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Discussing Controversial Issues Exploring the Role of Agonistic Emotions

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Abstract

Drawing on recent work on affective citizenship and agonistic emotions, this article explores the role of emotions in discussions of controversial issues in Norwegian high schools. Empirical material was collected through individual interviews with 11 teachers (two of whom were interviewed together) and group interviews with 28 students (five or six students per group). This study contributes to the literature on the teaching of controversial issues by shedding light on the affective dynamics and emotional complexities involved. This task was carried out along two interrelated lines of inquiry. First, it explored the role of emotions in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues in the classroom. Second, it explored how the management and display of emotions are embedded in the constitution of interactional patterns.

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Introduction

AS “DISSATISFACTION WITH democracy has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed democracies” (Foa, Klassen, Slade, Rand, & Williams, 2020, p. 1), calls to educate students in democratic citizenship are receiving heightened attention and consideration in many contexts. One way these calls have manifested is in arguments in favor of teaching controversial issues in the classroom. Controversial issues, in this context, are “issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based upon alternate worldviews” (Stradling, 1984, p. 121).¹

Drawing on recent work on affective citizenship and agonistic emotions, the aim of the present study is to explore the role of emotions in classroom discussions of controversial issues, thereby contributing empirically to the related literature. The rationale underpinning the study is twofold. First, this phenomenon is not yet well studied or understood. Second, studying

debate. Rather, this study favors the definition given here as most appropriate for its purposes—it is a stipulative definition. For recent overviews of the criteria debate, see Anders and Shaduk (2016) and Lippe (2019).

1 There is an ongoing debate about what is the appropriate criterion for deeming an issue controversial. In this study, I do not engage with this

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emotions may provide important insights into how educative discussions of such issues might be possible. Roughly speaking, by an educative discussion, I mean a discussion that is meaningful to participants and provides opportunities for learning and educative experience that is relevant for furthering the democratic aim of education.

Situating the Study: Citizenship Education and the Teaching of Controversial Issues

Currently, literature on the teaching of controversial issues is expanding rapidly, with work emerging from a variety of contexts. American scholars, for example, have written important and timely books about the topic (e.g., Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Zimmermann & Robertson, 2017), and in Europe, the Council of Europe has published a training package for teachers called *Living with Controversy* (Kerr & Huddelstone, 2015).

Much of the scholarly literature provides a rationale for teaching controversial issues in terms of democratic citizenship education (e.g., Gereluk, 2012; Hahn, 2010) and the educative potential inherent in democratic discussion (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

According to Kerr and Huddelstone (2015, p. 7), “[to] engage in dialogue with people whose values are different from one’s own and to respect them is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and fostering a culture of human rights.” Yet they contended that “young people do not often have an opportunity to discuss controversial issues in school because they are seen as too challenging to teach” (p. 7). In an important book on the topic, Hess (2009) similarly claimed that democracy demands controversy: “there is an intrinsic and crucial connection between the discussion of controversial political issues, especially between people of disparate views, and the health of democracy” (p. 12). She gave several reasons in support of this claim. First, political discussions can have two powerful effects: They can make people more tolerant of opposing views, and they can teach people about important issues. Second, Hess claimed that too few people engage in this kind of political talk and that the trend is moving in a nondeliberative direction. Third, she suggested that schools have the potential to change this trend by teaching students how to engage in discussion (p. 12).

While the role of emotions is discussed in many studies, few have focused explicitly on the role of emotions in discussions of controversial issues. However, some studies by authors working in the context of divided societies, such as Northern Ireland and Cyprus, have explored controversies related to the teaching of history, focusing mostly on teacher emotion (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2007; Kitson & McCully, 2005; McCully, 2006, 2012; Zembylas, 2017; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Perhaps this is because, in these contexts, historical controversies are likely to be sensitive issues, defined here as issues that can easily move people to distress, anger, or offense (Gereluk, 2012, p. 89).

