"POLS 318 Notes: Topic 2"

Topic 2.1: Basics of Theory Building

BDM Book (pp. 37-65)

- One of the important ways we study international events is by learning from the past. Yet, we cannot rely solely on past events to explain what we think may happen in the future. This is important not just for predicting the future, also for understanding current events.

- Facts, that is historical events in the past, are crucial part of any explanation. But, facts do not explain by themselves. They serve as evidence for an explanation - a theory that offer reasons for these events and consists of clear components.

- **Theory** - an explanation for some empirical phenomena. An example is the conditions that lead to the start of a preventive war, what encourage or discourage economic prosperity and more.

- We study social science and these examples fit with our category of cases or events. Yet, this definition pf theory also fits with the hard sciences. These theories include multiple conditions that explain what govern the motion of stars and planets, or what leads to changes in weather patterns.

- There are 3 fundamental components to any theory:
  - Assumptions.
  - Logic.
  - Predictions.
- We evaluate theories based on 3 elements:
  - Logical consistency among the theory's assumptions.
  - Evidence that supports or contradicts the predictions of our theory.
  - Evidence that show whether our theory outperforms alternative explanations or that it under perform them.
- One easy way to distinguish b-w history and theory: history provides a descriptive explanation to past events; theory offer prospective explanations to classes of events (past or future).

- A few more ways to understand theory:
  - It is a simplified representation of reality.
  - It is built on a series of assumptions that help this simplification (yet also limit our view).
  - Assumptions are the building blocks of theory - a set of simplifying conditions under which that theory is expected to explain the issue at stake and offer future predictions.
  - Theory is deductive - it offer a general explanation that can be applied to a class of specific cases.
  - The assumptions can be fit together based on logic to derive predictions - *hypotheses*, that represent the theory's explanation of the reality that is being studied.
- Theories are not just for academics (and long-suffering students), policymakers use them as well. They need to make many decisions based on uncertain reality in which they lack all the facts. Based on alternative, or competing explanations (i.e. theories) that they have to understand what situation they

face. They use the information that they do posses to asses those theories and test their explanation fits with reality.

- Example: Iran nuclear program (ADD PIC)
- The main research question: nuclear for weapons? or for civilian use?
- Let's begin with some known facts:
  - Iran built secret, underground facilities for nuclear research.
  - Iran has thousands of centrifuges.
  - Iran is enriching uranium.
  - It's leader declared a 'fatwa' rejecting the use of nuclear weapons.
- Some potential explanations:
  - If we assume Iranian leader view nuclear weapons as critical for expansion of their deterrent power versus the US and Israel threats to their regime.
  - If we assume that the leaders believe heaven awaits those who martyr themselves by destroying Israel.
  - Iran is interested in developing civilian nuclear energy to supplant its energy shortages.
- Policymakers rely on information, in this context is collected by intelligence and national security agencies, in order to test these theories and identify which is not consistent with the facts. If we have evidence for Iran testing a nuclear bomb trigger (essential a small atomic explosion), we can fit this evidence for the theory of using nuclear weapons to deter external threats to the regime. It also rules-out the civilian usage explanation.
- *So what are we doing here?* We use a structured set of rules (scientific rules) to learn of the way to assess competing explanations using existing evidence. Searing this structure is the first important step to understand reality by applying the scientific method to international affairs.

Theory - a general explanation

- Theories state the relationship b-w variables.
- Variables: characteristic, event that can have multiple values.
- Constants: characteristic, event that has only one value.
- Dependent Variables: what we want to explain.
- Independent variables: what we use to explain the different values (variation) in the DV.
- We derive expectations by linking variables as causes in a series of logically connected arguments.
- Those expectations (hypotheses or propositions) describe some form of relationship b-w the DV and IV's.
- Hypotheses are the basis for predicting the values of the DV in the past, and more critically, in the future.
- Example - Arms races theory (PIC?):
- A central dependent variable is the likelihood of a country to enter a war (we explain multiple countries rather than a specific event).
- Common IVs: (1) the magnitude of threat from the adversary (measured with levels of arms expenditures); (2) domestic demand for consumer goods and public services versus defense expenditures (*guns vs. butter*).
- Proposition: increases in threat combined with decreases in demand for consumer goods and public services increase the likelihood of war (Richardson 1949).

