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Leyla and Mahmood - Emotions in Social Science Education

- The paper explores the role of emotion in social science education in two specific cases.
- A relational perspective on emotion captures how bodies come together and move, forming communities through emotion.
- There seems to be a relation between strong emotions and a potential for politicization of the subject.
- In one of the cases, the teacher fails to move the students through a disciplinary social science analysis.

Purpose: The paper explores what emotions do in social science education through two specific cases and discusses the relation between emotion and politicization in the subject education.

Method/approach: The cases are selected from an on-going dissertation project that uses interviews, video and observations in examining how social science education is played out in practice, with a focus on the students. Inspired by Sara Ahmed, emotion is seen as relational.

Findings: Seeing emotions as relational makes it possible to capture a dynamic in the classroom that brings a complexity to a discussion on social science education. There is a relation between emotion and politicization; in the two cases, emotion signals that a subject matter or situation is contested.

Keywords:

Social science education, emotion, politicization, ethnography

1 Introduction

'I have experienced all of this', Leyla, a student, tells me during a lesson on international law. It is the first time that I speak to her and it is the first thing she says to me. I had asked Leyla about finding the information asked for in an assignment. In response she tells me about her experiences of war. *'This is what happened, this is how you feel in war'*.

A month later, in an interview, Leyla claims that the teaching on international law and human rights 'is crap'. However, she did not intervene in the teaching taking place that day. The crucial point for Leyla is not telling her story, making a testimony, becoming visible. What is crucial, rather, is how her story would be heard and interpreted by the others in the teaching group. She is angry with the education, but if she did intervene and other students would question her or laugh at her, she says she would hate them. And the feeling of hate would distance her dramatically from them.

Education is impregnated with emotions (Boler, 1999; Karlsohn, 2016; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Zembylas, 2016), and social science education is no exception; emotion is shaping and being shaped by the education going on in the classroom. In this paper I will analyse the role of emotion¹ in social science education² through two specific cases and discuss the relation between emotion and politicization in the subject education. Emotion is seen as relational which is inspired by the thoughts of Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2000, 2010, 2014) and the field of critical emotion studies (Seibel Trainor,

2006; Zembylas, 2016). This involves trying to get away from the perspective that emotions are personal in order to capture that they are systematic when it comes to their effects. The focus is on what emotions *do* in the classroom.

Instead of considering emotion as either something that exists inside a person, something we have, or something entering a person from the outside through social and cultural practices, to Sara Ahmed emotions create the borders between me-we or individual-social³. If we transfer that thought to the context of education, to become a part of the classroom's *we* you must feel in a certain way. Emotions move between people and also make bodies move forwards, backwards and sideways in relation to objects.⁴ Hence, emotion aligns some bodies with others; being moved in the same way creates community (Ahmed, 2014, p. 209). Emotions stick to certain objects, and these objects can be increasingly emotionally charged when emotions circulate between people. This way of seeing emotion as relational acknowledges the fact that everything we do is shaped by contact with others. The way we come in contact with others is shaped by histories of contact, which have to do with the subject's history but also histories that come before the subject (Ahmed, 2014, p. 6).

Politicization is conceptualised as when an activity or event is made political in character ('Politicization', *OED*). For that to happen I assume that there has to be a contention taking place in the classroom that involves demands for resources, justice or recognition (Calhoun, 2002). In this paper the analysis regards specific heated situations, even though I acknowledge the inherently political character of all education.

The use of cases makes it possible to pay attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 292) and due to

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the research design⁵ it has been possible to get beneath the surface of the situations in order to catch emotion that is not expressed as overt emotionality in the classroom.

The two cases are from the same teaching group and teacher but they are deliberately chosen because of their different character: In the case of *Leyla*, emotion works beneath the surface of classroom interaction. In the case of *Mahmood*, the classroom is heated and students as well as the teacher are taking action.

