RESEARCH METHODS *IN* INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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2ND EDITION

RESEARCH METHODS *IN* INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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PREFACE

The first edition of *Research Methods in International Relations* was published in 2015, at a time when there were few introductory International Relations (IR) textbooks that introduced students to important methodological debates in the discipline while also providing practical guidance on research methods. This is still the case today. Methodology and methods are often discussed separately, despite the fact that any effective application of research methods tools requires an understanding of methodology. The line that ties together methodology, research design, and research methods is one that is often obscured in texts that zoom into just one aspect of the research process.

The second edition of this book maintains the features of the first edition that were so positively received, namely its comprehensiveness and accessibility. These features have been joined by significant innovations, additions, and revisions throughout. The result is a fully revised and updated second edition, which includes, as one important example, a much more in depth and broader coverage of important methodological debates and perspectives. One significant change I have made is to revise how the methodological spectrum is presented, by using the terms of positivism and interpretivism rather than empiricism and interpretivism. This more accurately reflects the state of the art in research in International Relations, and gives due weight to interpretive research conducted in IR. Of course, interpretive agendas are empirical, in the sense that collected data is observed and experienced. While still empirical, positivist research is understood by conformity to a set of epistemological assumptions about how to study the social world in order to make generalizable law-like statements about social practices.

In addition to this, critical theory and normative theory are also addressed at greater length in this second edition, to offer better guidance on the question of how to design and carry out critical and normative projects and also to better highlight critical and normative theory contributions to IR scholarship.

The second edition also includes two entirely new chapters on interview research and discourse analysis. These additional chapters offer practical guidance on how to conduct good interviews and make use of interview data, as well as a practical introduction to the strengths and weaknesses of using discourse analysis in research. Both offer timely updates, as these two methods' tools are increasingly used in undergraduate research. All chapters have been substantially revised and updated throughout, and reflect the recent developments and most important debates in IR today.

INTRODUCTION

Research Methods in International Relations (RMIR) is a companion for students and researchers in the broadly defined field of International Relations (IR). The aim of this textbook is to help you navigate the research and writing process from start to finish. By doing this, RMIR will help you to unlock the diverse research practices that today define the study of international affairs.

The first edition of this textbook, published in 2015, took as its point of departure the assumption that a firm grasp of methodology and methods was a necessary prerequisite to making sense of research within the discipline, and also for making your own contributions to academic and policy debates. Its central aim was to do this in a manner that was accessible to the novice researcher. The second edition is written in the same spirit, but with substantially updated chapter content and entirely new chapters on interviews and discourse analysis.

What's New in the Second Edition

The second edition is significantly revised and updated. Chapters that appeared in the first edition include new examples from recent scholarship and reflect recent debates and developments in methodology and methods. One of the more prominent changes that you will notice is that Chapters 1 and 2 present a broader and more nuanced discussion of methodological choices in IR. In the second edition, I have also opted to use the broad labels of *positivism* and *interpretivism* throughout this book over *empiricism* and *interpretivism*, as used in the first edition. This is because the term 'empiricism' risks being confused with approaches to research with an empirical focus, which includes a broad range of research that falls outside of positivism. More on what these terms mean will be discussed in Chapter 1.

One of the unique features of this book is that it provides an in-depth introduction to IR methodology that goes beyond just presenting you with a guide to research methods. Research methods are practical tools that we use to collect and analyze data. Methodology, on the other hand, refers to a consistent set of assumptions about how to go about doing research and distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' research. Without a clear understanding of methodology, having a good command of research methods is like

knowing how to operate construction equipment without an architectural plan of what kind of structure you are trying to build. The second edition has sought to expand upon this by providing you with both an introduction to methodology as well as examples of methodologies in practice. Moreover, the second edition also includes new sections on critical theory and normative theory in IR.

Each of chapter of this book has been substantially updated to reflect recent developments and debates in IR and also to draw connections between IR methodology, methods, and IR theory. Exemplary research is highlighted in each of this book's chapters to provide examples of how different methodologies and methods are used in research. In some cases, exemplary research will be spotlighted in chapters. Every chapter will also contain further reading lists that feature a roadmap of readings. These further readings will allow you to explore many of the topics discussed in each of the chapters in much greater detail.

All of these updates and revisions have been made while maintaining the accessibility of the first edition. Even with no prior background in IR, or in philosophy of social sciences, you will be able to navigate the following pages and learn how to make sense of IR research practice, and also how to research and write your own research essay, thesis, or dissertation. We will return to some of these additions when the chapter outline of this book is introduced. First, however, let us reflect on a question that you may have about why you are reading this book. How do methodology and methods matter in IR?