In one study, Zembylas and Kambani (2012) investigated the perceptions and emotions of 18 Greek-Cypriot teachers in relation to the teaching of controversial issues in elementary-level history

instruction. Their findings indicated that while teachers generally see the value of thematizing controversial issues in history instruction, they are “less assured when the discussion shifts to the implementation of this approach when the context shifts to ethnically divided Cyprus” (p. 108). There are different reasons for this insecurity. First, the approach might not be compatible with the current predominant methodology of history instruction. Second, the lack of maturity of younger students might make the approach difficult and ineffective in achieving desirable aims. Additionally, the teachers’ own emotional discomfort might make the approach difficult to implement (p. 124). More generally, the study added to the literature on the teaching of controversial issues by thematizing the emotional complexities involved, shedding light on the emotional challenges of teaching controversial issues in a divided society. According to Zembylas and Kambani (2012), this is important because paying attention “to emotion rather than technicist pedagogy is a key to unlocking the prospects of developing and perhaps increasing the potential of implementing approaches such as the teaching of controversial issues” (pp. 125–126).

Several other relevant studies have explored the emotional and affective dynamics in discussions of political issues in American classrooms (Garrett, 2020; Garrett & Alvey, 2020; Garrett et al., 2020). Garrett (2020) explored what he called the containment of emotion in two different cases of classroom discussions. He defined “containment” as “the dynamic invitation, manifestation and exchange of psychical content through discussion or dialogue that allows for the creation of emotional significance” (p. 347). The analysis of these two cases suggests that emotion is always part of discussion, whether acknowledged, honored, dismissed, or ignored. Moreover, the nature of this presence is manifold; it exists in students’ responses, explicit material, teachers’ orientations toward conflict, and the psychical economy of the classroom. “What teachers and students do is to varyingly acknowledge, centre, dismiss and accommodate it [the emotional content]” (Garrett, 2020, p. 351).

Here, I ask the following research question: *What is the role of emotions in classroom discussions of controversial issues?* By exploring this question, this study adds to the literature and sheds light on the affective dynamics and emotional complexities associated with teaching controversial issues in several ways. First, the context of the present study is not in a divided society, such as Northern Ireland, Cyprus, or the U.S. Comparatively speaking, Norway is a relatively stable, cohesive, and well-functioning democracy. In terms of satisfaction with democracy, it is part of what Foa et al. (2020) called “the zone of complacency” (p. 23). Although divided societies are particularly interesting objects of study for several reasons, the Norwegian context also has some benefits. For example, the relative stability of the political culture might make it easier for teachers to introduce controversial issues into the classroom and, accordingly, for researchers to study the teaching of controversial issues.

Empirically, the present study adds to the current literature by exploring the role of emotions in discussions of controversial issues. While most other studies have focused on teacher emotions,

this study takes an interactional perspective. Drawing on interviews with both teachers and students, it provides descriptions of how emotions play an important role in practice.

Theorizing (Agonistic) Emotions

Emotions are a hot topic in social theory and research. According to notable theorists, we are, more broadly, witnessing an “affective turn” (Clough, 2007; Fortier, 2010; Zembylas, 2014a). Zembylas (2014a) argued that one important contribution of the affective turn has been to help theorists and researchers move beyond the emotion-reason dichotomy that has long plagued Western philosophy and social theory. Zembylas (2014a) traced this split all the way back to the Greeks (particularly Plato), further arguing that the distinction was greatly sharpened in the Enlightenment period (particularly by Descartes and Kant) (p. 542). In the second half of the 20th century, however, there was a gradual shift away from the dichotomy in Western philosophy, as other fields, such as neurobiology (e.g., Damasio, 2005) and cultural studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2004), developed. This shift, Zembylas (2014a) argued, has “undermined rigid distinctions between ‘head’ and ‘heart’ . . . by showing that emotions are central to reason” (p. 542; cf. Damasio, 2005); “recent work in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies has focused on emotions as multidimensional . . . as both cultural and embodied, as actions and practices that arise in power relationships” (p. 542; cf. Ahmed, 2004). Accordingly, emotions are not primarily construed as internal mental states. Rather, emotions are relational and constitute an integral part of social practices in which bodies relate to other subjects and objects (Reckwitz, 2012; Zembylas, 2014a). They are “inseparable from actions and relations, from lived experience” (Boler, 1999, p. 3).