Constructing theories

Important aspects for theory building in the context of international politics (although true for most domains):

- The selection of assumptions is critical. Yet, scholars will build their theories based on the assumptions that they believe are best reflection of the events.

- As a result, different theories can explain similar phenomena.

- For Neorealism (we'll get to it), a central assumption is that states are *unitary actors* - internal conflict of opinion b-w decision-makers do not influence actions in international politics.
- For FP-based bureaucratic theory, a central assumption is that actions are based on the internal dynamics of bureaucracies and their desire to promote their mission. This reject the unitary actors assumption.
- Explaining military spending:
  - Bureaucratic theory views it as a function of the perceptions of different military leaders tat manipulate threat perceptions to increase defense budgets for their organizations.
  - Neorealists reject this view in favor a more unitary perception of threat and interests of the state, thus it 'required' military spending.
- A critical question for theory-building: whether its assumptions limit the domains of circumstances that the theory can address.
- We aspire to build general theories (PIC EINSTEIN). But, in many cases we 'settle' for **middle-range** theories that offer plausible explanation for a certain class, or cluster of events (yes, social science is hard).
- The principle of *Parsimony* - when we construct theories, we try to derive an explanation that covers multiple cases with limited set of assumptions.
- For example - a theory that explain *only* the causes of global wars is less useful compared to a theory that explains why many types of wars occur - nuclear, short, low-cost, bilateral or trade wars. This is a better fit for a 'general' theory of war.

Judging Theories

One critical asepct in the assessment of theory is its logical consistency - the assumptions cannot contradict one another. If they do, then we may face confusion about what is the explanation for the issue at question, as well as how can we predict future outcomes?

- Example: the theory of Realism (Morgenthau 1948) - focus on **power** as the central component of how nations relate and behave toward each other.
- What contradiction? On the one hand, nations seek to expand their power at any cost. At the same time, he also describes an additional type of nations, SQ, who are content with the current situation and do not pursue more power. How can we make predictions?
- Further discussing these conditions, we can predict that imperialist nation (seeks power) will act in ways that change the distribution of power in its favor, so far so good. But this prediction fails for the SQ nations!!
- Since assumptions are the foundations of any theory, this problem is significant and raises serious issues with the application of the theory to reality.

- When discussing the judgement of theories, we can begin with *the first princople of wing walking* - a theory will prevails as long as it outperforms others. If a more accurate explanation emerges, it is likely to supplant the existing theory.
- But this 'switch' is not easy to implement. We need to accumulate a large volume of evidence to show the new explanation is better than the exosting one.
- The principle of wing walking is one intuitive reason (PIC) - even learning about a potneital new alternative does not convince us to adopt it when we also consider the costs or risks associated with this change. when switching is very costly ('trying to wind walk?'), then the probability of making it is much lower.

- This principle explains a lot of why IR is predictable - giving up on our beliefs is very costly so we reject alternative explanations or ways of behavior. Many leaders tend to hold on to their beliefs for much too long until making the switch is too costly, making their behavior too predictable.
- An example - in the field of CT, the most powerful tool against radicalization is convincing radicals or perpetrators that there are other ways to accompish their goals or making true to their beliefs. When those beliefs are ingrained in religion, or years of discrimination (whichever kind), then the change for those individuals is too costly and not likely. The end result is that very few radicals 'turn back' when the tool used is pursuation.
- Another example for the persistance of existing ideas: rejection of Reagan's SDI ('Star Wars').
- To counter the threat of nuclear attack, the administration contemplated the SDI plan which was intended to provide **active defense**, rather than then common strategy of MAD that existed since early in the cold-war.
- SDI represented a sharp deviation since it removed the idea of assured destruction (of soft targets like cities) from the equation of nuclear war. It made nuclear deterrence less powerful and thus, potentially better.
- For our purposes, following the wing walking principle, the potential risks from adopting SDI were too great and it was rejected (there were many other reasons).
- One related aspect to this assement is the tendency of individuals, when evaluating costs and benefits of alternatives, to place greater weight on the former compared to the latter. That is, we prefer to remain in the current state since we view the potential costs as too high compared to the potential benefits of an alternative explanation.

Testing theories: the case study method

When we want to assess a theoretical explanation, we use evidence and cases.

