

Psychology, Political Psychology and International Relations – What are we talking about?

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Abstract:

Psychology and international relations theory (IR) share an ambivalent relationship. On the one side psychology is neglected within the theory building of IR, on the other side there exists a large history of psychological approaches within the discipline, as well as interdisciplinary research in the field of political psychology. However, leaving psychology out of IR is not understandable from a psychological point of view since the differentiation between “rationality” on the one side and “irrationality” as psychology on the other side is artificial and contra-empirical. Systematically and naturally incorporating psychology – as for example motives and emotions – in IR would mean to understand international phenomena more profoundly and closer to reality.

Psychology and international relations theory (IR) have an ambivalent relationship. With social and cognitive psychological findings international phenomena could be explained, understood and anticipated better and more correctly. That is because the application of only structural approaches using rational choice is extremely biased and cannot alone suffice to project resilient explanations of incidents within the international system. Even more, “rationality” as given by the image of the homo economicus “has little power to make valid predictions about political phenomena” (Simon, 1985, 293). In contrast to that “psychology” as basic motives or emotions of humans is no external factor

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inflicting men's rationality. As inherent part of anyone of us, without emotions for example, any decision-making at all would be impossible – be it “rational” or not (Stein, 2008). Thus, while on the one side rational choice theorists still think “that they can achieve predictive power using rational assumptions”, on the other side “most psychologists might find it absurd that anyone would assume that individuals are rational” (McDermott, 2004, 12-13). But still – even if improving – the inclusion of psychological findings remains on the fringes of the established theoretical building of IR. With this article I pursue two different aims. First, there is to be shown – even though psychology still is no central issue – how diverse and confusing its incorporation within the academic field of IR already is. Therefore, there is provided an overview of how one might approximate to the field without forgetting about vital areas. After that there is shed light on the specific demands and critics regarding the shortcomings of concretely incorporating psychology in IR. A stronger and more systematic inclusion of psychology within IR, particularly on motives and emotions, would yield tremendous benefits for research.

IR and Psychology – A confusing field

Even though the disjunction between “psychology” on the one side and “rationality” on the other side seems totally artificial and stands against modern psychological findings, the neglect of psychological approaches is even more astonishing, since psychology at least understood in an anthropological sense was an integral part of IR when it emerged and developed in the 20th century as academic field. It was not before the 1930s and 1940s when the discipline *de facto* began to form a common sense with the theoretical conception of realism as a critique to an utopian idealism which apparently had failed with World War II (Brown, 2001, 24-30). As key figure of that time counts Hans Morgenthau, who for many probably is the founding father of IR, He built his realism on the psychological motive par excellence: power. All men are driven by the aspiration to power and it is power all states and the statesmen respectively seek to maintain, increase or demonstrate (Morgenthau, 1946, 1967). Until the 1970s Morgenthau's main work “Politics among Nations” of 1948 was the most cited one and a main reference point for further theoretical development (Jacob, 2003, 35). However, it would become outdated in 1979 by Kenneth Waltz's neorealist “Theory of International Politics” (Waltz, 1979), where he aims to explain international politics with the necessities and forces of the anarchic structure of

the international system. In 1959 Waltz had already categorized Morgenthau's work as "first image analysis" using only individuals as reference points for research (Waltz, 2001). The three images categorization – the second image using the state as reference object for analysis and the third the international system – is still prevailing as standard model to organize theories and concepts of IR. The first image having "limits of its serviceability" (ibid., 40) is in that context defined as rather short-sighted and antiquated. This negative connotation because of the first-image-ascription together with the reductionist picture of men being solely power seekers might be the reason why most researchers nowadays engaging in psychology do not relate to or even mention these origins of IR.

