RESEARCH METHODS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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International Relations (IR) is a field of study with a rich genealogy of methodological contestation that draws upon diverse traditions of research in the social sciences. From IR's emergence as an academic field of inquiry in the early 20th century, it has drawn inspiration from a number of diverse disciplines: law, economics, political science, history, and sociology, to name a few examples.[1] Importantly, IR also incorporated methodological traditions, and research methods, from these disciplines. At times the traditions of some of these disciplines, such as economics, made a deep imprint upon IR scholarship. Yet, this cross-disciplinary engagement, which gave us the diverse toolbox of research methods presented within this book, should not be interpreted as suggesting that IR is a discipline where 'anything goes' in terms of research practice. Indeed, although Stephen Walt (2011b) points out that we should avoid attempts to impose a single method or theoretical perspective on the field as this would limit research agendas to a narrow scope of questions that could be addressed by the popular method of the day, we should also strive to produce methodologically rigorous research that meets the standards of inquiry within the methods and methodological traditions with which we engage. To be sure, far from IR scholarship lacking methodological rigor, we, as students or scholars of IR, are confronted with the task of reconciling a field of study that welcomes methodological plurality while also adhering to rigorous standards in methods.

This textbook on research methods recognizes this plurality of methods and does not aim to promote a single approach or method for the field. Nevertheless, IR research methods should be held to the same standard demanded across the social sciences. This allows for a unified approach to methods that vigorously interrogates research methods and methodologies even in the context of the diverse research agendas that fluctuate in response to rapid transformations

and heated policy debates that characterize our rapidly evolving field of study and practice.

IR's diverse methodological traditions have resulted in researchers, in both scholarship and practice, making use of a diverse array of research methods. Unlike fields of study such as anthropology, which make use of core methods built around ethnography and group observation, IR has brought with it research methods from a number of fields: anthropology, economics, law, political science, and sociology. Thus, an understanding of a broad spectrum of social science methods is a necessary prerequisite for academic or policy literacy. A strong grasp of research methods not only unlocks the tools necessary for you to contribute to IR scholarship, but also reinforces critical thinking skills that constitute prerequisites for a number of research-focused careers that range from policy roles within foreign ministries, to decision-making roles within business or financial forecasting, or research intensive positions within inter-governmental or non-governmental organizations. As such the forthcoming chapters can be seen as a roadmap for academic writing, but they also contain a wider relevance for anyone pursuing research on topics or themes related to international politics.

The relative absence of research methods textbooks in the field has created an unnecessary barrier to research for students of IR, which might leave you questioning what **methodology** and methods mean in a field as broad and diverse as IR.[2] Unlike North American political science, where research methods training is a core part of the curriculum across political science programs (Van Evera, 1997), students of IR are often introduced to, and asked to, contribute to theoretical debates within the field without a firm grasp of underlying methodological debates. Indeed, theoretical and methodological contestations have long frustrated those who attempt to engage with salient topics in international politics.

Most research essays in IR are empirically grounded in some event in international politics and aspire to be policy relevant. For example, you probably approach the field from the perspective of an interested observer of international politics rather than as a partisan to hotly contested theoretical warfare, and thus you would like to explain what you observe rather than use theory as your initial point of departure. This discrepancy alone creates a certain amount of discomfort for those who attempt to link their interests to theories of IR that are of a more general and abstract hue. In sum, research topics that are often of interest include a wide range of issues often plucked from the day's headlines: the causes of conflict in a particular country, or the outbreak of revolutions, the negotiation and durability of peace agreements, political violence and terrorism, corporate accountability for human rights abuses, to international responses to climate change, to name a few.

Meanwhile, although the general focus of theoretical contestation within IR migrates over time: from liberalism to realism, to neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, to **constructivism** and beyond, the underlying methodological contestations between those who embed their research within an empiricist

natural science tradition and those who embed their research within a more reflexive interpretive tradition endure. This enduring rivalry between these two broad traditions, which will be elucidated in greater detail shortly, is reflected across the diverse array of subfields in IR with which students of IR are likely to engage with during the course of their undergraduate or postgraduate studies. These subfields include, for example, international security, international political economy, foreign policy analysis, international organizations, and comparative politics.