The affective turn is also relevant in the ongoing debates on normative democratic theory between deliberative democrats (following Habermas) and agonistic pluralists (following Mouffe). Arguably, (deliberative) democratic theory “has had an uneasy relationship with the presence and functions of affect in politics” (Mihai, 2014, p.31). According to Mouffe (2002), the shift toward passions, emotions, and affects² highlights a fundamental flaw in deliberative democratic theory. She argued that the rationalistic and individualistic framework of deliberative democratic theory is wholly inadequate for addressing the problems that democratic institutions are facing today (Mouffe, 1999). This is partly because, as another theorist of agonism has argued, “the liberal deliberative approaches to democracy, in their emphasis on reason, have underestimated the role of emotions” (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 273). Indeed, Mouffe has invited us to “see that passions are ineradicable from politics: they mark collective political identifications that constitute important sources of motivation” (Mihai, 2014, p. 31). Accordingly, theorists in the agonistic tradition have started to

2 One challenge of presenting the literature on the topic is that different theorists use different terms (“passions,” “emotions,” “affects”) in different and sometimes idiosyncratic ways. While this study generally favors the comprehensive term “(agonistic) emotions,” involving both feeling and cognitive content that can motivate behaviour (cf. Mihai, 2014), some inconsistency in use of terminology is not to be avoided.

examine and theorize the role of emotions in democratic practices (Tryggvason, 2018; Zembylas, 2018).

For agonistic pluralists, then, it is a truism that emotions are an integrated aspect of political and democratic life (Tryggvason, 2018, p. 5). Tryggvason (2018) argued that an expedient point of departure for exploring the role of emotions in political and democratic practices is the agonistic notion of the political as it is articulated in the contingent distinction between “us” and “them”:

If emotions in this sense are bound up with the question of collective identities, in which what I feel is inseparable from who I am . . . then political emotions, in terms of being emotions that are directed toward social and political issues, can be seen as something that binds the identity to the political issue. (Tryggvason, 2018, p. 6)

Mihai (2014) theorized what she called “agonistic emotions”—emotions fit for adversaries—from a similar point of departure. Because passions cannot be done away with, she wrote, “our goal should not be to repress but to ‘tame’ passions” (p. 31). Fundamentally, this concerns the way in which the contingent relationship between “us” and “them” is established. As Mouffe (1999) wrote, “the novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them distinction . . . but the different way in which [it] is established.” To establish this relationship in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy is to establish a relationship between adversaries, presupposing “that the ‘other’ is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as . . . somebody with whose ideas we struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question.” An adversary is a “legitimate opponent,” someone “with whom we have a common shared adherence to the ethico-political principles of democracy” (p. 755).

The notion of politics as presented here has implications for the exercise of democratic citizenship. As Mihai (2014) wrote, “agonistic encounters require adversaries to refrain from certain ways of engaging with one another, politically relevant emotions must not violate certain rules of engagement with the different other, the very rules that undergird a democratic ethos and make agonism possible” (p. 40). In short, this notion of politics implies endorsing a form of citizenship that is “passionate yet respectful” (p. 41).

Zembylas (2014b) theorized two different “emotional injunctions” relevant for such a conception of passionate yet respectful citizenship, which he calls “embracing the other” and “coping with difference,” respectively (pp. 11-13). According to Zembylas (2014b), calls to embrace the other are often heard in multicultural societies, with the assumption that this is (under certain conditions) a good thing. Embracing the other, however, is not a monolithic process, as it creates relations of both proximity and distance, with ambivalent emotional connotations (p. 11). Accordingly, calls to embrace the other may not be as innocent as they sound, as they are inextricably linked to negotiations of who is and who is not seen as legitimate objects of embrace; “the contribution of affective citizenship exposes the underlying ambivalences of ‘embracing the other’ – that is, both the desires and anxieties for empathizing with the other, yet demanding that he or she adjusts to the values promoted in ‘our’ schools” (p. 12).

Coping with difference concerns how emotional discomfort is managed and how citizens learn to live with difference. Zembylas (2014b, pp. 12–13) emphasized how unease and discomfort are unevenly distributed and how this distribution is related to power structures prevalent in society. Moreover, this uneven distribution “reminds us about the role of affect in ‘who’ gets constructed as a source of discomfort” and that emotional injunctions, such as embracing the other and coping with difference, “that might be perceived as evidence of ‘good will’ . . . cannot simply will away the uneven distribution of affect” (p. 12).

