

Student Feature – Levels of Analysis

Written by Carmen Gebhard

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CARMEN GEBHARD, FEB 25 2018

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Thinking of different levels of analysis in IR means that the observer and analyst may choose to focus on the international system as a whole, parts of the system in interaction with each other, or some of its parts in particular. What forms the parts or components of this system is again a matter of perspective. The international system can be conceived of as made up of states, groups of states, organisations, societies or individuals within and across those societies. IR generally distinguishes between three levels of analysis: the system, the state, and the individual – but the group level is also important to consider as a fourth. To be able to use the level of analysis as an analytical device, we need to be clear about what we are most interested in. We have to clarify for ourselves what it is exactly that we want to look at when discussing a particular theme or issue concerning the ‘international’ sphere.

If we were to study and understand the 2008 global financial crisis and its consequences, for example, there would be various ways of approaching, discussing and presenting the issue. To determine the level of analysis we would need to determine what those levels are and ask ourselves some questions, which we can explore below.

The Individual Level

Would we look at the actions of individuals responding to the financial crisis according to their own position or responsibilities? For example, a prime minister encountering the leader of another state to negotiate an important financial agreement, the head of a large corporation adopting a policy to rescue their business or even the situation of individual citizens and their attitude towards austerity measures?

International Relations: Bargaining and Leaders

The Group Level

Would we be more interested in the actions of groups of individuals, such as all voters of a country and the way they express their views in the general election, political parties picking up on the issue in their campaigns or social movements forming to counter the effects of the crisis on society?

Would we be interested in activist/pressure groups like ‘Anonymous’ that seek to influence the global debate about the winners and losers of globalisation and capitalism?

The State Level

Would we look at states as actors in their own right as if they were clearly defined entities that have certain preferences, and accordingly, look at their actions and decisions to find an answer to our analytical questions?

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Would we then be looking at how states interact with each other to deal with the crisis – in other words, their foreign policy? How they build off each other's suggestions and react to international developments and trends? How they cooperate, say, in the framework of international organisations?

Or would we be looking at them as competitors and antagonists, each of them pushing for a stronger position in what makes up the world economy?

The System Level

Finally, might we try to look at the global level, the big picture, and try to grasp wider ranging dynamics that emerge from the global economic 'system' to affect its various components, states, national economies, societies, individuals?

A much-debated example of this kind of system perspective has been presented by Daniel W. Drezner (2014), who argued controversially that the international system of financial governance did well at coping with the 2008 global financial crisis. He looked at how various parts of the system worked together to mitigate wider repercussions. After all, while we call it the global financial crisis, the world has really not changed much since then and you might argue it has been business as usual for the system.

How the Level of Analysis Determines Our Findings

Being aware of various possible perspectives helps us to develop an understanding of where we stand as analysts and observers. It also guides us through the process of investigation and analysis. First of all, the particular perspective we assume determines the kind of information we would need to gather and look at in order to be able to answer our questions and draw meaningful conclusions.

A system-level ('systemic') study would need to consider global linkages that go beyond single interactions between states. It would need to look at such things as the balance of power between states and how that determines what happens in global politics. This could include developments that are even outside the immediate control of any particular state or group of states, such as the global economy, transnational terrorism or the internet.

What is Globalization?

A state-level study would require careful consideration of what kinds of states we are looking at (how they are ordered politically), their geographical position, their historical ties and experiences and their economic standing. It would likely also look at the foreign policy of states, meaning their approach to and practice of interacting with other states. Key indicators of the foreign policy of states would be the policies proposed and decided by governments, statements of top-level politicians but also the role and behaviour of diplomats and their adjoining bureaucratic structures.

A group level analysis would again need to try and break the analysis down into certain kinds of groups, how they relate to the state level and where they position themselves with respect to the global dimension of the issues they are dealing with. An example of this can be seen in the work of Engelen et al. (2012), who discuss the global financial crisis as the 'misrule of experts', pointing at the politicised role of technocratic circles and the relative lack of democratic control over the boards of large banks and corporations. A group-level analysis focusing on foreign policy would look, for example, at the role of lobbying groups and the way they influence national decision-making on an issue.

If looking at the actions of individuals, we would likely also need to engage with the implications of human nature. This can be seen in the psychology and emotions behind people's actions and decisions, their fears and their visions as well as their access to information and capacity to make a difference. Psychological factors do not only matter at the level of individual members of society or of a group. They are also an important factor in the analysis of foreign policy, whenever particular mindsets and perceptions of political leaders and key actors might influence their

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decisions and behaviour.

Christine Lagarde (IMF) on Leadership

Which one of these specific perspectives we choose would greatly influence our findings. In other words, the focus or level of analysis determines the outcome of our scholarly investigations. Meanwhile, the real-life events we are analysing remain the same, of course. That is a particularly important consideration if we aim at developing generalised conclusions from our observations. Strictly speaking, our conclusions would only be valid within the scope of the level of analysis we chose to focus on. Insights provided by other perspectives would remain outside the remit of our analysis. To illustrate this, let's stick with the above example of the global financial crisis as it is one of the more debated issues in contemporary politics.

From the System Level

If we studied the global financial crisis from a system-level perspective, for instance, we would expect to gain an insight into the global dynamics that make up the international financial system. Focusing on the big picture would enable us to develop a comprehensive model of explanation that could potentially capture the states and national economies within that global system. The explanations we derive from this systemic model, however, might exaggerate the system-level factors that have conditioned the global financial crisis. As a consequence, we might overlook a lot of psychological and sociological issues that would be the subject of a group-level or individual-level analysis.

Resiliency of the Financial Industry

From the State Level

If we studied the same theme from a state perspective, we would develop a greater level of detail about specific circumstances in particular states as well as in their interaction with each other. The distinction here, as will be discussed further below, is not quite this rigid in practice as the state level is rarely looked at in isolation but more in its wider systemic context. For our example this would mean that the world financial system is taken as the framework in which state actors operate, so state action is often conditioned by factors beyond the state's control.

From the Group Level

If we studied the issue from a group-level perspective, we would yet again reach a different result in our findings. We would potentially emphasise aspects of the global financial crisis that would escape a more comprehensive global level analysis. This includes analysing the impact of the crisis on society and the livelihoods of individuals as exemplified in the UN Report 'The Global Social Crisis' (2011).

The Global Social Crisis

From the Individual Level

Finally, focusing on the individual level and, say, particular actions of specific personalities in the public realm – be they politicians, diplomats or bankers – would lead to us drawing different conclusions again about the causes and consequences of the financial crisis.

CEO Testimony – 2008 Housing Collapse

The Bigger Picture

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In short, being aware and acknowledging the potential gaps in our observation – that is to say, all of what is not directly captured by our perspective or level of analysis – is important. Applying rigour in our analysis is also important. These guidelines for scholarly investigation are applied in many academic disciplines, including the natural sciences. What German theoretical physicist Werner K. Heisenberg (1962, 58) said in respect to research in his field very much also applies to IR; ‘we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.’ Scholarly writings are nevertheless not always explicit about their particular perspective or level of analysis. So, as a reader, it is important to stay critical and to look closely and enquire whenever an argument presented to us appears to straddle potentially conflicting analytical lenses.

As you start to read deeper on particular IR issues, always remind yourself of the importance of analytical clarity. Do not hesitate to expect and demand it even from renowned authors and established publications outlets. Note that clarity concerning one’s level of analysis does not necessarily mean that different perspectives could not be used in conjunction with each other – on the contrary. Many of today’s political challenges are so complex that they require our analyses to span across various levels.

International Relations: Proximate Versus Underlying Causes

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