In part because of the theory-focused nature of major debates within IR, starting a research project, for either an undergraduate essay or postgraduate dissertation, can appear a daunting task as students are faced with the initial problem of reconciling their interest in international politics with scholarly debates in the field. Students of IR have long sought to respond to questions that attempt to either explain or understand the world around us. In fact, the discipline of IR itself emerged from an attempt to understand the causes of war and peace in international politics. Recall that fundamental questions, such as those which sought to elucidate these determinants of war and peace, launched IR as a field of study in the aftermath of the First World War, when the first Chair of International Relations was established in Aberystwyth in 1919 (Burchill, 2001), and it remained a focus of inquiry throughout the Cold War as IR scholars sought to mitigate the risk of a nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union through deterrence theories grounded in rationalist assumptions regarding superpower behavior.[3]

In the post-Cold War years, intra-state conflicts expanded the focus of IR research as students and scholars sought to understand the proliferation of internal armed conflicts. Furthermore, developments such as the liberalization of international trade and regional political and economic integration saw the deeper integration of the study of domestic politics within states and bargaining models that reflected domestic interests into the field. In addition, the proliferation of human rights activism and human rights commitments entered into by states also led students of IR to attempt to understand what appeared to be a transformation in world politics as state interests, once argued by realists to be narrowly defined in terms of power, now seemed to encompass an expanding range of values and norms of appropriate behavior.

As you embark on research paper writing, you might not be aware that the questions you ask are embedded in underlying assumptions about how to interpret the social world. Every research article read you have read within your IR curriculum, and every research paper you will write, is embedded within a certain methodological framework and can be placed along the enduring divide between **empiricism**, on the one hand, and **interpretivism**, on the other. For example, when reading Cold War literature on international nuclear conflict, you might not be aware of the empiricist assumptions of those scholars who apply scientific methods to explain the conditions under which international

nuclear conflict is likely to escalate into a nuclear exchange. In short, academic writing cannot be disentangled from methodology, and methodology cannot be disentangled from academic writing.

While many students, and scholars embark upon selecting research methods without a deeper reflection upon the logic of their use, this chapter will draw linkages between methodologies and research methods through two broad epistemological approaches to IR research, empiricism and interpretivism, which will be explained in greater detail later in this chapter. While empiricism dominated the discipline during the latter half of the 20th century, IR after the turn of the century is now characterized by greater methodological plurality, with leading journals in the field containing a broad range of research that ranges from statistical methods and formal modeling to interpretive research.

From Methodology to Method

It is within this context that we turn to a fundamental question that will shape our research: how do we understand, interpret, or explain the social world around us? In fact, it is helpful to recall here that this question itself defines the very nature of research. Indeed, Pole and Lampard (2002) adopt a process-focused definition of research, which defines research as 'the search for knowledge' (p. 3). With this definition of research in mind, it is not surprising that the preceding question has been at the heart of philosophy of science debates and has produced a wide array of responses that range from claims that the scientific method used to understand the natural sciences can be applied to the social sciences to a complete rejection of the scientific method. Later, this chapter will chart these traditions with a focus on how they relate to student research topics and research methods choices with which students of IR are confronted.

Of course, at the very outset of the research process it is important not to get lost, or misdirected, by questions of methodology. IR's plurality in methodologies and its diversity in research methods often generates a significant amount of confusion, even among scholars in the field, as highlighted by Keohane's early challenge to feminist IR scholars to develop a research agenda that would allow for testable conjecture and **hypothesis** testing, something explicitly rejected on epistemological grounds by many feminist scholars within the field (Tickner, 2005). It is essential to remember that distinct methodological traditions not only deploy different methods, but also emerge from distinct traditions, theories, and principles of reasoning that have shaped research techniques used in the field. Therefore, they often ask fundamentally different questions.

