

DOING INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Global and Local Methods

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ONE

Understanding world knowledge

1.1 Ontology and epistemology

1.2 Reflexivity

‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ This idea often justifies the historical bases of international studies. The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana wrote the phrase in his *Life of Reason* in 1905. But his preceding sentence is now forgotten: ‘when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual’.¹ Colonial ideologies still influence the Euro-American **worldviews** that dominate present-day international ‘knowledge’.² We should also ‘remember the past’ through the histories of the world written by Arab, Chinese, Greek, Persian, Hindu, Slavic, Roman and other non-European scholars.

Knowledge comes from the intellectualization of facts or opinion, usually by comparison (C14.1). The first part of this chapter outlines how we question the existence of things that we take for granted – *ontology* – and then how we come to know about these things – *epistemology*. This is particularly important within international studies, because the scale of knowledge is very large, and this creates endless possibilities for grand claims based on nothing more than ‘authority’. For the researcher, this questioning starts from a *reflexive* approach to all aspects of a study – an ongoing personal assessment of “where we are coming from”, and how our own, and other, worldviews, may affect the objectivity of a study. Because the world is a big place, most world knowledge arrives through intermediaries, and that is a problem as al-Bīrūnī noted a thousand years ago (Figure 1.1).³

The tradition regarding an event...will invariably depend for its character as true or false upon the character of the reporters, who are influenced by the divergency of interests and all kinds of animosities and antipathies between the various nations.

Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, *India* (circa 1030)

Figure 1.1 Reporters

1.1 Ontology and epistemology

Are we just avatars in a virtual reality game played by higher beings – just objects in a massive computer simulation? And if not, how can we prove it? **Ontology**⁵ – the study of how we know that something exists – can help to explore questions like this. How did something (an *entity*) come into existence, how do we prove it *is*, in what way does it *be*, how do we know it is *real*, and how can we *categorize* it?

Ontological questions can be posed in simple forms – What makes this event **international**? Could ‘international’ situations occur without the political construction of **nations**? Is this phenomenon truly **universal**? How do we demonstrate **global** impacts? Questions can also be framed as a *null ontological hypothesis*, a default assumption that something does *not* exist until we can show that it *does* – that nothing is universal, global, international or human, until we explain why it is. Broadly, philosophers take a stance between accepting that anything that is a noun exists (**realism**), or arguing that existence comes from a subtle interplay of experiences and mental events (**nominalism**). Some argue that nothing exists (**nihilism**).

Philip Dick proposes a basic test of existence, ‘Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.’⁶ And John Searle makes a useful distinction:

- some things are ‘*observer independent*’ – ‘brute facts’ that ‘exist independently of us’ (earthquakes, tides, weather);
- others are ‘*observer-relative*’ – ‘institutional facts’ that ‘depend on us for their existence’ (citizenship, laws, moral values).⁷

The Earth clearly exists ‘independently’, but nations only exist because of us. What about the ‘world’? To decide, we first need to define ‘world’ – is it the physical planet drifting aimlessly in space, is it the planet with its peoples, places and systems, or is it a geopolitical region as delineated by the UN? (Figure 2.6)

As mentioned in the Introduction, Yuval Harari’s lucid argument that ‘sapiens’ are the only animals that can create *imagined realities* – religions, financial systems, companies – is very significant when analysing the social world. Money is clearly an ‘imagined reality’ and this is very evident in currencies from cowry shells and paper dollar bills to *Bitcoin*. Around 97% of world money now only exists in cyberspace. Throughout this book, keep in mind that *people* exist objectively as a type of animal,

but when described in terms of ‘nationality’, ‘race’, ‘religion’ or ‘ethnic group’, these are imagined distinctions. *Places*, if described as a valley or sea exist objectively, but when a valley is a ‘border’, or seas become ‘territorial waters’, these are imagined places. The construction of these imagined things happens within social *systems* and related international institutions, which only exist in the human mind. These are constructed through the imagined knowledge in *documents* (C13), and now determine the future of the whole of our planet. Our Earth’s climate, seas and ecosystems exist objectively, but their fate is now controlled by our imagined realities.⁸

