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THE INVISIBILITY CLOAK: HOW 'INTERNATIONALS' EMOTIONS AFFECT THEIR LISTENING IN PEACEBUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

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How 'Internationals' Emotions Affect Their Listening in Peacebuilding Partnerships

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Pernilla Johansson defended her dissertation "The Emotional is Political: Analyzing Listening Practices of 'Internationals' in Peacebuilding Partnerships" in June 2018 at the Department of Political Science, University of California, Irvine. She has extensive experience as a peacebuilding practitioner at an INGO and currently works at Sida Partnership Forum. Her focus areas in research and practice involve learning and culture issues in organizations working for social change. The full-text version of her dissertation is available here: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2vk8g270>

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Abstract

Why are ‘international’ peacebuilding actors so bad at listening to their ‘local’ partners, even when they want to and know they should? Practitioners, policy makers and researchers all agree that effective peacebuilding requires internationals to stop imposing general solutions and to instead support local ownership, that is, to listen to locals. Still, research shows that local actors rarely feel heard by their international partners. What is the reason for this “listening gap”? Challenging conventional wisdom, my dissertation finds that internationals’ everyday emotions matter. This is because emotions can keep us within current norms and hinder receptive listening, where we are open to learning and change. For example, daily stress stops internationals from hearing input outside of donor logics, while pride leads them to celebrate small victories within colonial development narratives. Such shared emotions keep internationals themselves “invisible.” That is, their behavior or capacity is kept off the partnership agenda, as if covered by an “Invisibility Cloak” which provides comfort to the price of muffled hearing. Therefore, to listen more receptively and shift power onto local actors, internationals must dare to step out as part of the partnership, to practice failing the present game and dealing with the feelings that arise.

Background & rationale: Internationals in peacebuilding don't hear locals, making peace less likely

“Most painful, was to hear that we don't ask [local partners'] advice, because we think we do it all the time, and base everything we do on what they tell us.”

INGO practitioner during staff discussion of a partnership evaluation¹

This quote from a professional practitioner in an international non-governmental organization (INGO) expresses both a central peacebuilding norm and the difficulty of its implementation. The norm is that of equal partnerships between international² actors and their local partners, in which local ownership is key. In other words, internationals should listen to their partners' advice and “base everything [they] do” on what locals tell them. The difficulty is that their local peacebuilding partners do not feel heard.³ On the contrary, they think internationals do not care about their expertise. The gap between the normative consensus and its limited implementation triggers my overall research question: Why are internationals so bad at listening, even though they want to and know they should? In my dissertation, I address this

¹ Interviews and observations were carried out in English, French and Swedish. To ensure anonymity, I do not note translations and use s/he and him/her or pseudonyms.

² I use “international” and “local” as distinct categories although this risks reproducing power relations (Richmond and Mitchell, 2012), and I drop the quotation marks for readability. Here, internationals include non-governmental, governmental, and inter-governmental organizations, and are sometimes also donor institutions. Locals include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental institutions, and private actors. Often, peacebuilding partnerships (as aid more generally) mix locals and internationals, with the former doing more implementation, and the latter contributing more funds. The dissertation starts with partnerships between INGOs and NGOs, discussing a wider range of internationals further on.

³ The dissertation contains a review of literature, donor commitments and research on practitioners to show the strength of this norm and how rare it is for local actors to feel heard by their local partners, citing, among others, Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Autessere, 2014; Cohen, 2013.

gap by examining what I first overlooked: the emotions expressed at the beginning of the quote above.

There, the speaker states that this gap is nothing less than “painful.” Such expressions of emotion were ignored in this discussion – and pushed aside by my interviewees and me (at first) – as beside the “real” point in our conversations about partnership. Experiencing and interpreting emotions are simply not considered relevant to being a competent peacebuilding practitioner today. Based on my findings, I challenge this conventional wisdom and argue that paying attention to the emotions that internationals experience during an ordinary day helps us understand how the listening gap is reproduced in daily practices. In addition, it helps us to identify obstacles to and possibilities for *receptive listening*, that is, listening that is likely to be felt by local partners.

