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How do the emotional and embodied experiences of international interveners influence their understanding and practice of peacebuilding?

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Abstract

What happens if international interveners feel emotions that they consider unsanctioned, unwanted and unprofessional? What if they enact and manage their emotions in ways that they – or others – deem unacceptable? If international interveners face anxiety about being 'too emotional' or not feeling or expressing the 'right' emotions, does this challenge their sense of identity? And what consequences could this have for peacebuilding and the conflict-affected population in which they were working? Building on the growing body of critical peace and conflict scholarship that has analysed international interveners at the micro-scale, this article analyses how individual interveners' emotional and embodied experiences influence their understanding and practice of peacebuilding. Based on a discourse analysis of the memoirs of 10 international interveners, this article identifies two primary interpretive repertoires that the interveners employed and argues that they generated two ideal-type subject positions: the intervener as objective, rational, technocratic 'expert' and the intervener as irrational, fallible, vulnerable 'human'. These subject positions determined the feeling rules that the interveners followed and the dilemmas they faced. This, in turn, affected how the interveners perceived the conflict-affected societies in which they were working, and how they understood and practised peacebuilding.

Keywords

embodiment, emotion, intervention, memoirs, peacebuilding

As liberal peace interventions became more technocratic and top-down in the 2000s, international interveners emerged as a transnational professionalised group. They were expected to be knowledgeable experts who performed an 'ideal' professional identity, moved

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skilfully between different conflict-affected societies, and switched between various ways of emoting to best conduct peacebuilding work. But what happened if they felt emotions that they considered unsanctioned, unwanted and unprofessional? What if they enacted and managed their emotions in ways that they – or others – deemed unacceptable? What if they struggled to identify who was 'deserving' of which emotions? If international interveners faced anxiety about being 'too emotional' or not feeling or expressing the 'right' emotions, did this challenge their sense of identity? And what consequences could this have for peacebuilding and the conflict-affected population in which they were working?

These questions are made more pressing by debates about the costs and benefits of international intervention (Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2015), which amplify the tension, contestation and confusion that interveners often experience. The shift towards bottom-up, locally led peacebuilding practices puts pressure on international interveners to justify their positionality, role and relationships with conflict-affected populations. In a context of growing doubts about the value and practice of international interventions, interveners face anxieties about insincerity, legitimacy, exploitation and questions about whether they do more harm than good.

International interveners are people who perform peacebuilding work and, while they may come from the nation or community in which peacebuilding is taking place or from elsewhere, they are 'international' if they 'operate according to the principles and standards set for international interventions' (Flaspoler, 2016: 235). I have interpreted peacebuilding broadly to cover work done with the intention of creating or strengthening both positive and negative peace (Galtung, 2013), including development and humanitarian assistance.

A growing body of critical peace and conflict scholarship has analysed international interveners at the micro-scale (Autesserre, 2014; Duncanson, 2013; Goetze, 2017; Henry, 2015, 2017; Higate and Henry, 2009; Hindman and Fechter, 2011; Koddenbrock, 2016; Philipsen, 2020, 2021; Pingeot, 2018; Pouligny, 2006; Read, 2018; Rubinstein, 2008; Smirl, 2015; Wallis, 2020, 2021). Severine Autesserre (2014: 1–2) has argued that interveners share 'a common collection of practices, habits, and narratives that shaped their every attitude and action'. Catherine Goetze (2017: 68, 2) has found that interveners share commonalities based on 'social origins, education, and their related value structure', as well as a particular 'personal and professional trajectory'. How interveners understand their identities shapes their 'visions' of peace. If this vision differs from that of the conflict-affected society in which they are working, this can undermine local attempts at peacebuilding, encourage interveners to overlook locally legitimate peacebuilding processes or even generate tensions between them and local communities (Van Iterson Scholten, 2020).

Building on those studies, I analyse how individual international interveners' emotional and embodied experiences can generate dilemmas that influence their understanding and practice of peacebuilding. This follows Goetze's (2017: 67) finding that interveners' 'worldview' got 'in the way of their dealings with local politics and was anything but neutral in its effects on the way the peace missions were (and still are) carried out'. It also builds on work by Amoz Hor (2022: 3) which argued that interveners experience 'survivor's guilt – the anxiety of being complicit or powerless to alleviate the suffering of others', which encourages them to rely on 'reductive narratives' that sideline local voices. And it builds in work which has found that interveners' security briefings, and the embodied experience of security practices and confinement to 'fortified' compounds (Duffield, 2010: 455; Smirl, 2008), can contribute to a 'conformist and risk-averse aid worker subjectivity' that 'reshapes the perceptions, interactions and exchanges' between interveners and conflict-affected societies (Duffield, 2010: 461; Miller and Moskos, 1995; Pouligny, 2006). My approach recognises that individual interveners are not 'strategic, disembodied, unemotional, rational actors' (Higate and Henry, 2010: 43). It also recognises that emotions are political: they shape identities and consequently how people understand the world and decide how to act and, in turn, influence how others respond. Therefore, studying emotions can reveal the 'dynamics of power shaping everyday micro and macro interactions' (Beattie et al., 2019: 137).

