

MICROFOUNDATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: Many of our theories of international politics rely on microfoundations. In this short note, I suggest that although there has been increasing interest in microfoundations in IR over the past twenty years, the frequency with which the concept is invoked belies a surprising lack of specificity about what microfoundations are, or explicit arguments about why we should study them. I then offer an argument about the value of micro-level approaches to the study of conflict. My claim is not that all theories of IR need to be developed or tested at the micro-level in order to be satisfying, but rather, that many of our theories in IR *already* rest on lower-level mechanisms – they either leave these assumptions unarticulated, or fail to test them directly. In these circumstances, theorizing and testing micro-level dynamics will be especially helpful. I illustrate my argument using the case of resolve, one of the central explanatory variables in the study of international security. I argue that the absence of microfoundations for resolve is one reason why IR scholars have had difficulties testing whether resolve has the effects we often claim, and sketch out a two-stage research design political scientists can use to study unobservable phenomena.

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Why don't democracies go to war with one another? (Doyle, 1986) How do human rights treaties shape state behavior? (Simmons, 2009) Why are nonviolent movements more likely to achieve their objectives? (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011) How are leaders able to credibly signal despite incentives to bluff? (Fearon, 1994) Especially once we move away from grand theories towards the "middle-range theories" that dominate the study of international conflict and cooperation, a significant proportion of our accounts of international politics rely on *microfoundations* — lower-level "cogs and wheels" posited to act as mechanisms linking cause and effect (Elster, 1989, 3).¹ This microfoundational momentum is all the more striking given the traditional skepticism International Relations (IR) scholars have displayed towards "reductionist" theorizing (e.g. Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1987). In this short note, I make three claims. The first is that there has been increasing interest in microfoundations in IR over the past twenty years, but the frequency with which the concept is invoked belies a surprising lack of specificity about what microfoundations are, or why we should use them. Second, I offer an argument about the value of micro-level approaches to the study of conflict. My claim is not that all theories of IR need to be developed or tested at the micro-level in order to be satisfying, but rather, that many of our theories in IR *already* rest on lower-level mechanisms – they either leave these assumptions unarticulated, or fail to test them directly. In these circumstances, micro-level theorizing will be especially helpful. I illustrate my argument using the case of resolve, a construct frequently used by political scientists to explain why actors prevail at the bargaining table, and win on the battlefield. I argue that the absence of microfoundations is one reason why IR scholars have had difficulties testing whether resolve has the effects we often claim, and suggest a two-stage research design political scientists can use to study unobservable phenomena more generally.

¹See Merton (1968). On the popularity of middle-range theorizing in American IR, see Colgan (Forthcoming); for a critical take, see Jackson and Nexon (2013, 548-550).