Emotions are relevant to listening because they affect how one perceives things and can process what is heard. I focus on what INGO practitioners’ emotions can tell us about how they perceive who they are and what they do in relation to local partners and to existing norms of peacebuilding. As an example, consider the tension in what I call the “capacity contradiction.” I find that INGOs walk a fine line between simultaneously praising their local partners’ capacity as agents for change, and claiming that these partners still need vital capacity building by INGOs themselves. While contradictory, both claims are necessary for their identity as good partners (to both locals and donors) according to current norms. Having to toe this line makes INGOs tensely cling to standard scripts of what internationals vs. locals are supposed to know. As a result, they are discouraged from hearing partners’ expressions of needs and capacities beyond the accepted scripts, and they keep the focus on partners’ incapacities. This is just one example of how emotions influence listening and orient our attention away from INGOs themselves, making them invisible in the partnership – as if they were wearing what I call an “Invisibility Cloak.”

I make three main claims, through a step-by-step analysis. First, emotions matter to listening in peacebuilding practices. Second, emotions matter because many practices are still “sticky” with a colonial hierarchy where all the focus is on improving the local actor. Doing so gives internationals the privilege of “invisibility,” what they do is placed outside explicit contestation, off the partnership table. In fact, it is as if they are wearing an Invisibility Cloak, shielding them from attention, keeping them comfortable and able to carry on as usual, with their sense of the game, themselves, and the future intact – to the price of muffled hearing. And third, change requires *purposefully failing* to hold on to privilege, loosening the Invisibility Cloak and *dealing with the feelings* of vulnerability, discomfort, and uncertainty involved in exposure. Based on my findings, I make recommendations for practitioners, donors, and researchers on how to fail for change and how to support themselves and others through the emotional consequences. In other words, the pain expressed in the introductory quote is productive, either re-producing inequality or producing change, depending on how internationals deal with it.

Research aim & questions: Analyzing the role of internationals' everyday emotions in the listening gap

”It’s not supposed to be about us!”

INGO interviewee

“Well, I don’t care if [internationals] are tired – the refugee woman they’re supposed to be helping is also tired”

PhD-advisor, February 2017 (approx. quote)

“I would expect that [INGOs] experience a lot of emotions as they are working in war zones, but this...this is just office politics!”

Researcher discussant, January 2017 (approx. quote)

These quotes show some – exasperated, mocking, even hostile – responses to my early findings that the emotions that INGO practitioners experience could be relevant to the overall research question:

- Why are internationals so bad at listening, even when they want to and know they should?

Indeed, conventional wisdom among both practitioners and researchers says that studying everyday emotions – especially those of internationals – is a provocative waste of time. To the contrary, I draw on extensive interview material and resources from different disciplines to investigate the role of emotions by answering the following questions:

- Can internationals’ emotions play a role for their ability to hear locals, and if so, how?
- What are the possibilities and constructive strategies for change?

My data are from interviews and observations. I carried out sixty-three in-depth interviews over two years.⁴ Out of these, twenty-five were with practitioners from three INGOs, twenty-three with donors, and fifteen with researchers.⁵ Most interviews were done face to face in Stockholm, Uppsala, Nairobi, Belgrade, Pristina, London, and Washington D.C., but several were done remotely, with people working in these places or in the DR Congo, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

Methodologically, I build on feminist (regarding power, reflexivity, and the importance of action points); qualitative (case selection), and interpretive research traditions,⁶ guiding both my choice of methods and my step-by-step analysis. Because equal partnership is already such a strong norm, I started with practice theory (mainly based on Bourdieu, 1990) and by asking practitioners to describe what they *do*. In this way I aimed to see commonsense “dos and don’ts” that could give new answers to why the listening gap persists. Analyzing interviews through an interpretivist lens meant paying attention to surprises as embodied reactions that alert you to what stands out from your expectations (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). My main surprise was the range of emotions

⁴ Sample interview questions included the following: “Can you walk me through a common day, what do you do at work?” “How is partnership relevant to these ordinary tasks you have described, or isn’t it?” “Can you tell me more about an occasion where you felt you/your organization were doing the right thing as good partners?”

⁵ While INGOs usually work as “donors” in the sense of funding their partners, I use the term donors for actors whose main function is to fund such partnerships. While such actors can include a range of actors, public and private, my interviewees work for governmental or intergovernmental aid agencies. I started out treating donors as outside of the international-local partnerships, but as later sections show, eventually included them in the concept of “internationals” as my findings show that “internationals” in a wider sense share emotional practices and take cover under the Invisibility Cloak.

⁶ Additional key references include Ackerly, Stern, and True, 2006; Lynch, 2014; Wibben, 2016.

that practitioners expressed when describing mundane tasks. Taking emotions as my main object led me to integrate cognitive research on the role of emotions in listening, learning, and change, as well as critical intersectional feminist perspectives (mainly through Ahmed 2006, 2014, 2017) on listening across power hierarchies. This step-by-step approach is reflected in the dissertation layout and contributes to clarifying the theoretical contribution of feminist perspectives to practice theory. Key concepts used in the dissertation are practices, receptive listening, and emotions.

