

Making Sense of the Discipline of International Relations: The Levels of Analysis

Abhishek Choudhary
abhishek.chy23@gmail.com

Doctoral Candidate

Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament,
School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract: The paper seeks to examine the ways in which an understanding of international relations is produced. It begins by examining the two broad camps: the positivists and the post-positivist and distinguishes between explanation and understanding of international relations. It then provides a detailed account of existing literature that uses the conceptual framework of ‘levels of analysis’ in international relations. The paper concludes by arguing that depending on one’s theoretical presumptions and the relative methodological utility, the levels of analysis provides a framework to understand and explain a given phenomenon. Thus, the choice is specific to case, methodology and theoretical orientation.

Keywords: Levels of Analysis, Positivism, Post-Positivism, Ontology, Epistemology

Introduction

International Relations, in narrow terms, is concerned with the relationships among the world’s governments. However, the relationship has to be understood in a holistic manner and not in isolation. The governments are closely knit with *other actors* like the international organisations, multinational corporations, and individuals. It is linked with *other social structures and processes* that includes the economy and domestic politics, and with geographical and historical *influences*. These are the constituent factors that could be identified with the phenomenon of globalization (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014: 3). Thus, to look at international relations or global politics, it is important to assess ‘how’ one understands it.

Explaining and Understanding: A Difference of Approach

In a broad sense, there has been a divide between the scholars of social sciences in general and that of International Relations in particular. On one side are those who seek to “explain” the given phenomenon – the “positivists” who seek to answer the “causal” questions. On the other side are those who claim to “understand” the social world – the “post-positivists” who seek to answer “constitutive” questions (Hollis and Smith 1990). This distinction was emphasized by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith in their seminal book published in 1990 titled *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. The major features of the two camps are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Positivists vs Post-positivists				
	Location of observer	Main concern	Type of questions addressed	Method employed
Positivists	Outside the phenomenon, more objective	To <i>explain</i> , as a social scientist.	Causal questions	Quantitative: survey, sampling
Post-positivists	Inside the phenomenon, more subjective	To <i>understand</i> , as a philosopher.	Constitutive questions	Qualitative: interviews, ethnography, analytical approaches

An observer is the one who works towards deriving some meaningful insights from a phenomenon or event. A positivist observer views the reality as present out there and ready for observation. A post-positivist, however, considers reality as a social construction. It relies on interpretation and thus is more subjective. Thus, in the discipline of International Relations, structural realists are seen to be positivists while critical theorists, feminists, and others are seen to be post-positivists.

It is important to figure what the scope of enquiry is in order to make sense of a given phenomenon. What could be expected from a student of international relations when he

tries to make sense of any event? Why is becomes important to assign jargonized labels like positivism, empiricism, post-positivism and so on? One important reason that could be attributed to such categorization is that it allows one to assume some set of rules and principles associated with a given category. For instance, if one scholar of international relations claims that he adheres to the ‘post-structural’ camp, there would be no need to separately mention that he does not base his enquiry on the primacy of states or the system.

This water-tight compartmentalization between causal and the constitutive theories, however, is problematic. One problem is that by labeling the distinction between explanation and understanding as science versus non-science leads to polarization of the discussion. As Wendt (1998) suggests, “...the intellectual activities associated with Explanation and Understanding *both*, are, and should be, practiced in both domains” (Wendt 1998). He further argues that distinction between explanation and understanding is not one between explanation and description, but between explanations that answer different kinds of question: causal and constitutive. He believes that constitutive theories also “provide explanations” (Wendt 1998). The difference lies in the fact that while the causal theories answer “why” questions, the constitutive theories seek to answer the “how-possible” or “what” questions (Wendt 1998).

Mijla Kurki (2006) goes a step further and contends the distinction between causal and constitutive theories itself. Her central thesis is that the very understanding of causation used in social sciences is narrow and flawed. The way causation is seen is based on David Hume’s notion that views causation as only the “push and pull” factors. For Kurki, this is a limited way to look at cause and therefore she borrows from the philosophy of Aristotle and expands the notion of causation. Accordingly, ‘cause’ is seen to have four components: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, and final cause. The Humean notion of cause is limited only to the efficient cause under this categorization (Kurki 2006: 206-209).

This broadened notion of causation, Kurki argues, allows to transcend the artificial divide between the so-called causal and constitutive theories. With this development, it would

be easier to have dialogues between different theoretical camps. This would allow for more constructive debates in world politics.

Levels of Analysis

To understand a given phenomenon, one needs some toolkits to simplify the complexities. Level of analysis is one such tool which, in simplest terms, imply the 'location' of a given phenomenon (Buzan 1995: 199). On the basis of what needs to be explained, scholars of International Relations, in general, have sought to segregate the levels into three: Individual, State/Society, and International System. It is to provide the scholar with a way to sort and arrange a phenomenon under study. It helps in providing a more accurate description, better explanation and reliable prediction (Singer 1961: 77-80.). Levels of analysis helps in suggesting multiple explanations and approaches that one might consider when the effort is explaining an event thoroughly. It helps in looking beyond the immediate and superficial aspects that might have caused an event and thus one digs deeper to analyse the actual cause (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014).

