

COMMENTS

Surveys, Experiments, and the Landscape of International Political Economy

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The contributions to this issue show that surveys and experiments offer exciting new tools for doing empirical research in international political economy (IPE). This essay cautions that the utility of these tools is not self-evident: Neither appeals to microfoundations nor to methodological individualism in constructing explanations for social phenomena themselves recommend an embrace of surveys or experiments. The field of IPE should worry that the focus on surveys and experiments will constrain not just methodological choice but also theoretical breadth, limiting the field's ability to conceive of what theories are admissible in learning about the global political economy.

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The field of international political economy (IPE) is defined by its object of study: “the politics of international economic exchange” (Lake 2006:758), or more broadly, “the interplay of economics and politics in the world arena” (Frieden and Lake 2000:1). As the contributions to this special issue confirm, the recent turn to testing theories of IPE using surveys and experimental methodologies represents an important and exciting new development for the field. One interpretation of the growth of this new body of research is that it represents a maturing field in which foundational assumptions are being subjected to increased scrutiny. A more critical interpretation is that researchers are coming to believe established findings about the relationships among aggregate phenomena in the international economy—the

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international system, relations among states, sectoral and factoral explanations for policy choices, and others—are incomplete or provisional in the absence of empirical tests using individual-level data.

This short comment advances the position that precisely because scholarship on international political economy commonly builds explanations at the levels of sectors, factors, governments, regimes, and states, there is a limit to the extent to which individual-level data can contribute to the field of IPE. Surveys, survey experiments, individual-level data, and related microlevel research designs are an invaluable addition to the methodological toolkit of IPE, but I argue that the use of individual-level data is neither necessary nor sufficient for constructing causal explanations about aggregate relationships in the global political economy. I make this argument by highlighting two problematic assumptions that appear to be at the heart of the experimental turn in IPE (and in political science more broadly). This sets the baseline for understanding the purposes for which surveys and experiments can be employed in IPE, and raises some thorny issues about how to integrate findings from individual-level analyses with theories that do not have theoretical microfoundations cast at the individual level. While I insist that these new kinds of data and new methodologies do complement existing IPE scholarship, I am uncertain about the terms upon which synthetic research programs can emerge.

MICROFOUNDATIONS, METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM, AND INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA

There are several good reasons to test macro- or mesolevel causal explanations using individual-level data. One is the relative control that surveys afford and the straightforward interpretation of the output of survey experiments. Done properly, surveys can help to elicit the actual beliefs and choices of individuals, freeing the researcher from the necessity of building explanations based on assumptions about what these are. Another is precision: Survey designs also force the researcher to outline the relationship between the analysis sample and the population of interest, a relationship which often remains opaque in snowball or convenience samples utilizing individual-level data. A third is interpretability: Experiments (in surveys, in the field, and in the lab) produce results that have straightforward causal interpretations. In a field such as IPE where much empirical research has struggled to provide credible research designs for making causal claims, this may be seen as a critical advance over the prior state of the art.

But some interest in survey-based research reflects disciplinary trends in mainstream political science that extend beyond international relations. Specifically, two false analogies: between individual-level data and

“microfoundations,” and between individual-level data and methodological individualism.

The appeal to microfoundations has motivated several important contributions to international relations scholarship in the past decade. For example, Jude Hays, Sean Ehrlich, and Clint Peinhardt carefully study whether governments can win over popular support for globalization through welfare and other social policies and motivate their inquiry in part with the statement that “no one has tested the microfoundations of the embedded liberalism thesis” (2005:474). Michael Tomz uses an ingenious survey experiment to test whether opinions consistent with the existence of audience costs can be found among a representative sample of US adults and appeals to a need for microfoundations as well: “if audience costs prove to exist under general conditions, this discovery would provide—for the first time—empirical microfoundations for a broad class of models in international security and international political economy” (2007:823–824).