In summary, this section has presented three points of analytical importance. First, emotions play an important part in democratic practices (Tryggvason, 2018; Zembylas, 2018). While normative democratic theory has largely had an uneasy relationship with the presence of emotions in politics (Mouffe, 2002), we are now witnessing an affective turn. Second, once the role of emotions is acknowledged, it follows that they cannot be done away with. Rather, they must be “tamed” or made compatible with pluralistic democratic politics (Mihai, 2014). Third, “emotional injunctions,” such as embracing the other and coping with difference, are relevant to this conception of democratic politics. However, as Zembylas (2014b) has reminded us, emotions such as unease and discomfort are unevenly distributed, according to power structures prevalent in society.

In the present study, theory serves as a sensitizing device to explore the role of emotions in classroom discussions of controversial issues. In accordance with the theory presented earlier, the main research question is operationalized into two sub-questions: (a) What is the role of emotions in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues in the classroom? (b) How are the management and display of emotions embedded in interactional patterns?

Methodological Issues

The empirical material of this study consists of interview data. In the spring semester of 2017, 11 teachers from seven different high schools were interviewed. Nine of these interviews were individual semi-structured interviews, while one semi-structured interview involved two teachers, for practical reasons. In the spring semester of 2018, 28 students from two of the same schools were interviewed in groups of five or six. The students were 17 to 19 years old.

The broader phenomenon investigated in this study is the teaching of controversial issues. Teaching is a practice that is both relational (Noddings, 2003) and contextual (Kvernbekk, 2005). It is relational in the sense that it is an activity that happens between a group of people (Noddings, 2003). It is contextual because practice is constituted by the actions, intentions, and interactions of students and teachers, which build up “the context of which they are part . . . [and] partly derive their meaning” (Kvernbekk, 2005, p. 172). The decision to study the experiences of both teachers and students is based on this understanding of practice. Thus, an important aspect of the research strategy was to obtain what Bateson (1972) called double descriptions: descriptions from both parties (teachers and students) of the interactional relationship.

The selection of participants was guided by two principles suggested by Alvesson (2011). The first principle was representativeness, meaning having “breadth and variation among interviewees so that they allow the covering of the social category it [the study] aims to address” (p. 49). Teachers who differed in age, gender, work experience, and educational background were interviewed, and students from two schools with different student populations and educational programs were chosen. The second principle was quality. Alvesson (2011) argued that researchers should seek out and “pay considerable attention to what is assessed to be rich, perceptive and insightful accounts” to secure quality (p. 50). Teachers were thus strategically selected to gain such “insightful accounts.”

Participants were acquired through snowball sampling. Some teachers were contacted directly. Then, these teachers helped to recruit other teachers they believed would have something insightful to say about the subject. Later, teachers from two of the selected schools helped to select and compose the student groups, with the aim of securing a varied student sample and constructive group dynamics.

To answer the research question, thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was chosen as an analytical strategy. Themes were chosen primarily for their ability to give insight into and help answer the research question; choices were driven by the analytic question. Accordingly, the analysis presented in this study is not meant to serve as a rich thematic analysis of the entire data material, but rather of a particular aspect of it. Moreover, the analysis was theoretical rather than inductive; it was “driven by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This analyst-driven approach also affected the way in which data was coded, as they were coded with the research question in mind.

Feeling Safe and Discussing Passionately

What is the role of emotions in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues in the classroom? According to the informants, different factors have played a part in getting discussions of controversial issues going. Most commonly, though, they emphasized the importance of a good classroom environment. When asked about what enables an educative discussion, one student, Anna,³ expressed, “It is important to feel safe with one another, in order to be able to say one’s opinion at all, and have a good discussion. We are very lucky to have that—a very good classroom environment.” This gives insight into what made Anna feel comfortable with discussing controversial issues. Part of her answer to the question is very broad, pointing to a “very good classroom environment.” The rest of the answer, however, is somewhat more specific: It indicates that the chief characteristic of this kind of classroom environment is that it makes students *feel* safe enough with one another to share opinions and have discussions. This suggests that safety is largely a quality of social

3 All names have been pseudomized to protect participant anonymity.

relationships, as it is a feeling individuals experience “with one another.” In all the group interviews with students, similar statements were made and agreed upon. For many students, the feeling of relational safety appeared to be a prerequisite for participating in discussions of controversial issues.

