

CHAPTER 2

Second perspective: people

International issues are commonly studied by an academic discipline called International Relations. Their focus is on international politics and economics, and therefore predominantly on the ways states interact. However, in International Studies the dominant focus is on the role of people. This domain of academic study is reserved for Social Sciences and Humanities. But whereas these disciplines usually focus on individuals and communities in their local environment, International Studies explores the role of these people in a global context. This textbook provides the following concepts that will help the student of International Studies understand the interaction between the individual and the global world.

Agency

In International Studies, the dominant focus is on the role of people – as persons, from the individual worker or parent to religious or national leaders – but also on their ideas and cultures, on their organized forms as communities and, in a final stage, on the roles they play in states and international organizations. These are the mentioned three dimensions of the local, the national and the global. A key notion when studying the role of the individual in these three dimensions is **agency**, which refers to the power and potential of individuals to shape their own lives. This does not mean that people are the determining factor in what is happening in their lives. Much happens that is outside of their control. The question is then how they will respond which effectively is also a form of agency.

The notion of agency challenges the traditional approach of studying states and (usually male) leaders by contending that *all* people play a role. Studies have subsequently been directed at uncovering the voices and roles of women, people of color, the enslaved, and people of lower socio-economic classes. The notion of agency allows students of International Studies to get a much wider view of the actors who play a role in the global complexities of this world.

Agency refers to the power and potential of each individual to shape their own life.

While agency is a useful concept for studying individuals, some academic challenges remain. One such challenge is how to study the needs and desires of individuals when considering that these individuals interact with each other. Are the needs and desires really those of the individuals who express them or are they

influenced by or copied from peer groups (family, friends, communities)? Or are these needs and desires perhaps an intricate part of the political, economic and social dynamics that play on a national and global scale? In the social sciences this dilemma is also known as the '**structure-agency duality**', which explores the balance between free will of the individual and the constraints or other influences of their environment. The assumption is that social structures such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, family and culture, but also political structures like laws, bureaucracies, governments and states may limit (or motivate!) individuals to exercise their agency. Studying these processes will help students of International Studies understand the dynamics of global events.

The **structure-agency duality** explores the balance between the agency of the individual and the constraints or influences of their environment.

Another challenge when exploring the concept of agency is how this may affect others. The focus of agency is usually on the individual's needs, desires, drives and capacities. Agency studied in this manner may then explain much about people's individual behavior, but not how that agency interacts with local, national or global issues. When researching the impact that people may have on others and how they may set something in motion that may or may not have a global impact, the Social Sciences often use the notion of the **change agent**. This is a notion that has been applied in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from the mass communicator and educator to human rights activists. Oftentimes the term change agent is used in combination with the concept of leadership, but the two are not necessarily the same. Consider, for example, a group of people who want to protest against something, so they post a time and place for this protest on social media, and several hundred people show up. Some people present made the first move in this scenario and may be considered change agents, but there is no act of leadership.

A **change agent** is someone who advocates or causes change in an organization or society. The notion of change agent is often used in conjunction with – but is not always the same as – the notion of **leadership**.

3-I's

Agency considers the actions of people, but another important question is what motivates people in today's global setting: what makes them tick? The answer to this question is of course immensely complex but can, for the sake of simplicity, be

reduced to what this textbook refers to as the **3-I's: interests, ideas, identities**. Examples of people's basic **interests** include safety, food, water, health, and access to resources (whereby the needed resources may change over time: for instance, lithium as a raw material for electrical batteries has recently become of primal importance). The second 'I' is that of **ideas**, which encompass ideologies and religions, whereby the belief in these ideas is a powerful motivator. The third 'I' stands for **identities**, which has multiple components, such as language, culture, customs and histories.

The **3-I's** stand for **interests, ideas, identities**. They represent the basic motivators for people's behaviors and thoughts.

