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Why we need to establish International Political Psychology

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Preface

A combination of Psychology with International Relations yields important results and ideas for improving the international world. This chapter proposes to establish International Political Psychology as a discipline with the purpose of harvesting ideas, theories and concepts that derive out of a combination of the above disciplines.

Keywords: Psychology; International Relations; Interdisciplinarity; Theory

Introduction

Some of the most urgent and important contemporary problems in international relations – from terrorism and the war in Syria, to populism in America and Europe, for example, to pressing global health problems, for example in mental health – demand answers that are hard to find in traditional IR. Interestingly, it might be more fruitful, for finding novel and sustainable solutions to these problems, to get inspiration from additional disciplines.

My interest in Psychology had been long standing. However, as an IR scholar, my interest in looking into Psychology for making a contribution to the IR literature was not inspired by the above named problems. Rather, I realised that there is a gap in the literature concerning IR and Psychology, with few writings present, and I therefore considered this a fruitful area to get involved in.

Indeed, Psychology in IR is underdeveloped. Some authors do exist, the most prominent book publication, and maybe the only one previous to *International Political Psychology* (Beyer 2017) was McDermott's *Political Psychology in International Relations* (2004). Some authors had contributed in terms of articles, and the occasional book, and importantly so (Herrmann and Milburn 1977, Mercer 2010, 2006, 2005, Booth and Wheeler 2008, Jervis 1989). But overall, a truly international Political Psychology was not developed. Political Psychology did serve as the outlet and arena for political scientists working with Psychology before, but its focus was to a large extent domestic, dealing with elections, national leaders, public opinion etc. Since then, Tereza Capelos has contributed to the field as well with the *Palgrave Handbook of Global Political Psychology* (2014).

Hence, when working on the combination of Psychology with IR for a book project, I started to realise the potential that lies in truly internationalising Political Psychology.

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It should be possible to use insights from the discipline of Psychology for inspiring International Relations. There is potential for compatibility of these two disciplines. For one, there has been a long standing tradition in IR to borrow insights from other disciplines for informing its canon of knowledge. The existence of International Political Economy could be the first example for this. Furthermore, both disciplines can be regarded as social sciences, Psychology at least in part with Social Psychology and its subdivisions, such as Peace Psychology and others. Also, Psychology is as interested in the topics that interest IR, for example problems of war, aggression, conflict, and peace. The main difference lies in the level of analysis: Psychology looks at the individual or small group, IR looks at the largest level, takes the global perspective. This results in a number of ontological differences. For example, authority structures, including the existence of military capability, at the global level are different than they are for the individual or the group, also, at the global level there is no true exit option, it is still a closed system, as long as space migration is not available. However, many apparent differences might not be too important, comparing the international with the small group: cultural or religious differences, status differences or differences in wealth etc. are to be found both in the small group as well as at the global level. One important difference that needs to be mentioned is that Social Psychology is able to conduct experiments to advance knowledge, a task that is impossible for IR to fulfil, as any practical application of theory is always necessarily immediately political. Experiments at the global level are simply not possible, or only in terms of simulations, which however then take place rather similar to a Social Psychology experiment and hence are not as instructive maybe about international relations and outcomes as the same experiments would be for Social Psychologists. Hence, the more the need to look into Social Psychology to acquire tested knowledge and to inform IR.

A preliminary study in IR which was conducted between 2010 and 2017 and resulted in the monograph *International Political Psychology* (Beyer 2017) resulted in a number of important ideas and outcomes, which will be presented and reviewed in the following. The main part of this chapter, hence, will present the findings that were derived in a mainly theoretical interdisciplinary study in IPP. The following will cover IPP's contribution to Neorealism, including a critique of its belief in the stability of bipolarity, it will present the similarities between domestic hegemony and international hegemony, the importance of equality and communication will be discussed, reflections on global consciousness as well, it will tackle the important issue of mental illness and how the regarding literature can help us understand and possibly prevent terrorism, this literature will also be useful in understanding 'rogue states' and possibly devising ways to guide them to peaceful behaviour, the topic of suicide epidemics and how to prevent them will be a new addition that is not found in the mentioned book, and the main part will conclude with summarising some ideas for a better global world and more effective global governance.