Ontology can also help to address other fundamental questions: is something real or ideal (is or ought), actual or abstract, fact or opinion, empirical or reasoned, known or believed? What are the *relationships* (ties, causal chains, reasoned links – “if this then that”) between *entities*, and what is the relationship and how do we know it exists?⁹ How do we justify the existence of *categories*, which are often a European invention? Until the 19th century, East Asian countries had no direct equivalents for distinctions such as science, religion and philosophy.¹⁰

International discourse is often based on supposedly obvious facts that are very questionable and can fuel conflict.¹¹ Development theories assume that improved development can come into existence through external intervention. But how do we know that countries would not develop, perhaps better, without that intervention? Within environmental economics, the idea of ‘green growth’ assumes that environmental constraints can be reconciled with economic demands. But is green growth just an alliterative oxymoron – can growth continue infinitely or are there limits and, if limited, how do we know when the limits are reached? The word ‘uncertainty’ is commonly used to describe our *risk society* era. Technology may have created new risks, but does that mean that our certainty about risk has declined? Arguably science has made human knowledge considerably more certain about world risks than in any previous generation. Are we certain that uncertainty is now less (or should that be more) uncertain? Within international relations, many mainstream theories depend on the idea that humanity is intrinsically chaotic, and this must be prevented by strong laws and aggressive policy. But how can we prove this ‘ontology of anarchy’?¹² Creating fear, without evidence, is an old political trick, but politicians with an academic background challenge it (Figure 1.2).

Cross-cultural ontology has distinct considerations,¹³ such as the cross-cultural aspects of *relational* ontology?¹⁴ Ontology is associated with the affirmation of identity through interpersonal communication, particularly when identity is in question, as among Palestinians.¹⁵ International dimensions often demand a logical questioning of seemingly illogical claims. Logically, countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia must still have witches and sorcerers, because they have laws against witchcraft and sorcery, sometimes resulting in execution.¹⁶ But to what degree is the ontology of witchcraft just being used for social control, as throughout Europe until recently? Similarly, sexuality is accompanied by ontological claims, which are contested cross-culturally.¹⁷ When, in 2012, the Iranian president,

The stated purpose [of the Immigration Bill] is to enhance the ability to deter people-smuggling to New Zealand...

...the Minister of Immigration was requested to provide the annual figures for the last 10 years showing the number of people listed in prosecutions confirmed to have been smuggled into New Zealand.

The Minister replied that 'The department's prosecution records do not record the number of people confirmed to have been smuggled into New Zealand...'

This bill rests on a fear based on complete ignorance of the facts. But whatever they might be, the numbers will have been minuscule, and so the only real significance of this bill has to be in its symbolism.

Let us look at the symbolism. It is based on a misperceived fear, it succumbs to the temptation to dog whistle to certain segments of the population...

Kennedy Graham MP, Green Party.
Speech on the Immigration Amendment Bill.
New Zealand Parliament, 17 April 2013

Figure 1.2 Challenging the ontology of anarchy

With permission: K. Graham

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claimed, 'In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country...In Iran we do not have this phenomenon.' He was discounting the fact that Iranian law formally addresses homosexual acts by men (*lavat* – sodomy) and women (*mosahegheh*). His courts executed people for breaking these laws.¹⁸ If there were no homosexuals in Iran, why would there be a need for laws and punishments to deal with homosexual behaviour?

