The Psychology of International Relations Theory: Finding an Appropriate Methodology for Research

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the bonds and boundaries a researcher must take into consideration when attempting to show links between intellectual history (or history of theory) and real historical events. Specifically, it will focus on the methodological considerations of a research project that is attempting to establish connections between academic International Relations theory, political ideology, and world history in the 20th century. The two main difficulties obvious from the outset in attempting to create such links are that the subject area is a) almost impossibly vast and b) deals largely in the abstract realm of contending ideological worldviews. As such, a rigorous, astute and highly selective methodological approach must be carefully applied if the resulting argument is to be of real academic value.

This paper, therefore, explores how to navigate specific boundaries and limitations such as a) the limited ability to make direct assessments of causality, b) the boundaries between different epistemological or ontological worldviews in their interpretations of the 'same' historical events, and c) the difficulties of situating a given worldview within its own historical context. Without a disciplined focus on the issues above it would be easy, given the ethereal nature of the subject area, to falter into generalisations or ideological partisanship that would render the argument practically meaningless. It concludes by discussing why an explicitly historical approach is the most suited to dealing with the project at hand.

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Introduction

This paper will discuss some of the main methodological issues faced during the first year of my PhD research project, the broad aim of which is to explore the bonds and boundaries between academic International Relations theory, theories of psychology, and core moments of international-political history in the 20th century. The paper will describe the various stages that led me to settle on an explicitly historical approach for the project. These stages will include: 1) a general summary of the initial idea, involving the original perception of a clear problem in International Relations scholarship. This summary will briefly discuss aspects of the history of academic International Relations theorizing, with a focus on the field's often superficial incorporation of different psychological theories; 2) a summary of a first attempt towards developing a coherent methodological approach for research. This will discuss the attempt to directly redefine the established theoretical categories of academic International Relations and the inherent challenges of doing so; and 3) a summary of a second methodological approach for research. This will focus on some of the advantages of a historical approach, as well as some of the limitations necessarily implied.

The overarching aim for this paper, therefore, is to outline why I have settled on a historical methodology as the most suitable for a research project straddling the nebulous boundaries between ideology, psychology, history, and politics. In doing so, the paper will touch on various on-going debates in historical theory, academic International Relations, and psychology.

Part 1) A Fundamental Problem in IR theory

The idea of International Relations or International Politics as its own academically institutionalised subject area is a relatively recent development. After WWII, with US government sponsorship, there was a gathering of some of the most prominent intellectuals on international affairs from the allied countries. The explicit aim was to develop a research agenda that would help avoid catastrophic global conflicts as had been seen in the Great Wars of the first half of the twentieth century. It has been argued that this meeting was the starting point of what we now recognise as International Relations scholarship in its present form, at least within an Anglo-American context.[1] At present, most prominent universities across the UK and the USA have departments or faculties that engage with the theorists and theories that emerged from this historical beginning to 'International Relations theory'.

The contrived and exclusive nature of the field's origins set a precedent for it to be dominated by a few core conceptions about the nature of the political world. As a result, the field has historically suffered from a paralysing myopia with regards to what should be the focus of its study, as well as regarding why and how such elements should be addressed. A particularly striking example is the total absence of consideration given to even the most basic ideas of human psychology by entire schools of International Relations theory. Indeed, many of the core schools forming the academic history of International Relations theory

could be scrutinised for their underlying psychological foundations. However, the neo-realist and neo-liberal fields, which have dominated the field from the late 1970s, stand out as the most problematic for two main reasons.[2] Firstly, the psychological assumptions at the basis of their theoretical models, characterised by certain core propositions about human psychology, were highly questionable. For example, these theories explicitly held that human beings exclusively act rationally, in their own self-interest, and with survival or the accumulation of power as their central concern. Psychologists of multiple different theoretical backgrounds would argue against each of these propositions. Secondly, the fact that these theories have been so dominant throughout the history of International Relations, as well as being those most closely associated with high-level policy making, made their flaws stand out as more problematic. Where other theories of International Relations may implicitly or explicitly be relying on psychology that is questionable in different ways, they were both less dominant (and arguably less influential) and less explicitly connected with policy than the neo-realist and neo-liberal theories in IR.

In combination, the two above factors are not insignificant. Indeed, the fact that theories almost exclusively dominating IR thinking from the late seventies until the early nineties (and are still prominently taught today) were built on the most questionable theoretical foundations seems inherently dissatisfactory. Furthermore, the prescriptive or advisory aspect to the neo-realist or neo-liberal projects, explicitly trying to promote themselves as practical or useable models for political decision-making, imply that these theories might more readily have exerted a concrete political influence than perhaps other less ready-to-use, competitor theories. In short, there is a distinct sense that the neo-realist and neo-liberal theories were somehow providing a paint-by-numbers picture of world politics, designed explicitly for policy makers, with the use of highly problematic psychology.