- It is common to evaluate the empirical usefulness of a theory by presenting one or several cases that are consistent with the theory's predictions.
- Case studies that rely on a single event are useful for developing ides about a certain phenomena or explain a specific event.
- For instance, studying the Vietnam war can explain this specific conflict, it also offers some ideas about research on proxy wars, the cold war conflicts, insrugency wars, and other.
- But, to provide stronger support for a theory, or actually, for a more robust test - we need more than a single case. Most social science theories make probabilistic predictions. To thoroughly assess such predictions, a single case is not enough. By design, the prediction is that the outcomes are mixed, thus we need as much evidnce (cases) as possible to strengthen our confidence in the proposed explanation.

- The selection of relevant cases for this testing is a crucial and complicated task when we conduct our research.
- Example: if we use both world wars as cases, we can argue that an arms is a cause for war. However, we can also find many examples for wars that did not follow an arms race. This example displays a *selection bias*.
- **Selection bias** occurs when we select cases to support our theory, but only the ones that are consistent with it, and thus overlook (or ignore) the ones that can refute it.
- One reason why this is a problem is that by focusing on a single case, such as a world war, we do not test for any variation in our DV since the war occured. Therefore, it is difficult to use it to build an explanation on the casues of war.
- Another example - the study of regimes (institutions, organizations) and how they foster cooperation. If we use known case(s) of regimes that foster co-op, we may provide some explanation, but we ignore cases in which those regimes (or similar in their characteristics) failed to do so.

A standard: the scientific method

The difficulties described above can be dealt with by using the guidelines offered by the scientific method. It helps us to evaluate the theory and see whether there are competing explanations that outperform it.

- **Logical Consistency** - the main aspect of this method. It means that a theory must clearly describe how one set of factors causes another set of factors. Competing explanations are assesed by controling for these factors in our empirical tests of the theory.
- This is much more difficult to implement in a social science setting, mostly since findings multiple (similar) cases to test is hard, and also we need to ensure that we can control all alternative explanations, which again is harder than it sounds.

- **Falsifiability** - an additional aspect to judge theory. When we test a theory, we should be able to state the conditions under which the predictions of the theory are wrong.
- If such conditions cannot be devised, we cannot falsify the theory and thus, we question it scientific fit. Religious beliefs are the clear example here, we cannot specify conditions in which the existance of a god can be true or false. As a result, it is not a theory but rather, a belief or a faith.
- A more fitting example - in terrorist research, some suggest that the extent of group lethality, or the amount of casualties it create depends on the level of competition b-w groups. More competition leads to more risky actions and as a result, more victims.
- However, a competing explanation is that higher lethality depends on strong co-op, rather than competition. The result is competing arguments leading to the same outcomes - more victims. Whether the evidence shows more competition or co-op, it leads to more victims, so we cannot falsify the theory.
- One 'solution' is to look at lower levels of cases, or unpacking our cases of inquiry. One study in this context offered conditions that explain how co-op increase casualties (Horowitz et al. 2014). Those are specific conditions that lead to this outcomes, and without meeting them, the outcome is much less certain. This is a partial solution but the main problem still remains.

Summary

International politics consists of many events happening. We have a large amount of potential explanations for these events and the challenge is finding the way to evaluate these competing arguments and find that ones that offer both a logical explanation to the event(s) in question as well as a prediction to similar event(s) in the future.
The scietific methods details the tools to evaluate these explanations.
USE MCLLELAND QUOTES P. 303.

Topic 2.2: Studying theories of IR

Singer (1961): Level of Analysis

- When studying issues, regardless of the topic at hand or the area of research, we can use many different ways to expolre the issue and offer potential explanations.
- The main distinction of this inquiry is between a macro and micro level of analysis. The micro level refers to the parts, or components of a system, while the macro level addres the whole system to explain the phenomena we face.
- In social sciences, this distinction can be seen between research in sociology and social psychology, which tend to emphasize personal attributes and personality based arguments, comapred to the macro-level approach championed by economics.
- This discussion also prevalis in international politics, but first we need to set the stage with the main requirements we have for the analytical model that we use (regardless of the level of analysis):
  - Offer accurate description and crrelate as much as possible with reality.
  - Provide capacity to explain the relationship b-w factors or the phenomena in question (valid and parsimonious).
  - Potential reliable prediction - how the factors may lead to similar future phenomena.