I begin by discussing the importance of analysing emotions and bodies and then consider how we can study the emotions and embodied experiences of individual interveners at the micro-scale. By focusing on individual interveners, I join scholarship which highlights that the mundane, situated and ordinary aspects of life and the role of the 'expressive, embodied, affective and ordinary subject' are political, as they involve the translation, negotiation and domestication of macro political processes (Higate and Henry, 2009: 19; Vayrynen, 2019), and recursively, the constitution of broader structures. I also draw on feminist work which highlights that war – and by analogy, peacebuilding – is 'a set of experiences that everyday people and elites have physically, emotionally, and social-ethically' (Sylvester, 2013: 65). As the everyday and international are 'co-constituted' (Nyman, 2021: 316), I do not overstate the agency of international interveners or understate structural constraints such as geopolitics, global capital, international institutions and colonialism. But I do argue that the agency of individual interveners can challenge and (re)constitute structures, because 'it is the behavior of agents that reproduces or transforms institutions over time' (Bell, 2011: 894), and institutions and individuals recursively influence each other (Steinmo, 2008). I also do not intend to imply that the emotions and embodied experiences of the individual interveners I study were more important than those of the conflict-affected populations they were working in.

Influenced by vernacular security, feminist narrative and discursive psychology approaches, I then conduct a discourse analysis of the memoirs of 10 international interveners. I identify two primary interpretive repertoires and argue that they generated two subject positions: the intervener as objective, rational, technocratic 'expert' and the intervener as irrational, fallible, vulnerable 'human'. These subject positions determined the feeling rules that the interveners attempted to follow and the dilemmas they faced. As these subject positions are ideal types, none of the interveners neatly occupied either one, although all tended towards the second, displaying varying degrees of vulnerability and fallibility during the emotional and embodied experience of conducting peacebuilding work. This, in turn, affected how they perceived the conflict-affected societies in which they were working, and how they understood and practised peacebuilding.

The importance of analysing emotions

Analysing interveners' emotions is valuable because emotions play a role in generating a sense of self, as 'identity is a feeling' (Mercer, 2006: 298). Emotions are typically understood as 'the *inner states* that individuals *describe to others as feelings*, and those feelings may be *associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioural states and changes*' (Crawford, 2000: 125). Emotions shape how we see, perceive and understand, which influences our attitudes, behaviour and decisions (Hutchison, 2016). While emotions are experienced internally, their meaning is cognitively, culturally and historically constructed.

The latter point highlights that emotions are intersubjective and 'power shapes what can or should be said when it comes to one's feelings' (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2017: 504). The influence of power relations is captured by the concept of 'feeling rules', which holds that emotions are 'governed by social rules' (Hochschild, 1979: 551). Some feeling rules are universal, while others are 'unique to particular social groups' (Hochschild, 1979: 566). Universal feeling rules often become naturalised, but more specific feeling rules are deliberately taught or socialised (Frevert et al., 2014). Feeling rules constitute an exercise of power because, by regulating how we express our feelings, they empower those who conform and constrain those who do not (Ahmed, 2014).

Feeling rules operate at two levels. 'Surface acting' describes how we try to manage how we express emotions to conform to relevant feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979: 559) when we are 'front stage' and conscious of being observed and of the social requirements of that context (Goffman, 1959). Surface acting therefore directs us to analyse how people consciously feel. In contrast, 'deep acting' refers to when we try to manage our feelings that precede our expressions, that is, how we incorporate desired emotions into our construction of selfhood and identity (Hochschild, 1979: 559). The perceived need to comply with feeling rules means we are constantly engaged in 'emotion work', whereby we are actively trying to manage our feelings via deep acting (Hochschild, 1979: 561). Therefore, emotions impact how we make sense of the world, how we understand who we are and how we act.

The importance of analysing bodies

An analytical focus on feeling rules should not privilege emotions over the body, as we feel emotions within our bodies. Indeed, we can become convinced of an idea, 'even in the face of its questionable integrity, because we are literally physiologically moved by it' (Mattern, 2014: 593). This is because we 'experience the idea in an embodied, sensual way that constitutes not just *how* we think but *what* we think and what we are *able* to think' (Mattern, 2014: 593). This highlights the need for an accompanying analytical focus on bodies, and consequently the lived experience of affect. Affect describes the prediscursive, unconscious and embodied way that we experience ideas that comes immediately before emotion (Sylvester, 2013).

Beyond affect, an analytical emphasis on bodies 'recovers the individual as the referent object of threat and (in)security' (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016: 43), as it is individuals who 'experience war in the myriad ways possible' (Sylvester, 2011: 1). This reminds us that peacebuilding is an 'embodied practice', enacted through sensory and bodily means (Read, 2018: 302). Bodies are 'more than material artefacts composed of flesh, tissue and bone; they are also social products that are co-present in face-to-face interaction' (Dyvik, 2016: 56).

Interveners are often constructed as ‘exceptional ‘international’ bodies, in contrast to the homogenised ‘local’’ (Read, 2018: 304). This is particularly the case with military interveners, whose bodies are assumed to be ‘imbued with strength, agility and tenacity in the face of physical hardship’ (Higate and Henry, 2009: 111). But interveners are not ‘homogeneous’; their roles as interveners does not override their other – frequently differing – characteristics and experiences. Interveners ‘interpret the world through the lens of their own culture and biography, that is, through their own *habitus*’ (Featherston and Nordstrom, 1995: 106). Analysing bodies allows us to interrogate the differences between interveners and question the power relations that generate them.