The level of analysis to be used depends upon the relative conceptual and methodological utility that each level would carry. Theories that tries to explain international relations are based on different levels of analysis and on different assumptions about the nature of international relations. Even when states are the core actors at the international stage, it is not necessarily the most appropriate level at which to focus analysis. The behaviour of states in the international arena could be an outcome of domestic political processes or of the behaviour of specific individuals (Griffiths et. al. 2008: 188).

The separation is identified by different names and labels. For some, it is the individual, the unit and the global system (Mansbach and Taylor 2008: 7). The point is to identify the 'location' of a particular phenomenon under study. Some scholars have argued for four levels of analysis: Individual, Domestic, Interstate and Global (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014). The logic for this fourth level is that certain actions go beyond interaction between two or more states.

While the term ‘international’ denotes interaction essentially between nation-states, the term ‘global’ is broader. The presence of non-state actors like the non-governmental organisations, global media and even terrorist organisations have changed the way one looks at international relations. Globalisation, along with the massive advances in information, communication and technological field, has played an important role in looking beyond the limitations associated with the idea of ‘international’. It is no longer the case that only nation-states are stake-holders in the context of world politics. Thus, it is more preferable to use the term global when the concern is beyond the relation between nations.

In mainstream international relations theories, there is a clear privileging of the level of the international. After all, the general understanding is that international relations, by definition, is about the relation between nations. The theorists from the realist perspective pay most attention to the international system level of analysis.

The Three Levels of Analysis: Kenneth Waltz and Barry Buzan

For a prominent scholar of international relations and the pioneer of Structural Realism, Kenneth Waltz, the so-called three ‘images’ are individual human beings, the states and the international system. Waltz’s ‘images’, imply the different categories of factors that cause war. His analysis of the levels or images was hinged upon the identification of causes of war. These ‘categories of factors’ are the attributes of individual human beings, states and the international system (Waltz 1959: 12).

Waltz analyses the utility of each image as follows: First Image: Human behaviour; Second Image: The internal structure of states; Third Image: International anarchy. As he puts it, the third image describes the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results (Waltz 1959: 238). So, for Waltz, it is the third image – the image of ‘international anarchy’ that is the most important factor causing war.

In a similar manner, one can look at the three different levels and categorize different factors/variables that could explain a given phenomenon. The first or the *individual* level of analysis relates to the perceptions, choices, and actions of individual human beings (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014). It also includes personality of great leaders. Leaders as well as the common citizens have influenced the course of history. Who is chosen at the helm of the power and how he behaves clearly has an impact on outcomes.

The second or the *domestic* (or *state* or *societal*) level of analysis is related to the group of individuals within states that influence state actions in the international arena. This includes interest groups, government agencies and political organizations (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014). These groups operate in different manners in different kinds of societies and states. For instance, in a multi-cultural society like that of India, the political organizations have to cater to very different sets of demands. This explains also why India has had a multi-party system. Other countries that are more homogenous have had two-party system.

The third or the *interstate* (or *international* or *systemic*) level of analysis relates to influence of the international system upon outcomes (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014). Thus, the focus of this level of analysis is on the interactions of states. It does not look at the internal composition of the state or at individuals who lead them. This level pays attention to states' relative power positions in the international system and the interactions (trade, for example) among them. Thus, the three levels appear as three concentric circles: the larger circle of international system, consisting of states and the middle circle of states consisting of individual human beings.

Using the three levels of analysis, let us now look at an example from recent history. The 2003 war against Iraq led by the United States can be analyzed using the three levels (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014; Mingst 2011: 62). See table 2 for details. Although scholars often focus their study mainly on one single level of analysis, other levels also provide possible explanation. There is no single correct level for a given “why” question.

Table 2: 2003 War against Iraq: Possible Explanations.	
Level of analysis	Corresponding explanation
Individual level	• Saddam Hussain's over confidence that he could defeat his adversaries. His miscalculation of response by other states. • George W. Bush's conviction to remove a leader whom he considered threatening.
Domestic level	• A strong faction of neoconservatives rose in support of establishing democracy in Iraq. They convinced the Bush administration and Americans that Saddam was a clear threat to U.S. security. • Iraq had an authoritarian regime and wanted to counter its enemy Iran.
Interstate level	• The United States was the largest global military power. No state was willing to back Iraq militarily and thus there was no fear of a large-scale military response. • Statements made by UN Security Council about action against Iraq were not seen as credible. • Saddam hoped that the Arab league would not condemn actions of fellow Arabic state.
Global level	• Increasing global fear of terrorism, or even a clash between Islam and the West after the events on September 11, 2001.