First findings in IPP

Neorealism

If we bring Psychology into the discussion about Neorealism, we find some intriguing new ideas. First, in Neorealism a model of conflict exists that poses anarchy and balance of power at the





root of conflict. The struggle for power, the national interest, and balancing behaviour by all states lead to tensions which can result in war if misperceptions, for example, occur. A central belief in Neorealism is therefore that bipolarity – an international constellation in which two superpowers dominate – is the most stable constellation. This has even been confirmed in empirical studies. The ideas behind this claim have been developed in the Cold War and as a response to the two world wars, which were believed to have originated out of multipolarity.

If we look into Psychology now, we first can develop an alternative model of conflict origination. Conflict stems from the formation of groups, according to Realistic Conflict Theory. If two groups exist, this in itself will create discrimination between the groups, and is therefore the basis for conflict. Emotions also play a role, such as fear, anger, etc. Triggers finally result in tensions breaking into conflict. This model implies that bipolar systems, such as the Cold War, might be the most durable systems, but they are not entirely stable or peaceful. In fact, when studying the literature on polarity and war closely, it has been found that while bipolarities are most stable, they produce the worst wars if wars should occur. If one considers the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, as a near miss in the Cold War and the latter's potential for nuclear holocaust, and if one thinks of the two world wars originating from bipolar alliance systems (Triple Entente versus Triple Alliance, Allied Powers versus Axis Powers) then one would think bipolar systems as the most dangerous systems. Hence, a combination of Psychology with IR means to take Neorealism's claims for bipolarity with caution. On the other hand, a probably more sober conclusion from this discussion would imply to not focus on discussions on polarity mainly when trying to decipher the problem of war and peace, but rather on questions of global integration.

Hegemony

The study of hegemony in Psychology has yielded very similar results to the one in International Relations. The factors that have been identified as how hegemony is exercised are similar in both disciplines, and among them count: force, coercion and influence. These factors, even though named differently, have been identified to both lie at the root of race relations in America (Sidanius and Pratto 2001) as well as at the root of US hegemony in the Global War on Terrorism. That two different disciplines focusing on different levels of analysis but at a similar structural condition identified the same factors causing this structural condition is in itself a fascinating finding and can be used to support the argument that it should be possible and meaningful to apply findings from Psychology to IR. Even if the former have been identified at a different level of analysis, they might apply at a global level likewise.

Equality and Communication

Social Psychology also instructs us about successful relations with Relationship Psychology. A number of findings derive out of this branch. For example, it states that communication is essential for successful relationships, a point that might be commonsensical in personal life, but that is undertheorised in International Relations. Little is in fact written about proper





communication or crisis communication in international affairs. Hence, to look at Relationship Psychology brings us one step forward.

Another important theme is the discussion about equality. Relationship Psychology promotes a number of different principles for maintaining equality in relationships, which in itself is thought central to maintain social harmony. These principles are based on 1) absolute reciprocity, 2) relative reciprocity, 3) needs based exchanges. To illustrate this, imagine you go for a dinner with a friend. At the end of the dinner, you have to decide how to pay the bill. You can either 'go dutch', or pay each according to what each ordered, or you consider the financial capacity of each person. All of these principles are considered good principles in Relationship Psychology if they are correctly applied. If they are violated, they cause conflict. So, imagine, for example, your friend tells you at the dinner that he has recently received a promotion and now earns more than you, he orders more food than you, but at the end you have to pay the bill. This would be a violation of all above principles and hence would lead to conflict, an analogy that would make sense to most. These principles can also be applied to international relations. In essence they mean the following:

- 1) Fairness in opportunity and equality of opportunity are essential, but
- 2) Redistribution and aid according to needs to relieve poverty and the worst excesses of inequality are also essential.