An analytical focus on bodies reflects a long strand of feminist scholarship which holds that making ‘sense of the human social experience requires us to draw on bodily senses’ (McLeod and O’Reilly, 2019: 140). It highlights the ways in which ‘social order is carried in and through the body and performed in our daily lives through the “techniques of the body”’ (Mauss, 1973). Therefore, trying to understand the embodied experiences of interveners acknowledges that ‘our primary sense of the world is thus one of bodily enactment’ (McSorley, 2014: 108).

How can we study the emotions and embodied experiences of individual interveners?

As emotions are internal, we can study them through ‘practices of representation, through narratives, gestures or other ways of communicating feelings and beliefs’ (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 129). Therefore, I used discourse analysis techniques. This reflects the orientation of vernacular security studies to understanding how people ‘construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge and categories of understanding’ (Croft and Vaughan-Williams, 2016). It also reflects feminist narrative approaches that seek to understand how people ‘make sense of the world around us, produce meanings, articulate intentions, and legitimate actions’ (Wibben, 2011: 2). And it reflects discursive psychology, which studies ‘how versions of reality and cognition are assembled in discourse’ (Edwards, 1999: 271). These approaches understand discourse as constructive, that is, that beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and emotions are constituted through discourse. This construction occurs intersubjectively, ‘through social interaction between people in everyday life’ (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 108). This means that our discourse is shaped by ‘master narratives’, a ‘cultural script about the meaning of social categories that exists in cultural artefacts and mass texts such as media representations’ (Hammack and Pilecki, 2014: 82–83).

I analysed the memoirs of 10 interveners. These memoirs provided insights into their emotions, embodied experiences and ultimately their identities. Reflecting that both emotions and discourse are cultural artefacts shaped by master narratives, as an Australian I analysed the memoirs of Australian interveners. Neither the Australian population nor the authors chosen are homogeneous; as noted, interveners carry their own *habitus* and may hold ‘many, often competing and contradictory, identities at the same time’ (Featherston and Nordstrom, 1995: 104). But conscious that my ‘affective encounters’ with these authors’ memoirs could ‘trigger specific feelings and emotions’ as I interacted with them (Parashar, 2019: 255), I hoped that analysing memoirs of Australians would maximise my understanding, as the authors belong to a cultural universe I recognise. I am conscious that, consequently, I have privileged the ‘voices that are most intelligible’ to me (Dauphinee, 2015: 265).

My discourse analysis focused on identifying the interveners’ interpretive repertoires, that is, the systems of terms, such as metaphors, tropes, emotional terms or figures of speech they used to make sense of, and account for, their emotions and embodied experiences (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Interpretive repertoires were analytically valuable because they ‘represent the background knowledge from which versions of actions, self and social structures are manufactured through talk’ (Hammack and Pilecki, 2014: 76). I then analysed how those repertoires created ideal-type subject positions (Davies and Harre, 1990). Each intervener’s subject position had implications for the feeling rules that they identified were necessary for them to follow in their peacebuilding work, and consequently for the dilemmas they faced.

Analysing affect was more challenging, given that affect is unconscious and therefore arguably prediscursive (Anderson, 2006). However, psychobiological research (Barrett and Wager, 2006) suggests that affect and discourse should not be separated, because ‘the registering of embodied states is always already bound up in meaning making’ (Van Der Merwe and Wetherell, 2020: 229). Therefore, to analyse affect we can pay ‘attention to people’s accounts and narratives about affect and the ways in which they formulate their experience and make meaning of situations and episodes’ (Van Der Merwe and Wetherell, 2020: 230). Analysing the role of bodies through memoirs was aided by recognising that memoirs are ‘*narratives of embodied experiences*’, as we use discourse to ‘make sense of and communicate our embodied experiences’ (Dyvik, 2016: 59, 62). Narratives can provide insights into embodied experience through ‘flesh witnessing’ (Harari, 2010: 57).

Memoirs have shortcomings. Their authors are fallible and partial, and consequently, memoirs are not necessarily reliable sources of history (Mac Ginty, 2022). However, it is their very ‘humanity’ that makes them valuable sources of reflection about the emotions and experiences of their authors. Indeed, memoirs may – at least partially – represent the interveners attempting to make sense of their emotions and experiences and, through that reflection, ‘attempting to restore their sense of self’ (Duncanson, 2013: 57). This is because memoirs represent a ‘complex kind of personal narrative: reflective, selective, more self-consciously constructed than the immediate reports’ (Hynes, 1997: xiv). Indeed, memoirs need not be objectively correct to constitute useful data, as how their authors make sense of their experiences can reveal ‘meta-data’ that includes ‘spoken and unspoken expressions about . . . thoughts and feelings’, as well as ‘rumors, silences, and invented stories’ (Fujii, 2010: 232).