Practices are things that we do as practitioners of different social “fields” or “games.” These games are not about fun, but have stakes for the “players,” whether in rugby, family dynamics, or peacebuilding partnerships. Experienced practitioners develop a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 66–68), a practical knowledge of “things to do or not do” (1990, p. 53) to be considered competent (belonging) by other actors. Being considered incompetent involves serious risks to INGOs who, for example, are dependent on good partnerships and donor funding to exist and carry out their work. Of course, these “rules” of the game can change over time and what seems incompetent now can later be thought of as quick to adapt. While most practice-based researchers study what practitioners do and say, I also ask how they feel about it. What can emotions reveal about the peacebuilding game, or, as I argue, the *two games* that INGOs navigate simultaneously, both today’s hierarchical set-up and tomorrow’s (partly imagined) with more equality and receptive listening?

Receptive listening is more than waiting to speak. It means being able to learn and change based on what you hear (Beausoleil, 2014; Bickford 1996; Campbell, 2018; Farinati and Firth, 2017). Cognitive research shows that this is not easy as biases and defense mechanisms protect our attitudes and behavior, with emotions as relevant – but ambiguous – factors (Kahneman, 2011; Romanowska, 2014). Critical perspectives highlight that privileged groups have even more barriers to hearing those lower in a power hierarchy

and need to do emotional work to be constructive partners in social change (Beausoleil, 2019; Lugones and Spelman, 1983).

Emotions, in my study, are relational (Ahmed 2014; Feldman Barrett, 2018; Jaggar, 1989). This means that they neither work from the inside-out, as individual properties that come out, nor from the *outside-in*, as outside forces that make you feel this or that. Instead, emotions say something about the *relation* between the subject who feels and the object s/he feels something about. This relation is shaped by material histories and orients our attention toward or away from the object. For example, your happiness when seeing a family photo on the wall is based on your historical relation (and perhaps imagined future) with the people. Materially, it is triggered by the photo hanging there, orienting your attention toward it (rather than away, for example, as if hidden in a closet). The happiness may also shape the collective subject of the family, if shared by the members, or as a norm of how one should feel to be accepted as a competent part of that group.

In sum, I disagree with the quotes above and think that we should care about how internationals feel as their problems with listening are likely to be “about” themselves. Therefore, I analyze internationals’ everyday emotional practices and ask what these can tell us about what helps and hinders them to listen across colonial hierarchies, and to re-orient themselves toward more equal peacebuilding partnerships.

Findings & discussion: The Invisibility Cloak – hiding privilege, hindering hearing

Below, I describe my findings and step-by-step conclusion: the emotional practices of peacebuilding internationals work to patch up an “Invisibility Cloak,” hiding them as actors with stakes in the partnership and hindering them from hearing their local partners. The first section describes how both negative and positive emotions shared among practitioners strengthen their success in the existing, more hierarchical game, rather than help them change toward the more equal game that they are explicitly aiming for. These emotions orient internationals’ attention toward their local partners, whether as problems to be solved or successes to be celebrated. This perpetuates colonial power patterns and leaves internationals themselves invisible as actors, as if they were wearing an Invisibility Cloak. This is problematic because equal partnerships require mutual receptiveness and change.

The second section describes in more detail how the Invisibility Cloak functions to cover internationals in three layers: personally, organizationally, and geopolitically. For each layer, emotions orient internationals toward partners and ensure that they, as the privileged actors, remain comfortably “off” the partnership agenda. This decreases the likeliness of internationals to change and of partners’ feeling of being heard. The third section describes the Invisibility Cloak as fashionable well beyond the INGO community, revealing that donors and peace researchers also take cover under the cloak, based on shared emotional practices in relation to partnerships. The final section addresses the possibility of change and potential strategies. I find that change is possible, and already underway in a few counterexamples in the data, which could be labeled “to hear, they must appear.” That is, internationals *must fail* to wear the Invisibility Cloak, to build capacities for the emerging game of equal relations. In other words, change requires that they prepare for purposeful failure and for dealing with the feelings that are involved. Building on Sara

Ahmed's (2017) figure of the feminist "killjoy" and her "killjoy support kit," my dissertation presents practical recommendations in the last chapter.

a) The Invisibility Cloak is functional clothing in three layers

"We might say '[Our INGO] and partners have influenced something'...but how did that happen? Did we do it, but it sounds better that they were with us, or...did we go to Brussels *together*? Or are we just [joining *them*] to give ourselves credit?"