Keohane's challenge is illustrative of a tendency to adopt a narrow view of methods that discounts alternative ways of asking questions and finding answers. In order to capture a broader perspective on IR research methods this chapter

presents an empirical–interpretive dichotomy to conceptualize the methodological divide within the field. This is not to make a claim that all research fits nicely along this continuum, nor should this divide be conceptualized as firm, or mutually exclusive. Rather, it is helpful to think of the empirical–interpretive divide as a fluid continuum along which researchers use a wide range of methods.[4] In order to determine where a student's own research falls along this continuum, students must first establish their research topic. Then, they must reflect upon the purpose of their research.

In sum, with IR reading lists containing works positing competing methodological claims and with classroom lecturers whose own research agendas fall within methodologically divergent research traditions, it is evident that IR is a discipline defined by its *inclusiveness* of competing approaches to methodology, although at times the perception that there is a certain methodological intolerance toward research that falls outside a particular tradition is also visible. However, overall, IR's inclusiveness comes at the cost of disciplinary cohesiveness and is therefore also a source of confusion among students seeking methodological guidance because unlike in other fields within the social sciences, where there is greater consensus around dominant methodological traditions, in IR no such consensus exists. Thus rather than conceptualize a hierarchy of research methodologies or methods, the following sections will introduce students to choices they will be confronted with in the research process. And, it will be these choices that will serve as a guide to both the research process and research methods. The next sections will therefore provide students with a roadmap to research practice within the context of these contested methodologies and will act as a basis for choices in **research design** and method that will be presented in forthcoming chapters. However, before moving on to questions of research design and method, it is first important to present the empirical–interpretive divide in greater detail.

Dueling Epistemologies: Empiricism and Interpretivism

When surveying existing literature in IR, it is immediately apparent that IR scholarship is far from monolithic in terms of approaches and methods. In fact, for the purpose of simplicity, it can be argued that IR scholarship can be grouped into two broad epistemological traditions that advance competing claims as to what should be regarded as acceptable knowledge within the field: empiricism and interpretivism. This dichotomy replicates a divide that is evident across the social sciences and coalesces around the question of what knowledge is of disciplinary value and what knowledge should we strive to produce? Two broad responses have been advanced to these discipline-defining questions. One approach argues that natural science methods should be applied to study the social world, while the other posits that the social world is not amenable to

study through scientific methods and **experimentation**. These two responses can be grouped under the labels of empiricism, empirically grounded explanatory research in IR, and interpretivism, reflexive research that rejects the application of natural science methods to the social world and instead interrogates ideas, norms, beliefs and values that underlie international politics.[5] Thus, despite the wide body of research that falls within the scope of IR, most research can be situated in one of these two traditions. In fact, IR scholars have described this division between these two traditions as 'a fundamental division within the discipline' (Burchill, 2001: 2).[6]

Although various authors have used different terms to describe the empiricist-interpretivist epistemological divide, the application of different terminology to essentially the same divide should not confuse students from the underlying division or obscure this divide between the two perspectives (see Table 1.1). In addition, rather than seeing empericism vs. interpretivism as strict dichotomy, it is helpful to approach this divide from the perspective of a choice that will inform how you will approach your own research and that reflects your own research interests.

Table 1.1   Empirical and Interpretive

Empirical	Interpretive
Naturalism	Constructivism
Behavioralism	Reflexivity
Explanation	Understanding

The aforementioned dichotomy does not neatly correspond to theoretical divides within dominant approaches to IR, such as between Realism and Liberalism or Constructivism. For example, there is a broad body of IR Constructivist research that falls within an explanatory empiricist tradition.[7] It is therefore instructive to take a step back from the theoretical debates, which students are likely to attempt to engage with in their own research essays, and approach questions of methodology and methods from the perspective of research purpose, as opposed to theoretical approach. This will in turn guide the formulation of a research question, and later research design. However, before moving on to research purpose, let us first establish the core features of empiricism and interpretivism.