In the interviews, students described different classroom environments, ranging from safe to unsafe. One student, Ben, described a difference between the classes he attended: “In the one class I am part of, there are many discussions, and things can get very heated. Not in a bad way, people just become very enthusiastic.” However, he did not feel that this was true of the classes he shared with the other students in the group interviewed. This, he said, was not because the classroom environment was “bad” but because “people are afraid to offend the other.” Like Anna, Ben was concerned with the classroom environment. Interestingly, he compared two different environments: one in which controversial issues were discussed and one in which they were not.

In an environment in which discussions were held, things could get heated. As such, this environment was not devoid of emotions. Ben suggested that this was not a bad thing: “people just become very enthusiastic.” Similar to what Anna described, this seemed to be a safe environment in which students felt safe with one another, highlighting the relational quality of safety. In this kind of environment, some “heat” and “enthusiasm” were welcome.

The other environment Ben described was different. While it was not “bad” per se, it was not a safe environment either. In this environment, another emotion, fear, was more prevalent. Like safety, fear also seemed to be embedded in social relationships and manifested in fear of offending the other. Accordingly, it was harder to initiate educative discussions because students hesitated to engage in order to avoid a potentially emotionally charged classroom environment.

In addition to feelings of safety and fear, the role of emotions in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues is often thematized using terms such as “interest” and “engagement.” As one student, David, put it, “If the teacher wants a discussion that is good, the teacher should choose something that engages the students. There is no use in selecting something no one cares about.” Another student, Cornel, similarly claimed that for an issue to be interesting, “it should have relevance for where we are in life. If it is hard to live in a home for the elderly is not that relevant now . . . but if the prices for bus tickets go up every month, that is a bit more relevant.” A common point made by David and Cornel was that a good issue for discussion is an issue that feels relevant to and engages the students; some kind of emotional investment is needed to create an educative discussion. Moreover, both students suggested that to establish this kind of relevance, teachers should choose issues that are pertinent to students’ lives (bus prices rather than elderly homes, as Cornel put it).

In contrast, other students argued that identifying relevant issues is not a straightforward endeavor. Emma claimed that in her school, “teaching is very much designed to be relevant to where you are in life when you are 16, or 19. It can become a bit forced. Because students come from all kinds of homes and have all kinds

of experiences.” One point Emma made was that what feels relevant and engaging can differ depending on the student because students come from different backgrounds. Student groups are often heterogeneous in terms of background, experiences, and interests. Accordingly, relevance is not something that can be established by an objective criterion, like age. Rather, it is something that needs to be created locally, in situ, by teachers and students present in that situation.

More generally, the statements of David, Cornel, and Emma suggest that teaching is embedded in tensions in both time and space. Teaching is affected by what students and teachers bring into and make present in the classroom and what is kept out and remains hidden (space). It exists between what is present in the students’ lives here and now (their backgrounds, experiences, and interests) and the possibilities for expansion and future existence (time).

As Emma expressed, an important part of the stories that teachers and students tell is that interest is created not only in relation to the issue itself but also in the relationship between the teacher and students. In the words of one student, Herman, “One needs at least two different points of view on the issue discussed. If there is only one point of view, then there is no discussion.” Another student, Felicity, agreed, adding, “If someone has a controversial or unusual opinion [about something], it is nice if they actually have the courage to say it. Because then we can discuss it.” A third student, Gina, said that if another student says something that she really disagrees with, “[she] cannot stay away.”

From those statements, three analytical points can be derived. First, starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues presuppose “the other” and “otherness.” If there is only one point of view, there is no discussion (Herman). Second, it is good for people to make their views public because then they can be discussed (Felicity). Third, disagreement can keep students engaged and make discussions develop. According to Gina, “she cannot stay away” if someone else says something that she really disagrees with.

The statement made by Gina indicates that engaged conflict can have a positive role in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues. Both teachers and students pointed out that some of the best discussions are passionate: Herman thought that “it is fun when things take off a bit.” Reflecting on discussions in her class, one teacher, Inna, explained:

[In my classes] discussions are usually civil. And I make sure to say that it is good with different opinions, but that they [the students] must make sure to give reasons for their opinions. Do not say, “That is dumb! How can you mean that?!” Then we are moving away from the academic . . . But sometimes, if I make too much of it, it can kill off the real discussion. When things start to boil a bit, I like it. I usually let things run its course. Because it is not like they are enemies. It is not like they are going to fight. As long as it does not go completely off track, I like to hear about it.