*INGO practitioner, describing the anxiety of the
"How will I Know"-taboo*

"But the question is always how much [donors] leave the capitals, how much they get out. There, we have *taken it upon ourselves* to *make sure* that they get out there. That is, we let them go with us, to the backcountry"

*INGO practitioner, describing taking responsibility
to link partners and donors*

These quotes illustrate the negative anxiety INGO practitioners often express in relation to their local partners and the positive responsibility they feel to link partners closer to international donors, here by showing donors more of partners' realities. These are two of the feelings that I analyze that practitioners experience in their daily practices (along with tension, stress, pride, and Yes!-moments of achievement). I found that practitioners connected negative feelings to things they *must do* and *must not do* whereas the positive feelings were connected to things they *want to do* and *think they should do* to count as competent peacebuilders. Here, I briefly lay out how these emotions orient

attention away from internationals to patch up the Invisibility Cloak and make it difficult to listen receptively.

It is easy to understand how negative emotions such as being tense, stressed, or anxious can make us less receptive to new input. Particularly so when we analyze how those feelings are connected to material threats of INGOs losing partners, donors, or even their very identity. Consider, for example, the *How Will I Know?*-taboo, named after the Whitney Houston song.⁷ This power taboo forces INGOs to live with the anxiety of not knowing what partners “really” think as an open discussion may be too disruptive to their identity as a competent peacebuilding player.

The interviewee cited above, for example, reasoned back and forth concerning whether the INGO could take credit for doing things with partners – instead of asking them directly. Stopping at this invisible, but clearly felt, barrier is characteristic of a taboo. I interpret the taboo as protecting the image of open communication between equal partners, which is threatened almost regardless of which turn a discussion would take. On the one hand, INGOs are eager for partnerships that fit the norm of equality, where they do things “together.” On the other hand, they are aware that actual power inequalities can influence what partners say (or do not say). Perhaps partners would feel too dependent to protest if the INGO would steal their thunder, or feel rejected if the INGO distanced itself? Both taking too much and too little credit risks donor and partner relations. The dominant discourse of equal partnership provides incentives for all to keep up an image of open communication, leaving INGOs anxiously wondering and unable to take partners’ views into account to change.

⁷ The lyrics continue “How will I know if he really loves me?” and list different ways to find out without asking directly, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/whitneyhouston/howwilliknow.html> (last accessed February 15, 2017).

Positive emotions, on the other hand, may seem to indicate openness and steps toward the equal relations of an emerging game. However, my analysis reveals that many of these “happy” listening practices in fact orient INGOs’ daily efforts toward strengthening the old, colonial game that they aim to change. Take the second quote, for example, expressing how INGOs take responsibility to link partners with international donors by showing donors more of partners’ complex realities. While these and other activities certainly strengthen partners and themselves, this is mainly within the existing game of colonial power patterns. That is, the local partner is in focus for improvement efforts and internationals have the funds and authority to say how things should be done. As shown in the dissertation, other positive emotions such as pride and Yes!-moments of achievements work similarly.

These findings are surprising in two ways. First, they show that *INGOs do listen*. In fact, their attention is extremely oriented toward local partners. While attention is necessary for receptive listening, it needs to be analyzed in historical and material context to determine whether it helps or hinders. Second, the orientation toward their local partner is so dominant that *INGOs themselves become invisible*. In fact, I claim that their emotional practices around asking, training, linking, etc. patch up an Invisibility Cloak. While internationals in many ways dominate the administration of peacebuilding projects, I find that their personal lives, their organizations, and their politics are hidden, kept off the shared agenda and never discussed as part of the partnership.

INGOs thus become invisible as political actors. I argue that this invisibility has colonial continuities, keeping the privileged Subject comfortable and less receptive to partners’ perspectives. While both liberal and critical peace researchers make arguments to put local actors in focus, I draw on broader strands of critical research, which increasingly scrutinizes the dominant actors who uphold the norms (and the norms themselves), whether these be men (and patriarchy), white people (and racism/colonialism), or straight people (and

heteronormativity). In other words, while I support scholarship asking what kind of in/visibility is forced on people in the margins, I investigate how the Invisibility Cloak of the more privileged internationals⁸ muffles their hearing of local partners.

b) The Invisibility Cloak is functional clothing in three layers

“[W]e don’t just say ‘oh my god this is so bad’ [again, laughs a little] but we *do* something. And we try to find out, we try to, to understand the situation, ‘what happened here?’ Do they have a lot to do, sometimes it can be personal stuff, someone in the family has died or ...”