Empiricism

As mentioned earlier, empiricism is drawn from the importation of natural science research practice into the social sciences. It is based on the broad assumption that

knowledge can be accumulated through experience and observation and is also often referred to as **positivism**. For those who see IR as a social science, IR should be studied in a systemic, replicable, and evidence-based manner.[8] For empiricists, the study of the social world is analogous to the study of the natural world. Theories of IR can be generated and tested through careful observation and experimentation. There is a rich tradition of empiricist research in IR that parallels that of political science and traces its roots back to founding figures of the discipline, such as Hans Morgenthau, who argued international politics was governed by 'objective laws', and Kenneth Waltz, who crafted a system structure image of international politics in his *Theory of International Politics*. Likewise, neo-liberals adopted the same positivist methodology to studying international politics; however, they reached differing conclusions in relation to conflict and cooperation in international politics than their neo-realist cousins. In sum, theories of International Relations with which students may be most familiar fall within the empiricist tradition. These theories seek to observe and explain state behavior while also testing **falsifiable** hypotheses derived from observations of empirical facts.

There are three core characteristics of IR empiricism: (1) that international politics can be studied as an objective reality that is a world 'out there' and distinct from the researcher; (2) theories are held to the standard of predictive validity; and (3) hypotheses tested in IR research should be falsifiable. An additional sub-characteristic that applies to a significant body of empiricist research is that it aspires to be of policy-relevance and to inform action by decision-makers.

At the outset of designing your own research, it is necessary to understand what side of the divide your own research interests gravitate toward. If you wish to explain events, developments, or the behavior of actors in international politics, then empiricist research methods will provide the means to do so as they will unlock tools that allow for causal claims and explanations of developments and practices of international politics.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism also draws upon a rich tradition in IR among scholars whose aim is not necessarily to explain events, developments or trends. Instead, interpretivism, also referred to as **reflectivism** or **post-positivism**, focuses on understanding social meanings embedded within international politics. Unlike empiricists who aim to advance cumulative knowledge through observation and hypothesis testing, interpretivists aim to unpack core assumptions that underlie the positivist image of the world in an attempt to counter the perceived empiricist orthodoxy in IR. Interpretivist research agendas seek to understand identities, ideas, norms, and culture in international politics. Examples of interpretivist literature in IR include groundbreaking contributions by scholars such as Richard Ashley and Robert Cox who cautioned the empiricist epistemological position that limits

acceptable knowledge in the field to empirical observation, which fails to question the underlying social and power structures of international politics.

The principal claim advanced by interpretivists is that the distinction between the researcher and the social world, implied by empiricists, should be rejected. This is because, interpretivists argue, that the researcher intervenes in, or creates, observed social realities through their own role in knowledge production and thus alters the object under study. In other words, the researcher and the research subject are mutually constituted through **intersubjective** understanding, and therefore the object of research does not have its own objective existence outside this mutually constituted relationship (Klotz and Lynch, 2007: 12). The experimental environment of the science laboratory in which control experiments can be carried out to understand the interaction between two or more physical objects cannot be replicated in the social world where the researcher interacts, and develops a relationship with, the social objects under study. As such, concepts at the center of empiricist research agendas, such as explanation and causality are rejected in favor of research agendas dominated by attempts to understand social meaning in international politics.

Now that the distinction between empiricism and interpretivism has been established we can begin to use this divide to better understand which research methods tools we can make use of in pursuit of our own research. Given IR's focus on international politics, most student research papers attempt to engage with topical events or issues in the world today. The topics of events often tell us something about world politics that is relevant beyond the topic or event at hand. How do we get from a description of a given topic or event to larger claims about world politics?

From Theory to Method: Research Choices

IR's disciplinary focus on great debates, or contested theories of international relations, has the unfortunate unintended consequence of obscuring serious attempts to critically reflect upon research design and methods. IR's grand theories, such as neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism, operate at a high level of abstraction that aims to elucidate general patterns of behavior decoupled from space and time, and therefore may seem hard to penetrate from the perspective of a student wishing to write on a topical occurrence in world politics. To be sure, while students of IR acquire a strong grasp of core theoretical tenants and controversies within the discipline through introductory texts (Baylis et al., 2010; Burchill et al., 2001), the discipline's internal gap between theory and policy forms a barrier to those attempting to make their own initial contributions to IR research (Walt, 2005).