Philosophers have now moved on from the age-old questions about whether gods exist independently of human existence, and whether the human mind exists independently of its body.¹⁹ But the increasing global influence of violent religious or quasi-religious ideologies should prompt new discussions, because the problems are rooted in persuading people to believe that certain things exist, without objective evidence. Once people accept, on the basis of belief but not evidence, that a god and a heaven exist, it becomes easy to persuade them that this god wants them to kill non-believers and the reward will be anything they desire in another imagined world. Scriptures can be misused to support this. Evangelical churches teach that the Old Testament is the word of their God and is literally true. It therefore supports the killing and torture of animals and humans,²⁰ killing people who hold different views including family members who try to challenge religious views,²¹ rewarding victorious soldiers with virgins from the defeated enemy to rape,²² and the ethic that children can be punished for the sins of their grandparents.²³

Quasi-religious ideologies are very similar. The idea that children can be punished for the sins of their parents pertains in North Korea, where the late Kim Il-sung now exists as the 'eternal president'. (Should new ambassadors therefore present their

credentials to a corpse?) All ideologies are open to ontological questioning, including familiar grand world theories. Environmentalist Barbara Ward provides a realistic take on Marx's rhetoric:

Karl Marx derives his critique entirely from Western ideas and sources...Dialectical materialism, the scientific secret of man's history,...has the grandeur and excitement of a great work of art – the somber force of a Verdi opera, the flashing vision of Goethe's *Faust*. But like them, it belongs to the world of imagination, not of fact...

The Marxist vision of history, with its cosmic sweeps from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to communism, is not true in the sense that a scientific experiment or a plain record of dates and happenings is true. It cannot be tested. No predictions can be based on it. And it is contradicted by a large variety of facts.²⁴

Comparing the ontological bases of religious doctrine and quasi-religious ideologies provides a way to question and challenge both.

Significant world issues arise within the 'ontology of nothing', which tries to establish whether nothing exists. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre explores nothing.²⁵ Nothing was the basis for many creationist ideologies, because the existence of nothing provided a void that needed a god to fill it. For many religious advocates, God was The Creator who made the world out of nothing, but this requires them to prove that nothing existed. Secular philosophers such as Jacques Lacan argue that nothing does not exist, and so a god as 'the creator' does not exist.²⁶ The deployment of nothing goes beyond creation myths and amusing arguments, and sometimes underpins major disputes.

thinking zone: what happens when nothing exists?

deploying nothing

The concept of nothing is very useful in political discourse, because it creates an impression that there is a gap that needs filling, which legitimates the actions of those who fill it. Consider:

- *Power vacuum* – an absence of political or other leadership.
- *Democratic deficit* – an absence of a Euro-American-style democratic government.
- *Terra nullius* – Roman law, 'Land belonging to no one' – Australian aboriginal history.
- *A land without a people for a people without a land.* – 'No other people, no other power, has ever created an independent state' in the land that is now Israel.*
- *Desert* – Latin *dēsertum* – 'an abandoned place' – The 'Great American Desert'.
- *Plains* – flat empty land. 'American Great plains', and home to the 'Plains Indians'.
- *Empty Quarter* (Rub' al Khali الربيع الخالي) – the large oil rich desert in Saudi Arabia.
- *Namakwa* (Kalahari Desert, South Africa) – a 'kind of vast, empty place', with large diamond and mineral mines. Namaland was the home of the indigenous *Nama*.

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- *Res nullius* – Roman law, 'Property belonging to no one'.
- *Void* – housing law: accommodation without an occupancy agreement. Hence, the 'Occupy' movement.
- *Failed/collapsed state* – a state that apparently has no, or an ineffective, government.
- *Frigid zones* – the Polar regions.
- *Space* – the place beyond Earth's atmosphere, containing everything except us.

[*See References for further information.²⁷].

Because of the large scale of world events, and the increasing use of big data (C6.5; C9.4), understanding how we, or others, know something is especially important within world studies. *Epistemology* – the study of theories of knowledge²⁸ – asks questions such as:

- What is the *origin* of the knowledge?
- How did the *empirical research* (and other experience) and *reasoned arguments* contribute to creating the knowledge?
- How *certain* (valid and error free) is the knowledge?
- Was the knowledge created *critically* (sceptically)?
- How has, or might, the knowledge *change* as other knowledge and understandings change?
- To what degree would the knowledge be seen as *generally true* (as 'a theory')?²⁹

An international perspective also raises questions about *cross-cultural* understandings of knowledge. Anthropologists would argue that 'traditional' or 'indigenous' knowledge might come more from practical experience, dreams and the spirit world, elders and other authorities.³⁰ Whose 'knowns' count most, and why?

thinking zone: how do we know the unknowns?

knowns

Former US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, concluded:

'There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.'

