

Exert 7

Cultural Identification and Empathy

Identification can be conditional on personal relationships, for example contacts with friends or on cultural or family history. One student told us how she had attended an Arab school and how this had affected her understanding of the conflict. Such cultural histories can also affect the ‘facts’ and versions of causes of disputes which are heard by the individual. It was also made clear to us that for some members of the Jewish community, memories of the holocaust had a powerful influence on how the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was seen. In a one to one discussion outside of the groups, a Jewish woman described her experience of visiting Auschwitz and the appalling sight of piles of children’s shoes. She then said that, ‘Sharon is a thug’ but commented that there are times when someone like that is needed. The conflict was seen through the prism of the holocaust – as she said, ‘we cannot go quietly into the gas chambers again’.

Another woman in a focus group expressed her view that the history of the Jewish people had affected how the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was understood. She saw Israeli actions as being motivated by fear and thought that public perceptions were influenced by feelings of guilt:

I felt that [the Israelis] had tried to enlarge their area, but I could understand because there is a lot of fear from the Israeli point of view. They feel very frightened where they are, and also because of the past history of the Jewish people we feel quite guilty as well.

(Middle-class female group, Paisley)

It is also possible for audiences to identify at a more general cultural level – for example to see one side of the conflict as being ‘people like us’ with manners customs and lifestyles which are readily understood and recognised. As one participant from London put it:

It's much easier for those of us in the West to imagine that a car bomb in the middle of a city is a tremendously terrifying thing...when you see a car bomb go off in the middle of a sophisticated city, the experience is much closer to one we can 'imagine'.

(Middle-class male group, London)

An additional factor to which this speaker pointed was that London had experienced being attacked during the IRA campaigns and he, and another participant described being close to bombs when they went off. The issue of cultural identification was raised by other participants – Israel was referred to as 'an island of democracy' in the Middle East (Middle-class male, London). At the same time, some aspects of Muslim culture were seen as strange and difficult to identify with. A female participant, who was actually quite sympathetic to the Palestinians, gave her own rather mixed feelings on this:

I feel there are lots of images I have of Muslim women that I find it very hard to see them beyond my own sort of white western perspective because they're all covered up. And when you hear them mourning – because I know that my voice goes "what's that noise?" and I know that that must be my western culture that makes me think [that], but it does come across as alien to me, and I'm aware that it is my perspective, but that doesn't make me get any closer, if you know what I mean.

(Low income female group, London)

These comments then stimulated a further discussion between Brian Hanrahan from the BBC and the film-maker Ken Loach who were present in this group. They focused on the issue of whether journalists should intervene to help audiences 'see through' cultural difference by appealing to more universal values (1), e.g. concern for human suffering or loss – and should this be done in the name of balance?:

Ken Loach:

That seems a very reasonable response that people do empathise with situations that match their own. Do you consciously try to counteract that effect when you are interviewing people who don't speak English or who are

speaking Arabic or some language we don't understand.
Is there an attempt to re-balance that and should there be?

Brian Hanrahan: Erm, no.

Ken Loach: Should there be, do you think if we are even-handed to both sides?

Brian Hanrahan: Re-balance in the sense of trying to deliberately skew the scales so that you feel more sympathy for this person, no; re-balance if you mean, do we try and present that person in their own, so that their argument or their background comes across clearly, yes. I certainly wouldn't try if there was someone who looked alien, was in an alien culture in an alien setting, I wouldn't try to do something that made them seem more like us, because I would feel that I was then intervening too much.

Ken Loach: It's a question more of not to skew it, but to elucidate it...

Brian Hanrahan: I'd certainly try.

Ken Loach: ...in a way that the audience would identify with the person because of their motherhood or because of their plight which is universal, so that you are not distracted by the veil...

Brian Hanrahan: We would go looking for common themes so you could understand, 'this is a mother', 'this is a teacher'.

(At Low income female group, London)

The predominant response in the groups was that in practice people did 'see through' cultural difference and they spoke in terms of universals. As one woman put it, 'suffering is suffering'. There were also references to other values such as a concern

with the abuse of power and the perception of the Palestinians as the ‘underdog’. One young male participant commented on how the Israelis had ‘built up’ their country – while the Palestinian areas were ‘not very good’. The Israeli towns were western with discos – but this did not affect how he identified with the two sides. As he put it, ‘I would support the Palestinians, I’d support the underdogs’ (Low income male group, London). As we have already noted, visual imagery of the Palestinians as the underdog does not necessarily produce a sympathetic response. A key factor is how such imagery is contextualized through explanations of cause and how these affect understanding of the legitimacy and rationale of the two sides. In the above case, the speaker had also been influenced by Palestinians who he had met, who had been giving out leaflets at the local shopping precinct.

We also found cases in the groups where the visual imagery of war was simply too much for some people and that they said that they turned away. Ken Loach explored this response and asked why they would not feel empathy with those involved:

Ken Loach: Obviously everyone here is very caring and thoughtful in general in the way that we are talking about it, and yet I was very struck by what you said; when you said “I can’t bear to watch it”. Now sometimes you’ll see pictures of mothers and their dead children and grand-parents with children who have died or sons who have died and you as parents, daughters or whatever, I would think that you would, all things being equal, you would identify with that person’s suffering. What is it that stops you, stopping in front of the television and saying: “I absolutely understand what that person is going through, I have a sense of what that person is going through”, because if news is to work that is what sharing a story is. What is it that stops you feeling that empathy?

One speaker replies that such images may be ‘emotionally exhausting’. And then Ken Loach asked: ‘Is it also to do with feeling you have no control, no say in it?’ To which a female participant replies:

Oh yes, because there is a thing that nothing is going to change, there are so many of those images, it's depressing and futile.

(Low income female group, London)

One dimension in this sense of powerlessness is the lack of understanding about why the events are occurring. As we have found in this and other research, the world can appear to people as an inexplicable mess. Of course a greater understanding does not necessarily mean that something can be easily done by viewers to solve the problem. But in principle to see events as having causes can be a first step towards understanding the possibilities for change, and to engaging with what is shown and to having opinions about it. As another participant put it:

There is definitely an absence of explanation which causes an absence of feeling because I can quite easily sit and I say I feel no way about it whatsoever.

Because I haven't been there it's got nothing to do with me whatsoever, so I have a lack of feeling about it. But I also have a lack of understanding about it – maybe if I knew a lot more about it, I'd have more feeling and more opinions on it.

(Low income male group, London)

There was a strong feeling in the groups that the news should explain origins and causes and that journalists should speak more directly to viewers about what was happening and why. The participants in the groups did not want news that was in any way biased or inaccurate, but the desire for clear straightforward accounts was very apparent. It was also the case that when viewers did understand the significance and relevance of what they were watching, then this could strongly affect their level of interest in the news.

Endnotes

1. Such values are not 'universal' in the sense that everyone believes in or subscribes to them. They are universal in as much as they have the potential to traverse cultural difference, but they do not always do so. They may be contested by other cultural and political values such as racism. A white colonialist for example might not think that the 'value' of universal freedom should be applied to black people.