INGO practitioner, describing getting a bad report from partners

“Wow! That was almost hard to answer, because you just take it as a given!”

*INGO practitioner, answering the question
“What can you learn from partners?”*

“it becomes important not only to be able to operate / ... / *away* from home, because the issues are *here* as well. And that creates an interesting challenge, because all of a sudden, you are ...’testing what you do’ in a much more challenging way.”

*INGO practitioner, describing connecting politics in
the global North and South*

⁸ The dissertation acknowledges different aspects of invisibility, based on Ahmed’s (2004, para. 1) point that a norm is invisible “only for those who inhabit it” and peacebuilding examples (Autessere, 2014; Smirl, 2015).

Having spotted the Invisibility Cloak, I examine its functionality in detail and find, as the quotes illustrate, that it covers internationals as actors in three layers: personally, organizationally, and geopolitically.

The **personal** layer may be easiest to see as we often think of emotions as individual. Consider the first quote, from Renate, describing how they take responsibility to soften the effect on donor relations when partners have written a bad report. Her INGO can then take death in the family into consideration when deciding whether they should “*do something*,” for example, “prolong a deadline, /.../ ask helping questions, [or] try to be accommodating regarding budget allocations.” In other words, internationals can make room for “personal stuff” to affect even contractual aspects of the partnership. My data contained several such examples, but no mention of the reverse. This is not a problem in itself but highlights two things: the taken-for-grantedness of unequal attention and its colonial continuities.

First, whereas INGOs accept and perhaps even encourage partners to share personal details, even of tragedies – which may be assessed as acceptable reasons for a late or bad report – they hold their own personal information off the partnership table. Second, practicing this inequality follows a historical hierarchy, where emotionality is associated with less power, more passivity, and more femininity (Ahmed 2014; Bourdieu, 1990). Acknowledging emotions means becoming vulnerable, open to questioning, and to change – all more appropriate for a subaltern actor perceived as being in development. Meanwhile, INGO practitioners are protected from such vulnerability by the Invisibility Cloak.

Perhaps the organizational layer of the Invisibility Cloak is the thickest as it is made up by the unequal attention to the set-up and work of the organizations in the partnership. As the second quote shows, it is “hard to answer” what internationals can learn from locals. Both negative and positive emotional practices direct attention toward the local partners’ development. Indeed,

almost every aspect of local partner organizations is under scrutiny, while strengths and weaknesses of the INGO rarely feature on the agenda, which means opportunities for mutual learning around shared challenges as equal partners are lost.

For example, stress is a constant pressure for INGO staff, as when my interviewee Carrie described matter-of-factly how the workday often ends without her having “leaned back in [her] chair” when she realizes it is time to go home after answering “hundreds of e-mails.” At the same, capacity building of local organizations often includes “sustainable” routines integrating staff health and safety issues. Another example is the pressure, described by another interviewee, in handling “the pain, the very real pain” of her staff. They decide about funding, and thus which partner organizations will have to lay off staff in some of the worst economic (and conflict) conditions in the world, but rarely seek advice from partners who deal with such dilemmas all the time. Also positive feelings, such as those from Yes!-moments where partners excel in advocacy efforts, keep the focus on local partners rather than orient attention toward shared challenges or possibilities to learn by reversing roles.

Finally, there is an underlying geopolitical layer structuring the Invisibility Cloak. What I mean is that INGO practices also make their Western home countries invisible as actors in the political dynamics of the conflicts where INGOs do peacebuilding. The armed conflicts are treated as local, national, or regional affairs located elsewhere, rather than entangled in political and economic relations (Sabaratnam, 2017, Williams, 2017) where Western countries are major players.

The third quote illustrates this through a counterexample, when my interviewee Marcos reasons about what happens when global connections are instead made visible between issues “away from home” and over “here.” Then, INGOs are tested “in a much more challenging way.” Getting involved in their home country politics, INGOs both face competition from “a much stronger local

civil society,” and risk a more sensitive relationship with their government, as global connections in immigration and climate change are “things people are considering when they vote now.” In other words, loosening the Invisibility Cloak, and bringing attention to INGOs as political “here,” can bring public scrutiny and jeopardize their government relations. While the comfort of business as usual is rarely noted, exceptions like this reveal that failing to follow the rules can expose vulnerabilities and increase uncertainty.

c) The Invisibility Cloak provides fashionable cover beyond INGO circles

“I can understand it for our country team, it’s their country / ... / but for expats like us, [feeling something] ... seems a bit full of ourselves, no?”