In International Relations, this point has been illustrated with a previous discussion about the role of inequality for causing violence, as presented in *Inequality and Violence* (Beyer 2016). Additional points can be mentioned here, such as that inequality is thought to be related to illness, both physical and mental, and early death in those who experience it on the weaker side, in particular if it is harsh. A deeper analysis illustrates that more equality can increase happiness, more equal countries often have higher happiness levels. While this is not an argument to promote a Communist style system, it supports the need for redressing excesses of any capitalist systems with new ideas that facilitate advancement of economically weaker citizens. An analysis of inequality's relation to violence, as conducted in the above mentioned book, also produced interesting results: At the national, societal level, inequality contributes to more crime, also including violent crime. Poverty, joblessness, lack of opportunities, lack of education and the resulting lack of status and prestige are thought to be related to a higher incidence of criminal activity. At the 'transnational' level, inequality has been connected to many violent occurrences and to most occurrences of political violence in particular, such as coups, terrorism, revolutions, civil wars. For all of these problems, inequality is one of the favoured explanations, even if often not uncontested or the only one. It is interesting, therefore, that at the international, systemic level, inequality only partly explains violence. It can be causally connected here too to explaining terrorism, for example instances such as 9/11. Inequality can even be used to find explanations, not justifications, for world wars, such as the Second World War that can be related back to the Treaty of Versailles and the Great Depression in Germany. However, on the other hand, quantitative studies indicate that contrary to the dominant opinion equality on the international level is more related to major wars, in particular if a superimposed authority is lacking. The major relatively recent wars, the First and Second World Wars, resulted arguably out of a relatively equal international constellation of two relatively equal alliance systems. The same occurred in the Cold War, in which virtually the two superpowers were head to head with each other. On this level, the solution would not be equality or inequality, it would





– in my view – be wrong to promote either or for the maintenance of peace. Equality on the international level would be important for other, humanitarian and ethical reasons. For preventing major war amongst states, the approach that seems most fruitful rather seems global integration under common authority, as already indicated by the Neorealists, even if they often rejected this idea as utopian. The latter point will be further discussed below.

Mental illness and terrorism

Mental illness has become increasingly an important topic of concern for global politics: The World Health Organisation currently runs an Action Plan Mental Health 2020 and British Prime Minister Theresa May has made mental health a priority for her government. This is not surprising, given that in many countries today 1 out of 4 individuals are diagnosed with a mental illness each year and the WHO predicts depression to be the main cause of disability in 2020.

Mental illness is commonly explained in current research with biological, neurological factors, such as imbalances in brain chemistry. This is also where the most common treatments (often neuroleptic medications) are targeted at. The sociological aspects are often underexplored. However, some causal factors have been identified, such as trauma generally, which can present from various sources, from war and violence, to unemployment, poverty, isolation or discrimination, to interpersonal conflicts or even physical illness.

If we take the socio-psychology of mental illness seriously, we can learn also something for explaining terrorism. While it is commonly believed that terrorists are not mentally ill, this question is not entirely settled. In the 1970ies, it was believed that mental illness was at the root of terrorism. Today, while this perspective has been refuted, it is still debated if suicide terrorists are possibly depressed, and also in recent cases of terrorism in the West, in particular lone wolf terrorism, a previous exposure to the mental health services is often found. Lone wolf terrorists (individual, isolated actors) have a long tradition of being suspects of mental illness, classically usually paranoid schizophrenia, which however often cannot be proven in court (see for example the Unabomber and Anders Behring Breivik).

This leads to the speculation that possibly generally terrorists, classically groups, are exposed to similar stressors than mentally ill people are (for example mass rape in war, deaths due to war, poverty, minority status in a country with accompanying discrimination). They might be protected against mental illness more due to integration into a group that resists. Belonging to a group had been identified as central in the psychology of terrorism previously.

If this is the case, then targeting the causes of terrorism becomes not only more necessary but also more possible. For example, this goal would need to involve reducing discrimination of Muslims in the West, including improving their economic chances, bringing development to the Middle East, MENA region, and Africa, and ending and avoiding wars.





Rogue States

Opirosko assigned the diagnosis of schizophrenia to states (2014). With this, he just identified a stark similarity of descriptions of how some mentally ill individuals in particular with certain diagnoses view and behave in the world on one hand and state behaviour as it is described by Realist authors on the other hand. Common topics are fear, paranoia, struggle for dominance and insecurity, lack of trust, and hostility.

Therefore, looking at the literature on mental illness could instruct us on understanding and interacting with states, such as in particular 'rogue states', who in today's world most closely resemble the Realist description. The literature on mental illness, for example schizophrenia, increasingly moves towards the experience of trauma as an explanation for its development. Isolation, stigma, exclusion and deprivation often go hand in hand with this or follow this. Trauma also seems to lie at the root of many 'rogue states', such as for example North Korea, and in international relations is usually represented in the experience of major war with following exclusion, isolation and deprivation.

