

“Why is it important to distinguish levels of analysis in IR?”

Just as Galileo famously disaggregated the motion of cannonballs into horizontal and vertical components, scholars in international relations seek to account for the behavior of states by developing a taxonomy of causes of unit behavior. An enduring classification into three “images” was proposed by Waltz (1959). This schema locates cause variously in individuals, states and the international system itself.

Why should researchers disaggregate cause in this manner? We may be interested, variously, in description, explanation and prediction (Singer 1961). But if all three images are involved in determining the ultimate outcome, what is to be gained by disaggregation? One scholar sees a tradeoff between a systemic level that yields a coherent, comprehensive image without much detail, and an “atomized” level richer in detail and depth (Singer 1961). The systemic level is said to provide superior description, while the atomized level is said to produce richer explanations (both apparently predict equally well).

This interpretation imperils the parallel with Galileo. After all, it seems unlikely that Galileo thought that we should focus now on the horizontal component, now on the vertical component, depending on our research objectives. Crucially, both components of motion are notional – the phenomenon is simply the actual motion of the object. In the same way, the effect of each of Waltz’s images is a purely notional disentangling of the bundle of causes that collectively yield what we are pleased to call an ‘event’. Waltz reminds us that “emphasis on one image may distort one’s interpretation of the others” (160), but the precise proportions in which each image ought to enter into our explanations remains obscure. Waltz does, however, indicate that these proportions change over time (225 et infra). The idea that each image, when considered in isolation, leads to utopian prescriptions (228) is helpful, as is the notion that the partial quality of each image drives researchers toward the inclusion of the others (230).

What are we to say to the objection that states, being composed of people, are simply aggregates, and that to treat them as units is simply to reify an abstraction? A partial answer lies in the quasi-objective character of social norms. Despite their indubitable origins at the individual level, the force of social norms takes on an objective character trammeling individual behavior (Cialdini and Trost 1991). In this way, the interaction of individuals produces an

epiphenomenon capable of directing their behavior. Similarly, the international environment may emerge from the interaction of sovereign states, but it nevertheless objectively shapes state action.

The idea that researchers should simply evaluate the tradeoffs and choose a level of analysis at which to proceed has elicited resistance. In a rebuttal to Singer, Moul (1973) argues that it is vital to shift our orientation mid-study to assess “the contribution of particular types of variables to an explanation of a state’s external behavior” (496). Moul also questions Waltz’s notion that the system and national attributes may combine to yield outcomes, writing that this approach “would be adding forests and trees, quarries and rocks, or gardens and flowers” (499). However, it seems to me that both forests and trees may affect the behavior of units, and that it is the *influence* of forests and trees that Waltz would wish to aggregate, not the incommensurables themselves.

If the images are purely notional, like the horizontal and vertical components of motion, then as our techniques of measurement improve, might not the need for an appeal to images diminish? After all, Singer argues both that the images defy theoretical integration (91) and that the systemic approach is motivated by the paucity of data. However, the utility of the images seems unlikely to diminish with increasing methodological sophistication. The role of beliefs in determining the relative importance of individual-, state- and system-level causes presents an opaque target for a research program. More centrally, the strategic nature of the interactions involved will ensure that information regarding the relative (proportional) role of various inputs changes the world as soon as it becomes known.

The salience of the strategic aspect of international behavior suggests an alternative approach. Lake and Powell (1999) argue that the central unit of analysis in the study of international relations should be the strategic interaction itself. This maneuver elides the levels of analysis problem by focusing on the nature of the interaction rather than the parties to it. Their focus on actors and their environment (4-5) “transcends the levels of analysis distinction” (26), and constitutes a “methodological bet” that agnosticism regarding the appropriate level of analysis will yield the richest empirical results.

One wonders how Waltz would have responded.¹ The emphasis by Lake and Powell on microfoundations seems to imperil the third image. Whether actors can be “usefully separated” from their environment seems to me to be an open question, though the results of the strategic choice research program seem impressive. In Galileo’s terms, strategic choice may reintroduce friction, air resistance, and other more realistic features of the real world. As Lake and Powell acknowledge, however, this focus may lead to “ever more theoretically sophisticated treatments of ever more particularistic problems and cases,” and they worry that we may “lose our ability to generalize”. On strictly third-image terms, of course, there can be no strategic interaction. Waltz’s technique of “understanding the first and second images in terms of the third” seems like a salutary corrective to the potential blind spots found within the strategic choice approach.

References

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¹ Since Waltz survived the publication of Lake and Powell (1999) by fourteen years, I imagine he must have written something about the strategic choice approach, but a cursory inspection failed to locate it.