2 Leyla: Experiences of war

3/2 2015: The teacher Rickard had planned for student presentations of an assignment about international law but it turned out that only a few students had finished it. Instead, Rickard lectured about the historical development of international law. Among the slides in his PowerPoint were two photos of cities bombed to pieces; the first one pictured Dresden, Germany in 1945, the second one Kobane, Syria in 2015. The teacher lingered at the picture of Dresden – he had himself been to Dresden a couple of years earlier. He talked about how beautiful the city is, recommending a visit. In the case of Kobane, no voice was raised to make it beautiful in contrast to the devastation in the picture. The teacher told the class that he was using the picture of Kobane to show that it is hard to realize international law; it depends on the states involved in the conflict.

After the short lecture the students were given time to finish their assignments. As I approached Leyla she was using a web tool to translate Swedish text into Arabic. I had not spoken to her before. I took a seat beside her and asked her if it was difficult to find the information requested in the assignment. In response, she told me that she has experienced war: *'I have experienced all this at close quarters'*. Leyla described the situation in Iraq in 2003: her family just staying inside a room with some food, for several months. Her father was an engineer for the Iraqi military and had to work, so they were just waiting for him to come home. She said something about it being a totally different thing to be part in it, to be at the centre of it, than to look at pictures.

At the time of the fieldwork, Leyla had lived with her family in Sweden for five years. When they fled she had almost finished upper secondary school. She describes herself as a top-student, getting prizes and advantages because of her high achievement, but on arrival in Sweden she had to start all over again, studying Swedish for one year, and then trying to pass enough subjects to qualify for upper secondary school. Leyla studies hard and wants to continue studying at the university. In the interview, there is a sense of fatigue when she talks about trying to master well known subjects in a new language. Regarding social science, she adds having no experience of the subject; she studied for one year what most of the other students have studied for nine years. They have meta-knowledge of the subject, knowing what it is and what one can expect from it.

The teacher Rickard talked to me about Leyla several times as an example of a potentially high-achieving

student where the language is a barrier. He said he avoids pushing her verbally by asking her questions:

Rickard: She strives for a lot and she is clever, really, but I think it is not fair to approach her with a verbal question (...) but when she raises her hand it is OK and in private it is OK.

Leyla's view on social science education is that it helps her learn about Swedish society in order to improve it. She sees Rickard's teaching as trying to create a mini society in the classroom, where everyone is interested in the others' views. Leyla tries to learn as much as she can and says she is very content with the teaching, but when it comes to education about the United Nations, human rights and international law she rejects the education. There is a change in her way of expressing herself: suddenly she calls the education crap. When I interviewed Leyla a month after we spoke to each other in the classroom, she returned to that lesson. It came up in response to the question of whether something had been emotional for her in the social science education during my observations:

Leyla: Yes it was when we were sitting and writing about it and you came to me and helped me, it just... when you talk about it, it just feels ... well some people don't feel well. But when you have experienced it yourself, then you know what it feels like, you know how hard it is.

Leyla recognises that feelings circulate in the classroom because of the topic of war; maybe particularly because of the pictures the teacher was showing. But she makes a distinction between the feelings of the people who do not feel well and her own feelings.

Leyla: When we talked about human rights and stuff like that, you talk about it, you say that: *'No we are not going to do anything [bad]'* but still, when in war, it's just... they do it, they are allowed to do it ... Even now, you know, ISIS [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] is in Iraq, my uncle lives in the city where they went into a museum and destroyed everything. He has still got that same feeling. So when they talked about human rights, I thought it was just crap. (...) When they sit in the EU, when they sit in the UN, when they sit talking about everything, they just... *'Yes no one is going to fare badly...'* but in reality it is not like that. In reality, many people die, in reality... well I'm not with Saddam Hussein, for example. But before, there was only one who murdered many. Now many are murdering many, quite many.

Leyla says she thinks the views held by her and some other students in the teaching group who have experienced war may develop the discussion in the classroom. But they do not intervene. The topic of withholding is something that recurs on several occasions during the interview.

Leyla: That's why I am not speaking during the lesson; it is because when I speak during the lesson, what should I say? Should I tell the things I have told you? Maybe it takes time, and then it is the self-confidence. (...) I could say it, but if

you have lived a nice life and haven't had problems you won't believe or feel what I am saying. Because what I am going to say, it feels, well it is difficult, so if someone would laugh, then I would just hate him or her, because it gets real so I just, I can't cope.