Introducing the interveners

Three of the interveners whose memoirs I analysed were from the Australian Defence Force (ADF): Wing Commander Sharon Brown (2016) (Retired) from the Royal Australian Air Force; Major Matina Jewell (2011) (Retired) from the Royal Australian Navy; and Major General John Pearn (1995) (Retired) from the Australian Army. Two, David Savage (2002) and Libby Bleakley (2019), were Australian Federal Police officers (now retired). One, Fred Smith (2016), is a diplomat with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Two were aid/humanitarian workers, Damien Brown (2012), a doctor with Médicins San Frontières (MSF), and Tom Bamforth (2014), with several non-government organisations. And two worked in governance capacity-building roles with the United Nations (UN) and other organisations, Lynne Minion (2004) and Mary Venner (2019). Three deployed to Timor-Leste (Sharon Brown, Bleakley and Minion), three to Sudan (Bleakley, Damien Brown and Bamforth) and three to Afghanistan (Sharon Brown, Smith and Venner). Other deployment locations included Kosovo and Kazakhstan (Venner), Syria and Lebanon (Jewell), Rwanda (Pearn), Angola (Damien Brown) and Pakistan (Bamforth).

Analysing the memoirs

I began by reading the memoirs to familiarise myself with the interveners. I then read each memoir again, extracting key passages related to the interveners' emotional and embodied experiences. I analysed those extracts to identify the interpretive repertoires adopted, the subject positions these created, the feeling rules these subject positions generated and dilemmas the interveners faced. I consulted the secondary literature to confirm that these repertoires, positions, rules and dilemmas were reflected in the work of other scholars. My analysis identified a tension between two primary interpretive repertoires, which generated two subject positions and four dilemmas.

Interveners as objective, rational, technocratic 'experts'

The first interpretive repertoire held that emotions should be suppressed. This generated the subject position of the intervener as an objective, rational, technocratic 'expert'. This is because, 'as experts and professionals', interveners 'have to make themselves bearers or traveling rationalities, transferable knowledge and skills, context-free ideas and universal applicability or purified moral action' (Mosse, 2011: 16). Indeed, Goetze (2017: 157) has argued that 'the ideal peacebuilder corresponds perfecting with the ideal image of the . . . reasoning, rational, upright, Enlightenment individual'.

This subject position generated a feeling rule that the interveners – most commonly the military personnel – should avoid expressing emotions as this would signal weakness, resulting in a loss of credibility. For example, although she felt afraid when caught in open warfare, Jewell (2011: 105) commented that: 'It's an unwritten rule in the military that, when things get tough, you can't afford to display any negative emotion'. As she later wrestled with PTSD, Jewell (2011: 243) reflected, 'there is a stigma associated with psych support and a fear that it will have a detrimental effect on your career'. Sharon Brown (2016: 28) similarly discussed the difficulty of showing the emotional toll of deployment; 'There are even those who think that anyone else suffering such effects must be weak, or even worse, insincere and fraudulent'. When she was also diagnosed with PTSD, she felt 'deeply ashamed' (Brown, 2016: 197).

Interveners as subjective, irrational, fallible, vulnerable ‘humans’

The other interpretive repertoire held that emotions should be acknowledged and expressed. This generated the subject position of the intervener as a subjective, irrational, fallible, vulnerable ‘human’ who must engage in the ‘messy, practical, emotion-laden work of dealing with contingency, compromise, improvisation’ while also managing ‘personal security, family relations, loneliness, stress and anxiety’ (Mosse, 2011: 16). This was common in the memoirs. Sharon Brown (2016: 28) listed her causes of stress as:

> You are separated from home and family and other social support networks, and there is a constant presence of others around you to the extent you never have a moment to yourself, with a working, eating, sleeping, showering, and toileting, exercising or relaxing. You can feel impotent trying to deal with issues back home. You must cope with restrictions placed on your diet, clothing, leisure activities and exercise options, along with the need to carry a weapon and the cultural differences between the host nation and coalition forces.

Indeed, after learning that her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, Sharon Brown (2016: 38) commented that: ‘I had the most heart wrenching urge to turn my back on this world to head back to Australia and comfort and care for my mother’. Similarly, after hearing that his wife had a miscarriage, Smith (2016: 13) wrote that he had ‘a heavy heart and a sense of shame for being on another one of my cowboy missions in her hour of need’.

The interveners’ dilemmas

The tensions between these subject positions generated four main dilemmas for the interveners that had consequences for how they understood and practised their peacebuilding work.

That they are not infallible or invulnerable

The interveners frequently measured themselves against what they perceived as the ‘ideal’ subject position of the intervener as an objective, rational, technocratic ‘expert’ and were conscious of a feeling rule that required them to appear infallible and invulnerable. But even from the outset of their deployments, they were challenged by feelings of uncertainty. This was often because they were given little prior information. For example, while Smith (2016: 41) researched Afghanistan before he deployed, he admitted that he ‘felt green in my ignorance of the bigger picture of Afghan politics’.

The interveners also reported uncertainty about the purpose and limits of their mandates. Indeed, most – even those from the military who would be expected to have the clearest orders – expressed ‘uncertain[ty]’ (Brown, 2016: 22) about the scope of their roles, with Smith (2016: 5) told to ‘go to the regional command in Kandahar, try to get to Uruzgan, figure out where you think the job is’. After getting a job with an aid organisation, Bamforth (2014: 6) was told his qualification was that ‘you can walk, you can talk and right now we need bodies on the ground’, although he had ‘no idea what I would be doing or who I would be working with’. In some cases, the interveners found that people were not qualified; in Kosovo Venner (2019: 29) described how, in each department of the UN mission, ‘staff from different countries, with different languages, worked with unclear terms of reference, and many seemed to have almost no relevant experience’. Although qualified for her job helping to establish a television station, after she arrived in Dili and appreciated the full extent of the challenges facing Timor-Leste, Minion (2004: 6–7) asked herself:

> What on earth can I contribute? . . . Is it indulgent to alleviate first world guilt and come here believing my skills will assist these people when a short car ride has shown me that all they really need is food, education, jobs, sanitation and I’m not skilled in the provision and sustainable development of any of these?