Donor interviewee, answering whether emotions are relevant to his/her role

“we felt that they...almost demanded [quick, embarrassed laugh] too much.”

Researcher interviewee, describing a Southern research partner

If only INGOs wore the Invisibility Cloak my findings would be of minimal significance. Therefore, my dissertation also asks how fashionable the cloak is as a marker of competent peacebuilding among a wider range of internationals. After all, competence is assessed relationally. Through my interviews with donors and peace researchers,⁹ I find that they share similar emotional practices, negative and positive as well as the awkward discomfort when they loosen the cloak and appear as parts of partnerships. Therefore, I suggest that the Invisibility Cloak is a shared fashion item in the peacebuilding field.

⁹ They were interviewed as individuals in the peacebuilding field, working (at the moment) for donor and research institutions respectively, not to represent those institutions officially.

Consider first quote, from a **donor** interviewee expressing a desire to distance him-/herself from emotionality about the job. S/he added that “I do a job” which is “very lucrative” but not about “the greater good.” Yet, s/he spent two hours with me, lining up examples of proud moments of achievements, of frustration with wasteful practices of internationals, and of passionate engagement in measurable impact on people’s lives. When I analyzed my donor interviews further, I found a pattern of shared emotional practices with INGOs.

One such example stems from donors juggling contradictory demands between increasing administration and staying close to “the field.” On the one hand, donor interviewees readily acknowledge that they barely (or not at all) can read all the documents they demand from INGOs (as suspected by one INGO interviewee). Instead, donor staff spend a lot of time and attention on how to systematize and store the information to make it available for imagined future users, such as colleagues, evaluators, or even the general public tracking their tax money. When I asked what this means in practice, one interviewee describes how s/he prepares a decision to support a partner:

”[O]f course, I’m filling in a lot of different [forms with] questions ... [I also] take in documents from partners, read them, take in additional information [small laugh], I go to a kind of quality assurance committee, colleagues, discuss, enter additional information, go back to the system, update it, take in *more* documentation from partners, go to a controller, check formalities and [do] risk assessments, budget assessments and those kinds of questions, then you...go back again [laughs], you go to your boss and the same thing can happen there, that there are still things, so yeah, it’s ...[long pause]. *Hopefully* you meet with partners during this period, but that’s not always the case. And yeah, you negotiate agreements, maybe you involve the legal team...[continues to explain further steps]”

Although s/he answers “hm, yes, I think so, at least most of the time” to my question if all these steps are meaningful, s/he also concedes that it has “gone a bit too far.”

On the other hand, despite all the information gathering, partner meetings are still desired, yet only “*hopefully*” happen, signaling decreasing priority. Being a competent donor in practice thus means documenting and following up on partners’ activities and progress to the extent that that documentation itself becomes more important than the direct relations. Not surprisingly, this orientation also keeps the donors themselves off the partnership agenda.

The second quote is from a **researcher** interviewee, describing at length the many measures s/he and his/her institution had taken to equalize cooperation with a Southern research partner. However, at one point s/he started wriggling in his/her seat and hesitated to speak, clearly awkward, and expressed frustration with the partner’s reaction to all these efforts. When I asked what the partner thought, s/he answered that they demanded to be included equally in all publication credit and “even wanted it to be included in the budget, they wanted to *get paid* to write things and we saw it more as ‘this is something you get by goodwill,’ to use the data from the project. /.../ there, we felt that they...almost demanded [quick, embarrassed laugh] *too much*.” The way my interviewee was torn by contradictions between hierarchy and equality, makes this simultaneously an example of business as usual and a counterexample.

As an example of business as usual, the longer story shows that the motivations replicate existing hierarchies where publication is seen as “intellectual property” mainly generated by the initiative and funding from the North. However, it is a counterexample in the way it pushed my interviewee’s team to appear as actors with stakes in the partnership, failing to conform to the existing norm. Concretely, they loosened the Invisibility Cloak and exposed their own need for publication credits, putting that issue on the partnership table, where it was discussed with the discomfort that made the researcher wriggle, laugh

embarrassedly, and hesitate to tell me. These efforts did not translate into a straight-forward success story. Instead, the awkward discussions where partners “almost demanded *too much*” eventually had to be returned to “what is normal” by getting their legal team to explain intellectual property – effectively pulling the issue from the table, buttoning up the Cloak, and taking a unilateral decision.