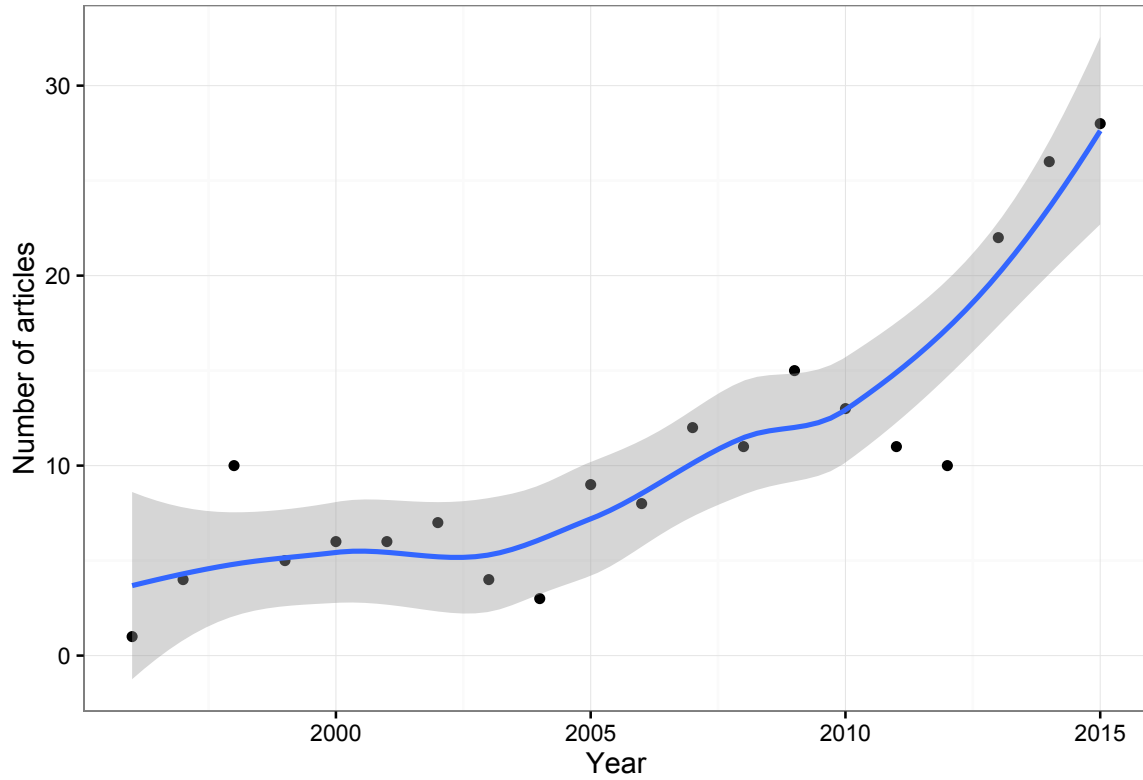
The microfoundational moment

After long privileging the study of phenomena at higher levels of analysis (Singer, 1961; Onuf, 1995), IR scholarship has taken a microfoundational turn. As Gerring (2007, 176) notes about the current state of political science more generally, “Macro is out, and micro is in.” This growing interest in microfoundations is evident in Figure 1, which plots the number of articles making reference to microfoundations that were published in nine IR journals (*Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *the European Journal of International Relations*, *International Organization*, *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *the Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Security Studies*, and *World Politics*) from 1996-2015. Although the number of articles ($N = 211$, in total) is small in relative terms — for example, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* published 25 articles in 2015, only four of which explicitly invoked microfoundations — the figure shows a relatively stark increase over time.² Two aspects of this trend are especially interesting. First is the extent to which this surge of interest in micro-phenomena transcends methodological and epistemological divides: practitioners of public opinion experiments and survey research frequently frame their contributions in terms of providing microfoundations (e.g. Kertzer and McGraw, 2012; Tomz and Weeks, 2013; Bayram, 2015; Renshon, 2015), but so too do constructivists and critical theorists interested in theorizing about the everyday dynamics of global politics (e.g. Hopf, 2010; Hall and Ross, 2015; Solomon and Steele, 2016). In this sense, microfoundations are about more than just experiments, and we can understand the surge of interest in micro-level approaches as broader than the growth of experimental work aptly chronicled by Druckman et al. (2006), McDermott (2011), Hyde (2015), and others.³

²Since Figure 1 is restricted to articles that explicitly make reference to microfoundations, it is possible that the trend it captures is partially a discursive one. Yet changes in discourse are revealing, since strategic speakers use the language they believe will resonate with their audience (Krebs and Jackson, 2007). It thus tells us a great deal that IR scholars seeking to contextualize their contributions are increasingly doing so with microfoundational arguments. Pepinsky (2014, 443) makes a similar point, noting with some concern the extent to which scholars using survey or experimental methods tend to reflexively “appeal to microfoundations” in order to justify their research designs, even if the ubiquity of the claim belies some murkiness about what microfoundations entail.

³See also the forthcoming special issue of *International Organization* on “The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations.”

Figure 1: Articles invoking microfoundations in IR journals, 1996-2015



The figure uses search results from Google Scholar to depict the number of articles making reference to “microfoundation”, “microfoundations”, “micro-foundation”, or “micro-foundations” published in *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Organization*, *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Security Studies*, and *World Politics* from 1996-2015, overlaid with a smoother and 95% CIs. Although the data above aggregate across all nine journals, we see a generally increasing trend at the journal-level in this time period for every journal apart from *International Security* and *Security Studies*.

