Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers." *Journal of Social Issues* 29(4):25–61.
- Kelman, Harbert C. 1996. "Negotiation as Interactive Problem Solving." *International Negotiation* 1(1):99–123.
- Mercer, Jonathan. 2014. "Feeling Like a State: Social Emotion and Identity." *International Theory* 6(3):515–35.
- Shepperd, Taryn. 2013. *Sino-US Relations and the Role of Emotion in State Action: Understanding Post-Cold War Crisis Interactions*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- The Telegraph*. 2009. "Barack Obama Criticised for 'treasonous' bow to Japanese Emperor." *The Telegraph*, November 16, Accessed August 2014. telegraph.co.uk
- Wendt, Alexander. 2004. "The State as a Person in International Theory." *Review of International Studies* 30(2):289–316.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.