However things become even more confusing when we take a look on the interdisciplinary field of political psychology. Since psychology can be defined as the science of mind and behavior with reference to an individual or a group or in relation to a particular field of knowledge or activity (Merriam-Webster, 2011), political psychology "applies what is known about human psychology to the study of politics" (Sears et al. 2003, 3), "uses psychology to explain political behavior" (Cottam et al., 2010, ix) or studies "mental processes that underlie political judgments and decision making" (Kuklinski, 2002a, 2). Of course, one has to confess that within the field political science draws more on psychology than being the other way round (Houghton, 2009, 22). Political psychology in its modern sense began to shape in the first half of the twentieth century with personality studies of political leaders by using psychoanalysis. This was followed by a behaviorist focus on political attitudes, public opinion and voting behavior starting in the 1940s. However, it was not until the 1970s when the field started to institutionalize and to professionalize with evermore seminars held at universities, by the publishing of the first Handbook of Political Psychology and the founding of the International Society for Political Psychology (ISPP) (Houghton, 2009, 23). That is also the time when a third wave of political psychology can be located, starting to deal with international politics issues such as decision-making, political beliefs, deterrence, nationalism, ethnic conflict etc. (Cottam et al., 2010, 6; Houghton, 2009, 26). Interestingly enough, this interest in "immaterial factors" such as mutual perceptions, othering of groups, beliefs or identities overlap in parts strongly with social constructivist and less strong but still with postpositivist approaches that emerged within IR in the course of the "constructivist turn" at the end of the 1980s.

Political psychology as a quite young interdisciplinary endeavor conceivably not only coincides with IR research, but belongs often inherently to IR. Thus, on the one side there are scholars dealing with political psychology with reference to IR issues, but might not regard themselves as part of the IR academia and on the other side there are IR-scholars applying psychology but do not even use the term “political psychology” in their work at all. This confusing overlapping of research might cause a waste of resources as scholars coming from different fields and vantage points knowingly and not knowingly reinvent in fact the same things over again. There might indeed be a consensus with regards to the basic definition, history and main findings. However, the ambiguity what political psychology is and what it means for IR scholars engaging in psychology is obvious when one compares some handbooks on political psychology where there is to be found a whole variety from looking at this field rather as a task for psychologists (Kuklinski, 2002b) to perspectives that locate it merely inside the discipline of political science (Cottam et al., 2010; Houghton, 2009) or IR respectively (McDermott, 2004). Linked to that it is interesting to know that the well noted “The Oxford Handbook of International Relations” (Reus-Smit and Snidal, 2008) dedicates one of 44 chapters to “Psychological Approaches”, however without referring once to a field known as political psychology.

Besides the young histories of this interdisciplinary field and IR as subdiscipline of political science, there is of course a long history of political theory that implicitly or explicitly uses psychological-anthropologic references to explain and understand human, social and political behavior. One can find such psychological references for example in the works of Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli. Apparently, these findings are not covered within a political-psychology-IR-nexus, even though one might state that “political psychology is almost as old as political science itself” (Kuklinski, 2002a, 19). Political theory – where the study of these historical authors is usually localized – next to IR as another subdiscipline of political science normally does not have many points in contact with IR research, thus, there might be the danger of losing the greater picture within the general field of political science. However, political theory provides us with a new linkage point to the ambivalent relationship between psychology and IR going further and diving deeper into the discipline of IR itself than the above history of the development of political psychology. One should be aware of these diverse narratives and fields of research in order to not to miss some crucial developments.