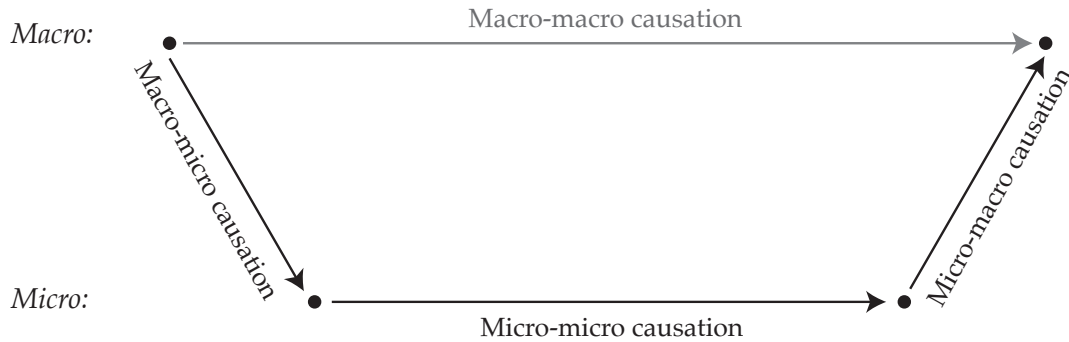
Second, and more importantly, despite the frequency with which IR scholars invoke microfoundations, the term is rarely explicitly defined, and used in inconsistent ways. In much of this literature, microfoundations are treated as synonymous with causal mechanisms or theoretical assumptions more generally (see e.g. Fang, 2008, 305; Gawande, Krishna and Olarreaga, 2009, 503; Gehring and Oberthür, 2009, 129; Rauchhaus, 2009, 874). In a canonical article, for instance, Achen (2002, 437), uses microfoundations to refer to “a formal model of the behavior of the political actors under study” to guide our use of particular statistical estimators, a definition that need not imply that the mechanism connecting the *explanans* and *explanandum* is situated at a particular level of analysis.⁴ Others cast the mechanistic implications aside and treat microfoundations as synonymous with the use of individual-level data more generally, a tendency noted with some unease by both Pepinsky (2014) and Jackson and Nexon (1999, 20, fn 322). Generally, both the meaning, and the value, of microfoundations are taken to be self-evident.

For my purposes, I define the use of microfoundations here as an analytic strategy where one explains outcomes at the aggregate level via dynamics at a lower level, consistent with how it is understood in parts of economics (“to refer to schemes which can be broadly regarded as attempting to reduce macroeconomics to microeconomics”) (Nelson, 1984, 575), and analytic sociology, which justifies the search for microfoundations by suggesting that “social phenomena... are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals — their properties, their goals, their beliefs, and their actions.” (Elster, 1985, 5).⁵ This definition is illustrated visually in Figure 2, which depicts one common visual metaphor for multilevel explanation in sociology, the Boudon-Coleman model (Coleman, 1986; Bunge, 1996; Hedström, 2005; Jepperson and Meyer, 2011). Unlike purely macroscopic explanations for social phenomena, represented by the grey pathway at the top of the trapezoid, microfoundational arguments are those that explain social phenomena via the dynamics represented by the black arrows forming the bottom of the basin.

⁴See also Achen (2005).

⁵See also Little (1998, 10), who defines “the microfoundations thesis” as a doctrine that “maintains that macro-explanations of social phenomena must be supported by an account of the mechanisms at the individual level through which the postulated social processes work.”

Figure 2: Visualizing microfoundations in multilevel explanations



The Boudon-Coleman model (e.g. Coleman, 1986; Bunge, 1996) is one common heuristic device sociologists have used to represent multilevel explanations. Microfoundational approaches are represented by the dark black pathway forming the bottom of the “boat”, seeking to explain the relationship between two macro-level constructs through micro-level mechanisms.

In this sense, a microfoundational approach rests on two key tenets. The first is a *mechanismic* view of social science, which holds that social inquiry is not just about estimating causal effects, but also providing *explanations* (Little, 1991), “unpacking the black box of causality” by positing the processes through which effects are produced (Stinchcombe, 1991; Bunge, 1997; Hedström, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Imai et al., 2011). Studying microfoundations thus involves exploring the “nuts and bolts” or “cogs and wheels” that shape social behavior (Elster, 1982).⁶ The second is an analytic commitment to exploring these mechanisms at a lower level of analysis.⁷ Because of the longstanding relationship between microfoundational arguments and “strong” methodological individualists, for whom theories that fail to specify mechanisms at the individual-level are “lazy and frictionless” (Elster, 1982, 453), much microfoundational research in political science and sociology has tended to situate the micro- at the individual level.⁸ At the same time, however, there is nothing inherent about a microfoundational approach that demands fealty to the first image: Renshon, Lee and Tingley

⁶As Gerring (2007) notes, mechanisms are defined in myriad ways across the social sciences, but following Hedström (2005, 25), who builds on Machamer, Darden and Craver (2000, 2-3), I define mechanisms here generically, as “a constellation of entities and activities that are organized such that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome.”

⁷These two tenets are distinct: although much of the work emphasizing mechanistic explanation focuses on the micro-level, not all mechanisms fit this bill: Tilly (2001, 34), for example, points to changes in governmental resource bases, and the disintegration of trust networks, as examples of mechanisms responsible for democratization.