The issue of level of analysis appeared in international relations in 1950s as an impact of the broader behavioural revolution in social sciences. Behaviouralism sought to apply the method of sciences to the social world. It emphasized upon quantification and a more positivist approach. It was a result of the debate between reductionist and systemic theories (Buzan 1995: 199). Kenneth Waltz outlined the difference between the two. If the theories of international relations explain international outcomes through the action and interaction of parts (i.e. states, or units) they are reductionist. A systemic theory deals with the factors at the international, not the national level (Waltz 1979: 60-78).

The theories focusing either on the individual or the national level are labelled as

reductionist by Waltz. The theories that look at the causes at international level are viewed as systemic. Buzan raises two questions about levels of analysis: how many and what levels should there be? How can these levels be defined and differentiated? Answering the first question, Buzan raises the issue relating to whether the 'levels' are about 'different units of analysis' (ontological) or are they about types of variables acting as 'source of explanation' of particular unit's behaviour (epistemological) (Buzan 1995: 203).

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of being. It asks: What is there in the world? What is the character of the things that make up the 'furniture' of the world? Ontology refers to how we see or understand the essence of things around us. The question asked is: '*what is reality?*'. It is about belief in reality – whether there is a single reality or multiple realities?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies how we produce and acquire knowledge. It asks: Are our knowledge claims valid? How do we justify our knowledge claims? Epistemology involves the ways and means by which we come to know something about the world. The question asked is: '*how can I know reality?*' (Viotti and Kauppi 2012: 3; George 2012: 24).

For example, if we look at debates surrounding nationalism, it shows a '*constructionist ontology*' – meaning that there is no single notion of nationalism and reality is constructed in a given context. Now, since we do not have a single reality, we have to interpret the reality. Thus, the corresponding '*epistemology*' – the way we know reality – will be '*interpretivist*'.

Viewing the levels different 'units of analysis' implies the location. It clearly shows a hierarchical scale. The different levels would only have to be separated by their existence in different iterations of space/time. This is the most common of looking at levels – as location. When levels are viewed as 'source of explanation', Buzan argues for a larger role for 'interaction capacity'. Interaction capacity is about the technological capabilities, and the shared norms and organizations, on which the interaction between units in the

system, or within a unit, depends. With change in technologies the quality and character of the interactions among and within units in the system as a whole gets changed (Buzan 1995: 210).

David Singer: The International System and the National State

David Singer's work has a major influence on the discipline of International Relations. Examining the systemic and sub-systemic (in this case, sub-systemic implies the national) levels of analysis, Singer focuses on the *descriptive*, *explanatory* or *predictive* capability of different levels (Singer 1961: 78-79). Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the 'international system' and the 'national state' as 'level of analysis', he argues that the utilisation of either level depends on the purpose of one's research. He argues that while 'one may well be corollary of the other, but they are not immediately combinable' (Singer 1961: 91).

For David Singer, the 'International System' level of analysis is the most comprehensive level of analysis as it encompasses the totality of interactions which take place within the system and environment. It is more holistic and more deterministic in nature. Advantages in terms of *describing* is that it is comprehensiveness. As a corollary, a disadvantage is that it lacks in detail. In terms of *explaining*, the advantage of the international system level is that it allows to make not causal but correlative statements based on general system level trends. Also, it provides a singularly manageable model. A disadvantage is that it exaggerates the impact of the system upon the actors and does not look at the impact of that actors might have upon the system. Also, it assumes a high degree of uniformity in the foreign policy decision making which ignores the fact that nations may differ among themselves regarding the idea of national interests. In terms of effectiveness in *predicting*, it provides a reasonably satisfactory basis for prediction. However, on the flipside, predictions can only be made in very general terms (Singer 1961: 80-82).

Singers talks about the 'national state' level of analysis which is viewed important by western scholars. It is advantageous in terms of *descriptiveness* as it allows to look into

more details and avoid homogenisation and generalisation. However, with too much focus on differentiation at the sub-systemic level, it may well produce an exaggeration of differences among actors. These differences could be attributed as virtues of one's own nation and vices of others. In terms of *explanatory* capability, it includes goals, motivation, and purpose of national policies into interpretation and explanation. Thus, it is able to question how and why certain nations pursue specific goals. However, goals and motivations could actually be an outcome rather than cause for a particular decision. The *predictive* power of national state level is not better than the international system level (Singer 1961: 82-89).

Talking about the effectiveness of his own analysis, however, Singer concedes that the international system and the national state are two of the more common orientations, and that many others are available and are perhaps more fruitful than either of those selected here (Singer 1961: 90).

Conclusion

There is no consensus among scholars over the most appropriate level of analysis. While the realists are mostly focused on the anarchic structure owing to a systemic bias, the liberals locate domestic and individual level factors as more important. The reason why one needs to look at the levels of analysis is that it helps in suggesting the most appropriate type of evidence to explore (Griffiths et. al 2008). The choice between the different levels of analysis depends on the issue that is being examined. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that a particular level of analysis is better than the other. Depending on one's theoretical presumptions and the relative methodological utility, the levels of analysis provide a framework to understand and explain a given phenomenon.

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