Why Psychology is necessary in IR

After having given an overview of the complexities of the incorporation of psychology within IR, I will come back now to the concrete demands and necessities regarding psychology and IR – however this research field might be labeled. Many scholars address the lack of attention psychological factors have within IR's theoretical advancement. There are different yet intertwined strands of argument what the shortcomings of incorporating psychology are and how it should and could be better applied and integrated. Thus, one criticism targets the lacking attention of psychological factors regarded as micro level approaches. In this view IR is seen as a discipline dominated by macro level approaches working on the systemic level and excluding the individual and even groups; yet with their psychological condition as important actors individuals and groups have influence in the international system. Thus, most of the relevant and still prevailing theories like neorealism, neoliberalism or neoinstitutionalism work on the macro level above the individual. The problem with this may be twofold. First neorealism for example is surely convincing in explaining the larger picture and long-time tendencies of international relations, and this exactly is what Kenneth Waltz wanted to do. As Chris Brown puts it, for Waltz human nature is a vague concept that is neither specifiable nor understandable in any scientific way. Therefore human nature is not conducive to getting an understanding of social phenomena (Brown, 2001, 265). Yet the parsimony of the theory works against explaining or even understanding very concrete actions and particular decisions, most notably the end of the cold war – which was done by social constructivism. In similar ways the other theories mentioned work only above the individual – including even the metatheoretical advancement of social constructivism. Second, the “neo-theories” are based on a state or group model of the “homo economicus” meaning that the world is perceived rationally and decisions are made reasonably – a supposition that does not hold against empirical observation (Houghton, 2009, 216-19).

In very close connection to that first criticism of neglecting the micro level, but quite more far reaching is the critic on the traditional duality of micro and macro level analysis in general. Psychological concepts understood as first image individual actor approaches as well as social psychological findings on groups certainly do not solely suffice to study international politics but neither do macro-level ones that try to exclude psychology. On the one side without macro-analysis foundations psychological approaches to international relations tend to be utterly naive and raise “legitimate ground for

complaint” as “too often psychologists have been guilty of either reductionist dilettantism or of simplistic activism” (Tetlock and Goldgeier, 2000, 94) meaning that they reduce politics to psychology in ignoring that there effectively does exist some situationist determination (Kuklinski, 2002a, 9; Sullivan et al., 2002). But the flip side of the story is that without psychology there are equal shortcomings with macro or situationist approaches that claim to look at the international system objectively. A lot of debates on the IR macro-level are in fact based on different psychological assumptions. For example the question if a bipolar world is more stable than a multipolar world depends on very subjective different psychological views on how actors estimate varying polarity – not on any genuine objective estimation of the environment (Tetlock and Goldgeier, 2000, 94). Put in a general way that means that the actual concern is not about applying psychology or not, but “weather we will rely explicitly or implicitly, naively or with expertise, on such models” (Sullivan et al., 2002, 165). It is the deliberate and explicit integration of both, macrolevel as systemic and microlevel as psychological approaches, that promises a win-win-situation (Tetlock and Goldgeier, 2000) as without incorporating psychological insights “[k]ey puzzles will remain unresolved” (Goldgeier, 1997, 1).

Another criticism targets at how psychological factors are involved in IR specifically. One argument is that if psychology is applied on either image of analysis it is only the case to explain “irrational” actions of decision-makers meaning that they “miscalculate and misperceive the nature of their external environment” (Goldgeier, 1997, 138). Jonathan Mercer explicitly complains about the predominant duality between rationality on the one side and psychology understood as cognitive bias and emotion on the other side. Examples for works that use psychology only to explain “irrational” behavior are for example Jervis’ “Perception and Misperception in International Politics” (1976), where he explains with the help of cognitive psychology how misperceptions such as incomplete information, stress, or cognitive bias leads to wrong decisions; also Lebow in his “Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis” (1981) traces non-rational decisions regarding the use of force back to psychological miscalculation and misjudgment, as does McDermott in “Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy” (1998) with “wrong” foreign policy decisions that are explained by prospect theory . On the contrary, Mercer in his “Reputation and International Politics” (1996) does not try to explain wrong decision-making with a psychological theory, but he challenges classic deterrence theory being taken for granted in stating that a state’s reputation for resolve is measured against a state’s actual commitment.

However, Mercer in transferring findings of social psychology to international politics is able to show that enemies in general are being perceived as more resolute than are allies or friends. This is due to the fact, then when someone behaves in our liking this is ascribed rather to the general circumstances, whereas when someone acts in our disliking, this is ascribed to the very character and bad intentions. Thus, Mercer concludes that if it is true that psychology only is useful to explain “mistakes (or deviations from rationality), then (1) rationality must be free of psychology; (2) psychological explanations require rational baselines; and (3) psychology cannot explain accurate judgments” (Mercer, 2005, 79) – three consequences that do not correspond with reality.