For many of the interveners, this sense of fallibility was compounded by an awareness of their bodily vulnerability. After being caught in skirmishes, Jewell (2011: 103, 117) described how she ‘could feel the fear rise in my stomach’, as she ‘felt the physical response to the sensations of being in a war’. Savage (2002: 153, 303, 213) found the frequent harassment of pro-Indonesia militia in Timor-Leste ‘bloody frightening’ and ‘incredibly intimidating’, as ‘it’s funny, the tightening in the chest that you get when it [the shooting] starts’. This meant that he and other UN police ‘had trouble maintaining an appearance of being in control’. Damien Brown (2012: 250–251) also reported a visceral reaction to gunfire, ‘Great currents of fear wash down my back like an electric shock . . . I should run but I stand still, paralysed by fear’. Similarly, after a rocket attack, Smith (2016: 137) commented that: ‘I felt the anger of the guy who fired the rocket. I felt hugely vulnerable against their force, real fear like I’ve never felt before’. This had consequences for how Smith (2016: 209–210) saw himself; he started

> to think like a FOB [forward operating base] soldier in other ways: being attacked on the base where you live increases your sense of vulnerability. There is comfort when you’re feeling under threat and knowing you can fight back. I’m starting to feel it would be good to learn to shoot.

Bodily vulnerability was particularly challenging for Sharon Brown and Jewell, who broke their backs during their deployments. After her accident, Brown (2016: 72, 84, 92) felt ‘out of control, imprisoned in my broken body’ and ‘powerful emotions associated with my injuries, including vulnerability, isolation and grief’, as she ‘lost my life in a single moment’ because her fitness was ‘crucial’ to her military service (Brown, 2016: 75). Jewell (2011: 233) similarly worried about the professional consequences; ‘if I couldn’t recover and return to the high level of fitness and athleticism required for an army officer, I could lose my military career . . . My career was my purpose in life’.

The women interveners identified extra vulnerability arising from their gender. Sexual harassment in the form of ogling (Sharon Brown and Jewell) and unwanted touching (Minion and Bleakley) was common. Two were subject to serious attacks. Jewell (2011:

58, 68) was almost raped, and while she ‘attempted to put on a brave face after the assault’, she was left ‘afraid to walk down the street on my own, for fear of being attacked by some of the local men’. After Minion (2004: 191) was stalked, she was invited to stay in the Australian Federal Police compound. But then one of the Australian police officers attempted to rape her, leaving her feeling as though ‘a piece inside me has died’.

That they feel emotions that are unsanctioned, unwanted or unprofessional

The second dilemma arose from the interveners experiencing emotions that they identified as unsanctioned, unwanted or unprofessional. Conscious that of perceived ‘ideal’ subject position of the intervener as an objective, rational, technocratic ‘expert’, Damien Brown (2012: 4) frequently questioned his professionalism as a doctor, as he felt ‘lost, overwhelmed, out of my depth’. Although he was capably performing his job, he constantly questioned himself, asking: ‘How am I to supervise this entire hospital – this *only* hospital – on my own? What exactly did I imagine I was going to achieve coming here, anyway?’ (Brown, 2012: 12). As his time at the hospital passed, he admitted to being ‘thoroughly out of my depth . . . It’s frightening’ (Brown, 2012: 54). These emotions eventually began to change his attitude to his work. After several months, he wrote that: ‘In the crowd I no longer saw individuals, just a wall of demands’ (Brown, 2012: 257). Bleakley (2019: 3564) similarly experienced feeling overwhelmed and, after uncharacteristically yelling at some police recruits she was training, she was ‘so upset with myself for losing it – I never wanted to be like that . . . I just wanted things to work’.

Several of the interveners struggled to manage their frustration about local cultural practices, which had consequences for how they perceived the local community. For example, after treating a girl with severe burns, Sharon Brown’s interpreter told her that they were likely a punishment. Brown (2016: 167) commented that

> Afghanistan was revealing the evil that humans can do to each other, whether it be the deliberate placement of improvised explosive devices that were so indiscriminate in their wounding and killing, or this type of barbaric and life lasting punishment of a child not yet old enough to understand the reason for her punishment. How can an adult feel no empathy for the child?

This frustration was shared by Smith (2016: 267), who after hearing of the death of an Afghan leader he had been working with, commented: ‘You can’t help these people, they just kill each other’. Savage wrestled with the treatment of children in Timor-Leste. He observed that ‘if children had been kidnapped in any western country all hell would have broken loose, but here it was just another common occurrence’ (Savage, 2002: 122). Bleakley (2019: 2227) was similarly frustrated by some of the behaviour of Timorese police; ‘even domestic violence and child sexual assaults were sometimes dealt with this way [informally]’. As he saw more patients (or their families) refuse medical treatment, Damien Brown (2012: 287) commented that: ‘it’s an aspect of this place I’m going to seriously dislike, this machismo, bravado, or plain aggressiveness’.

