

International Relations Lab # 1: Applying the Levels of Analysis Approach to International Relations Questions

PS 3210: International Relations
Prof. Vanessa A. Lefler
Middle Tennessee State University
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Introduction

This series of International Relations Labs was created to introduce new international relations students to the scientific study of international politics.

The purpose of this lab is to introduce you to one of the most fundamental – but certainly not easy – concepts in studying International Relations scientifically: the research question. It also employs the Levels of Analysis approach to provide a simple tool to construct IR questions.

The Scientific Study of International Politics

Whereas journalists tend to study international relations with the intent to *describe* (i.e., who, what, when, where) and policymakers tend to *prescribe* (e.g., does policy *x* have the benefits it claims? what are its consequences? how can we improve it?), political scientists seek to *explain* (e.g., does *x* cause *y*? does *x* have a relationship with *y*?). We do this by systematically studying events or objects of interest through the scientific study of international politics.

The SSIP approach was adapted from the natural sciences model:

1. Identify some behavior that needs to be explained.
2. Offer some tentative hypotheses, perhaps derived from some theory purporting to explain that behavior.
3. Evaluate the hypotheses in light of available evidence.

4. If the evidence supports the hypotheses, consider their implications — the additional statements (or predictions) that can be deduced from these confirmed hypotheses (Kinsella, Russett, and Starr 2012).

After identifying an phenomenon of interest that he or she hopes to explain, but before constructing a hypothesis, the researcher poses a *research question*. The research question is the central guide to what a research endeavor plans to accomplish. Theory and hypotheses derived from it are the answers to research questions.

At first, it may seem easy to pose a question worth researching. We ask questions all the time, like, “What are the largest MNCs in the world?” or “How do IGOs differ from NGOs?” A *research question* is different because it is systematic, generalizes to similar phenomena, and, in many cases, demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship (Bennett 2002; Roselle and Spray 2012).

Instead, many of us are familiar with writing papers where the goal is to explore, summarize, or *describe* a concept: e.g., “What are the differences between civil and interstate war?” or “How does international law affect global politics?” These are fine questions to help expand your personal knowledge, but, as Roselle and Spray (2012: 2) note, “This type of paper . . . does not necessarily expand our general understanding of political phenomena or contribute *new* information.”

A fundamental difference between a research question and a descriptive question is that the answer to a research question is something novel and possibly argumentative. The answer to a descriptive question is simply a list of facts. We seek to construct and answer research questions because we want to increase general knowledge about international relations.

Questions that reflect the characteristics of a research question (systematic, generalizable, causal) share the following elements of construction:

- It concerns *causes* or *consequences* of a phenomenon of interest (Roselle and Spray 2012; Van Evera 1997).

1. Begin with *why* or *what* and, sometimes, *when*.

Good examples include:

“What effect, if any, does democracy have on outcomes of counterinsurgency wars?” (Getmansky 2013)

“Why do armed groups recruit large numbers of children as fighters, often coercively?” (Beber and Blattman 2013)

“When are INGOs more likely to exaggerate their allegations?” (Hill, Moore, and Mukherjee 2013)

2. Word choice matters: *How* questions, and even some *what* questions, simply lead to descriptive papers.

Avoid these examples, which both imply descriptions, rather than systematic analysis:
“How do global markets operate?”

“What is the American foreign policy decision-making process like?”

- It clearly indicates the relationship to be studied (Kinsella, Russett, and Starr 2012).

1. Identify the outcome or event you want to explain.

This is the *dependent variable*.

For example, if you are interested in “civil war,” the question, “What effect does religious factionalism have on civil war?” (in which civil war is the *dependent variable*) is different from “What effect does civil war have on religious factionalism?” In the latter case, religious factionalism is the *dependent variable*.

2. Create a short list of things that may influence whether the dependent variable is observed or not.

The items on this short list make up the *independent variables*.

Independent variables are inferred from observation and derived from theory. We will discuss theory development later in the course. For now, rely on inferences based on the evidence available to you.

3. Generalize the specific case to a general phenomenon.

Craft the question so that it addresses a broader range of behaviors, rather than specific case. Think of the case as *evidence* of the general behavior, as focusing on a specific case is likely to lead to description, rather than systematic inquiry.

Nonetheless, consider how a topic can be sub-divided into subtopics so that it presents a question that can be answered relatively easily.

Civil war, for example, can be broken down in a number of different sub-processes: onset, escalation, hostility, transmission, duration, termination. Identify the possible sub-processes and hone your research topic even further.

For example: Asking, “What effect does religious factionalism have on the duration of civil conflict?” will probably lead you toward a more novel and successful research project than to ask the more general question above.

4. Link cause and effect (independent and dependent variables) in terms that lead to a specific answer.

Avoid open-ended questions: “Questions that inquire about ‘cause’ or ‘consequence’ ... are better since readers can more easily tell if you answer them” (Van Evera 1997, 100)

Good examples include:

“What effect do territorial concessions to an ethnic group have on the incidence of new separatist conflicts?” (Forsberg 2013).