Two research fields of psychology – emotions and motives

One particular interest when engaging in psychology are emotions. This field of research caught a relatively high degree of attention resulting in the assignment of an “emotional turn” with the beginning of the new millennium. Here we find for example prominent works by Crawford (2000) on passion, by Ross (2006) on constructivism and emotions, by Bleiker/Hutchison (2008) on emotions and world politics or Fattah/Fierke (2009) on emotions and political violence in the Middle East. These works understand emotions as a natural part of political decisions and actions, not as deviance from rationality – a general dominant view that is again keenly criticized by Mercer since it ignores the contribution of emotions to rational decision-making and draws only on emotion to explain so called irrational behavior. It is, however, according to the current state of research, that there are no rational decisions or actions without emotions (Mercer, 2005, 93ff.). Hence he stresses the importance of emotions as constituting and strengthening certain beliefs such as trust, nationalism, justice or credibility and concludes that insights to the importance of emotional beliefs would have policy implications for example in strategies to fight terrorism (Mercer, 2010). Mercer not only challenges the dualism of psychology and rationality but also the opinion that emotions as psychological part of human nature can only be a component of first image research – in contrast psychological findings regarding human nature can sure enough play a role in all three images of research (Mercer, 2006).

Besides that, motives – which are in fact psychologically preceding emotions – have also gained certain notice. Drawing also on philosophical writings, but explicitly on psychological and social psychological findings are for example works on recognition and

respect. These two concepts as motivational factors for political behavior of states and statesmen deliberately try to pose alternative explanations to a perspective of the international arena as neorealist self-help-system driven by the hunger for power and need for security. While the need for recognition is biologically inherent as to basically stabilize insecure state identities (Ringmar, 2002, 2008; Ringmar and Lindemann, 2011), respect is expected for very stable state identities and might – if not paid adequately – cause uncooperative and defiant political actions (Wolf, 2008, 2011). In that sense one can state that “[w]hen striving for respect, actors seek adequate consideration of their a) physical presence, b) social importance, c) ideas and values, d) physical needs and interests, e) achievements, efforts, qualities and virtues, and f) rights” (Wolf, 2011, 112). These approaches might lead to a whole new reading of international crises and conflicts – for example the uncooperative role of Iran within the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program or the destructive role of Venezuela under the government of Hugo Chávez – that until now had been explained quite differently or had not been understood at all.

Summarizing, when psychology is to be and should be taken as a matter of course to enable corollary, better or new explanative models, the question remains what kind of methodology is there to be applied to find out about psychological motives such as respect or recognition or about emotions like humiliation or fear. Here occurs the problem, that one is dealing with innate factors that are inscribed naturally within the human being, but are of course very difficult to grasp within a positivist design. How can one ever “prove” the relevance of psychological factors not within a small-intergroup-setting but regarding one time international occurrences? On the other side, postpositivist or thick-constructivist discourse-analytical designs seem as well not suitable and viable as psychology is precisely not at all constructed but based in human biology. Thus, thin constructivist designs, which believe in the “existence” of immaterial factors such as identities and beliefs making up for the starting point of social construction, seem to be the most fruitful ones for an undertaking of incorporating psychology – at least, social constructivism itself with its focus on identities and beliefs might really profit from psychological findings. The crucial point in doing research is, however, that intersubjectivity, which signifies the mutual understanding of analysts, is enabled and granted. First as political scientists even if we engage in different subdisciplines like IR, political theory or even political psychology, second within the subdiscipline of IR itself equal if one engages in classic neorealist research with positivist designs or discourse

analysis. Otherwise there will sprout ever greater fragmentation both in the discipline of political science and the diverse research fields resulting in lacking scientific progress.

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