Other questions arose when considering how many policy-makers, high-level government officials, foreign affairs editors and military chiefs of today were schooled in such theory and knew little else. Does believing and applying theories based on such a survivalist view of human psychology make adherents, and the foreign policy affected, more aggressive, callous, and dangerous? If a military chief or foreign secretary sees the world's nations as an unruly, anarchic pack of survival 'units', each looking to secure power and supremacy over their neighbours in a dog-eat-dog global fight to the death, what sort of foreign relations will be the likely result? How many people could be, and arguably have already been, affected? To anyone unfamiliar with the field, this characterisation of the neo-realist and neo-liberal positions may seem hyperbolic. In truth, it is not an unfair reflection of the sort of terminology applied within these academically respected (within the field) bodies of work.[3]

These concerns, then, form the core questions of a research project attempting to understand how, why, and when did these problematic theories emerge, as well as whether they can be connected to concrete international policy making and policy effects. The following sections of this paper will trace considerations on how best to approach these questions.

Part 2) First Methodology: Analytical Recategorisation

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The first attempt to develop a research agenda looked to assess multiple theories from across the IR intellectual spectrum in terms of their understandings of human psychology. It purported to identify what psychological ideas various theorists included either explicitly or implicitly in their political theorising. The hoped-for outcome was that, once the analysis was completed, it would have been possible to identify new trends, groups, and consequences of particular understandings of psychology within IR theory. In an attempt to make the investigation as focused and specific as possible, the analysis specifically assessed the theories with regard to two core psycho-ontological questions.[4] The first was whether or not the theory's view of psychology allowed for an unconscious aspect to the human mind, or whether human beings were considered to be wholly conscious and rational. The second was whether they took an ontologically dualistic or monistic position on the relation between mind and world. In other words, did the theories hold that there is an external, objective reality to world politics (and, indeed, life itself) which the mind tries to comprehend (dualism), or did they hold the world to be subjective and characterised as interrelated with the very process of intellectual theorising itself in a cyclical process of discursive creation and development (monism).

Such a line of inquiry initially seemed appropriate for two reasons. Firstly, by assessing the work of theories from across the IR spectrum specifically with regards to their psychological ontologies, it was proving possible to connect theorists from entirely different IR traditions in new ways. In other, words, theorists that are generally considered to be at odds about their broad models of how world politics functioned can actually be considered as being in general agreement based on their view of human psychology. The converse also proves to be the case, as theorists usually associated with the same 'school' can be shown to actually have been working with mutually incompatible psychological ontologies. This possibility to re-categorise the schools within IR scholarship (and, indeed, having a model to potentially do the same within related fields) at first appeared to be very encouraging. There seemed to be the potential for significant impact in debates over how the basic history and structure of the field should be considered. The second reason the approach seemed appropriate then was because if one isolated theories according to their particular psychologies, it would consequently be possible to directly scrutinize the reliability of their psychological understandings. This would be useful for inter-theoretical disputes about the validity or accuracy of positions being put forward.

There are, however, three central problems with using this methodology. The first is that considering the theories in such a way is completely ahistorical. In other words, comparing how theories from completely different eras and contexts engage with notions like 'the unconscious' is somewhat artificial and overly presentist. The unconscious as understood in the early twentieth century is different to how the unconscious is defined in the early twenty-first. As a consequence, assessing the various theories according to any particular single fixed notion is too rigid an approach as it ignores how different theorists engaged with such concepts in their own intellectual contexts. Secondly, and connected to the first problem, there is no consensus within psychology (or anywhere) about the 'true' nature of the human mind. Attempting to assess

how 'good' the different historically prominent IR theories were on the basis of their psychological understandings is to assume that the theory from which my own criteria were derived is somehow authoritative. Finally, the approach is fundamentally flawed because it provides confused definitions of dualism and monism when compared with how these terms have been used throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophical dualism and monism are usually associated with the debate over whether human consciousness can be considered as dependent on or separate from the physical body,[5] whereas my own definitions of dualism or monism were more related to epistemological debates on the objectivity or subjectivity of knowledge.

In summary, on becoming aware of the combined weight of the above three problems within the research agenda, it was clear that a new or updated approach was necessary. The second, more successful attempt to define a research methodology suitable for the particular project will be discussed in the following section.

Part 3) Second Methodology: Intellectual History

A way to address all three of the flaws of analytical recategorisation is to switch to a more strictly historical approach. This perspective has several benefits, not least that it allows the IR theorists under scrutiny to be placed within the intellectual context of their day, thus engaging with the various theories in question on their own terms. As well as avoiding conflation between different understandings of concepts in the present and the past, it actually allows these differences and developments of meaning to come to light and become objects of interest in their own right. Moreover, the historical approach does not require a fully developed and defendable psychological position of its own. Rather, it tries to engage objectively with a more descriptive, almost narrative view of historical developments within IR and avoids judging them according to any particular criteria. A further benefit of this is that, by not supporting any particular partisan argument, the history of the matter in question (for example, the historical record of particular theories of International Relations) is allowed to speak for itself.

