

On Becoming an Expert

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I have a close and intimate relationship with pain—the kind of pain that takes your breath away and makes you sick to your stomach. When I was young, I lost my footing on the steps of a school bus and fell—hard. I came back to consciousness with a deeply bruised ego and a nearly broken ankle. I was irreparably different. In the many years since, I have begun and ended each day in unimaginable pain. Learning to live with it has been a profoundly unsettling experience. I have grown to be grateful for the humility that my body teaches me daily, learned to feel both known and liberated in that disquiet, but I have not yet learned how to put up with the experts.

When you have chronic pain and illness, everyone imagines themselves to be an expert. Strangers will ask if you struggle to sleep so they can wax poetic about a supplement their nutritionist recommended for stress; well-meaning friends will tell you that “[insert-any-fitness-regimen-here]” helped them recover after they pulled a muscle skiing; an opinionated family member will be sure that a strict change in your diet and exercise would help you get back to normal. But these everyday experts are much more manageable than the ones who lead the first. While regular folks hear that I am in pain and want to help, doctors—of medicine and philosophy alike—hear I am in pain and want to understand what, when, how, and why. I cease to exist to them as a person and instead become a puzzle to be solved. Questions are posed, theorizing ensues, and eventually some authority determines that knowledge is produced, but never by me. Even as the embodied site of that knowledge, my experience belongs to someone else.

International relations—the whole academy really—is full of experts. *Those experts*. The ones who don’t think with you but through you (usually without understanding the difference between those positions).

I think that I am being taught to become one of those experts.

The training for a Ph.D. at a U.S. university feels starkly different from my M.Sc. in the U.K. It has a different tone and rhythm to it. It demands that my voice matches its cadence, but the words taste bitter on my tongue. This training notices different problems and finds different solutions. It

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requires that I prove myself as a dispassionate observer, but it makes my skin crawl to have to wear this version of expert as if it is a uniform. It discourages the questions that have animated my curiosity and previous education, but pain (and the trauma that comes with it) has taught me these questions and, how I ask them, are relevant and necessary precisely because it is deeply discomforting to do so. But this training tells me that I can find an intellectual “home” in (American) international relations if only I learn the right way to perform what it calls objectivity.

If you don’t know how it feels to be made into a puzzle, you won’t be able to recognize what it looks like in practice to take something that someone isn’t willing to give. We are taught not to notice this work of worldmaking, to borrow from Getachew,² that allows for a very prescriptive relationship between the scholar and their subject. We take without intending, we don’t know how or that we should also give, and so create a relationship of extraction and exploitation. When you do know how it feels, it is like all you can notice is all of the ways that you are seen in theory but then discarded empirically. The heaviest thing about the discipline of IR becomes how you are read out, written out, and taught out of mattering.

When I was invited to participate in this conversation about why people ought to matter in IR, I spent months waiting for the words for what I was feeling to come. It seems so innately true that people matter in IR, I am not sure what I can say that is not already known. I still don’t have the words. Maybe it is because this version of IR I am being taught now is one that I don’t recognize, but this version of an expert is one that is all too familiar.

But I am furiously typing into the notes app on my phone as I sit in the recovery room of a pain specialist’s office after a particularly bad procedure because I think I finally have figured out the words that only seem to appear when I am most in pain. What is usually chaotic nothing-ness and everything-ness sharpens into something—I like to believe is insight but who can say?—when I am most annoyed with being misunderstood. The theory gets in the way of understanding, the knowing eclipses empathizing, and the expert believes they aren’t accountable to the one they study or the effect of their theorizing.

Months ago, I sat in on a Zoom panel discussion on co-authorship. I tried to imagine how to practice recognizing that people are experts on their own experience. I asked the panelists what it might look like to include participants in our research as co-authors (not as ignored footnotes or unread acknowledgments) of the ideas they are integral to developing. The panelists were visibly confused by the question. The moments of silence that followed were incredibly loud. Their brows furrowed and eyes narrowed, their expressions speaking without needing words. When they did speak, they dismissed the idea. “This isn’t relevant to my work; it simply isn’t done.” Like the purpose of the question was not to imagine how we could do things differently. “That is not what co-authoring means in political science, you wouldn’t be able to publish that, especially as a grad

² Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

student.” Like faculty, institutions, and journals are doing us a favor by working with us and publishing our work. Like the work we do of questioning is not precisely the labor that institutions use to authorize closure and refusal as the performance of expertise. “I think what you are asking is when do I allow grad students to be co-authors on my work.” Like I am the one who is confused, as if I have made it to a Ph.D. without knowing how to string words together to form a question as I mean to ask it.