⁸On methodological individualism more generally, see Lukes (1968); Udehn (2001, 2002); List and Spiekermann (2013).

(Forthcoming) use microfoundations to dive down to the neurological level, Chaudoin, Milner and Pang (2015) use them to implicate second-image factors more generally, and economists routinely characterize models of firm-level behavior as micro-founded. As with debates about levels of analysis in general, the appropriate level of analysis in which to situate microfoundations thus depends upon the question being asked (Stinchcombe, 1991), rather than abiding by a strict “substitutionist” edict that holds that “the goal of science is the pursuit of explanations at the lowest possible level of analysis” (Berntson and Cacioppo, 2004, 108), in which political science’s quirks are reduced to physicists’ quarks.⁹

Microfoundational arguments are not without their critics, and skeptics of “microchauvinism” (Turner and Boyns, 2002) warn that the search for microfoundations can sometimes be problematic.¹⁰ As the grey pathway on the top of Figure 2 implies, some causal mechanisms reside at the macro-level — supply and demand in economics, for example — while multiple realizability means that many macro-level phenomena cannot simply be reduced to micro-level causes (Schelling, 1978, 13, Most and Starr 1984, Wendt 1999, 150-157, Thompson 2003). The study of power laws and scale invariance (Richardson, 1948; Cederman, 2003) offers a good example of work that self-consciously eschews microfoundations: if battle deaths tend to follow a power law distribution (Friedman, 2015), regardless of who the combatants are, why the belligerents are fighting, or what tactics they employ, then multiple micro-level mechanisms can lead to the same macro-level state, such that the latter cannot be reduced to the former.¹¹

IR scholars’ growing interest in forecasting (e.g. Schneider, Gleditsch and Carey, 2011; Ward, 2016) offers another example. In a pathbreaking large-scale geopolitical forecasting tournament,

⁹Interestingly, although the growth of interest in microfoundations in IR has made IR more self-consciously “psychological” (see, e.g. Kertzer 2016), social psychologists themselves rarely invoke the concept, perhaps illustrating David Foster Wallace’s parable about the fish who doesn’t know what water is because she’s never swam in anything else. Although couched in different language, the rise of social neuroscience, which focuses on the interplay between micro (neural) and macro (social) phenomena, has reignited similar debates about reductionism and the relationship between brain structure and social behavior. Whereas Waltz (1979) criticized psychological explanations as reductionist, psychologists themselves tend to be concerned about reductionism of a different kind that seeks to reduce the mind to the brain (e.g. Bem, 2001). See Holmes (2014) for a creative application of these debates to IR. Methodological localism offers one way of thinking about the appropriate level of analysis in which to situate microfoundations - see Little (2012).

¹⁰For a particularly cogent discussion in an IR context, see Thompson (2014).

¹¹See Stumpf and Porter (2012) for a critique.

Tetlock et al. (2014) harness the “wisdom of crowds,” finding that people can make accurate predictions of world events if their probability estimates are aggregated using an extremizing algorithm (Baron et al., 2014). Although the findings are hugely important for social scientists on substantive grounds, they are also striking in terms of what they tell us about theory. Participants in forecasting tournaments each have their own latent theory about how the world works, which manifests in an event either being observed or not observed; algorithms take the predictions produced by these latent theories, and aggregate them together, but never test the underlying theories themselves. Microfoundations here are impossible. Indeed, the premise of wisdom of crowd mechanisms — that you get better predictions by black-boxing the mechanisms — is the very opposite of a microfoundational approach. We know if an event is likely to occur, but do not know why; aggregation washes out the errors, but also the theories. The same is true with the case of power laws discussed above: the current research on power laws in IR tends to characterize the distribution of conflict, but at the cost of explaining it.

Although some quadrants of IR are indeed resistant to microfoundations (or perhaps mechanistic explanations altogether), I suggest that there are fewer of these cases than meets the eye. Like Monsieur Jourdain in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who realizes he has been speaking prose his whole life without knowing it, much of the IR scholarship that formally eschews micro-level analysis nonetheless tends to implicitly rely upon micro-level assumptions. Structural realist theories of international politics — especially in Waltz’s (1979) formulation — are often vocally opposed to micro-level theorizing, but also rely on particular sets of assumptions about the behavioral consequences of uncertainty and fear, for example (Kertzer and McGraw, 2012), which even if socially shared, are only felt by individuals.¹² As Herrmann (1988, 177) notes, “Even Kenneth Waltz has been forced to explicate his assumptions at the micro level in order to keep his macro explanation alive.”