Just like the geopolitical counterexample, where Marcos challenged the separation of issues “here” and “away,” this counterexample highlights the emotional make-up of the Invisibility Cloak, as well as the emotional consequences internationals must prepare for if they want to open up to change.

d) Loosening the Invisibility Cloak – failing and feeling in order to change the game

“it’s not clear from the outset who should decide, who is the final arbiter. That was uncomfortable at times”

INGO interviewee, describing a formally equal partnership contract

In the dissertation, I deal directly with the possibility of change. If the Invisibility Cloak that internationals patch up with their daily practices keeps them in old-fashioned hierarchies where they cannot hear their local partners, can they learn to listen receptively and what might this look – and feel – like?

Whereas both negative and positive emotional practices can reinforce existing power asymmetries, I find that failing to wear the Invisibility Cloak and instead ‘appearing’ relates to feelings as quoted above and in earlier counterexamples of being “uncomfortable,” awkward, and challenged. These feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty make sense when you imagine playing a game and pushing for new rules at the same time. It is simply necessary for some players

to *fail to conform* to existing rules (invisibility) *in order to perform* the emerging, explicit norm (receptive listening). Therefore, I find that to change the peacebuilding game, internationals must practice *purposeful failure* and *dealing with the feelings* involved.

As other feminist and queer scholars, Sara Ahmed (2017) pays particular attention to the costs – including emotional costs – paid by actors who “fail” the norm, who in their doing and being are seen as (in her words), “out of place,” and to what resources can support them. I draw on these lessons and flip them to fit privileged actors who can choose to purposefully fail to push the boundaries of the game. More specifically, I analyze counterexamples where interviewees express the vulnerability, discomfort, and uncertainty of purposefully failing the present game, failing one’s present self-identity, and failing one’s present view of the future.

Consider the quote above, from my INGO interviewee Hopi, describing a counterexample: a partnership through a formally equal contract. Instead of the INGO signing the donor contract and distributing money to the local partner based on their reports, here, both actors were formally equal and putting in staff time with donor funds only covering shared expenses. As this left the INGO without many of the practices described earlier, keeping attention on partners, the first two years were, according to Hopi, “a little bit outside our comfort zone.” However, the shared agenda also led to spectacular results that she “could never have dreamt of.” But in the third year, a small adjustment meant that staff had to be paid through the funding for common expenses that Hopi’s INGO was responsible for, and “as soon as that happened, a number of issues broke out.” One such issue was that the auditing requirements kicked in and Hopi’s INGO had to demand a report from the local partner.

According to Hopi, that’s when “things turned sour.” The partner was slow to share information and the process stalled. At first, the finance staff at Hopi’s

INGO were just annoyed but when the delay put the INGO's own donor relations in danger, that's when they got "*uncomfortable*." They even demanded that she "just decide this now, just *move!*" She admits she considered it, but instead decided to hold out longer. The resolution included negotiation between the organizations, as well as between finance and program staff within Hopi's INGO. The example illustrates that doing differently means taking risks, making yourself vulnerable to questioning individually and organizationally, and embarking on an uncertain, open-ended process.

Similarly, in the earlier researcher counterexample, my interviewee had to deal with the discomfort of spelling out unspoken hierarchies of who should have publication rights in a cooperation project with a Southern research partner. Having to stand up for their own stakes in the partnership shook their self-image as generous and dispassionate funders of their partner's capacity building. Eventually, they felt that their partner demanded "too much" and asserted their rights according to existing norms through legal expertise. And, in the geopolitical counterexample, Marcos explained how INGOs take risks when they challenge the separation between issues "here" and "away." In sum, purposefully failing the game means having to deal with feelings of vulnerability, discomfort, and uncertainty regarding our position in the game, our identity, and our view of our future.

Using Ahmed's figure of the feminist "killjoy" who disturbs the happy comforts of business as usual, and her idea of a "killjoy support kit" to sustain such efforts, I make recommendations for internationals who want to "killjoy" in the present peacebuilding game to push toward a new game of more equal relations.