It is not the question that was asked, but it is a question that they can answer and therefore the one that is worth ~~their~~ our attention. To reframe the question into the one we are comfortable with does more, I think, than to avoid the question that we don’t know how to answer; it is to teach grad students not to ask questions that are unsettling or difficult or that the real experts don’t already know how to answer. It tells us we are better off not recognizing ourselves in the disorderliness, the ambiguity, the contradiction, and the entanglement of the human experience. So, I stared at the wall behind my computer and breathed in a bit too deeply to avoid dealing with that feeling, the one I first learned in pain specialists’ exam rooms. It enervates and enlivens at once. I want to scream and also take a nap; I want to leave the room and I want to interrupt. But how do you explain something to someone committed to misunderstanding you or (less generously) the point? How is it possible that the people you are thinking through don’t count as co-producers of that thought? What knowledge can we claim to be producing without them? What scholarship—what of anything actually—happens alone?

Pain. Pain is what happens alone. It produces a unique kind of loneliness. By nature of chronic pain, my way of entering the world is most often felt as what I cannot do, what is unavailable and impermissible to me. All you want is for people to notice and recognize the pain before you have to name it and explain, right up until the moment that their concern starts to feel like gravity, it defines how you are allowed to move and be. Then it starts to feel unbearable to have someone watch you so closely to see when you are affected. It feels like they are waiting for you to be incapable and insufficient, so they get to have a place in it. They are waiting for your pain to belong to them. To know you are seen first and perhaps only as a list of symptoms is to always wonder if you exist at all outside of them.

I think pain is a curse. I hold my body in permanent tension. I am afraid to show pain and to teach people how to notice unless I name it. Eventually they forget that I will flinch when they touch me and then things that should feel like belonging are a reminder that I don’t. I avoid sharing this loneliness for fear that the only time I register as my whole being is when I feel like I am the least of myself. I want the privacy to decide when and with whom I share my worst moments. I want the protection of knowing what I know and that it is mine. I want the safety of surviving alone so I don’t have to use the spoons I have left to comfort people who witness the pain and the state of constant, perpetual grieving where I live. If they cannot make my pain belong to them, it ceases to exist to them.

For some, it seems to mean something different, and invariably something more, to think of lived experience as a means to knowing, rather than knowledge itself. It is not enough to see the pain; in order to know, they have to make the experience make sense. It is not in the being, but in the becoming that things matter. I don't explain what it means in the "right" way. They change the words until they resonate with them, so that they can explain it to me. Like I am the one who is confused, as if I have not had to invent new vocabularies to explain sensations they have never felt. "Everything happens for a reason." What is the reason? The silence while we wait for them to tell us is very loud again. In this sense, IR is perhaps not best or most wholly understood as a discipline, but rather as a *disciplining*. We are actively disciplined into thinking it is up to the expert, who is disciplined into thinking it is their right and responsibility, to decide the boundaries of who is allowed to know, how they should discover it, and what knowledge actually looks like and matters. What if the expert I become is one that sees only what I am looking for, only what I already know how to see and explain, and not what is really there?

I think pain is a gift. I seek ways to be with people even when I cannot stand them. When pain is at its worst and it cuts deepest, I have taught myself to manage it by telling myself that I am carrying it for someone who cannot bear it anymore. I imagine that there is someone who needs me to hold their pain for a little while so they can rest. It is a strange and lovely way to feel pain differently. It makes it easier to think that I am strong enough to carry someone else's burden, to help them hold it, than for it to belong to me alone. Then pain can become a way to belong. I think about how this kind of imagining might make IR more hospitable—if we are carrying what is heavy for and with each other, to create space for us to rest, to communicate, to live and love and think in new ways unburdened by the pain that has come before? What would it mean to exist in IR, to matter to IR, by holding this at our center and as our purpose? How can we be a different kind of expert?