In that statement, Inna began by describing the nature of discussions in her classes and remarks that they “are usually civil.” Moreover, Inna said she takes care to remind students to be civil

with one another. She emphasized that some measure of civility is to be expected in her classes. However, she also made clear that this is a point she did not wish to make too much of a fuss about because it “can kill off the real discussion.”

Like Ben earlier, Inna described an environment where things can get “heated” and where people are “enthusiastic” but not in a “bad” way. Indeed, she liked it when discussions stirred up emotions and usually “let things run its course.” This is something Inna was able to do because she felt safe that her students were not “enemies” and were not “going to fight.” Indeed, as she went on to explain, she “likes it when they [the students] are sincerely engaged in what they are talking about.” A common point made by both Herman and Inna is that educative discussions are passionate, “when things take off a bit” (Herman) and students “are sincerely engaged about what they are talking about” (Inna). An important presupposition for these kinds of discussions is that they emerge between a certain type of opponent, as students are not “enemies” (cf. Mouffe, 1999; Mihai, 2014).

The Management and Display of Emotions

How are the management and display of emotions embedded in interactional patterns?

The previous section suggested that certain displays of emotion can play a positive role in initiating and sustaining discussions. However, students and teachers also seemed to agree that emotions, in some ways, need to be controlled. In the statement by Inna, this has been implicit in her pointing out that the students are not enemies. Likewise, Herman claimed that to have educative discussions, one should “not let emotions take over.” Another student, Janice, said that educative discussions involve “having self-control—not being aggressive. Because then it becomes unpleasant.”

A common feature of all these statements (Inna, Herman, Janice) is that they imply that there are some ways of expressing emotions that are incompatible with educative discussions of controversial issues. These statements highlight some dos and don'ts: one should have self-control and act as a friend but should not fight, act as an enemy, let emotions take over, or be aggressive. The statements show that teachers and students engage in what Zembylas (2007) called “emotion management” or “conscious efforts to control what we are feeling, based on social and cultural norms about the expression and communication of emotion” (p. 61). Moreover, they support Boler's (1999) claim that “emotions are a feature always present in educational environments,” most often “visible as something to be ‘controlled’” (p. xix). In short, passions must be “tamed” (Mihai, 2014).

The question of how the management and display of emotions are embedded in the constitution of different patterns of interaction was explored through the interviews with students. A topic that came up frequently was how the presence of strong emotions can affect discussion. The participants agreed that discussions are likely to regress when strong emotions are directed at the person rather than the issue. According to one student, Kieran, this was not an uncommon experience:

Very often it has happened that what starts out as a regular discussion . . . First, one gets very provoked or engaged, and then it changes from being a nice conversation, to be a conversation between an attacker and a defender. And that is no fun to be a part of. It is no fun for the rest of the class either, so they usually back off because they do not want to be part of it either.

In essence, the statement from Kieran depicts a transition from a constructive to a regressive discussion. To begin with, there is a “regular discussion,” and the conversation is “nice.” As the discussion unfolds, however, someone gets “very provoked,” and it becomes an emotionally charged encounter between “an attacker and a defender.” Moreover, the statement suggests that at least one part of the interaction (the attacker) is not able to manage his or her emotions according to social norms and that these emotions are directed at someone else (the defender). In other words, the discussion becomes personal, as it becomes about the person just as much as about the issue. Accordingly, the discussion is transformed into something else: it regresses into a new and different mode. In this mode of discussion, discussing is no longer cooperative or about learning. Rather, it is about winning, perhaps even humiliating the other. Clearly, this also affects the rest of the class, as they “back off” and “do not want to be part” of the discussion. They become spectators rather than participants.