Leyla gives different reasons for withholding speech in the classroom; a lack of confidence regarding whether she would be able to express her thoughts in Swedish and the risk of boring the other students by taking a long time formulating herself. When talking about the lesson on international law, she adds a previously unmentioned reason for her withholding of speech, the risk of hatred.

3 What does emotion do to social science education in the case of Leyla?

In Leyla's case, the subject matter of international law could have been politicized in the classroom in a new way. Leyla says that she could have developed the discussion if she had shared her thoughts. The emotion of anger that she relates shows that the teaching is contested. At the same time, emotion is the reason for her withholding of speech: The threat of anger intensifying into hatred stops her from intervening in the teaching going on. This is added to the other reasons she states for not speaking, reasons that seem to exist all the time, and no matter what the topic is. So emotions stick to the topic of international law. But what is stopping Leyla here is not the topic but a risk that is relational – she speaks about the teacher trying to create a mini-society in the classroom and being rejected or distanced from that seems to be unbearable. Hatred would make her move away so fast from the other students that it might be difficult for her to stay as a part of the classroom's *we*.

Regarding the pictures of Dresden and Kobane, Leyla assumes that feelings about the photos circulate between students in the teaching group; *'some people don't feel well'*. When she adds that she *knows* what it feels like, it is as if she thinks that other feelings circulating in the teaching group because of the pictures encroach her feelings; we cannot settle with the feelings of pity or compassion, because they are not true. *'I know what it feels like; I know how hard it is'*.

This view on 'real' versus 'fake' feelings corresponds to a reflection made by the teacher, Rickard. When talking about the education on migration, human rights and international law after the actual education has taken place, he says that he has been operationalizing his own ideas about how students with an immigrant background might feel:

Rickard: I feel it is tricky, because it is obvious that I should have asked if there is someone who wants to recount his or her experiences of this. I should have. But then at the same time I feel a bit frightened about it, actually it is my own presupposition that maybe you don't want to give an account of this, it is not a nice experience to expose to others. And if you ask them about it you put pressure on them – I am a refugee, I am pointed out as a refugee, and now I have to recount it as well. You want to cut that off ...

but it is a bit strange if you cut off experiences of life so it just becomes a theoretical perspective.

Rickard's ideas about how it might feel to have a background as a refugee and then be asked to tell your story keeps him from bringing up students' experiences in the teaching despite his notion that it is strange to cut off the life world from the theoretical perspectives. But in this particular case, as we have seen, it is not actually telling the story or the story itself that is a hindrance for Leyla, what worries her is how she would come across to other students and what the emotion in the situation would do to their relationship.

4 Mahmood: responses to terrorism

On January 7-9 2015, attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a kosher shop in Paris killed 17 people. The attacks were carried out by three gunmen claiming they were part of al-Qaida and avenging the Prophet Muhammad. At the first social science lesson after the attack, the attacks were brought up by the students. The teacher Rickard had not planned to spend time discussing the attacks; still it had crossed his mind that it might happen. It was a heated situation. In the discussion, the student Mahmood said that *'you have to expect a negative response if you provoke someone'*. In response, he was met with a strong reaction from a group of students in the teaching group, defending freedom of speech. Two months later, in an interview, the response he received from a group of students was still vivid, there is a sudden intensity in his narrative:

Mahmood: Everyone was like, no, you can't think that way, it is not Sweden. I was like, yes I can think that way, because it is the way I think. If you're going to do something in the first place, then you have to expect something back, so you get some shit back. You won't get flowers back.

The teacher describes the reaction in a similar, generalizing way, as the whole teaching group turning against Mahmood, like a mob, defending freedom of speech. Later in the interview, Mahmood nuances what happened, in saying that some of the other students in class were 'on his side'. They just did not let it show in class:

Mahmood: So I was the only one that like, okay, I didn't think it was okay that they were murdered, but I thought they [the editors of Charlie Hebdo] were wrong. There were others who agreed with me there and then, they said it in Arabic, but they never let it show.