Likewise, novel solutions to treatment for mental illness, such as the Open Dialogue approach, can instruct us about interaction with rogue states. The Open Dialogue approach favours dialogue on an equal basis, with all views, including the patient's, accepted. It also includes unconditional support for the patient. Translated into foreign policy targeted at 'rogue states' this would imply a more tolerant diplomatic exchange and a substantial increase in foreign aid and inclusion, rather, and in opposition to, the normal isolation, threats and sanctions.

Suicides and IR

Suicide epidemics are a yet underexplored topic of concern for the international community. It is not yet widely known that more people die from suicide each year than die through war and terrorism. If one includes all other violence, such as crime, into war and terrorism, still about half as many people die from suicides: 1.6 million from all external violence, compared to 800.000 to close to 1 million from suicide each year. In addition, suicides as well as suicide epidemics are not only related to international events and processes, they also have the power to influence international events and processes. For example, the Arab Spring started with the suicide of a Middle Eastern fruit seller, who burned himself to death in protest against rising food prices, which were caused by international economic processes. Suicide epidemics preceded both the First World War in Germany and the US, as well as the election of President Trump in the US. Hence, it is important to take a global perspective on suicides both as a human security issue, as well as an indication of larger international processes.

Suicides have been studied mainly by psychiatrists (who by the way is the profession with the highest suicide risk) and have been mainly connected to mental illness, in particular depression, but also other diagnoses. Durkheim is the main author who connected suicides to a sociological explanation (2006). He presented arguments that suicides are caused by lack of integration (or lack of social capital, egoistic suicide) and lack of life chances (for example due to unemployment in economic depressions, anomic suicides). He also mentioned suicides due to too restrictive societies (altruistic suicides), but these seem to be a minor problem in today's





world and seem to affect mainly very traditional cultures. If we take the literature as well as additional new findings on suicides to the global level, we find the following additional factors:

- 1) Societal cohesion seems to protect best against suicides. This can be provided in a traditional way through the strong connecting force of religion and the presence of large families, as in the Muslim world, which seems comparatively little affected by suicides, or due to the state enforcing integration, as in Communist China, which also is little affected by suicides. Thailand, for example, similar to the Islamic world, is relatively protected against suicides probably due to the presence of one majority religion (Theravada Buddhism) which is followed by 95% of the population. In the Western world, equivalents to social cohesion that can protect are (negatively) nationalism, as in war time, which usually goes along with employment (positively), or (also positively) economic opportunity and the possibility to creativity, which is thought by some to protect as well as religion against suicide, and which is present in particular in prosperous times when business opportunity and jobs are widely available. The existence of welfare state functions can also at times take over the role of traditional social capital, as traditionally supplied through religious charity or large families, which could explain why Europe is less affected by suicides than the US.
- 2) Population density extremes seem to go along with a high risk of increased suicides. Both over-populated countries (for example India and Japan) as well as under-populated countries (Russia and Greenland) are often world leaders in suicide numbers. This could be explained with difficulties of effective political, social and economic governance if population density is extreme. For example, over-population might bring scarcity problems and crowding, which has been identified as an important psychologically disturbing factor, while under-population might mean it will be difficult to maintain a prospering economy and to create community, the latter might instead result in isolation of many individuals due to large distances between them.
- 3) Poverty and inequality have been connected both to suicides as a causal risk, as well as economic downturns and other crises. Unfortunate life situations, unemployment in particular, and unfortunate immediate events are known to contribute to suicides.
- 4) War and peace in general also have a connection to suicides: It is generally believed that suicides increase in peace time, with possibly a spike before peace turns into war. In war suicides remain at a relatively low level, maybe due to deaths due to other causes, but also maybe due to increased employment and societal cohesion. At the end of wars, suicides generally are at a low, maybe the lowest, level. Hence, it would be necessary to identify how suicide risk can be reduced in peace, learning from war experience and adapting the positive aspects (for example mass employment, more societal cohesion) to peace time.

Peace and Global Governance

If we look at Peace in international relations, we have to take a look at Peace Psychology. Peace Psychology promotes a number of points, some already mentioned in passing above, for the maintenance of peace, such as common projects, equality, dialogue, education, etc. Interestingly, an important idea from International Relations seems not very dominant in Peace





Psychology: common institutions. Peace Research in addition promotes pacifism as an orientation as central for the maintenance of peace.