For some interveners, frustration gave way to anger. After the husband of a patient bleeding to death refused lifesaving surgery, Damien Brown (2012: 313) described how he was:

> trembling. The man glares and I'm hot-wet with nerves . . . In this moment I feel more anger towards a person than I've known before. I hate this man and what he represents; what these women, these children and so many other men have to put up with because of people like him, the *strongman*, the self-righteous minority of men who impose their wills on the rest . . .

Similarly, after militia killed a Timorese man, Savage (2002: 234) described how he 'could feel the rage rising in me and I didn't know whether to go over and punch them or cry in frustration. I stared at them and the bastards just waved at me. What sort of people were they?' This frustration and anger had consequences for the interveners; after returning home from his first deployment to Afghanistan, Smith (2016: 279) found that 'the seriousness, anger and impatience from my war on time has made me antipathetic to company and making friends'.

Frustration and anger often left the interveners disillusioned. On the eve of Timor-Leste's independence in 2002, Minion (2004: 104) 'ponder[ed] whether it was sensible of the UN to have ever spent all those millions of dollars setting up a TV station in a third world nation when the second largest city, Baucau, hasn't had electricity for the last two months'. After witnessing the lavish UN-sponsored independence celebrations, Minion (2004: 119) reflected that: 'I wish we'd had the sort of celebration the Timorese deserved, that we'd flicked the switch on a dependable electricity station or inaugurated a filtered water system'. Towards the end of her second deployment in Timor-Leste, Bleakley (2019: 3130) reflected that: 'The rich were only getting richer – and often more arrogant too – and the poor were only getting poorer. The truth was that they were no better off than they were before all the UN missions came to Timor'. Venner (2019: 182) was similarly disillusioned; 'it was clear to everyone that the removal of the Taliban had not brought stable government to Afghanistan. It had simply restarted the civil war, re-empowered the warlords, reinvigorated the criminals and drug dealers, and stirred up the fundamentalists'. Damien Brown (2012: 157) concluded that: 'this is the reality of medicine in developing countries: people die of preventable conditions that are easy to treat, or even prevent . . . None of it is rocket science – or expensive'.

Several of the interveners became frustrated and disillusioned with the UN. After being caught in fighting between Hezbollah and Israel, Jewell (2011: 100, 105) reflected that: 'The UN appeared to be unprepared for such a protracted war. It could be argued that the UN had become somewhat complacent and was simply not ready or rehearsed to respond'. As the war escalated, Jewell's (2011: 134) 'feelings of disempowerment and disillusionment reached a peak' when she was unable to assist evacuating citizens, leaving her feeling 'completely powerless'. Similarly, after visiting a remote village in Timor-Leste in danger of militia attacks, Savage (2002: 186) described how the 'poor villagers thought that we were here to protect them from the militia . . . We can't protect them from anything'. This left Savage (2002: 187) feeling 'like a traitor. They were all excited because they thought that the mighty UN had come to save them, but in fact we were just paper tigers'. These feelings prompted Savage (2002: 196) to 'wonder what the

UN had really got these people into'. As he was evacuated following the violent 1999 referendum, Savage (2002: 352) reflected that: 'we had failed in our mission to help the poor people of East Timor . . . I was exhausted and full of despair'.

These feelings led several interveners to question whether they wanted to, or should, continue their deployments. For example, after moving to Somalia, Damien Brown (2012: 317) described being 'tired from all the on call, from the bouts of diarrhoea and the constantly broken sleep, and then I suspect I'm going to make a major mistake . . . and on top of it all, I confess that I'm losing my desire to be here, to do this work, or to even care about anyone else anymore'. Similarly, towards the end of her second deployment in Timor-Leste, Bleakley (2019: 3587, 3610) 'had to stop and reassess why I wanted to be there', as she 'had really struggled and felt very depressed, negative and worn out'. As his second deployment to Afghanistan wore on, Smith (2016: 224) commented that: 'I'm losing my appetite for reaching out and meeting new people'.

Several of the interveners felt guilty about their comparative wealth. When looking for accommodation in Dili, Minion (2004: 335) asked herself: 'maybe I should be thankful for what I have and remember that I'm in a developing nation?' Both Bleakley (2019: 3130) and Sharon Brown (2016: 54) also felt 'guilty' about their living conditions compared to those of the Timorese. Damien Brown (2012: 126) experienced similar feelings in Angola after distributing medical supplies; the 'sense of guilt I'm feeling about this . . . there's little doubt that our gesture is token, we know this, but what worries me is the faint whiff of neo-colonialism: wealthy white people handing out freebies to impoverished Africans'.