Rational choice theories offer another example. Like the structural realists they sought to sup-

¹²On collective emotions in IR, see Hall 2015.

plant, rationalists in IR have tended to emphasize a “methodological bet” that greater progress can be made in the social sciences by focusing on structural features rather than characteristics of actors themselves (Lake and Powell, 1999; Kertzer, Forthcoming). As a result, rational choice frameworks are often used to showcase the power of institutions (e.g. Shepsle and Weingast 1981) rather than dive deeply into actors’ characteristics. At the same time, however, rationalist models also tend to rely on relatively strict micro-level assumptions about where actors derive utility from, how they calculate costs and benefits, how they make judgments under uncertainty, and so on. As Simon (1985, 297) notes, “a large part of the “action”” of these models comes from these micro-level assumptions, many of which are the product of mathematical convenience or path dependence; there is nothing innate to rationalism that precludes it from embracing different sets of micro-level assumptions, just as there is nothing that inherently prevents it from placing a different methodological bet (Kertzer, Forthcoming). Indeed, the desire to empirically validate these canonical assumptions — and if necessary, depart from them — has motivated pathbreaking research agendas, including much of what we now think of as behavioral economics (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky, 2000). Many critiques of rational choice, then, are really critiques about a particular set of microfoundations.

Some rational choice scholars have pushed back against critics by distinguishing between instrumental and procedural rationality, arguing that rational choice does not require rational thought, such that the utility of rational choice does not depend on the plausibility of its micro-level assumptions (e.g. Achen and Snidal, 1989).¹³ Yet this analytic move does not make microfoundations matter any less: a growing body of research is not only revealing the degree to which instrumental rationality in theory requires procedural rationality in practice, but also the extent to which rational

¹³This instrumentalism is one reason why rational choice theory’s relationship with microfoundations has been so fraught (Hedström, 2005, 60-66). On the one hand, rational choice is strongly rooted in same methodological individualist tradition we associate with microfoundational approaches: Fearon and Wendt (2002, 65), for example, go so far as to characterize the divide between rationalist and constructivist approaches in IR as paralleling that “between methodological individualism and holism in the philosophy of social science”, while Elster (1982) proposes rational choice as a solution to the absence of microfoundations in Marxist thought. On the other hand, it is striking how many of the invocations of microfoundations in IR accuse rational choice theory of either possessing problematic microfoundations, or lacking microfoundations at all (e.g. Reus-Smit 2003; Weyland 2008). A similar charge is levied against structural realism (e.g. Fischer 1995; Kahler 1998), which I discuss below. In both cases, the tension can be attributed to divergent philosophies of science: an instrumentalism at odds with microfoundational approaches’ emphasis on (philosophical) realism.

choice as it is conventionally modeled rests upon a distinctive cluster of psychological traits. Even in its less “behavioral” variants, then, rational choice ultimately has psychological microfoundations (McDermott, 2004; Mercer, 2005; Rathbun, Kertzer and Paradis, Forthcoming).

Finally, one need not be a strong methodological individualist to argue that microfoundations matter (Udehn 2001, 336, Hedström and Ylikoski 2010, 59-60). Complexity theory, for example, is built upon the premise that one cannot explain systems solely by reference to the behavior of each of its components (Miller and Page, 2007, 3) — and thus, the rejection of methodological individualism — yet complexity scholars in IR frequently use agent-based modeling to show how the emergent properties of systems depend on how agents’ preferences and behaviors are parameterized (Axelrod, 1997; Cederman, 1997). To study microfoundations is not to presume that “all social phenomena can be explained in individualistic terms alone” (List and Spiekermann, 2013, 629), but rather, to recognize that many macro-theories are built upon micro-level assumptions. The virtue of microfoundational approaches is a willingness to either explicate these assumptions theoretically, or validate them empirically.

From this perspective, then, there are two challenges in the study of IR to which microfoundational approaches can contribute. First, some of our theories gloss over the microfoundations necessary for them to function: it is not that the theories lack microfoundations, but that they fail to specify what they are. It is for this reason that democratic peace theory, for example, is often accused of being “an empirical regularity in search of a theory” (Hopf, 1998, 191). This challenge is usually addressed through theory development, as research accumulates and scholars propose more concrete mechanisms (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999; Reiter and Stam, 2002). Second, many of our theories do have well-articulated microfoundations, but leave them untested, or incur the ecological fallacy by being tested only at the aggregate level (Zeitsoff, 2013). Our models of coercion typically rely on a particular set of micro-level assumptions about how individual civilians respond to threats and violence (Schelling, 1966; Pape, 1996). Our models of ethnicity and civil conflict typically assume that ethnicity matters because individuals can easily identify members of ethnic

outgroups (Horowitz, 1985). Our models of trade typically assume that trade preferences stem from actors' economic interests, either based on factor endowments or specific factors (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). Our models of audience costs typically envision a monolithic public responding to presidential threats in unison like the chorus in a Greek tragedy (Fearon, 1994). Subjecting these assumptions to direct empirical testing (e.g. Lyall, Blair and Imai, 2013; Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014; Harris and Findley, 2014; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Kertzer and Brutger, 2016) enriches our theories, improves their explanatory power, and gives us greater confidence that the regularities we are seeking to explain are occurring for the reasons we claim.