“How do coalition partners affect the dynamics of crisis bargaining?” (Wolford 2013)

Less successful examples:

“Why did the Colombian government decline a ceasefire agreement in negotiations with the FARC last fall?” (Too specific)

“How do we understand the role of intergovernmental organizations?” (No cause-and-effect relationship)

- Last, it demonstrates appreciation of the complexity of world affairs by hinting at important variations or limits (Roselle and Spray 2012).

1. Highlight ways that outcomes might be different or contingent under certain conditions.

For example, consider:

“What determines why some self-determination disputes develop into mass nonviolent campaigns, others turn into civil wars, and still others remain entirely in the realm of conventional politics?” (Cunningham 2013).

“Why are some peacekeeping mandates broad and expansive while others are narrow and well defined?” (Allen and Yuen 2013).

Meanwhile, avoid questions like these, which rely on absolutist assumptions:

“Is Kim Jong Un threatening to East Asian security because he was raised in an exclusionary ideology?”

“Why is China overtaking the United States as the global power?”

Posing a well-developed research question is an important task for the social scientific researcher because it frames the approach and scope of the rest of the project. Therefore, it is useful to practice how to write effective questions that reflect these qualities.

The LOA Approach, Revisited

This section summarizes the Levels of Analysis approach and gives some examples to illustrate its implementation. As our textbook explains, the notion of *levels of analysis* is a useful way of organizing our complex world. The utility of this approach is threefold:

1. The levels of analysis categorize the *actors* and *phenomena* we may wish to understand better.

These would include individuals, like foreign policy leaders, ethnic groups, and terrorists; states, like the US or Russia; international organizations; and systemic forces, like the global economy.

2. Based on these categorizations, the approach allows us to view an event from different perspectives; possibly coming to different conclusions based on the level of analysis.

Illustrations of this benefit are below (Power and Alliance Formation, Democracy and War).

3. Attention to which level of analysis is being used to study or explain a concept avoids faulty inferences.

Example: Power and Alliance Formation

J. David Singer, who authored the grounding work on the levels of analysis in *International Relations*, offers an example that illustrates the LOA problem:

“One might, for example, postulate that when the international system is characterized by political conflict between two of its most powerful actors, there is a strong tendency for the system to bipolarize (for smaller states to come into alignment with one of the two major powers). This is a *systemic-oriented* proposition. A sub-systemic (*state-level*) proposition, dealing with the same general empirical referents, would state that when a powerful actor finds itself in a political conflict with another of approximate parity, it will tend to exert pressure on its weaker neighbors to join its coalition” (Singer 1961:91, emphasis added).

Let us explore this example: Singer summarizes two different theories about the relationship between power and alliance formation. At the systemic level, conflict in a bipolar system – in which two states control the largest shares of power in the world, as during the Cold War – tends to make smaller states take sides. Neutrality should be rare.

In this proposition, there is no real differentiation between the two major powers in conflict or among the states that would join these alliances. We can say nothing about the national interests of the major powers – only that conflict between them leads to a different pattern of alliance formation.

While this offers an explanation of the alliance patterns during the Cold War, for instance, it tells us less why the United States and the Soviet Union might seek out such alignments. To answer this second question, we need to think about the motivations at the state level: a state in conflict with another state of relatively equal power will recruit allies, presumably to increase its power relative to its adversary.

In this proposition, we can differentiate the important actors. States have the property of being powerful (or not) and they can form alliances to change that power.

Example: Democracy and War

Even new students to international relations may be familiar with the Democratic Peace – the observation that democracies almost never fight each other. Drawing on this observation, scholars

and policymakers seek to know whether democracy is generally correlated with peace. Yet, answering the question of whether democracies are more peaceful than non-democracies is tricky because analysts disagree on which level of analysis to evaluate the question.

International LOA: The Dyadic Democratic Peace

The common phrasing of the Democratic Peace – that democracies almost never fight each other – is a proposition that comes from the study of interactions between two states (dyads). Using this approach, scholars find robust evidence that democracies rarely go to war with one another (Russett and Oneal 1997) and are less likely to use violence to resolve conflicts (Dixon 1994; Shannon 2009). Thus, at the *international* level of analysis, the Democratic Peace enjoys much support.

But, this only begins to answer whether democracy leads to peace. Consider the question in two other ways: First, whether democracies are generally pacifying. To answer these questions, we must consider the state and systemic levels of analysis, respectively. Second, whether a democratic state is more or less likely to turn to violence than a non-democratic state.

Systemic LOA: Is More Better?

At the systemic level of analysis, Mitchell, Kadera, and Crescenzi (2005) reveal that there is, indeed, a systemic Democratic Peace. As the number of democracies in the world increase, the amount of conflict in the international system (e.g., the proportion of states involved in militarized conflict) decreases.

State LOA: Do Democracies Participate in Fewer Wars?