Conclusions and recommendations: Practical killjoying and killjoy support practices

Studying peacebuilding internationals' everyday emotions helps us understand more about their lack of listening to local partners and about conditions for change. While my findings show that emotions do orient internationals' attention toward partners, which is important for receptive listening, I also find that *how* they do so has the opposite effect. Both positive and negative emotions orient internationals toward success in the existing peacebuilding "game", which is still characterized by a colonial hierarchy where internationals themselves become invisible. In fact, everyday emotions work to patch up an *Invisibility Cloak*, hiding internationals as political actors and muffling their hearing of partners' perspectives.

Counterintuitively, my findings thus challenge the conventional wisdom that peacebuilding should focus on local partners. I show that to re-orient from existing norms and hierarchies to the explicit goals of receptive listening, internationals must pay more attention to themselves. Specifically, they must loosen the Invisibility Cloak and expose themselves as political actors with stakes in the game, as part of the partnership. In other words, they must *practice purposeful failure* of business as usual (invisibility) and *dealing with the feelings* that arise. According to my data, these are likely to be awkward emotions of vulnerability, discomfort, and uncertainty. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's figure of the feminist "killjoy," who also breaks shared (sexist) orientations, and her "killjoy support kit," I develop recommendations for killjoying and killjoy support practices for peacebuilding internationals. These target INGOs, donors, and researchers, and work for persons, organizations, and geopolitical arenas.

For internationals who dare to "killjoy," **I recommend beginning by preparing "killjoy support practices"** to deal with the awkward feelings

involved. One way to start is to tend to your Body, Story, and Allies,¹⁰ whether as persons, organizations or arenas.

- **Body: Tend to physical and mental space. For example, slow things down. While stress can be argued to be a constitutive condition for peacebuilding, having been central since its beginning in the 1960s** (Goetze, 2017), it will make it harder to do things in new ways and to take risks, not to mention to learn which requires **time to reflect and discuss awkward issues**. Innovation also thrives in an **open and psychologically safe climate**, where criticism is readily shared but never personal.
- **Story: Spell out what you are doing and why**, that you are experimenting to push the boundaries toward new relations, as clearly and as often as possible internally and externally. This will **strengthen your commitment**, make you more **understood and credible** (even by/to actors who do not agree), **facilitate agile experimentation** by colleagues and allies, and enable **faster learning** as you test and adapt. For example, if you do fewer projects, motivate this by bigger changes and more learning.
- **Allies: Find critical friends** (Holvikivi 2019), that is, actors who support you and do not hesitate to disagree with you at the same time. **Look across usual boundaries** to break present groupings and allow new ones to emerge.

Donors have a particular role in enabling those they fund to killjoy by encouraging and funding killjoy support practices for more sustainable commitment and change efforts.

¹⁰ These resemble three of ten support kit items in Ahmed (2017): bodies, books, and other killjoys, as well as Mannergren Selimovic's (2019) conceptual grid for grasping the everyday through body, story, and place.

For internationals who dare to “killjoy” in peacebuilding partnerships (whether INGOs, donors, or researchers), **I recommend experimenting** with practices that break the taken-for-granted hierarchy between internationals and locals and that expose your own stakes in the game.

- Killjoy examples directly from my data include **completely equal formal contracts** between partners and **developing shared agendas, reversing capacity building** so that internationals **learn from locals** or both partners **learn together** to face mutual challenges, and **making explicit global connections** across North-South boundaries.

Researchers can killjoy even outside concrete partnerships, by doing what I call “flip, feel, and fail,” which includes reversing who/what is seen as data vs. analytical expertise (e.g. analyzing privileged internationals using theory from ‘the margins’), paying attention to emotions in your data and your research team (as this can provide data about unspoken norms and expectations for results),¹¹ and empowering new actors and dynamics through your recommendations (who is expected to have the power to act vs. who is targeted for change).

Finally, for local actors in partnerships with internationals, I hope that my findings can be useful in your efforts to make internationals listen and share peacebuilding challenges with you.

¹¹ The dissertation goes into more depth on how to study emotions as practices, as well as conceptual and practical advantages of doing so, as one of its main theoretical and methodological contributions.

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Effective peacebuilding requires international actors to listen to local partners, which often fails in practice. Through interviews with practitioners, donors and researchers, this DDB identifies how everyday emotions help or hinder the receptivity to local perspectives.

Effektivt fredsbyggande kräver att internationella aktörer lyssnar på lokala aktörer, vilket ofta brister i praktiken.

Genom intervjuer med praktiker, givare och forskare identifierar denna DDB hur känslor i vardagen hindrar eller ökar mottagligheten för lokala perspektiv.

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