Thinking About Research in IR

Researching and writing your own papers is an exciting and rewarding process that will lead you to rethink many assumptions that you might have had before beginning your research. For many of you, writing your first papers in IR will lead you toward a career in research and writing, whether as a foreign affairs professional in government, in the non-governmental sector, or as a researcher in industry or academia.

One of the things about IR that might have drawn you to the subject in the first place is that there are a number of different ways we can draw upon to analyze and make sense of international affairs. This goes beyond disagreements over how to deal with global challenges, like for example, global COVID-19 vaccine distribution, and gets to the question of what global problems do we identify as the most pressing and why? State security, socio-economic inequality, racial justice, decoloniality are all part of the conversation in IR. How we identify global challenges and what challenges we choose to address is informed by how we understand the world around us. Methodological assumptions we make about how we study world affairs, our own role in the research process, and what kind of knowledge we aim to produce offer many different roads to travel in IR research.

RMIR will provide you with a roadmap that will allow you to more easily navigate research design and methods choices you will confront in your own research. In order to make informed research choices, you will learn the underlying logics behind methodology and methods and how to use tools for data collection and analysis in your own research.

As a roadmap, this textbook will provide you with a resource that will help you navigate research choices. This textbook does not make a case for a unified methodology or approach to IR research. There is no single approach that is advanced in the following pages, but rather you will learn how different methodologies operate with different logics and have different evaluative criteria. In this sense, this textbook takes a pluralist approach to methodology, more on what this means will be discussed in Chapter 1, but Jackson's (2016) emphasis on rejecting efforts to impose a single way of knowing upon IR captures nicely the ethos of research practice that this textbook aims to present.

With this openness to different ways of doing research in mind, the forthcoming chapters will provide you with a comprehensive roadmap of the research process, from research question formulation and research design, to data collection and analysis, to writing up your research.

Introducing Research and Writing in International Relations

What makes an academic essay, a thesis, or a dissertation different from other forms of writing? When you read about international affairs, you probably click through a number of news stories and op-eds on your go-to international affairs websites. Moreover, you might also watch video reports or documentaries and listen to any number of podcasts that cover international politics. Reading articles, watching documentaries, and listening to podcasts on international affairs might have been what first inspired you to study IR.

What makes academic writing distinct is that our writing aims to answer questions about the world around us through a rigorous, systemic and open-minded process known as research. Often you will have a strong hunch about a research topic after having read a lot about your topics of interest. Doing research will give you the tools needed to challenge your preconceived understandings of your topic. At the very heart of this process is data collection and data analysis. Analyzing and collecting data isn't as simple as it sounds – there are wider philosophical issues to contend with: why are you collecting your data? And how will you analyze it? Will you analyze large datasets because you are interested in big picture arguments about international affairs? Will you analyze the speeches of world leaders because you believe how we describe the world shapes how we respond to major events? Do you see international politics as static and unchanging or do you see it as dynamic and evolving?

Writing is how we communicate our research and our findings so that others can see the roads we travelled and question how we arrived at our destination. Effective and concise writing forms a bridge between our research and our audience. Indeed, you may aspire for your research to help contribute to making sense of the myriad of urgent and complex questions confronting decision-makers working for governments, NGOs, or businesses. How you do this and what this looks like can take on many different

forms from policy papers that address contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, armed conflict, climate change, territorial disputes, human rights abuses, and economic injustice, to papers that contribute to theorizing how 'taken for granted' concepts in international politics like borders and sovereignty emerged in the first place and how their meanings continue to shift.

Research requires us to collect and analyze some form of data, whether that be opinion polls, speeches by world leaders, data on military spending, or iconic photographs that change how we understand a particular issue like migration or climate change. What distinguishes a piece of academic research from advocacy pieces is that we are transparent about our methodological assumptions, method choices, and limitations of our research designs. This requires us to open to challenging our own preexisting hunches we may have about a topic. We often find the unexpected in our research. This is part of what makes our research of value to a broad range of readers that goes beyond academia and includes journalists, policy-focused researchers at think-tanks, and foreign affairs professionals.

A Guide to Research Practice

This textbook is best approached as a 'how to' guide for research practice in IR that offers step-by-step advice for every stage of the research process, from thinking about basic methodological positions to framing research questions, research design, data collection, data analysis, and writing up your work. This textbook is a comprehensive guide for how to set out on any kind of research project within the discipline, whether as a novice researcher or as a postgraduate. Furthermore, it is designed to be sufficiently broad in the tools covered to serve as a reference to have on your desk for any future research you may conduct long after you complete your studies.

Not only will the following pages of this book help you engage with a wider audience in IR, but methodological literacy will also make you a more critical consumer of information you receive about international affairs that you find expressed on blogs, online and print media or on television.