At the state level, however, the evidence is less conclusive. Many scholars initially found that democracies were *not* less likely to be engaged in war than non-democracies. In part, because democracies – though they do not fight each other – engage in conflict with non-democracies at about the same rate that authoritarian governments fight each other (Maoz and Abdolali 1989). These results are buttressed by the idea that democratic leaders initiate conflicts in order to take advantage of “rally-round-the-flag” effects (Smith 1996). More recent research introduces evidence that democracies are, by themselves, less conflictual than their authoritarian counterparts (Morgan and Campbell 1991; Russett and Oneal 1997).

It is because of these mixed findings at the state level that scholars’ and practitioners’ confidence in the Democratic Peace as a policy prescription remains cautious – though optimistically so.

Conclusion

Ultimately, selecting the Level of Analysis from which an actor or phenomenon is studied depends on a number of factors. These include the nature of the phenomenon, the theory believed to explain it, and the availability of information (data). We will discuss how theory and data availability interact with these choices later on in the semester.

The Task: Use the Levels of Analysis

Part 1: In-Class Event Analysis

In groups of 3 or 4, you will do your own event analysis. Each group will be given a different international relations story. Break the story down: summarize it, identify the key actors, and construct some simple propositions about the event using different levels of analysis. As a group, answer the following questions. Not all of the questions may have obvious answers. At the end of the class, you will report your answers.

1. Summarize: What is the article generally about?
2. Identify: Who or what are the major actors discussed in the article? Are they state or non-state actors? Specify non-state actor types (IGO, NGO, MNC, private individual not representing a country).
3. Are there other actors, not listed in the article, who may also be important to the phenomenon's occurrence?
 - Are any of the countries involved democracies? If so, does the article take into account the impact of public opinion?
 - Do you know of any NGOs or MNCs that would have an interest at stake in the issue discussed and are otherwise not mentioned?
 - What region of the world does the event occur in? Are there regional features that could help explain the event?
 - What about other countries? Are there potential major-power interests involved that could lead to an interaction between the location of interest and outside actors?
4. Thinking about your answers to questions 2 & 3, identify how this event could be studied from each level of analysis (individual, state, international systemic).

As a group, construct a simple presentation (e.g., PowerPoint) to illustrate for the rest of the class how your event could be studied from each of the levels of analysis.

This presentation should be submitted to the D2L Dropbox with each group member's name listed in the notes section.

Part 2: Individual Event Analysis and Research Question Construction

On your own, select another international relations article from the list on D2L. You may not select the same one you did in class. Answer questions 1-4 from Part 1 for your new article that you answered in class (minus the LOA presentation/infographic), plus these additional questions:

6. Using your analysis of the article, pose four research questions that reflect each level of analysis: Individual, State, International, and Systemic. Preface the questions with a brief explanation of how these questions were inferred from the article and why they present an interesting puzzle about international relations outcomes.
7. Did you focus on the same cause-and-effect relationship for each of your different questions – as scholars have in the study of the Democratic Peace? Or, did you use the different levels of analysis to pose questions about different phenomena? How do you think the approach you took – same relationship or different relationships – reflects the usefulness of the Levels of Analysis approach?

Directions:

In 700-1200 words, type your answers to Part 2 using complete sentences and paragraphs. The format of your paper should conform with the following rules:

- 1-inch margins, all around. Standard, serif (e.g., Times) or non-serif (e.g., Calibri, Arial) font, between 10 and 12 point size.
- The heading, which includes the “top matter” and title, should be single spaced, with double-spacing between the title and the body of the paper. In the header, each page should give your last name followed by the page number. For example:

Lefler, 1
Vanessa Lefler PS 3210:001 International Relations Unit Lab #1 30 January, 2014
“ASEAN in Crisis: Divided We Stagger”
Double-Spaced Body

- If you use any sources outside the textbook or the article, cite them at the end of the paper.
- Save the document as a **.pdf** and deposit it in the Dropbox on D2L.

Papers not submitted in .pdf formate will be penalized 10%.

Rubric

The following table describes how this assignment will be graded.

Article Summary	Points
Summarizes the article	/4
Identifies and categorizes the major actors	/5
Identifies and categorizes actors not listed in the article	/2
	/12

Levels of Analysis Application	Points
Partitions event of interest into each LOA	/5
<i>Research Questions:</i> Poses research questions for each LOA	/6
<i>Research Questions:</i> Explains questions' link to the article and scholarly interest	/3
<i>LOA Reflection:</i> Identifies the method of inquiry (different cause-and-effect relations for each LOA or same cause-and-effect relation for each LOA)	/2
<i>LOA Reflection:</i> States benefits of LOA approach to this inquiry	/2
	/18

Deductions	Penalty
Source documentation, spell-checking, grammar, format, page #s, etc.	up to 10 points
Too short – Does not meet 700-word minimum	-5 points per 200 words
Not submitted in .pdf format	-10%
Submitted late	-7 points
Did not attend lab date	-20 points