Kieran's statement highlights what seems to be a shared social and emotional norm. The norm is that one should stick to the issue and not engage in personal attacks. This norm is agreed upon and emphasized by all students. However, things can be less clear and messier in practice. In the words of one student,

I think a good discussion presupposes that people do not see their political opinions so much as a part of their personal identity. It seems to me that people have very unclear boundaries when it comes to what is a personal attack and what is an attack on their opinions. (Landon)

According to Landon, many of his fellow students have a hard time distinguishing between their political opinions and their personal identity. Because of this, they have unclear boundaries when it comes to what constitutes “sticking to the issue” and what constitutes a “personal attack.” One way to interpret this statement is that there is a discrepancy between the normative ideal and the experienced real. While students agree about the validity and usefulness of the norm, it might be difficult to adhere to in the moment, especially in cases where opinions are hard to separate from identity. While it is likely that students do not always live up to standards of excellence, a more generous explanation might be that students struggle to balance disparate forces.

As established in the previous section, teachers and students alike stated that some of the best discussions are passionate. This requires some emotional involvement. However, students are also expected to keep their political opinions and personal identity separate, signaling a form of detachment. Accordingly, students are required to negotiate between competing ideals, which is a more complex communicative task.

Broadly speaking, all social behavior is communication. Communicating with others involves simultaneously

communicating content and one's relationship with other people (Watzlawick et al., 1967). When the students spoke about the presence of strong emotions, it was implicitly or explicitly about the communication of anger and aggression. As pointed out by two students, Michaela and Nancy, this pertained not only to what was communicated (content) but also to how it was communicated (relational component):

MICHAELA: "I think it has a lot to say how you express your opinions. If I, or if we two have a discussion, I can stick to the issue, sort of, but if I attack you with my voice, that is also a problem. I think that one should stay calm and be open to other people's opinions."

NANCY: "Yes. Right. There will be no good discussion if one is never heard from the other party. If they come with, almost like threats, back. That one goes in attack."

Michaela, in agreement with other students, suggested that one should stick to the issue. This is a social and emotional norm that—at least on the surface—deals mainly with the content of communication. However, she went on to argue that this is not necessarily sufficient, claiming that "if I attack you with my voice, that is also a problem." Like Landon, both Michaela and Nancy used the word "attack" to signal an act of aggression. Moreover, Michaela related this to the more general claim that "it has a lot to say how you express your opinions."

Michaela, Nancy, and several of their classmates commented on the relational component of communication. The students argued that one should not express opinions in an angry or aggressive manner because then it becomes "a problem" (Michaela), "unpleasant" (Janice), and "no fun to be part" of (Kieran). Consequently, there can be "no good discussion" (Nancy). One reason why something might be taken personally might be the manner in which the opinion is expressed.

In the empirical material, several anecdotes were collected that suggested that expressions of anger and aggression can create a rather dramatic emotional experience. Asked about why he thought there was little discussion in his class, Kieran relayed a story from his freshman year:

Many people do not dare say their opinions. In our freshman year, when we had social studies . . . we had a discussion. I remember that I said my opinion, and that apparently hit straight at the heart of what another student believed. So, she basically attacked me right back. Then I was thinking, can we not keep it civil? Instead, she focused all of the discussion on attacking my opinions. It was rather stupid. Since then, I have not participated in many discussions.

The story depicts an interaction between Kieran and another student that started out with him voicing opinions that "hit straight at the heart of what another student believed," triggering this student to focus "all of the discussion on attacking [his] opinions." The anger and aggression that Kieran felt directed toward him appeared to have made a lasting impression on him, as he claimed not to have participated in many discussions since. Asked if he felt unsafe, Kieran replied, "Yes, I think it is stupid when you try to

have an academic conversation where you [are] just attacking and throwing insults at each other." Classroom discussions, it seems, did not feel safe or worthwhile for him anymore. Accordingly, the experience might be labeled "miseducative" (cf. Dewey, 1938/2015), as it effectively blocked opportunities for future growth.

Another student, Cornel, told a very different kind of story from his class when the topic of discussion was politics. He said he discovered that "there were some [students] in our class that had almost completely opposite political views." This did not become a problem, however, because "even if these two disagreed politically, they still managed to smile, laugh, and say hello to each other in the hallways the same day, only minutes after." These students were able to manage and display their emotions in accordance with prevailing emotional norms. They were able to "cope with difference" and "embrace the other" (cf. Zembylas, 2014b). According to Cornel, it "was a pretty good way to start out the school year because we got to see that it was okay to have different opinions."