Resolve as a latent variable

One case in which giving attention to microfoundations is especially helpful is that of resolve. Resolve is one of the most central explanatory variables in the study of international security, used to explain everything from why states win wars (Maoz, 1983; Morrow, 1988; Pape, 1996), to how they prevail during crisis bargaining, thereby preventing conflict from breaking out (Schelling, 1966; Snyder and Diesing, 1977; Morrow, 1985; George and Simons, 1994; Lebow, 1998). IR scholars implicate it in a wide range of contexts, from deterrence theorists arguing for the importance of states maintaining “reputations for resolve” so that challengers will not try to take advantage of them (Jervis, 1976, 1979; Powell, 2003), to classic IR theorists who saw “national morale” or “national will” as a component of power (Wright, 1964; Organski, 1968; Cline, 1975; Morgenthau, 1985; Cline, 1994), to scholars of asymmetric conflict investigating whether democratic publics are too “soft” (Pape, 2003, 349), or cost-intolerant to be resolute (Mack, 1974; Merom, 2003; Mueller, 2005; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2009; Caverley, 2009/10; Lyall, 2010).

Despite this pride of place, IR scholars have had a difficult time testing our theories about resolve's effects. The chief difficulty is that resolve itself is not directly observable. This imperceptibility is in fact a defining feature of resolve in the IR literature: if resolve were directly observable,

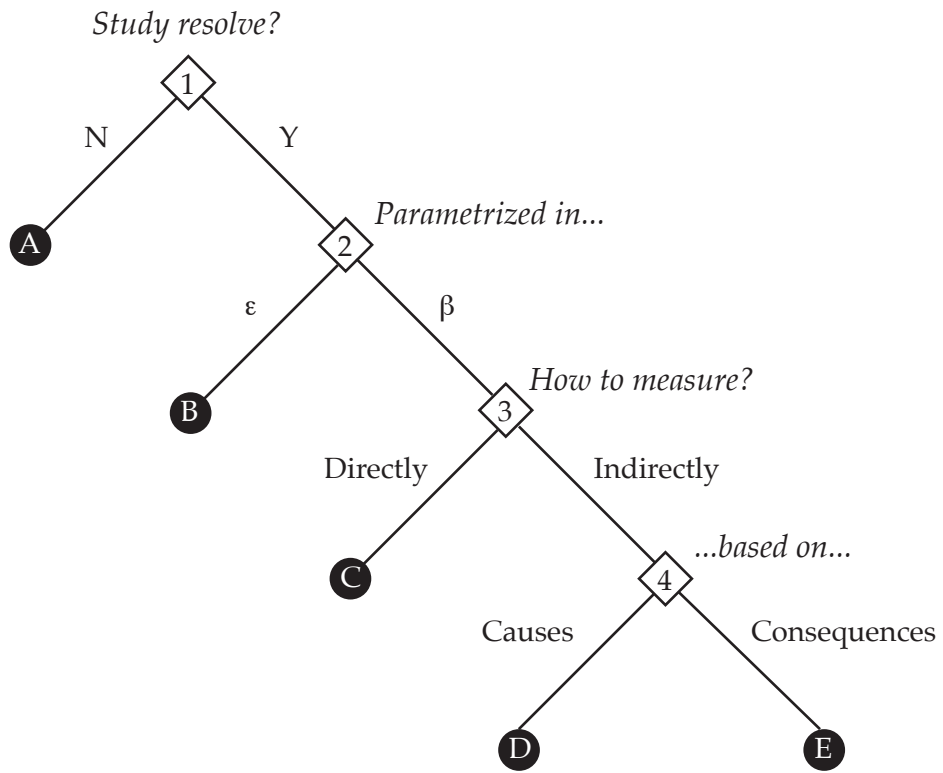
actors would have no need to go through the trouble of signaling it, and there would be no incentives for actors to misrepresent their resolve in the first place (Fearon, 1995). In this sense, it is precisely because resolve cannot be directly observed that it plays such an important role in rationalist theories of war.