However, at the same time, often relatively straightforward questions or policy debates in international politics reflect underlying theoretical contestations in IR

literature. When we think about a particular event in world politics, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s or the 2003 Iraq War, there are a host of theoretical approaches to IR, which would lead us to widely divergent policy recommendations. In relation to the former Yugoslavia, those who saw the war as the result of the aggressive behavior of a select few autocratic leaders, such as Slobodan Milosevic, argued for international intervention to bring about an end to the bloodshed – and later demanded regime change to bring about a sustainable peace in the region. On the other hand, those who saw the conflict as the product of deep-seated ancient ethnic animosities cautioned against intervention, as they saw little hope for internationally driven peace-building efforts in the aftermath of an inter-ethnic armed conflict. Likewise, in relation to the 2003 Iraq War, competing theoretical perspectives on both whether or not Saddam Hussein could be deterred from aggressive behavior and on democratization and democratic peace offered divergent policy prescriptions and forecasts for the likely aftermath of the initial US-led invasion.[9] Thus, if we approach theory from the perspective of a causal conjecture of what is likely to occur under certain conditions, then the bridge between topics of interest and theoretical debates becomes more visible.

Now that a relationship to theory has been established the question of method arises. In order to simply start thinking about methods, it is helpful to recall that research methods are 'techniques for collecting data' (Bryman, 2008: 31). These can include quantitative methods to interpret large **datasets** or **qualitative methods** to allow research to delve deeper into specific events, places, organizations, or personalities. However, before embarking upon data collection it is imperative that the researcher has a clear idea of what data to collect. This is especially the case now given the massive body of data that is within easy reach of students of IR.

Data in IR is widely available and rapidly growing. In relation to secondary sources alone, there are an increasing number of online traditional and non-traditional media resources, electronic databases, and libraries that are all easily accessible to the researcher. As such, knowing where to begin data collection is as important as knowing what techniques are available, through which data can be interpreted. Data collection and data analysis thus require the researcher to make choices in terms of research topic, research question, research design, and research method. In short, what data we collect is always contingent upon what questions we ask.

Research is about making choices. From the very outset of the research process students are confronted by choices that will inform what kind of research essay they will write. Although students of IR have no trouble identifying topics of interest, such as international terrorism, human trafficking, civil conflict, the gap between student interest in, or detailed knowledge of, a particular phenomenon, event, or geographic area and the process of distillation of interest and knowledge into a methodologically cogent and theoretically informed research

paper often results in essays which fall into the gaps of either over-generalizing – 'I have studied a particular case and my findings therefore will explain a certain behavior across all cases' – or making unsubstantiated claims – 'I argue X, but have not presented relevant empirical data, or scholarly secondary sources, to substantiate this claim.'

Poor research choices result in essays and dissertations that are either unable to support key observations posited by the author or fail to make a contribution to scholarship at all. Often these poor research choices are the result of students taking short cuts in the research process. As mentioned earlier, essay or thesis writing often begins with the prospective author deciding to write on a topical event or trend in international politics. For example, a student's interest could be in the Arab Spring uprisings that began in Tunisia in January 2011 and set off a chain of on-going revolutions across the Arab World. The student, having followed closely media reports on the Arab Spring, already has a general idea of the topic at hand; however, this broad body of descriptive data does not provide guidance as to how to shift from collecting information on the Arab Spring to producing a cogent research essay that makes a contribution to scholarly literature. In short, at this stage the student remains unsure regarding what questions to ask, what type of research design to adopt, and what methods could be effectively used.

First, it is essential to narrow down the topic at hand. While Chapter 2 will assist in formulating a research question, before we can think about our research in terms of research questions, we need to first establish where the project is grounded in relation to the two epistemological perspectives outlined earlier: empiricism and interpretivism. In order to arrive at an answer, you should ask yourself what is your interest in a given topic? What do you want to know about it? What kind of knowledge do you want to create? Your response to these questions will help you make coherent choices in relation to research design and method. Do you aim to explain the causes of revolution? Are you interested in elucidating how authoritarian regimes that were perceived as resilient collapsed in the face of popular protests? Or what role opposition movements played in the Arab Spring revolutions? Perhaps, you are interested in the consequences of revolution. For example, what role will Islamists play in transitional processes? If these are topics you wish to explain, then an empiricist approach will allow you to select a research design and methods that will help you to begin to tease out causal relationships and explain events and outcomes.