Yet despite the growing use of the term “microfoundations” in contemporary IPE,¹ political scientists have not agreed on a definition of what microfoundations are. Most commonly, and following the quotes from Hayes et al. and Tomz cited previously, political scientists use microfoundations to denote individual-level findings about beliefs or preferences. However, when macroeconomists write down microfounded models, the “microfoundations” are *assumptions* about the optimizing behavior of individual agents. The general equilibrium models constructed from these assumptions are usually not *tested*, they are *calibrated*. To the extent that these models *are* tested, it is by matching some moments of a data series, not through individual-level surveys to check whether their models’ assumptions hold for real people. Maarten Janssen (1991:688) concludes that the turn to microfoundations in macroeconomics, and the subsequent developments within that literature, “were not brought about by severe testing.” Microfoundations in contemporary macroeconomics, in other words, are theoretical claims rather than empirical ones. Behavioral economics presents some trenchant empirical critiques of maximizing behavior among individuals, but usually this is done in order to construct better theoretical models (see, for example, Rubinstein 2006) rather than to overturn or test existing findings of causal relationships at the aggregate level.

The fact that microfoundations of macroeconomic models are theoretical assumptions rather than empirical findings need not require that IPE adopt the same perspective. The fields of international relations and political science may simply have a different definition than economics: microfoundations as individual beliefs, preferences, or opinions. But in fact,

¹A full-text search of the journals *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *World Politics* for the term “microfoundations” yielded the following results: 7 hits between 1991 and 1995, 13 hits between 1996 and 2000, 14 hits between 2001 and 2005, and 56 hits since 2006. Of the 13 hits from 1996 to 2000, 5 (38%) were from the 50th Anniversary issue of *International Organization*.

there is only one definition of microfoundations appearing in a prominent political science journal over the past two decades, and it accords more with the economists' view of microfoundations as theoretical assumptions than with any alternative: "A 'microfoundation' for a statistical specification is a formal model of the behavior of the political actors under study. The model might emerge from decision theory, game theory, or some other formalism" (Achen 2002:437). Achen's target is statistical models of political phenomena, but it fully inverts the relationship between microfoundations and any type of empirical evidence, at the individual level or otherwise. In this formulation, microfoundations are not empirical patterns, needing to be discovered in order to test theories; rather, they are the theory itself, specified in a rigorous enough way to discipline the search for evidence.

This prominent definitional statement suggests, at the very least, that there is an unacknowledged disagreement among political scientists about what microfoundations are and what they are for. And, in fact, there are competing uses of microfoundations that accord with Achen's perspective among prominent works in IPE as well. John Freeman's (2002) plea for microfoundations in the theoretical models of the interactions among central banks and other politicians is one notable example. Looking forward, reconciling these competing definitions of microfoundations will help to identify the points of tension between theoretical development and empirical testing in IPE. Moreover, "testing microfoundations" following the Achen/Freeman/macroeconomics approach may need to be done using methods other than surveys or experiments.

A thin interpretation of the methodological individualism may also underlie some efforts to put individual-level data to use in service of broad questions in IPE. Methodological individualism as commonly understood in the social sciences is, at base, a constitutive or ontological position: "whatever happens can ultimately be described exhaustively in terms of the individuals involved" (Arrow 1994:3), or put otherwise, "the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation" (Watkins 1957:106).² What does not follow from an individualist ontology is the conclusion that causal explanations for aggregate outcomes must rest ultimately on claims of what individuals think, feel, believe, or do. Even Elster's classic statement that "to explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the *actions and interaction* of individuals" (Elster 1989:13, emphasis added) conflates the two positions. In one recent critical overview of methodological individualism, Christian List and Kai Spiekerman (2013) explain how methodological individualism does not negate the existence of aggregate causal relations that supersede the explanatory power of individual causal mechanism:

²So the "methodological" in methodological individualism is a misnomer. See Udehn (2002).