The 3-I's play a role in all global events and complexities of today. Sometimes because people are the cause of such events. If they are, the 3-I's are at the root of people's *actions*. Certain ideas may be the cause for war, for instance, just like the pursuit of certain interests may lead to the establishment of large corporations and the development of technologies, or to economic meltdowns and the depletion of resources. In other instances, people may need to *respond* to regional or global events like a pandemic, climate change or migration, and are forced to make choices and take decisions which are always driven by their interests, ideas or identities. For instance, migration can be welcomed out of economic interest or feared as a negative impact on a society's identity. Covid-19 was believed by some to be a mere flu, by others to be a public health hazard, and by yet others to be a government conspiracy to gain more power. These perceptions are decisive for how that global event is dealt with: it can make quite a difference if an issue is considered an economic opportunity, a political challenge or a social problem. Sometimes perceptions are so widely shared that they have a global impact (a process that has accelerated exponentially with the emergence of social media). After Covid-19, for instance, it appears that the mistrust of vaccinations became a global trend.

Humanities

As mentioned, the main disciplines involved in studying International Studies are Humanities and Social Sciences. Many universities distinguish between the two: 'Humanities' are all disciplines that study the thoughts of people and their expression thereof (like history, languages, theology, philosophy, arts) while 'Social Sciences' are all disciplines that study the behavior of people (like anthropology, psychology, sociology, political sciences). In this textbook, however, we are joining all these subjects together under the heading 'Humanities' as the study of the behavior

and thoughts of people. Furthermore, as we will see in the next chapters, Law and Economics, although often treated as disciplines separate from Humanities, also play distinctive roles in International Studies.

Humanities in this textbook is the study of the behaviour and thoughts of people.

Academic studies are traditionally divided into Humanities and Natural Sciences (which deal with the material world, like flora and fauna, planets and stars, living organisms and lifeless materials). A distinct difference between the two categories is that the Natural Sciences have the possibility of conducting accurate measurements through which they can prove or disprove hypotheses. That is also why they are called the exact sciences. The Humanities, on the other hand, have a much more elusive research object: humankind. And humans have a few characteristics that can make accurate measurement challenging.

First, humans appear to be rather unpredictable. For instance, the large political events in recent decades that had a global impact, like the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the Arab Spring in 2011 were not predicted by the hundreds of experts that were monitoring these areas. Contrary to the Natural Sciences, humans, it seems, are not governed by laws that, once we understand them, can be used to predict what people will do.

Second, while both humans and animals are motivated by *interests* – survival, food, resources – humans are typically also motivated by *ideas* and *identities*. Revolutions have been started because of ideas, wars because of national identities. The Americans rose in revolt spurred on by a piece of paper that started with ‘We, the people’, and the Belgian revolt of independence was sparked by an opera. The many calls for freedom or independence are more than a claim of rights, just like a demonstration for peace is more than an appeal to principles. Often there are underlying driving forces of human emotions like hope, despair, fear, pride. These are human qualities that are not always easy to put in a simple academic equation. The same applies to the many forms of communication that humankind has at its disposal like language, arts, music. Speeches are known for having roused entire populations, giving them a sense of unity and purpose. Similarly, music is one of those typical human abilities that can wield enormous power: there are plenty of examples of songs that unite and empower people, whether during religious gatherings, rock concerts or revolutions.

The third characteristic that distinguishes the Natural Sciences from Humanities is that students of Humanities are humans themselves. Studying one’s own species poses certain academic problems. Can students of Humanities, being humans themselves, be sufficiently objective and neutral in the pursuit of these studies? This question challenges the academic quality and integrity of study. Some scholars

hold an **absolutist** view by claiming that Humanities are just another science, and they practice the study of Humanities with empirical research based on evidence and hard truths. Others hold a **relativist** view: they argue that the subjectivity of the researcher cannot be denied or neutralized and must therefore be taken into account when conducting research (see also chapter 'Diversity').

The relativist viewpoint gained momentum with the theory of **Postmodernism** which argues that reality and morality are not set in stone but are human constructs. According to postmodernists, since there are no laws of nature that determine how humankind works, and one can never prove that God or the universe has set rules that determine what is right or wrong, there remain only the rules set by humans themselves. In other words, according to this viewpoint, people shape their own way of looking at the world. Postmodernism, therefore, is against lending permanence and authority to knowledge and values. While this reasoning has a certain logic, it also risks making any kind of research into humankind almost impossible.

Further reading

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- Sherman Tan, 'Understanding the "Structure" and "Agency" Debate in the Social Sciences,' in Kathleen Powers (ed.), *Habitus. Vol1: The Forum*, 36-50