

Levels of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Carmen Gebhard

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CARMEN GEBHARD, MAR 27 2022

This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

Levels of Analysis are the building blocks that are faced by all students and academics when they seek to build an analysis. We need such a device because the vast array of themes, actors and issues that we face in International Relations can quickly become overwhelming. Without separating these at times, such as with the levels of analysis, it would be a daunting task to make enough sense of things to build, or utilise, a theory that would allow us to pose viable answers to research questions. When analysing something, you will always have material constraints such as time, availability of material, or a word count. In that sense, making a conscious decision about what level of analysis you will explore will allow you to develop a more focused piece of work and simultaneously trains you to approach complex issues with an academically satisfying method that will produce results.

The four levels of analysis in International Relations are:

The system level comprises the global system in its entirety and looks at issues like the distribution of political power, the economic system, global governance (international organisations, laws and norms) and the diffusion of technology. Importantly, it also considers how these factors create conditions that impose themselves structurally on the other levels.

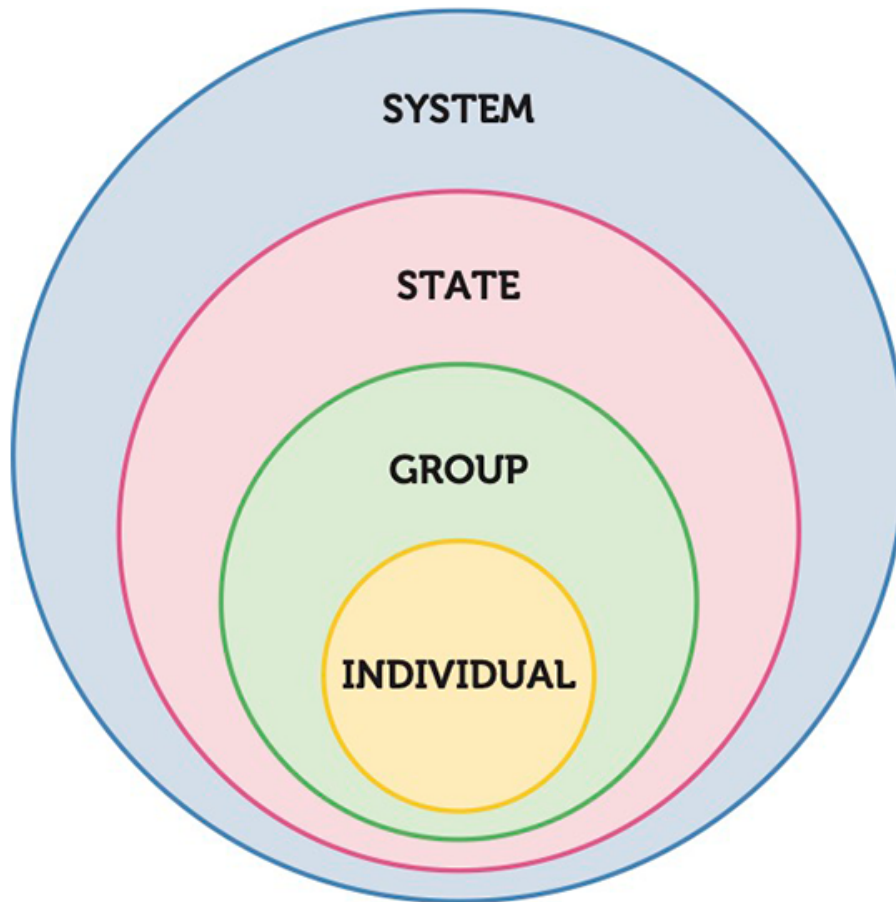
The state level looks at nation-states as actors in a set of particular external conditions, and actors with particular internal characteristics (such as whether they are democracies or whether they are large or small) and considers their strategic and economic positions.

The group level looks at actors within their social, organisational, professional and bureaucratic context, and points to the way in which they interact with their surroundings. Examples are political decision-makers in the context of governmental structures like political parties, non-governmental organisations and interest groups acting at the intersection between governments and societies.

The individual level looks at the behaviour and decisions of people both in governmental and non-governmental roles, examining their beliefs, fears and their personalities.

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About the author:

Dr Carmen Gebhard is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. She has a particular interest in small states as well as in inter-organisational relationships in security and defence matters.