These ideas taken together, and in combination with the ideas discussed above, lead me to conclude with a summary of some ideas that could help build a better, more stable and peaceful, international system.

- 1) A global parliament could help ensure to increase global dialogue on an equal basis. It would need to be based on the principle of one person one vote. How to construct such a system in a fair manner and without violating national feelings remains yet open, but solutions can be thought about.
- 2) A global welfare state could help remedy the worst excesses of capitalism and globalisation, or lack thereof, and help alleviate suffering at least as long as job promotion and wealth creation are not sufficiently developed. It could hence help prevent problems such as crime, slavery, human trafficking, reduce drug abuse and trade or human trafficking, and maybe could even help to reduce terrorism. This global welfare state would need to be maintained by the global governance institutions and be supported by the world community of states.
- 3) An early warning system for war based on global mental health data could help prevent conflicts. Such a system would need to collect depression data internationally, and if significant increases in depression in any regions or countries would be discovered, it would be necessary to intervene with soft tools, such as medical aid, financial investment, diplomacy etc., to prevent violence erupting.
- 4) The military installations would need to be integrated into one truly global alliance. This would mean to allow accession of Russia into NATO and from there on other states until NATO is a truly global alliance, resembling a truly global police force. After political global integration with the UN and EU etc. and economic integration with globalisation, military integration seems the missing link to prevent war amongst states. In particular the integration of Russia in NATO could also facilitate the abolition efforts with regards to nuclear weapons. Agreement on nuclear disarmament would be easier to achieve if the contending superpowers remaining from the Cold War were joined in one common alliance. If the militaries per se would be joined in one organisation, the Security Dilemma, that is thought central to the cause of war, would be logically abolished. Within NATO, the Security Dilemma is virtually absent. It is the military establishments posed against each other, not diplomats or state leaders, who threaten others most. Hence, after political and economic integration, we now need military integration.
- 5) Finally, it seems overall that for the management of a world that is predicted to have to hold possibly 14 billion people by 2090, we in all likelihood need a stronger global governance system, hence the UN and affiliated organs might have to be expanded. Growing population numbers, in particular if the growth is rapid, potentially contribute to higher risk of global conflict. All major periods of war in the history of Western civilisation occurred in periods of high population growth and were usually followed by new inventions of superimposed authority, such as the sovereign state after the 30 Years War, the League of Nations after the First, and the UN after the Second World War, for example. For this reason, and to avoid other problems related to overpopulation of the earth, such as environmental pollution and exploitation, economic scarcity, etc., sensibility in terms of reproduction and reproductive and family planning rights,





including the right to abstain from reproduction (voluntary childlessness), for women worldwide need to be strengthened also.

Global Consciousness

This final paragraph will deal with an essential, usually ignored part, in International Relations: Spirituality and Consciousness. It is central in the discussion in Transpersonal Psychology and can in fact be related to IR.

First, spiritual literatures, on which much of Transpersonal Psychology is based on, have a long tradition of describing the world as one unity. This occurs not only in Western spirituality, but is a global theme, to be found in Islam, Buddhism, etc. This unity is often thought to be connected by what one could call 'the global mind', a concept difficult to grasp and maybe not yet clearly enough described. However, the latter can be related to some of Alexander Wendt's writings of the state as a person (Wendt 2004) and the work of the Global Consciousness Project. It seems to imply that the feelings and emotions of each global citizen contribute to the whole. If the feelings and emotions of each global citizen are in harmony (roughly speaking) then the possibilities for peace are better and the global consciousness is unified. This should not be read as an argument for mind control or global dictatorship, but for the need to help increase global harmony and ultimately the happiness of each global citizen, by means as for example are described above, to maintain peace. Also, this is in line with the recommendations of most spiritual approaches, such as the Dalai Lama's, that a compassionate orientation towards the global level is necessary for each of us.

Conclusion

Overall, using the insights from Psychology to instruct International Relations can be highly useful. A large number of novel ideas and concepts can be derived out of a synthetic study, and more is possible. Hence, I believe there is value in and a need for a sub-discipline of International Political Psychology, which would bridge the divide between the psychological sciences in their fullness and IR. The discussion above is illustrated in more length in the book *International Political Psychology: Explorations into a New Discipline*.

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