The system level of analysis

- Studying the system offers the benefit of a more comprehensive point of view, encompassing all interactions within the system. By studying this level, we learn of the patterns of interaction which the system reveals, and to generalize about such phenomena as the creation and dissolution of coalitions, the frequency and duration of specific power configurations, modifications in its stability, its responsiveness to changes in formal political institution, and more.
- In other words, the study of the system allows us to gain much insight about international relations as a whole, and thus generalize about how it explain different phenomena that are happening 'inside' this system (coalitions, power changes).
- At the same time, this level has its own disadvantages. First, any explanation in this level will underplay the role of the components, in this case, nation-states, as driving the outcomes. This shiofts the focus from autonomy and independence of choice for actors, and into a deterministic orientation (a function of the system).
- Second, it requires a high degree of uniformity in the FP operations of the actors. This view suggest that no room is allowed for diversity in the beahvior of the parts of the system. We will get to realism, but its most basic assumption reflects this point - Morgenthau argues that all members of the system operate woth one goal in mind - interest defined as power.
- By eschewing any empirical concern with the domestic and internal variation within the separate nations, the system-oriented approach tends to produce sort of "black box" or "billiard ball" concept of the international actors (Singer 1960, p. 81).
- This discounting of differences among nations, this view generates a homogenous image of our nation-states in the international system.
- While this is a clear descriptive limitation, is offer the benefit of an adequate basis for correlative statements - allows to identify and measure correlations b-w certain forces that lead the parts of the system to act similarly.
- One more benefit of this model is its simplicity - a manageable model with not many methodological requirements for empirical testing.

The nation state level of analysis

- The traditional focus of most research on international politics (also today), the nation-state is the primary actor within IR.
- The clearest advantage is the opposite of the system approach, it allows much variation among states and as a result, encourages any researcher to study these actors in much greater detail.
- The in-depth study of these actors is crucial to our ability to create general (and comparable) arguements or explanations about the issue at stake.
- On the other hand, the focus on actors may lead to over-reliance on these differences and thus, limit our ability to compare and contrast uniformities observed in the actors behavior.
- An additional difficulty that this model faces is to solve the dilemma of whether an actor's behavior (its FP) is based on being goal-oriented and promoting these objectives, or being 'pulled' to certain choices due to past and present characteristics of the environment in which they operate.
- The view of goal-oriented (even with external limitations) means that the nation-state approach compells us to study *how* are these goals are being selected. This is the need to understand the process that leads to the adoption of certain international goals that must be pursued.
- Such study requires attnetion to the institutions where these goals are devised, the ones that affect this process from within, as well as external factors in-play.
- The author enters (indirectly) into a discussion about the individual and whether the behavior is based on objective factors or her perception of these factors. this is a long discussion in politics that surrounds the question of what determines our behavior.
- A related challenge in this context is with respect to indicators and measures. If we accept that perception is crucial in shaping behavior, how can we measure, in a systematic and accurate matter, these views?
- We'll get much more into this discussion when we study theories such as realism, liberalism and constructivism.
- Finally, Singer views the nation-state approach as richer and with potential for a more satisfactory explanation for IR. The main price we pay for adopting such approach is the need for more complex methodologies.

Summary

Singer compares both levels of analysis:

- Description - system offer more comprehensive view, state level offers more details and depth.
- Explanation - state level is stronger due to its depth and offering of information to address the process of formulating FP.
- Prediction - no clear distinctions. Yet, he suggest that policymakers are more likely to favor the state level due to its details, and scholars, who seek a general framework, prefer the system one.
- His bottom line is that we cannot select one as better than the other. Under certain conditions, each has its own benenfits. He mention that this choice should begin earlier, when we explore the issue itself and build our view of it (in other words, our assumptions).
- Examples for applying both levels - p. 91.

Colgan (2016): IR Research

Surveying the field of research in IR raises concerns about losing ground in terms of theory (we address this in a question of what should we study more? Theory or its application?)