Or is your interest more reflective? Are you interested in exploring the symbolism of the Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 that set off street protests across Tunisia? Are you interested in Western interpretations of the Arab Spring? Or perhaps, your interest is in discourses of revolution in the Arab Spring? Or would you like to explore evolving regional or ethnic identities in the context of political transformations? If so, you will find that an interpretivist approach to your research, and research method selection, will prove most helpful.

Table 1.2   Researching the Arab Spring: Empirical or Interpretive?

Empirical	Interpretive
I want to explain the causes of revolution.	I want to understand how revolution transformed local identities.
I want to explore the political role of Islamist movements before and after the revolutions.	I want to understand the symbolism of self-immolation in the context of the Tunisian Revolution.
I want to examine the constitution drafting processes in post-revolutionary Tunisia or Libya.	I want to understand Western perceptions of the Arab Spring and how these have been shaped by recent transformations.

Table 1.2 helps to integrate how your interest in a given topic, or the questions you want to answer, will inform your choice in terms of what kind of research you will pursue. At this point, it is then necessary to both interrogate more deeply the topic area and attempt to explore what has been written already in the scholarly literature. While guidance on carrying out a **literature review** is provided in Chapter 4, here it is important to emphasize why a wider awareness of the field is a necessary precondition for any effective data analysis. For example, a student wanted to write an essay that would explain the causes of conflict in the former Yugoslavia. In the end the student argued *the wars in the former Yugoslavia were caused by ancient ethnic hatreds*. Such an essay, explicitly empiricist and focused on making a causal argument about the causes of civil conflict, represents a large number of student research projects in that it is an attempt to explain a salient question in international politics. Indeed, the essay aimed to be policy relevant through presenting to decision-makers an explanation of the causes of internal conflicts in the aftermath of the Cold War, and thus aspired to inform policy responses to internal conflicts.

However, while the student was aware of the empirical focus of this research and explicitly set out to explain the causes of a particular conflict, the student narrowly collected data from select media reports and editorials published during the 1990s, and did not make use of more recent literature that forms the foundation of a scholarly consensus in the field, that the conflict was elite-driven, or in other words was caused by political elites seeking to solidify their hold on power. Forthcoming chapters on writing a research design, writing a literature review, qualitative, and case study research will together offer a guide to avoid such research pitfalls.

On the other hand, another essay on the same topic: *what are the causes of the war in the former Yugoslavia*, failed to make an argument at all. Instead, rather than investigating causality, a summary of the conflict in the form of descriptive essay was provided. Thus, it was little more than a timeline of the war in the former Yugoslavia. While both of these examples aim to impart knowledge of the

conflict in the former Yugoslavia to the reader, neither was an effective research essay. The first was an attempt to explain the conflict while the latter constituted little more than a descriptive essay. While both essays are rich in detail, neither succeeds in making an argument, either causal or interpretive. This is not because of a lack of knowledge of the subject matter, but instead because of a failure to effectively apply methods tools presented in the forthcoming chapters.

In sum, in order to avoid falling into the trap of making unsubstantiated causal claims or writing an essay that is little more than a description of an event, students must bridge the gap between interest and knowledge on the one hand and methods on the other. One way to do this has been presented in this chapter: *research interests* and *purpose* should be first located along the aforementioned empiricist–interpretivist divide. This will allow research essays to carry out two functions. The first is to add to empirical knowledge about a given topic and the second is to contribute new insights to scholarly debates within the discipline. Only once the purpose of the research essay is understood can a research question and research design be constructed that will allow the student to write a coherent research essay, and thus select relevant research methods presented in the forthcoming chapters.