Mahmood fled from Iraq with his family in 2009. He studies at the natural science programme and would like to study to become an engineer, working with construction. In class Mahmood was either verbally active, making comments and asking questions, or visually absent, occupied by his mobile phone or almost falling asleep. I noted several times that other students laughed when Mahmood said something. Sometimes it seemed to be because of a language mistake, sometimes I could not trace the reason for laughing; it was as if other students



were expecting his utterances to be funny, even before they had a chance to catch what he said. On those occasions, Mahmood was often smiling in response to the laughter. Only once I perceived him as nervous: during an oral presentation of the European Parliament, where he clearly struggled with some of the Swedish terms. The teacher Rickard has got the impression that Mahmood is thick-skinned:

Rickard: It [Swedish language] easily goes wrong and I guess that can get tough (...) but he is probably rather thick-skinned. (...) If you ask a question he always answers it, he does not have a problem with that.

In the heated situation in the classroom, Rickard paid attention to what Mahmood said and the overt reaction he got from other students. He then started talking about different perspectives on the attacks and expectations on Muslims to apologize for what happened. Rickard's main focus was to nuance the view on Islam and violence; *'a religion cannot be made responsible for the deeds of three individuals'*.

Mahmood: He tried to explain what I meant, so that they would not get it wrong. (...) He is on no one's side, he just tried to fix the situation, and he did not want the class to be a mess. Because that is his job.

According to Mahmood, Rickard tried to calm down the situation.

5 What does emotion do to social science education in the case of Mahmood?

In analysing what Mahmood said in the classroom, which could be summarized as *the editors at Charlie Hebdo are wrong and it is not surprising that they were attacked*, it is striking that his utterances are not extreme; he is, as he puts it in the interview, not saying that attacking the magazine's office was right. Still, he receives a strong emotional reaction from a large group of students in the teaching group, expressing a massive unity. The quick mobilization of unity, making Mahmood's utterance seem more extreme than it is, could be shaped by past histories of contact, or rather an established narrative about the other. He is heard through that narrative, either by some word or phrase that he actually says, that is sticky, starting the associations, or just by saying something in a 'brutal' way (as the teacher Rickard puts it in an interview), that is coming in contact with the other students in a way that triggers them. The students reacting against Mahmood may well be hearing more in his statement than was uttered due to a narrative they interpret him through.

A number of feelings are at work in this situation: disgust, fear, and love.

Disgust involves moving away from an object, a movement of repulsion. According to Sara Ahmed (2014 p. 195) emotions align some bodies with others, as well as attach different figures together, by the way they move us. Seen this way, Mahmood's utterance in the classroom threatens the community of disgust over the

terrorist attacks, and by a disgust reaction against him, other students re-attach disgust to the terrorist attacks and thereby resettle the borders defining the classroom's *we*.

Ahmed interprets responses to terrorism as emphasizing a need for showing community, a need for 'sticking together'. She describes an idea of good citizenship in the aftermath of terrorist attacks that involves being alert, being vigilant, reacting against suspicious 'others', as well as defending the values of a 'global community of free nations' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 78). According to Ahmed, the defensive reaction is driven by *fear* for the future and aims at survival. It is directed towards imagined others who can appear anywhere, anyhow and maybe (horror of horrors) pass by un-noticed.

The defensive reaction from a large group of students in this case can be seen as such a 'good citizenship'; the students stick together, defending freedom of speech, reacting quickly and emotionally and therefore perhaps without taking in what Mahmood is actually saying. While Sara Ahmed sees fear and anxiety as driving forces in such defensive reactions, there is also the possibility of a feeling of pride or even *love* in showing unity against 'the other', the intruder. In the classroom, could the 'good mob' be seen as driven by love of itself and/or of a love of the 'global community of free nations'?

In the heated situation, the teacher uses an analytic, disciplinary, social science approach. In the interviews conducted six weeks later, Mahmood and other students remember that the teacher did try to widen the perspectives in the teaching group, but they do not remember the content of what he said. What remains with the students is what other students said in class and the emotional reaction. The teacher did not break through to the students with the 'cool', disciplinary analysis he conducts. The motion through emotion in the classroom is not affected by the teacher. So what emotion does in the case of Mahmood and the discussion about the terror attacks is that it aligns some students to others, rejects Mahmood and other students who remain silent from that community despite the fact that Mahmood is needed as a trigger for the movement *and* it makes a distanced, disciplinary social science analysis ineffective.