It is apparent that the relationship between the two students in Cornel's story is very different from the interaction related by Kieran above. The students in Kieran's story were not able to cope or embrace, and they became enemies (cf. Mouffe, 1999), but the students in Cornel's story "managed to smile, laugh, and say hello to each other in the hallways the same day, only minutes after [the discussion]." Accordingly, the experience became educative rather than miseducative (cf. Dewey, 1938/2015), as it created, rather than blocked, opportunities for growth.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the role of emotions in classroom discussions of controversial issues. The investigation was conducted from an interactional perspective, exploring the perspectives of both teachers and students. The aim was to shed light on the affective dynamics (cf. Garrett, 2020) and the emotional complexities (cf. Zembylas & Kambani, 2012) involved in the discussion of such issues, thereby making an empirical contribution to the literature.

In line with the arguments put forth by agonistic pluralists about democratic politics and practices in general (Mihai, 2014; Mouffe, 1999; Ruitenberg, 2009), the analysis of the empirical material shows that emotions play an important role in classroom discussions about controversial issues. First, emotions play a part in starting and sustaining classroom discussions of controversial issues. Second, the analysis suggests that the management and display of emotions are integral to the constitution of different interactional patterns.

Moreover, the empirical contribution of the article is that it shows not only *that* but also *how* emotions play a role in discussions of controversial issues in the classroom. By shedding light on the affective dynamics and the emotional complexities involved in such discussions, the analysis presented in this study supports the notion that emotion, perhaps more than "technicist pedagogy," is key to developing and implementing approaches to teaching controversial issues in the classroom (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012, pp. 125–126). Accordingly, being able to accommodate these

elements is essential to conducting discussions that address controversial issues across the curriculum (cf. Garrett et al., 2020).

An important limitation of the study is that it does not address how issues of power play into these emotional complexities. Neither does it address how emotional complexities and relationships of power are tangled up with categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the study was not designed to—at least not primarily—identify these issues. Second, categories like race, ethnicity, gender, and class were rarely foregrounded in the stories told by teachers and students. Perhaps this is because these categories did not feel particularly relevant to the experiences of the informants in question, or another way of investigating might yield different results. Nevertheless, these are important issues that deserve and require more research.

The empirical material does, however, give some insights into the interrelationship among emotion, personal identity, and the exchange of (political) opinion more generally in a way that reverts to the theory. As noted in the theory section and engendered by the analysis, agonistic pluralists take as a truism that emotions and identity are integrated aspects of politics and democratic life. Tryggvason (2018) argued that an expedient point of departure for exploring the role of emotions in political and democratic practices is the agonistic notion of the political as it is articulated in the contingent distinction between “us” and “them”: “[I]f emotions in this sense are bound up with the question of collective identities, in which *what I feel* is inseparable from *who I am*” (p. 6).

In at least two ways, the empirical material underscores this point. First, descriptively, it suggests that emotion is bound to opinion and identity. Indeed, as Landon put it, this interrelationship is sometimes so strong that many of his fellow students had problems distinguishing between their (political) opinions and their personal identity. Second, normatively, the empirical material shows, among other things, that student interest and engagement play a crucial role in starting and sustaining discussions of controversial issues, that is, it matters whether students care about an issue or not. To overlook the role of emotion and its relationship to opinion and identity is, accordingly, not only descriptively inadequate but also counterproductive from a normative point of view.

Notably, the empirical material also suggests that the intermingling of emotion, opinion, and personal identity is not always and in all ways something to be cherished. As Landon pointed out, because many students have a difficult time distinguishing between their (political) opinions and personal identity, they also have unclear boundaries when it comes to what constitutes “sticking to the issue” and what constitutes a “personal attack.” As such, discussions can become unsafe or even create dramatic emotional experiences, making discussions miseducative and impeding opportunities for future growth (cf. Dewey, 2015).

This view lends credence to some of the criticisms that deliberative democrats aim at agonistic pluralism; it is not uncommon for advocates of deliberative democracy to warn against the dangers of putting identity at the center of discussion. Accordingly,

it might be right, as one authoritative interpreter of deliberative democratic theory argued, that

“focusing on personal identities is likely to lead to struggles between individuals, and that views built into and deeply rooted in identities make rational deliberation over the problem itself, and a shared effort to define the problem, more difficult” (Englund, 2016, p. 69).

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