Thinking about Methodology, Epistemology and Ontology

Methodological debates within IR have long been at the heart of theoretical contestations within the discipline as scholars and students of IR attempt to either explain events and trends in international politics or understand world politics. Methodologies, *or the means through which we acquire knowledge*, are closely related to two related concepts: **epistemology** and **ontology**. While epistemology was discussed earlier in the context of our discussion of the two epistemological approaches, the question of ontology remains to be addressed. It should be emphasized that all three concepts, methodology, epistemology, and ontology, are important for establishing at the outset the why, how and for what purpose we are undertaking our research project. Ontology frames the object of study. For interpretive research agendas, ontology is often at the center of inquiry as interpretive authors attempt to deconstruct the meaning of entities that we take for granted as existing in international politics, such as states or organizations. The second is epistemology, or the study of knowledge and knowledge production. Empiricists and interpretivists make epistemological claims about what forms of knowledge have value. Are valuable contributions to scholarship those that involve rigorous testing of variables to explain a certain outcome? Or are they those that question the ontology of actors in international politics, such as states? Taken together, methodology, or the means of knowledge acquisition; epistemology, what knowledge we should

acquire; and ontology, the study of being, constitute a core foundation upon which we will build our research agendas. Therefore, a basic awareness of methodological traditions in IR will help unlock appropriate research designs and methods for your particular research project. An awareness of what is under study and how to go about studying presupposes ontological and episte-mological assumptions about International Relations.

Ontology, Epistemology, and Methodology

Ontology: the study of being, the nature of social entities

Example: Do objective entities that we take for granted in international politics, such as States, have an external reality? Or more simply, what is a state?

Epistemology: the study of knowledge, how is knowledge produced

Example: Are certain forms of knowledge privileged? Do we focus on explanation?

Methodology: ways through which we acquire knowledge

Example: How do we know, or the underlying logic of knowing.

Back to Basics: Thinking Critically about International Relations

For many students, engaging with theoretical debates within the field can prove daunting at the outset of a research project. One way to bridge the gap between theoretical debates within the discipline and your own research interests is to examine how the particular issue that interests you relates back to wider theo-retical dilemmas. Another means of arriving back at these debates is a simple thought exercise aimed at evaluating claims advanced by states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, or even scholars. What do international organizations claim to achieve? What about states? Are they effec-tive? How do we know whether or not they are effective? There are a host of questions that come to mind simply by taking a cursory look at any number of these international organizations' websites. The box on the next page presents an example drawn from the United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Thinking Critically about International Relations

States, International Organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Multinational Corporations all make empirical claims about how they shape international politics or developments. As students of International Relations, our research should provide a means to test many of these claims. Take for example the claim put forward by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia on its website:

'… by removing some of the most senior and notorious criminals and holding them accountable the Tribunal has been able to lift the taint of violence, contribute to ending impunity and help pave the way for reconciliation.' (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia)

A firm grasp of research methods will allow you to immediately recognize that two **causal mechanisms** are argued to lead to three major outcomes.

Causal Mechanisms

- Removing senior criminals
- Holding senior criminals accountable

Outcomes

- Lifts taint of violence
- Contributes to ending impunity
- Helps pave the way for reconciliation

Students with an interest in international justice may attempt to interrogate the claimed causal relationship between holding persons accused of war crimes accountable before an international criminal tribunal and the promotion of reconciliation. Already, you should note that independent and **dependent variables** can be identified.

While the terminology presented above might not yet be entirely clear, there is a common-sense evaluation of claims that can be made at the outset. What does the Tribunal claim to achieve and how does it claim to achieve it? Alternatively, the question could be posed: what does the Tribunal mean by reconciliation? Or reconciliation among whom? Individual victims, ethnic groups, states? At this point you should be able to identify that the first question would lead the researcher down a route of observation and testing: empiricism. While the second question focuses on the meaning of a complex social practice, reconciliation, which requires the researcher to investigate the very concept of reconciliation and how it is used by the Tribunal: interpretivism. Finding

responses to these questions will already serve as a basis for thinking about and developing research questions, design and methods that will be presented in the forthcoming chapters. Think back to Table 1.2, which mapped a series of potential research questions against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. Now try to do the same in relation to the Yugoslav Tribunal in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3   International Justice in International Relations

Empirical	Interpretive

Now that you have completed Table 1.3 you can go on to thinking about how to translate these questions into research questions that can serve as a basis for a research essay or dissertation.