6 Discussion

This paper examines how a relational perspective on emotion affects the analysis of social science education. The relational perspective is able to capture a dynamic and complexities that an object-focused view (what counts as controversial and emotive topics) or psychologizing of emotion (as something an individual has) might miss because they look for emotions inside persons, not between them. The situations in the classroom are more complex than they might initially seem. In the visually calm lesson on international law, there is the risk of being moved and disconnected from others by the feeling of hatred, that is *what the feeling would do*, that keeps Leyla from openly politicizing the topic international law in relation to experiences of war. In the heated discussion about the attacks on Charlie Hebdo



and the kosher shop in Paris, Mahmood is made the trigger for the mobilisation of unity of other students in the teaching group.

Regarding the relation between emotion and politicization in the social science education, emotion in the cases signals that a subject matter is contested and is or can be politicized⁶. There is a judgement and critique through emotion, also in Leyla's case where intervention is withheld. In the two cases, the recognition from other students seems to be more important than the recognition from the teacher. Leyla worries about the reactions of the other students, she does not worry about the teacher's reaction, he is not threatening. Teachers may be stuck in thinking about how they react, and miss how students react and the analysis of the dynamic in the classroom. Or think that they can 'make it up' by sole disciplinary analysis, as in the case of Mahmood: It is striking that the teacher's action in the situation, dealing with the emotionally charged class-room by modelling different perspectives on the attacks, fails to move the students.

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Endnotes

¹ In the following, I use the terms emotion and feeling as synonyms. Following Sara Ahmed I do not make a distinction between bodily affect and cognitive emotion.

² Social science education in this paper refers to the Swedish school-subject Samhällskunskap, a subject that resembles, but does not equal, civics, social studies and citizenship education.

³ This part of Ahmed's thinking on emotions separates her from other researchers theorising emotion in relation to politics; for example Nussbaum (2013) and Marcus (2013). Ahmed does not make the distinction between an inside and an outside, that is, she does not see emotions as something we 'have'. Emotions rather play a part in shaping the *we* and the *I*. By deploying Ahmed's thinking in relation to the situations in the classrooms, I am able to capture complexities that Nussbaum's normative view on which emotions to cultivate as support for just institutions or Marcus' psychologizing of emotion might lose because they look for emotions inside persons, not between them.

⁴ This line of thinking is inspired by the etymology of the word; it stems from the Latin word *emovere* – 'move out' (*e-* out + *movere* move). ('Emotion', OED)

⁵ The cases stem from the author's on-going dissertation project (monograph) that investigates how social science education is played out in practice, with a focus on students and the composition of student bodies. The fieldwork used in this paper has been conducted in four upper secondary schools in Sweden, in teaching groups where 40-70% of the students have an immigrant background. I have interviewed teachers about their plans and ideas regarding a certain subject matter, then observed and filmed the teaching of that subject matter for a number of weeks. Afterwards, I have interviewed students and teachers about shorter videoed situations but also social science education more generally. From this material I have chosen two cases/persons for this paper for a close up view of how emotion work in relation to a certain subject matter or situation.

⁶ In the first version of this paper, I stated that the relation between emotion and politicization is positive, by which I meant that the strong feelings in the cases show a potential for politicization. As Leyla's case shows though, the relation is not always positive in the sense that strong emotions facilitate the politicization to be addressed in the teaching. An alternative reading of the relation between emotions and politicization in the cases, provided by one of the reviewers of the paper, would be that the strong emotions are making it difficult for the teacher to politicize the content, or even preventing the issue from being politicized. Through that reading, the relation between politicization and emotion is seen as negative. It is possible that emotions both facilitate and obstruct politicization in social science education, but there seems to be a potentially important relation between the two. I would like to thank one of the reviewers for comments that developed my reasoning on this.