Take for example, the oft-cited claim that democracies do not go to war with other democracies. During the later 1990s, it was even suggested that no two countries with a McDonald's have fought a war against each other (Musgrave, 2020). While this particular claim was proven false – there are McDonald's franchises in countries that have gone to war, consider the wars in the former Yugoslavia for example – this proposition became a widely held belief with strong roots in the United States' own identity as a liberal democratic state. In fact, during the early years of the George W. Bush presidency, this assumption informed a wide range of policy discourses. How would we go about answering how useful a predictor of war is the type of government? That is, are democratic states more or less likely to go to war with one another? We could start by turning our assumption into a testable hypothesis.

H1: Democracies do not go to war with other democracies.

Next, we can test this hypothesis against empirical data that we will gather as part of our research process. Of course, at this point, you have probably already recognized that this process, even in relation to a relatively simple statement like the one presented above is fraught with choices related to research design and methods. When is a state a democracy and when is a state not a democracy? Are elections enough to be considered a democracy? Or do democracies also need to respect a wide range of political and civil rights? Do you gather statistical data on all wars that have been fought in the last two centuries and try to find correlations between regime types and conflict or do we look at in-depth case studies of events where democracies were in conflict with each other, but war did not break out? The chapters that follow will provide guidance on different ways you can find answers to the questions asked above.

RMIR equips you with a set of tools for collecting, interpreting and analyzing a wide body of information that we will gather from digital media sources, television, newspapers, expert interviews, or large datasets. These tools will, in the short-term, help sharpen your ability to make an impactful contribution to debates through your own research essays, theses or dissertations. However, and perhaps more importantly, these tools will also help make you a more effective decision-maker and communicator in the policy, business or academic communities as questions about how we know and how we go about evaluating claims are not just classroom exercises but inform strategic decision-making in pretty much every field you can imagine. Your academic assignments or thesis project should therefore not be viewed as a rarefied form of writing, but rather a project that will help sharpen skills that will help you to ask better questions and provide more insightful answers.

Research Methods as Research Choices

At the very beginning of your research project, you may find yourself asking a number of questions about *how to conduct research*. Common questions that come to mind might be: how do I design my project? What data will I need to collect? How will I make sense of this data? There is no one single answer to these questions, and how you answer these questions in the context of your research project might be very different to your peers. Research is about making choices. And, in order to make informed choices, there is an important distinction to be made between methodological assumptions and methods. Think of methods as the tools of research – they are the practical techniques which you will use to collect and analyze data. Options when collecting data spans conducting interviews to archival research, analyzing Tweets to experiments. When it comes to analyzing your data, again the options are plentiful, from using statistics to find causal links to hermeneutics and discourse analysis. Don't be overwhelmed – choosing the tools of data collection and analysis is related to methodological questions and RMIR will assist you by providing you with a detailed guide to navigating these research choices that you will encounter during the course of your own research .

Methodology aids and informs our choice of the tools, or methods of research. By methodology, we refer to the philosophical principles informing our research. It relates

to bigger questions around what it is we know, and how we can find that knowledge. We discuss this further in Chapter 1, but for now, consider an example of the World Health Organization (WHO)'s COVAX program. Under this program the WHO sought to secure a fair and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines once they became widely available in 2021 (WHO, 2021). You may wish to explore questions that identify reasons why COVAX was effective, or not, in securing COVID-19 vaccines for developing countries. Methodological considerations inform the likely tools, or methods, you will find most useful in investigating answers to your question. Here, you would need to find a way to identify causes of effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, and collect and analyze data that would allow you to assess effectiveness.

As IR researchers, we're passionate about shedding light on the complex challenges faced by the world today. From authoritarianism, pandemics, terrorism, and populism, to military coups, great power rivalry, regional integration, economic crises, and human rights abuses, there is seemingly no end to the many salient issues in international affairs that we grapple with and you can research. Any such research project must start first and foremost with a consideration of philosophy of science, that will have you consider questions like: can we identify a single cause behind complex social events? Are there law-like regularities that we can uncover through our research that will help bring a degree of certainty to the policy process? Are we neutral observers of the world around us or are we an active part of this world?

There is no universal agreement on the most persuasive answers to these questions, but a broad consensus has emerged to now embrace this plurality. Different methodological positions offer different ways of explaining and theorizing, and each tells us something different about the world. Traditionally, discussions around philosophy of science were presented in a series of 'Great Debates'. While they have been the subject of intense discussion in IR, many of the so-called 'Great Debates' have been proven not to have occurred in the way they're typically presented in the textbooks (Ashworth, 2014), so I won't reproduce them at length here, although they will be briefly revisited in Chapter 1. At this point, an example will suffice, to show the different methodological approaches to research questions. Let's think about debates over US-China policy. Should the United States challenge China's rise as a great power? Should the United States be more accommodating of China as a rising power? Or should the United States push China harder on issues of human rights? Should China's maritime claims be challenged by Washington? All of these questions will require us to reflect on the question of power, and how national power matters in IR. These debates are not new as you might think (see Carr, 2001 or Morgenthau, 2005).