Chapter Summary

IR is a field of study defined by contested methodologies and methodological plurality. As such, there is a diversity of theoretical approaches to explaining or understanding world politics alongside a diverse range of research methods available to the student and practitioner of IR. When embarking upon undergraduate or postgraduate essay or dissertation writing there are a number of questions that should be asked even before thinking about a research question. These questions are:

- What is your topic of interest?
- What is the purpose of your study?
    - Is it to explain a certain event, trend or phenomena in world politics?
    - Is it to interrogate the meaning of a particular discourse or practice in world politics?
- Where do you fall along the empiricist/interpretivist divide?

Your response to the first question should be fairly straightforward. The second requires you to think about what it is you want to do. What kind of knowledge

do you want to add to a particular issue? Once you have settled on a response to this question you are then able to situate your own research along the two broad traditions in IR research presented in this chapter.

In order to disentangle this divide between contested research agendas, that often fail to communicate with one another, the empiricist–interpretivist epistemological debate in IR was presented to help understand and evaluate the utility of each set of methods tools presented later in this book. It was emphasized that questions of methodology and epistemology are best approached from the perspective of your own interests and research topic. Start from your topic and purpose and ask yourself do you want to explain events in the world 'out there'? Or do you want to question the social meaning of a particular practice in international politics? Once you have established your research topic and purpose, you can then go on to thinking about your research question with an awareness of how the question you pose will in turn determine which methods are most appropriate for your research.

Suggested Further Reading

Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Terry Nardin, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True (2013) *Theories of International Relations,* 5th edition. Palgrave Macmillan: New York. See the Introduction, pp. 1–31.

Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990) *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Clarendon Press: Oxford. This book provides a more in-depth exploration of the supposed dichotomy between explanatory approaches and approaches aimed at understanding.

John Gerring (2012) *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework,* 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In particular for an overview of an empirical perspective on science see 'Chapter 1: A Unified Framework', pp. 1–23.

Jonathon W. Moses and Torbjorn L. Knutsen (2012) *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research,* 2nd edition. For an overview of methodological perspectives see Chapter 1 (pp. 1–18). For an introduction to the empirical, or as Moses and Knutsen refer to it, naturalist, approach see Chapter 2 (pp. 19–51). And, for an overview of an interpretivist, or as Moses and Knuten refer to it, constructivist, approach see Chapter 8 (pp. 169–203).

Notes

1   Chris Brown argues that International Relations, prior to its emergence as a field of study after the First World War, was previously a subset of other disciplines, namely, history, international law, economics and political theory. See Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations*, 2nd edition. New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 20.

2   Among the few texts that attempt to engage with research methods for students of IR are Frank P. Harvey and Michael Brecher's *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies*.

Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002. Another, yet narrower text is Detleft F. Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias' *Cases, Numbers, Models: International Relations Research Methods*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004. For a qualitative methods specific text see Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash (eds), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.

3 For an illustrative collection of essays see Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (eds), *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*. New York: University Press of America, 1993.

4 This continuum is analogous to Klotz and Lynch's use of the term spectrum to differentiate between what they described as positivist and post-positivist epistemological positions. Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007, p. 11.

5 Hollis and Smith distinguished between the two with reference to empirical approaches, which aimed to explain, and reflective approaches, which aimed to understand. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Andrew Linklater, 'The question of the next stage in international relations theory: a critical-theoretical point of view', *Millennium*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1992.

6 This divide has been described under numerous terms that all reference the same schism: causal vs. constitutive, naturalist vs. constructivist, explanatory vs. constructivist. Scott Burchill refers to this divide as a fundamental division within the discipline.

7 See Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2001, pp. 391–416. Although some authors use constructivism synonymously with interpretivism when discussing research methodology, the term interpretivism is used here to avoid confusion over the use of constructivism as a theoretical tradition in IR, which also includes explanatory studies of norm evolution.

8 For examples of research methods texts which adopt a scientific approach to disciplines related to IR see Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sydney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, or John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

9 Stephen Walt makes a parallel argument in relation to both the former Yugoslavia and Iraq. See Stephen M. Walt, 'The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 8, 2005, p. 28.