That they should be close, but not too close, to conflict-affected societies

The tension between being an 'expert' and a 'human' also generated the dilemma of how close the interveners should get to the local community. Most remained relatively distant, in many cases because of concerns about their security. For example, as he prepared to go 'outside the wire' for the first time in Afghanistan, Smith (2016: 32) was 'pretty nervous and didn't sleep well. Having been briefed rigid about the IED threat, I was pretty certain I was going to die'. Similarly, when he arrived in Timor-Leste, Savage (2002: 15, 41) noticed that 'it was quite a paradox, children smiling and waving, while in every shadow I imagined the militia ready to pounce'. Venner (2019: 112) similarly observed that the 'constant stream of alarming messages emailed each day warned us against engaging in almost every possible leisure time activity . . . It was not surprising that I started seeing all Afghans as potentially dangerous'. Beyond keeping him distant from the local population, after Damien Brown (2012: 70) read about atrocities committed during the Angolan war, he began to question whether he could trust his Angolan medical colleagues; 'it worries me what role some of the people here, the men, may have had'. He ultimately decided to stop reading:

> I can't finish. It serves me better not to think too much about what has taken place here. About who was a victim, who may have been a perpetrator, and that some of these people – on either side – could be on our staff. (Brown, 2012: 71)

In other cases, safety concerns, and consequently distance from the local population, arose from a perception of being under-prepared and ill-equipped. Savage's (2002: 15) UN mission was unarmed, which left him a 'nervous', as did the fact that 'there wasn't any talk of being provided with ballistic protection'. Jewell (2011: 32) similarly reported 'feelings of fear, frustration and anger' as she started to 'understand the hidden dangers associated with working in a UN force with outdated equipment and, at times, poorly coordinated operations'. This meant that Jewell (2011: 73) found foot patrols stressful; 'my heart would be pounding and adrenaline surging through my veins. All of my senses were on high alert and working overtime'. Indeed, in Lebanon, Jewell (2011: 59) felt insecure in the UN compound because 'only a padlock on the front and rear gates prevented access to the post . . . This low level of security was always a little unnerving for me, considering we were unarmed observers in a dangerous part of the world'.

In contrast, several of the interveners spent most of their deployments in compounds physically separated from the local community, which exacerbated their sense of distance. Sharon Brown (2016: 28) felt 'like I was suffocating, so much so I may just as well have entered a prison compound'. She was so 'determinedly eager to find ways to connect to the local community that I found it increasingly difficult to sit in a compound in someone else's country and know very little about its people' (Brown, 2016: 29). Bamforth (2014: 79) was also confined to a compound in Sudan, so that

> despite the sounds around us, Darfur was remote. We were locked away in offices in compounds, barely allowed out because of the passing traffic of militia and the endless fluctuations of alliances between local commanders and factions – Sudan rarely imposed.

Similarly, living and working in a medical compound in Angola, Damien Brown (2012: 1) described a sense of distance from 'the incomprehensible, pitiful, frightening universe that begins just beyond these walls'.

Although she was not confined to a compound in Kosovo, Venner (2019: 40) 'realised how little I really knew about what was going on in Kosovo . . . So far I'd actually got to know very few Kosovars. Everyone I dealt with in the UN administration was another foreigner'. This had consequences for how Venner understood both Kosovars and other interveners. For example, after an intervener she knew was arrested for corruption, she remarked that: 'Like most foreigners, I found it hard to believe that an international official would be involved in corruption. Corruption was what the locals did. We were the good guys' (Venner, 2019: 95). Similarly, several months into his deployment in Angola, Damien Brown (2012: 176) commented that

> I had such vivid notions of befriending staff when I applied to volunteer, or being invited to their homes and getting to know their families, but the divide between expat and local staff here is rigid: exclusive employer versus employee with few options . . . So, I regret to say that after five months I know little about them.

This led, at times, to clashes between him and the Angolan medical staff.

Despite their security concerns and physical separation, several interveners became close to the local community. Once Sharon Brown was allowed to leave the military compound in Dili she volunteered at a local orphanage, providing English lessons. Brown (2016: 31) recognised that this work helped her as much as the local population (and possibly more), reflecting that: ‘It not only provided an escape from the hospital and my clinical role, it gave me a way to deliver aid . . . in my own way’. Jewell learnt Arabic pre-deployment and used it to get to know the local population, taking tea and playing with neighbouring families. Smith regularly played music with his Afghan interpreters, which helped him to build relationships. Bleakley also got to know the local community by helping with the rice harvest, implementing a youth crime prevention programme, starting a boxing club for young people and attending church services.

That they are not needed (or as needed as they expected)

Several of the interveners faced the dilemma of realising that – despite striving to meet the ideal subject position of the objective, rational, technocratic ‘expert’ – they might not have been needed, or as needed as they had expected. For example, Sharon Brown (2016: 31–32) reflected that: ‘It would still take many years of life and travel to realise that the citizens of countries or communities that I perceived to be disadvantaged did not require my charity, nor my pity’. Venner (2019: 191, 205) found that Kazakhstan ‘didn’t look in anyway like a place in need of foreign aid’, which she found ‘strangely disturbing’, as it ‘made me question some of my ideas about the work I’ve been doing and the nature of foreign aid’. Indeed, in her epilogue, Venner (2019: 314) reflected that: ‘Over the years I’ve become more cynical. I’ve learned more about the real problems facing these societies and realised the pointlessness of some of the work done by donors’. Similarly, Bamforth (2014: 128) reflected that: ‘The limitations of humanitarian work seemed evident in Darfur. Despite the urgency of the needs, the humanitarian problems there were not those that humanitarian work alone could solve. It was a political, historical and humanitarian mess’.