SO...

What are the significant 'known knowns', 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns' in: international relations, development studies, environmental politics, religion, war studies, human capabilities, international organizations?

information systems

Identify examples of *direct primary data* about states, i.e. the data does *not* reach you through indirect 'authorities'.

- From your personal perspective, are there any *certain* 'known knowns' about the examples you identify?
- Are there any '*unknowable* knowns' in the examples – seemingly factual claims which cannot be known because there are no methodologies to discover the truth about them?

archive

If we could set up a database of the misuse of 'unknowns' in international politics, what would be in that archive and who should maintain and fund it?

Because of the distance and scale of events, international knowledge is often based on an 'argument from *authority*',³¹ such as a government or commercial expert. The credibility of expert views assumes that:

1. the expert is usually correct about the subject,
2. there is a professional consensus that the expert is usually correct, and therefore
3. any further opinion from the authority on this subject is likely to be correct.

But the views of international experts are susceptible to the *halo effect*.³² We might judge an authority to be correct because the 'halo' of one particular above-average trait – wealth, tradition, position – can generate a perception that other qualities are above average – honesty, intelligence, diligence. These problems were recognized long ago by Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn. Like al-Bīrūnī, in 1377 he complained about unreliable authorities – 'Reliance upon transmitters' – and he recognized the 'halo' problem of 'authorities' (Figure 1.3).³³

People as a rule approach great and high-ranking persons with praise and encomiums [tributes]. They embellish conditions and spread their fame.

Students often happen to accept and transmit absurd information that, in turn, is believed on their authority.

Ibn Khaldūn (1377) *The Muqaddimah*
(Bk 1: Preliminary Remarks)

Figure 1.3 The 'halo effect' (Ibn Khaldūn)

International knowledge is often created to deceive, in the form of *propaganda*.³⁴ From the 1950s to 1980s, Eisenhower, Nixon and other American leaders deployed

the *domino theory* to justify the Vietnam War – that if Vietnam became communist then other countries in South East Asia would also fall.³⁵ The claim had no evidence-base. More than 5 million Vietnamese died in a pointless war, which cost America around \$165 billion. Misinformation is not just simple retrospective lies to cover up previous mistakes or misdeeds. It also comes in the form of *pre-emptive deceit* – political knowledge-creation that aims to get in first so that subsequent truth is less likely to be believed – as concerning Iraq in 2003.³⁶ This is explained further on the website.

Ontology and epistemology are often confused. Roy Bhaskar calls this the ‘epistemic fallacy’.³⁷ But although they are not the same, they are linked, and should both be kept in mind throughout a whole study, particularly when data is being reported, to avoid repeating questionable discourse. Where did the idea of an ‘axis of evil’ and ‘good and evil’ come from? The source is probably the Persian prophet Mani (مانی) (circa 216–276AD).³⁸ So when, (then) US president G.W. Bush deployed his ‘good and evil’ rhetoric about the ‘axis’ of supposed US enemies, including Iran, he was repeating an Iranian ideology.

1.2 Reflexivity

When the two Wright brothers were developing their ideas for the first aeroplane, if they argued about something, at some point they would deliberately swap sides in the argument.³⁹ This is an ancient Greek technique called *Dissoi Logoi*. Philosophers analyse how false logic arises, and an awareness of this can help to avoid weaknesses in arguments. Material on the website explains the familiar problems.

There are many relevant approaches to *reflexive* or *reflective* thinking – turning our mental processes back upon themselves. When developing intelligence tests in 1904, Binet assessed ‘auto-critique’ – the critical understanding of oneself.⁴⁰ Bourdieu provides philosophical arguments for reflexivity in sociology,⁴¹ and many writers develop the methodological implications.⁴² Organizations or groups use *sense-making* or *mindfulness*.⁴³ But these ideas are not new. The *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* (資治通鑒) by Ssu-ma Kuang (司馬光) (1018–1086), provided a history of China from 403BC to 959, and aimed to help subsequent rulers *reflect* (in the ‘mirror’ it provided) on the mistakes and success of their predecessors.⁴⁴

Techniques for reflective thinking are not complicated. Using simple words – if, but, or – can expand thinking. Sociologists often talk of viewing events through different *lenses*. Materials to explore these techniques are on the website.