This approach has had demonstrable benefits, for example, in consideration the work of EH Carr (a key figure within twentieth century academic International Relations). Via an in depth assessment of his biographical work in the 1930s, leading up to the publication of his cornerstone IR text *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in 1939, it has been possible to firmly locate Carr within the context of early twentieth century trends in psychological theory.[6] In brief, the main intellectual currents which fundamentally shaped Carr's understanding on human psychology include developments in: evolutionary theory; crowd psychology; romantic and pragmatic philosophy; sociology; and various forms of psychoanalytic theory.[7] The value of this detailed inquiry into Carr's intellectual setting is that it provides further insight into his political theory. Having this knowledge for a number of the core theorists from throughout the history of IR theory will allow for a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of how and why IR scholarship developed in the sometimes seemingly problematic or unexpected way it did. Furthermore, if any correlation can be found between particular political theories and concrete policy outcomes, it would allow a logical connection to be made between

different understandings of human psychology and implied or expected political outcomes when these are present.

In short, the historical approach is an effective and coherent methodology to investigate some of the interrelations between academic International Relations theory, psychology, and international politics. In addition, its downsides appear relatively minor and manageable. For example, a main methodological issue in historical theory is that it is arguably impossible to develop a fully impartial or objective perspective. Any historian has to decide what to consider 'historically significant', essentially based on personal preference about what to include and what to omit. The 'facts' of history, therefore, are decided to a greater or lesser extent by the bias of the historian. Consequently, the dilemma arises whether it is better to attempt to be as objective as possible or, conversely, be more explicit with one's bias. Either way, however, if the research is backed up by evidence, organised into a logical narrative, and coherently engages with perspectives of related historical authorities, it is arguable that questions of bias and objectivity are of secondary importance. Indeed, the reader is free to make up his or her own mind on the matter. These unresolved methodological questions are longstanding and well known within the field of historical studies.[8] Most importantly, they are manageable enough to not affect to the overall suitability of the historical approach within my research. The benefits certainly outweigh the negatives and consequently it appears to be appropriate for the project moving forward.

Conclusion

This paper has summarily discussed how my current PhD research project has developed from an initial idea into a project focusing on IR theory from a historical perspective. At present, this approach appears to be the most suitable for the research. By interconnecting historical developments in academic International Relations theory, intellectual trends in psychological theory, political uptake and implementation of these various currents, and the outcomes of their policy application, it will be possible to track how specific ideas have contributed to political realities. The historical approach certainly offers a straightforward and adaptable methodology for addressing the various bonds, boundaries, and degrees of abstraction involved in such an interdisciplinary project.

Endnotes

1   See, for example, Nicolas Guilhot, ed. *The Invention of International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

2   For useful histories of how the field has developed, see e.g. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).; Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).; Brian C. Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations," in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse-Kappen, and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2002).; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, "Why International Relations Has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001).; Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, "The Big Bangs of Ir: The Myths That Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919," ibid.39, no. 3 (2011). Etc.

3   See e.g. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2001).; Stephen M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. I. and Miller Katznelson, H. (NY: W.W. Norton, 2003).; Joseph Nye, "Neorealism and Neoliberalism," *World Politics* 40, no. 2 (1988).; Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984).

4   The 2x2 grid format of this project, creating four mutually exclusive ontological categories, was inspired by the research model in Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011).

5   See e.g. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/ (accessed 16-09-15).

6   Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939 : An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2001 edn ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1939); *The Romantic Exiles*, 1975 ed. (New York: Octagon Books, 1933), Biography - Reprint; *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism* (London: JM Dent and Sons Ltd., 1934), Biography; *Michael Bakunin* (London: Macmillan, 1937), Biography; *Dostoevsky: 1821 - 1881* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931), Biography.

7   See e.g. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1855).; Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, SIXTH EDITION, WITH ADDITIONS AND CORRECTIONS TO 1872. ed. (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1872).; Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1896 Translation, Seventeenth Impression ed. (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1895).; Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell PhD (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911).; William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1922 ed. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907).; *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912).; Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W.D. Halls, 1982 Edn. ed. (London: The Free Press, 1895).; Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and

Edward Shils, Preface by Louis Wirth ed. (London: Lund Humphries, 1954).; George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934).; Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 2015 Dover Thrift edn. ed. (USA: Dover Publications, 1920).; Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 20 vols., vol. 6, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung (London: Routledge, 1968).

8   These questions are developed in e.g. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?*, Second Edn. (1986) ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1961); Quentin Skinner, "The Limits of Historical Explanations," *Philosophy* 41, no. 157 (1966); Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1999); Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error : A Contemporary Guide to Practice*, ed. Steven Shepard and Phillip Honenberger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Thomas L. Hankins, "In Defence of Biography: The Use of Biography in the History of Science," *History of Science* 17, no. 1 (1979); Daniel Wickberg, "Intellectual History Vs. The Social History of Intellectuals," *Rethinking History* 5, no. 3 (2001).

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Biography

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