It is entirely possible that *social* properties, not *individual-level* ones, display the most systematic causal relations in some social phenomena. . . . This *explanatory* holism, however, does not imply any more radical form of holism that gives some kind of *metaphysical* priority to social structures over and above the individuals living in them. (2013:629–630)

Armed with this understanding, we can see that individual-level evidence drawn from opinion surveys that is inconsistent with a macrolevel theory is only sometimes a reason to discard the latter. It all depends on the theory.

One illustrative contrast between constitutive versus causal claims about individual preferences in IPE may be drawn from Kenneth Scheve and Matthew Slaughter's (2001a, 2001b) pathbreaking analyses of individual preferences toward trade and immigration. Scheve and Slaughter introduce each with a direct claim that "a complete political-economy model of trade policymaking must somehow characterize individuals' preferences over trade policy" (Scheve and Slaughter 2001b:267), citing Dani Rodrik's (1995:1458) argument that "in principle a political-economy model of trade policy must . . . contain a description of individual preferences over the domain of policy choices available to policymakers." Rodrik's assertion is incontrovertible as a constitutive claim: Someone must have preferences over policies, and the ability to enact them, for it to make sense to model policy from a political economy perspective.³ His assertion, however, does not entail that preferences have causal implications for every model of trade policy, or more precisely, for the importance of every kind of individual in that model of trade policy. For example, one might easily construct a model of economic policymaking in democratic societies in which mass preferences exist, can be explained by existing theories of the distributional implications of trade policy, but do not serve as an input to the decisions of policymakers who enact policy choices under broad conditions.⁴ In that case, policymakers' preferences have causal power, but not survey respondents' preferences.

These points have implications for survey-based research in IPE that are not properly understood. If microfoundations are often theoretical assumptions rather than empirical claims, and if evidence about what individuals

³There are alternative ways to theorize trade policymaking aside from what Rodrik terms the political economy perspective, focusing on bureaucratic politics, national interests, national identity, and others.

⁴In other work, Rodrik himself appears to follow this line of reasoning. Noting the dramatic liberalization of international trade and the absence of a concomitant liberalization of international migration in the advanced industrial economies, he writes that "the bias towards trade and investment liberalization is certainly not due to the fact that that is politically popular at home (whereas labor flows are not). The median voter in the advanced countries is against both immigration *and* imports: fewer than 1 in 5 Americans and Britons reject import restrictions when they are asked their views on trade policy" (Rodrik 2002:21, emphasis in original). The specific model of trade policy formation Rodrik has in mind is unspecified.

think or do is not essential for every causal explanation, then looking for individual-level data in support of a macrolevel causal relationship is not self-evidently a productive exercise. It must be defended with respect to a specific theoretical proposition or causal relationship. Returning to the audience costs example, Tomz's careful wording of his description of his contribution—"empirical microfoundations for a broad class of models" (2007:823, emphasis added)—is critical, highlighting that (1) this is a particular understanding of microfoundations, and that (2) there exist other models of audience costs without such individual-level implications for survey respondents. The challenge of specifying with precision how individual-level data speak to general theoretical propositions plagues any enterprise in the social sciences that aims to refine theories or causal relationships among social aggregates using individual-level data. It just so happens that the working definitions of IPE as a field—"the politics of international economic exchange" or "the interplay of economics and politics in the world arena"—entail the centrality of aggregate political and economic outcomes in the field's domain of inquiry.

Surveys, of course, can sample from many different populations of individuals: MTurkers, citizens, voters, business owners, investors, bureaucrats, political elites, and others. Experiments can make use of these samples too. Some populations are more relevant to IPE than others: IPE as a field has richer expectations about how individual investors ought to think, and how they ought to behave in response to different stimuli, than how young men filling out Internet surveys should think and behave. So, Layna Mosley's (2003) interviews with individual market participants are fundamental to her argument about the effects of global capital market integration on national policymaking, and this work illustrates one case in which there is a clear role of individual-level data in studying the politics of the global economy. Another example where surveys play an integral role in supporting a well-specified theoretical argument is Tim Büthe and Walter Mattli (2011), in which business surveys provide unique insights into how firms and regulators jointly construct regulatory standards and enact regulatory practices. Their theory suggests that these are the units whose actions and interactions constitute private regulation in the global economy, and this justifies focusing on them.