- Some argue that in recent years, the push is greater for analysis of narrow questions and focusing on hyps testing instead of developing theoretical arguments to explain the world around us.
- This argument is prevalent among scholars (many of them 'veterans of the field'). But the main problem with their argument, which partially explains its relatively lack of attention, is the lack of enough empirical

data to support it.

- Descriptive: some types of studies are less likely to be taught, meaning instructors (themselves professional scholars) do not view them as important as others (Examples: the 'flip' b-w qual and quat work, ignoring experimental work, policy analysis). TAB P. 495
- One important finding is that most published research is focused on testing of hyps much more than the dominant teaching material. This suggests that we are facing a decline in focus on theorizing on international events.
- As global events change, we always need to work on developing more theoretical insights. Think about these issues: how do we analyze and address climate change? What are some of the implications of the rise of political Islam? New forms of warfare? All these should be studied from a theoretical perspective and not just as an empirical question.

Avy & Desch (2014): Links to policymaking

In this course, mostly in the first half of it, we will learn many of the 'large' theories of IR. Let's ask the question we all think about - why should I care? What is it going to do for me in the 'real world'? Now, I use some work to discuss these linkages.

- Some work using surveys of policymakers and scholars argue that both 'camps' view academic knowledge as valuable and important for policy. Yet, evidence regarding research published actually suggest that most work relies on sophisticated approaches and methodoligies that policymakers find the least useful.
- The authors fielded a survey to policymakers and tested what are their level of familiarity and knwoledge of academic work? They also inquire about the usefullness of this work.
- Sample: 234 senior members of the national security decision-making process for Bush sr., Clinton and Bush J.
- Main findings:
  - Policymakers are aware of recent scientific work and as a whole, use such insights - under the term of 'background and frameworks'.
  - View is negative in terms of effectiveness since most work is viewed as too-technical, instead of offering substantive findings.
  - Surprising results - the more educated among gov't officials are the least patient to academic work and skeptial of its use.
  - Most important contributions should be as informal advisors and creaters of knowledge rather than direct policy advocacy or training or employees. Qualt work appears as more useful to provide context and insight in comparison to quant studies (which dominate the field today).
  - The main limitation is time constraints - if insights are not delivered in consice and clear manner, they are of little use.
- Figures and descriptions:
  - Fig. 1 (p. 231) - usefulness of argunments by descipline.
  - Fig. 2 (p. 232) - usefulness of different methodologies.
  - Fig. 3 (p. 233) - familiarity with dominant theories.
  - Fig. 5 (p. 234) - usefulness of theories to policymakers.
  - Fig. 7 (p. 236) - regions (studied and of interest to policymakers).
  - Fig. 8 (p. 236) - how scholars should contribute.
  - Fig. 14-15 (p. 241) - the use of theories in government work (purpose).
  - Fig. 18-19 (p. 242) - actual use of theories by government.

Byman & Kroenig (2016): How to relate to policymaking

Some work addressed the question of how to design IR research that will be appealing to policymakers. Main points:

1. Design research that is likely to produce outcomes with practical implications, and lead to useful recommendations.
2. Identify and focus on situations where policy debate lacks clarity and inject information into the process.
3. Time - offer research that is related to current events, making it more relevant to policymakers.

- The situation in which academic input is most likely to be rlevant and accepted by policymakers:
  - During discontinous events or shocks (9.11, Soviet collapse, the Arab Spring) - challenge to existing gov't knowledge, can be an opening to expert scholars.
  - Policy failures (the outbreak of insurgency in Iraq).
  - Unexpected decisions where the gov't lack enough initial knowledge (intervention in Somalia).
- Concrete steps:
  - Networking and creating personal relationship with policymakers.
  - Positioning the work within the bureaucratic process.
  - Producing short reports for nonacademic outlets with clear implications.
- An important point - what is being relevant? An expectation to substantially shape major policy actions/decisions in possible, but not very likely.
- Those are strategic types decisions that are restricted to the very senior of officals and most people in the policy circles have no reach to those levels of decisions.
- Instead, we must devise a new standard - rather than an academic research being the main factor shaping policy, it should have some weight in the deliberation process.
- For policymakers, academic work has the benefit of offering contrarian views, those are harder for policy advisor or think tank scholars who are more closely related to the system.

- Example, Demo peace - from early publication (1986) to being part of two presidents' strategy in the early to mid 1990's (pp. 303-304).