The affective dimensions of water conflict and cooperation

4th Water and Peace Seminar

9–10 March 2022, The Hague & online

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Many experts engaged in water diplomacy and water conflict resolution have experienced that factors like trust, beliefs, emotions, values or personal chemistry matter in achieving cooperative solutions or not.

Examples are plenty: Officials distrust data provided by other riparian states. Political leaders object to seemingly beneficial proposals for cooperation due to fear of disadvantage. Politicians and media fuel nationalistic sentiment. Conversely, a charismatic facilitator manages to set a positive tone between adversarial parties. Shared beliefs or traditions provide a basis for a constructive atmosphere in transboundary river commissions. Good personal chemistry between political leaders enables compromise – or the contrary if there is personal animosity.

However, discerning what role exactly such affective factors play in water conflict and cooperation has not received much attention so far. Research as well as policy advice tend to focus on (supposedly) rational reasoning and factors like economic benefits or costs, political interests, power relations, geographic location, or the existence of formal rules and organizations. Although valuable, these perspectives might limit our understanding of the range of factors which shape interaction over shared water resources and preclude potential water diplomacy solutions.

Reasons for that might be that affective factors seem to be much more difficult to grasp and to operationalize. But the dominant perspectives also reflect the Western bias in the relevant academic disciplines that has conceptualized cognition and rationality as being detached from emotion and as a superior way of problem-solving than approaches that are based on, for example, spirituality or social bonding.

In order to overcome the rational/emotional dichotomy and hierarchy in science and policy discourses on water conflict and cooperation, we draw inspirations from the current academic debates around the emotional turn in International Relations, the literature on emotional geographies, and the emerging field of Environmental Humanities. They have in common an understanding of affective factors neither as opposed to rationality nor as purely individual, but instead, as closely related to structural conditions. Moreover, we encourage interdisciplinary exchange with disciplines so far involved only marginally in understanding conflict and cooperation over shared water resources, such as social anthropology or psychology.

In the 4th Water and Peace Seminar, we would like to discuss to what extent these new approaches provide useful insights for improving our understanding of the political dynamics around conflict and cooperation on transboundary waters and crafting adequate water diplomacy strategies.
In particular, we are interested in:

• **Emotions and (mis)trust:** How do emotions affect policy priorities and negotiation tactics? Why are negative emotions (like fear) so much easier to mobilize than positive ones (like trust), and what does this mean for water diplomacy?

• **Spirituality, beliefs and religion:** While spiritual values are increasingly recognized at international policy level, how is this translated into practice? Can new legal concepts like the personhood of rivers do justice to them and translate spiritual or cultural values of rivers into tangible and operationalizable approaches for governing shared waters? Or do they call for a radically different way of doing water diplomacy?

• **Networks, cultural ties and social bonding:** Do shared traditions, a common history or language make water cooperation easier? What is the role of personal ties between political leaders or negotiators in conflict resolution processes? How do epistemic communities, informal networks, (imagined) communities enable or hinder cooperation? Does their relevance differ according to the level and track of water diplomacy?

• **Art and culture:** How do art and culture capture transboundary water in its many dimensions? How do they create bonding and understanding that support cooperation - or are used for agitation in a conflict?

• **Social identities:** How do different gender, race or class identities impact norms and practices of water diplomacy?

• **Psychology:** How do individual and group psychological dynamics shape interactions over shared waters, in particular in negotiations and in disputes?

• **Discourses and nationalism:** How do certain narratives evolve, become dominant, and how do they influence water conflict or cooperation? How is water used as a symbol of nationalism or a means of nation-building and how does that affect conflict and cooperation dynamics?

The Water and Peace Seminar is for invited guests only and will take place on 9–10 March 2022 in hybrid format at the Humanity Hub, The Hague. Physical attendance will depend on the actual corona regulations and might be restricted in number. We appreciate your feedback on planned online/in-person attendance to waterdiplomacy_project@un-ihe.org