But for many questions at the core of IPE, surveys—even when warranted by the theory—are often prohibitively expensive. It is fairly easy to get a sample that looks enough like the American voter to replicate experiments (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012); it is next to impossible to get a sample of Chinese provincial officials looking for mineral resources in Angola to explore two-level games in South-South investment. Not surprisingly, Mosley collected individual-level data using primarily interviews rather than surveys. Büthe and Mattli's contribution is distinctive in the effort required to collect the business survey data.

A COMPLEMENTARY ENDEAVOR?

The core argument in favor of surveys and experiments as tools for IPE is because we have well-specified theories about individual-level phenomena that pertain to the questions that animate the field. Most obviously, we may simply be curious about how people think about the global economy. In that case, findings about trade policy preferences (Scheve and Slaughter 2001b) are valuable insights into individual preferences about international economic exchange even if they do not ultimately serve as inputs to a larger causal arguments about policy outcomes. It also invites productive exchanges about the role of distributional politics versus other factors in shaping preferences over international economic exchange, as in Jens Hainmueller and Michael Hiscox's (2007) careful exploration of whether college education proxies for skill or socialization in the formation of preferences about immigration. The findings in Judith L. Goldstein and Margaret E. Peters (2014) and Benjamin E. Bagozzi, Thomas Brawner, Bumba Mukherjee, and Vineeta Yadav (2014) can be read in this light. It could also be the case that individual choices are themselves the direct inputs to the politics of international economic exchange. This is the case with the two Icesave referenda, in which an absolutely critical aspect of Iceland's international economic relations was subject to popular vote. The results in K. Amber Curtis' (2014) analysis do not directly speak to the question of individual vote choice, but her approach does help to contextualize the factors that may have shaped the results of the two referenda. It is also possible to view some research on using surveys and experiments to explore issues such as trade, immigration, and conflict as not actually "about" IPE but rather about debates in political psychology about socialization, other-regarding preferences, framing effects, and other cognitive mechanisms in the study of public opinion that can be revealed through IPE topics.

It is also possible to employ survey and experimental techniques on populations that are not comprised of individuals: firms, unions, trade associations, or others. Here, the experimental methodology remains but is used to explore the practices of one class of collective actors in the global economy rather than a sample of individuals. This is one creative example of keeping the focus on a collective actor that is relevant to real-world problems in the global economy while hewing closely to the principles of experimental design.

It should be clear, then, that the intellectual space is wide open for the field to embrace the new contributions that survey and experimental methodologies bring, even if I am correct that some of the interest in these methodologies is predicated on a faulty understanding—one which pervades most of political science as a whole—of what microfoundations are and methodological individualism means.

Yet the fact remains that individual-level data can *at best* only complement, never replace, aggregate-level research on the global political economy. The nagging question is how to integrate findings from surveys and experiments into existing theoretical debates and what to do when findings are not complementary. Here, there is creative work to be done, perhaps through explicating more fully the “bridge assumptions” that relate macrosocial conditions to expectations about individual behavior and the “transformation rules” that relate individual-level findings to macrolevel social phenomena (see Coleman 1990; Raub, Buskens, and Van Assen 2011:2-8).⁵ But since the standards of evidence for survey researchers and experimentalists differ from those working with observational data on collective actors in the international economy, it is unclear to me how contradictory findings could ever be reconciled.