Conceptually, the unobservable nature of resolve means we can think of it as a latent variable (Bollen, 1989; Wansbeek and Meijer, 2000).¹⁴ Although political scientists regularly study latent variables — personality orientations (Mondak, 2010) regime type (Treier and Jackman, 2008), ideal point models of state preferences (Voeten, 2000), and so on, the idea being that when a construct is not directly observable, we can model it based on its observable implications — resolve is different in that, for the questions IR scholars tend to be interested in, establishing its implications is our goal in the first place. When it comes to regime type, we cannot directly measure how democratic a state is, so we instead measure how free and fair its elections are and treat that as an indirect measure of democracy, since the competitiveness of the executive recruitment process is logically constitutive of what democracy means (though see Hayes, 2012). The relationship between resolve and military victory, on the other hand, is precisely the empirical question we are trying to prove (Rosen, 1972; Maoz, 1983). In this sense, the same unobservable quality that lets us attribute such explanatory power to resolve in our theories also inhibits our attempts to test resolve’s explanatory effects.

This challenge means that there are at least five different empirical strategies one can adopt when facing the prospect of studying resolve with observational data, illustrated by the decision tree in Figure 3. First, one can simply decide to avoid studying resolve altogether (option A in Figure 3). Merom (2003) takes this route, eschewing “motivational theories” of asymmetric conflict outcomes for being too tautological. Rummel (1975*b*, 275-276) similarly notes that for many scholars “will

¹⁴For related arguments, see Clark and Regan (2003), who use a split population model to study opportunity (although not willingness) as an unobserved latent process (see also Xiang (2010)), and Renshon and Spirling (2015), who model “effectiveness” as a latent variable using Bradley-Terry models. Each of these works show that the study of unobservable factors poses important implications for how we test our theories, although both opportunity and effectiveness are closer to capabilities than resolve, per se. For a rather different take on latent variables in international security, see Rummel (1975*a*, chap. 9-10).

Figure 3: Fave ways to study resolve with observational data



is a metaphysical concept, not quite respectable for ‘scientific’ interest.” If one decides to study resolve despite these challenges, the question becomes how to parameterize it. Noting that resolve is “notoriously difficult to measure,” Sartori (2005, 91), like Reed (2000), pursues option B, treating resolve as part of the correlated error terms in a unified model of conflict onset and escalation. Although a clever way to handle selection effects in a theoretically-informed manner, relegating resolve to the error term is less helpful in testing its effects, per se — unless we are comfortable assuming that the correlation in the disturbances is due specifically to resolve rather than other omitted variables, hence why Reed (2000, 90) is careful to note that resolve is one of a number of potential culprits.

Thus, rather than treating resolve as the error term, a number of works in IR choose to study resolve as a variable in its own right. The subsequent question becomes whether to measure resolve directly (option C) or indirectly (options D-E). If resolve is indeed a latent variable, however, then it cannot directly be observed, precluding the possibility of option C. Thus, most of the existing empirical studies of war adopt option E, inferring resolve based on one of its posited consequences: Rosen (1972) and Mueller (1980) infer resolve based on the number of casualties each side is willing to suffer, Maoz (1983) proxies resolve by the highest level of severity of the dispute, Langlois and Langlois (2009) infer resolve based on the percentage of the country’s population in the military, Cline (1975) measures resolve via military expenditures, while Sullivan (2007) treats the magnitude of ground troop deployments as an indicator of “commitment.”

This empirical strategy faces two potential concerns. First, some of these measures of resolve veer dangerously close to tautology, inferring resolve from the same outcomes they are being used to explain. Lewin’s (2012) study of resilience in war is illustrative in this regard: his six cases of a lack of “national resilience” are military defeats, while his three cases of national resilience are military victories. Option E thus assumes axiomatically what should be proven empirically, thereby reducing resolve to a catch-all residual category used to explain everything that our traditional theories cannot (March, 1966, 6 1; Baldwin, 1979; Jervis, 1979, 316; Rummel, 1975*b*, 275; Ray and

Vural, 1986), and turning it into a set of “post-hoc explanations for otherwise perplexing conflict outcomes” (Sullivan, 2007, 497). Second, as Gelpi and Griesdorf (2001, 638) note, there is an important distinction “between demonstrations of resolve and the underlying preferences that may give rise to such demonstrations”: escalatory policies may indeed signal resolve, but the resolve these demonstrations are intended to signal may not be sincere – hence why states with low levels of resolve can often prevail in crisis bargaining through successful bluffing (Powell, 1987). If we want to study the effects of resolve — rather than the effects of signals of resolve — we need to find an empirical strategy that avoids conflating the two.