Connected to this dilemma was the sense that the local population did not necessarily welcome or appreciate their assistance. For example, on her second deployment to Timor-Leste, during declining political relations between Timor-Leste and Australia, Sharon Brown (2016: 55) reflected that: ‘the feel of this mission was very different. The hero-cum-celebrity status of ADF personnel that I experienced in 2000 had been replaced by deep-seated resentment towards Australia over the oil resources battle in the Timor Gap’. This meant that, while she and her colleagues were freer to move around Dili, ‘we had to be much more wary of how, where and with whom we travelled. We were required to wear a sidearm or carry a rifle in what the ADF calls “force protection measures”’ (Brown, 2016: 55). Minion (2004: 30) found her Timorese colleagues unreceptive to her advice: ‘The boss of the newsroom just ignores me; he is unwilling to accept advice from a malae [foreigner]’. Indeed, Bleakley (2019: 1992) found in Timor-Leste that ‘There was often animosity between the local police and the UN police . . . You could understand that Timorese were proud people and some didn’t think they were doing anything wrong and like the way they policed their districts’. This meant that her ‘work was frustrating and monotonous’, as the Timorese police only called their UN counterparts ‘when they needed transport or a camera’ (Bleakley, 2019: 1904, 1971).

Conclusion

The way that interveners feel – both emotionally and bodily – when performing peacebuilding work is neither benign nor innate. My analysis identified two main interpretive repertoires in the memoirs I analysed, which generated two subject positions: the intervener as objective, rational, technocratic 'expert' and the intervener as irrational, fallible, vulnerable 'human'. While the interveners perceived the 'expert' subject position is ideal, neither subject position is normatively preferable. Instead, the two subject positions represent analytical ideal types from which I identified the feeling rules that the interveners tried to follow: either that emotions should be suppressed or that they should be acknowledged and expressed. These subject positions and feeling rules, in turn, generated four major dilemmas that the interveners faced: that they are not infallible or invulnerable; that they feel emotions that are unsanctioned, unwanted or unprofessional; that they should be close, but not too close, to conflict-affected societies; and that they are not needed (or as needed as they expected).

None of the interveners neatly occupied either subject position, although all tended towards the second, displaying varying degrees of vulnerability and fallibility as they experienced the emotional and embodied experience of conducting peacebuilding work. Much of the secondary literature argues that the subject position of intervener as 'expert' dominates how interveners understand themselves and their role. It has been argued that this can lead interveners to 'value technical proficiency over country-specific expertise' and consequently fail to support, or even to provide space for, conflict-affected populations engaging in peacebuilding (Autesserre, 2014: 12). The memoirs I analysed revealed that the interveners were aware that the intervener as 'expert', with its associated feeling rules relating to suppressing emotions and acting 'professionally', was the 'ideal' subject position to which they should aspire. But the subject position they most occupied was of interveners as 'human', hyper-aware of their knowledge gaps, uncertainty, fallibility and vulnerability.

These feelings were compounded by a sense of bodily vulnerability stemming from the discomforts, dangers, and, at times, degradations of working in conflict zones, with the women interveners particularly vulnerable to harassment and sexual violence. The interveners' embodied security practices and confinement to 'fortified' compounds also created distance between them and conflict-affected societies. While some interveners, particularly Bleakley, made considerable attempts to get to know the local community in which she was working (and indeed, Bleakley's memoir concludes with an epilogue about her ongoing volunteer work in Timor-Leste), they were all aware of their distance – whether physical, cultural, social or economic – from the local community.

The interveners' emotions and embodied experience affected how they perceived themselves, their roles, their performance, the local populations they were ostensibly there to 'help', and consequently how they acted. Their feelings of uncertainty, fallibility and bodily vulnerability sometimes led them to question their professionalism and capability. Their feelings of frustration and anger, particularly with members of the conflict-affected population, at times encouraged them to develop pejorative perceptions of that population, or undermined trust in that population, including in some of their colleagues. It also led some to become disillusioned, to question whether they wanted to continue with their work, and to either lose the desire, or ability, to get to know the population in which they were working. These findings suggest that their emotions and embodied experiences at times negatively impacted on their ability to conduct peacebuilding work. However, this is not to diminish the important contributions each intervener also made.

My findings highlight the value of analysing individual interveners at the micro-scale, because although they operate within broader structures, it is ultimately them who implement – via everyday decisions and actions – peacebuilding work. This gives interveners scope to shape, through their individual beliefs, behaviours and interactions, how peacebuilding work occurs, and recursively, to influence the broader structures in which they work. For example, after working on several missions for the International Organisation for Migration, Bamforth (2014: 11) reflected that: ‘Despite being a rapidly professionalising, multibillion dollar industry, humanitarian work – given it takes place in crisis situations – is still often ad hoc, driven by people rather than systems and, above all, accidental’.

Much of the micro-scale critical peace and conflict studies literature has focused on drawing generalisable conclusions about large groups of international interveners and has concluded that interveners tend to understand themselves as objective, rational, technocratic ‘experts’. My article is much more modest in scope and shaped by selection bias in the type of interveners who choose to write memoirs (Hor, 2022), but my overriding finding is that interveners are aware that they are irrational, fallible, vulnerable ‘humans’. While we may identify patterns when we examine interveners in great numbers, each has their own identity, perceptions, emotions, embodied experiences and ultimately stories to tell. If we focus primarily on the structural and institutional influences on – and faults of – international intervention, we risk overlooking that they are implemented by individuals who are fallible, vulnerable and often trying their best in difficult circumstances.

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