For some, reconciliation may indeed be impossible, which raises concerns about the future direction of the discipline. The most worrying development for the field of IPE would be if the field were to come to believe that only individual-level explanations count, or that we only know things that we learn from experimental protocols. This would be equally as unproductive a condition as one in which surveys and experiments play *no* role in IPE. In the discussion of surveys and experiments in the introduction to this special issue, I am struck by the following claim:

We suggest that the feasibility of using experimental methods for statistical tests, which allows for evaluation of causal relationships at the microlevel, may in fact incentivize scholars to develop well-specified theories and claims of the microlevel mechanisms at work in each theory. This may in turn pave the way for more logically consistent theoretical models in IPE. (Jensen, Mukherjee, and Bernhard 2014)

The problem with this statement is that there are many “logically consistent theoretical models” in IPE that do not rest on the behavior of the types of individuals who could respond to surveys or experiments.

Macroeconomics offers a cautionary tale in this regard. The “old Keynesian” aggregate demand-aggregate supply (AD-AS) framework is perfectly logically consistent, in the strict sense that one can derive conclusions that follow logically from its premises. But it cannot be reconstructed from the optimizing behavior of individuals or households, so a generation of macroeconomists has concentrated on developing macroeconomic models with microfoundations, resulting in Real Business Cycle theory and the New Keynesian response. Today, many wonder if these theoretical developments have been productive, when the old-fashioned, nonmicrofounded Keynesian seems to work just fine when coherent policy analysis is most needed

⁵I thank Gerald Schneider for alerting me to this literature.

(Krugman 2012). In this case, logically consistent models without individual-level theoretical microfoundations are preferable to microfounded theories that may not produce coherent models of entire economies—which, in the end, is the purpose of developing those theories. Returning to IPE, then, if the experience of macroeconomics is any indication, we must be skeptical that by priming us to think about the individual-level implications of theories, surveys lead to create more logical, more coherent, or more useful theories.

Similar questions arise about the use of experiments in IPE. Within other fields—including developmental economics, which the editors of this special issue rightly note has inspired some of the new methodological developments in IPE—there has been some pushback against the belief that experiments are “the gold standard” for generating knowledge, estimating causal parameters, or anything else. Concerns about external validity, ad hoc theorizing, and the sometimes artificial contexts in which experimental data are collected are well known, so I do not repeat them here (on these, see Barrett and Carter 2010; Rodrik 2008). Instead, I want to focus on the possibility of learning about the social world without experimenting.

Commenting on Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo’s (2011) recent summary of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in development economics, Angus Deaton (2012) observed that that experimental evidence obtained from RCTs is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning about development. Experiments are not necessary because most of what humankind has learned, it has learned through trial and error. Experiments are not sufficient because the estimand in RCTs is almost never the policy treatment effect about which scholars wish to learn.⁶ For IPE, though, the challenges run deeper: RCTs have the benefits of being actual interventions in the lives of actual people that measure directly the outcomes that they seek to measure. Even the most creative experiments in IPE, such as Matthew Brigham, Michael Findley, William Matthias, Chase Petrey, and Daniel Nielson (2013), unavoidably resort to analogies; in this case, “respond to an email” is interpreted as evidence of organizational learning.

I conclude from this discussion that a new focus on surveys and experiments represents a far greater challenge to the existing ways of producing knowledge in IPE than has been understood. The stakes for the open economy politics tradition are high: integrating findings from individual and aggregate data that do not agree, and in the future, adjudicating between theories that have implications that can be relatively easily tested through surveys and experiments, and those that do not.⁷ While I do not have systematic evidence on this account, I believe—based on my personal experience as a

⁶See Heckman and Vytlačil (2001) for a thorough discussion of how the estimands of various treatment effects estimators can be related to general policy decisions.

⁷The stakes for what Oatley (2011) calls “non-reductionist” IPE are far higher, although I have not spelled these out here.

participant in meetings of the International Political Economy Society, and as an interested observer of the field—that we are already seeing a change in the way that scholars working with surveys and experiments conceive of what questions are interesting to study, what theories provide admissible answers to these questions, and what evidence counts.⁸ At just the time in which IPE should be poised to study critical problems in the interplay of economics and politics in the world arena, these intellectual currents may dissuade scholars from believing that these problems can be studied at all, or even seeing that these problems exist.

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⁸This point echoes the discussion in Shapiro (2005).

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