One way to address this challenge, then, is to choose option D: rather than inferring resolve based on its consequences, one can study it based on its causes. Doing so, however, requires us to have theories of where resolve comes from, and why some actors are more resolved than others — or, put another way, doing so requires us to have microfoundations. In other words, microfoundations aren’t just valuable because they soothe individualist sensibilities; they’re valuable because they can give us crucial leverage on answering the questions we’re interested in.

More generally, then, we can think of microfoundations as fitting into a general two-stage research strategy for the study of unobservable phenomena. At the first stage, IR scholars can use prior theory, formal models, or experimental methods to explore the causes and microprocesses underlying a given phenomenon. Kertzer (2016), for example, uses laboratory and survey experiments to explain variation in resolve, taking advantage of the control and measurement advantages afforded by experimental methods to study the predictors of resolve in a manner that would not be possible with observational data. At the second stage, scholars then gather measures of these same constructs using observational data — whether in the archives, or a large-N context — and use them to create a composite or latent measure of the construct of interest. These composites can be created through a variety of methods. In a structural equation model (SEM) approach, the composites can be operationalized through formative indicator models — structural equation models where the indicators are of the variable’s causes rather than its consequences (Edwards and Bagozzi, 2000;

Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). For theories that implicate causal complexity, a Boolean statistical approach can be employed (Braumoeller, 2003), where the construct is operationalized as the product of conjunctural or substitutable causal pathways, though the fundamental logic remains the same.

Because of space constraints, I only briefly touch upon the research strategy here — though interested readers can refer to Kertzer (2016) for a more detailed exposition — save for three methodological considerations worth noting. First, the initial stage of this research design can be thought of as either articulating theoretical logics or establishing empirical regularities, depending on whether the purpose is theory building (hypothesizing microfoundations for a particular phenomenon), or theory testing (validating microfoundational assumptions made in previous work). Experimental methods are particularly helpful in this regard, both of because of the control they offer the experimenter to directly manipulate the constructs of interest, and the measurement advantages they bring (McDermott, 2002). Second, regardless of whether a formative indicator model or a Boolean statistical model is used at the second stage of the research design, the key is the reliance on multiple indicators, lending a richer understanding of the microfoundations of the construct, and enhancing confidence in the results compared to the use of just a single measure. Unlike in traditional approaches to latent variables in political science, however, because these multiple measures are of the *causes* rather than the *consequences* of the construct, statistical techniques designed to assess the reliability of the composite measure are less useful here. After all, although one expects the consequences of a phenomenon to be correlated with one another (e.g. if stable borders affect both the likelihood of conflict, and the likelihood of democracy, democracy and the probability of conflict should be inter-correlated, as Gibler (2007) shows), the causes of a construct can be independent. Finally, this type of multimethod research design is also helpful in thinking about situating experiments in context, complementing rather than supplanting observational or aggregate work (Pepinsky, 2014, 438).

The retreat from utopia

Writing in 1971, Holsti suggested that the field of IR was experiencing a “retreat from utopia”, as IR scholarship went from grand to granular, abandoning the postwar pursuit of “a general theory of international politics” in favor of more molecular, mechanistic work that “avoids explanations at a high level of generality.” (p. 177, 172). Contemporary observers, however, will note that by the end of the decade, the retreat had reversed. Micro was out, and macro was in; structural theories, (Waltz, 1986, 329) argued, might not “tell us all that we want to know”, but do “tell us a small number of big and important things.”

IR scholars appear to have once again retreated from utopia, whether because of an interest in new questions spurred on by developments in psychology and behavioral economics, an appreciation for new methods engendered by developments in causal inference, or a willingness to relax old assumptions after seeing structural theories fail so miserably to explain the very big and important things they were supposed to address. This brief note sought to document the growth of interest in microfoundations in IR, lend them some conceptual clarity, and offer an argument about their value. My argument is ecumenical, and question-driven: not all theories require microfoundations in order to be satisfying, but a significant proportion of our theories in IR either rely on implicit micro-level mechanisms that remain untheorized, or explicit micro-level mechanisms that remain untested. Moreover, for some questions — as I suggest is the case with resolve — the absence of firm microfoundations has led us to a variety of quandaries. It is these questions where systematic micro-level work, both theoretical and empirical, has the clearest potential to make important contributions. If the durability of this microfoundational moment is unclear, it is the magnitude of these contributions that will help determine the extent to which it endures.

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