Arguably, complete *objectivity* is impossible,⁴⁵ so researchers should aim ‘to understand the effects of [their] experiences rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate them’.⁴⁶ It is helpful to consider the strengths and weaknesses of *positionality*⁴⁷ – the *exogenous/etic* perspectives as an *outsider*, or the *endogenous/*

emic perspectives as an *insider*.⁴⁸ But assessing personal identity is not always straightforward, particularly for international students and scholars who return to a “home” country to do research.⁴⁹ Would a Pakistani student from a middle class family in Islamabad be an insider or outsider if she did research among the Taliban in North Eastern Pakistan?

Most reflexive methodology is not specific to international research but geographers provide useful insights about fieldwork, feminist perspectives⁵⁰ and researching elites.⁵¹ Careful consideration of the implications of working across languages⁵² and using translators⁵³ is clearly important for much international work, but is also increasingly relevant within multicultural countries. There is discussion concerning international collaboration in research,⁵⁴ and cross-cultural management studies,⁵⁵ but international relations has ‘lacked a sociology of itself’⁵⁶ and is arguably less internationally reflexive in its approach to research than might be expected.⁵⁷

Research diaries or ethnographic notes can provide a basis for reflexive thinking. Notes might be based on self-reflexive contextual impressions, which may later become data or help to explain data (Figure 1.4). Alternatively, they can be structured more formally as: *observational notes* (a purely factual account), *methodological notes* (what happened during data collection), *theoretical notes* (what might be the broader explanations) and *analytic memos* (initial comparisons of data, theory and literature).⁵⁸ Notes might also include how researchers and others are feeling – tired, angry, stressed – because later this might warn of unreliable data.

MAY 3 - First impressions: lots of concrete, beautiful mountains in the distance. The welcome is very warm, people are so polite and hospitable; it makes me feel very welcome.

MAY 4 - Outside of the home, things are a bit different. I had to change my shirt before going out as it is a little see through (I had never noticed that before!). So that put me on my guard. But people are very friendly. It is interesting seeing how people dress. Men can get away with more and many dress in ‘Western’ styles. Girls all wear hijab. Some women do wear clothes that reveal the outline of their body shape, but hair, arms and legs are always covered. There are both cultural and legal aspects to this. The head being covered draws you to their faces, and particularly the eyes. I never noticed so many different subtle shades of brown, green, blue before.

MAY 6. As a foreign man, you must be careful. There is no physical contact with a woman if you are not family. You can shake their hand if it is offered, otherwise you simply say Assalam o Alaikum. I bumped into a woman in a shopping mall, and quickly said ‘sorry’, reaching out in a reassuring way (something I would do at home). The woman looked shocked, and A. said that if I had touched her it would have been very offensive.

Figure 1.4 A self-reflexive contextual diary

(By a European man in a Muslim country)

More broadly, the UN concept of *international understanding* provides a framework for reflecting on world research.⁵⁹ A Deputy Director General of UNESCO, W.H.C. Lewis, provided a nuanced explanation:

International Understanding is the ability to observe critically and objectively and appraise the conduct of [people] everywhere to each other, irrespective of the nationality of culture to which they may belong. To do this one must be able to detach oneself from one's own particular cultural and national prejudices and to observe [people] of all nationalities, cultures and races as equally important varieties of human being inhabiting this earth.⁶⁰

To transcend nationalistic and other divisive approaches, the concept of thinking and trying to act *without borders*, which derived from *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), is now applied to over 60 world organizations including musicians, reporters, monks and clowns.⁶¹ The idea reflects the formation of international organizations in the 19th century,⁶² and the present-day movement is assisted by books such as *Activists Beyond Borders*,⁶³ initiatives like the *Reporters Without Borders* and the *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. But, as George Orwell reminds us, progress does not intrinsically lead to international understanding or a borderless world:

We were once told that the aeroplane had 'abolished frontiers'; actually it is only since the aeroplane became a serious weapon that frontiers have become definitely impassable. The radio was once expected to promote international understanding and co-operation; it has turned out to be a means of insulating one nation from another.⁶⁴

thinking zone: potatoes without borders

Potatoes are now grown in more than 100 countries around the world, but:

Belarus

- Belarusians eat the most potatoes – 335 kg per year. The world average is 33 kg.
- The average potato production in Belarus each year is 865 kg per person. In the USA – 69 kg per person.
- Belarus is the 10th largest potato producer in the world.
- Belarusians know more than 300 recipes for potatoes.
- There is a Belarusian national dance called *Bul'ba* – 'potatoes'.
- In the Soviet Union, Belarusians were sometimes called *bulbashi*.
- In January 2014, Russia accused Belarus of potato smuggling from the EU.

global potatoes

- Potatoes came originally from Peru and Bolivia, not Belarus. So how, and why, did the potato get to Belarus, and become so popular?
- Potatoes came to Spain from South America. Peter I brought a small sack of potatoes from Spain to Russia in the 18th century.

- Peter I wanted to grow them in Russia but farmers didn't know how. They ate potato tubers and died. The potato became known as the 'Devil's apple' and people refused to grow it.
- Belarus and Ukraine were under Russian domination at that time, and Belarusians grew them instead.

potato politics

- Potatoes are the world's fourth largest food crop, after rice, wheat and corn.
- The UN *International Year of the Potato* (2008) promoted the idea that the potato is crucial to avoid global food shortages.
- In Europe, only a quarter of potatoes are now eaten by humans. Half are fed to livestock. The rest is used to produce alcohol and starch used by food chemical and paper industries.
- *GMO-Compass.org* claims that 'extending the benefits of potato production depends on improvements in...potato varieties that have reduced water needs, greater resistance to pests and diseases, and resilience in the face of climate changes'.
- In 1998, Hungarian researcher Árpád Pusztai claimed on British TV that rats fed with GMO potatoes suffered damage to their intestines and immune systems. The next day he was suspended by his employer, the *Rowett Institute*, his research team was disbanded, and data seized. UK government officials, *Monsanto* and (then) heads of state Blair and Clinton were implicated in the actions.

Where, and what, next for the potato – what is its global future?

[See References for further information.⁶⁵]

Note: Most online information about GM potatoes stems from the GM industries. *Genewatch.org* provides alternative views.
(Research: Belous Daria, Minsk State Linguistic University)

main ideas

The construction of **international knowledge** needs to consider:

- how we can prove that relevant things *exist* (ontology).
- how we *know* about things (epistemology).
- *cross-cultural* understandings of existence and knowledge.
- why the *authority* for any source of information is credible.
- how we detect *propaganda* and *pre-emptive deceit*.
- whether *definitions* and *assumptions* are clear and international.

A **reflexive** approach should aim to avoid:

- bias caused by ethnocentricity, nationalism, or worldviews.
- bias caused by human psychological traits.
- simplistic conclusions from complex data.

And should aim to achieve:

- an examination of the research design, data and analysis from *different perspectives* – self, others, mirrors, eyes, lenses.
- contributions to *international understanding*.
- researchers and readers who think *without borders*.

key reading

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Keck, M.E. and Sikkink, K. (1998) *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Woolgar, S. (1988) *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London and Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

online resources

To access the resources – search on the name in italics or use the http.

International knowledge

Future of Humanity Institute – do we exist, and will we continue to exist? – existential-risk.org

Ontology.com – ongoing discussions from an American perspective

Epistemology for dummies – a good start – www.epistemologyexpress.com/efordummies.htm

Interdependence Movement. Citizens Without Borders

Electronic Frontier Foundation – protecting the freedom of electronic communication across borders