But, how do we know how to research power in IR? Is IR about the study of power as an ordering principle in the international order, or is it about the study of how power is exercised? What is power? How does that power operate? Is there a material world that is separate from humankind that we study or is this world of nation-states something that we had a hand in creating? While you are probably already familiar with some of these questions, what you might not be aware of is that a question of methodology underlies many of these contested understandings of the world around us. In order to engage with

these debates, an understanding of how we know what we *think* we know about the world around us is fundamental.

This is where having a firm grasp of methodological and methods concepts and practices is essential. Given the plurality of methodologies and methods in IR, you will be provided in the forthcoming pages with the tools needed to establish a strong understanding of **positivist** and **interpretivist** research, alongside **qualitative**, **quantitative** and **mixed** methods data collection and analysis strategies. However, before introducing these terms in the forthcoming chapters, let us first turn to setting out the chapter outline.

Your Methodology and Methods Roadmap

Over the course of the next 12 chapters, this textbook will provide you with a practical guide to carrying out your own research project from beginning to end while also providing you with a survey of research methodologies and methods. Although the structure of this book tries to parallel your own research journey, it is important here to remember that research is not a linear process. There will be many times where you might go back and revisit earlier research choices. This is perfectly OK. In fact, it is likely a sign that you are on the right path.

Chapter 1 introduces the broad methodological debates underpinning all decisions about research design and methods. IR's contested methodologies are explored through a presentation of a positivist and interpretive methodological spectrum. These two distinct approaches to doing and evaluating research will be discussed. The chapter offers a comprehensive introduction to methodology, epistemology, and ontology, and you will become proficient in using these terms to inform how you carry out research. With reference to specific examples of diverse research practices in IR, this chapter will provide you with the broadest possible introduction to methodology in IR that will also include critical theory and normative theory.

Chapter 2 introduces you to crafting research questions and research design. Moving from a broad topic of interest to a research question that you can answer in the scope of an essay or thesis is often one of the more challenging steps of the research process. This chapter provides you with some practical tips and considerations for coming up with your own research question. Covering a broad spectrum of research questions and designs, it covers research questions that span the positivist–interpretive spectrum. From the starting point of research choices, we go deeper into making sense of the plurality of research questions and designs within the discipline.

Considering research ethics is essential at every stage of the research process and also an essential part of every IR research project, whatever its methodological grounding. **Chapter 3** provides a comprehensive overview of research ethics that goes beyond questions of academic honesty, such as plagiarism. Here, we will explore how positionality and reflexivity are important ethical considerations to take into account whenever carrying out research. In addition, research ethics are illustrated in practice when conducting research with participants. The principle of 'do no harm' has long been a guiding

principle of social science research, which relies on interaction with human research participants through interview research, focus groups, surveys, or questionnaires. As more and more IR researchers gather their data from interviews or other forms of interaction with research participants, questions of research ethics, and how they interact with different codes of ethics (from personal ethics to institutional and professional ethics) require greater attention within the discipline. Thus, research ethics go far beyond traditional questions of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, which are also covered in this chapter.

In **Chapter 4** you will be provided with an overview of how to conduct a literature review from start to finish. This includes resolving dilemmas over where to begin when preparing and structuring your literature review, and where to draw the line as your literature review will always only be able to cover a small portion of a much broader literature. This chapter is designed as a practical guide to explaining how your research offers an original contribution to the field. Whatever your research project, it is essential to situate your own research within the existing body of scholarship.

Chapter 5 marks a transition from these important but broader issues of methodology, design, ethics and reviewing the literature, to focus on how to go about collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 5 starts with an introduction to some data collection and analysis techniques that fall under the broad umbrella of qualitative methods. Here we will focus on how to study artefacts of human life from textual analysis to collecting primary data from research participants to visual analysis of images, photographs, or public spaces. As such, this chapter provides you with a full range of qualitative methods, while also highlighting more recent innovations in qualitative IR, such as visual methods.

Chapter 6 goes on to provide an introduction to quantitative methods. It also surveys both data collection and analysis strategies, this time using quantitative methods. Interpreting databases, such as the Correlates of War project, and making sense of indices, such as the Freedom House Index, will require quantitative literacy. Statistics and formal methods are also widely used in IR and appear frequently in the discipline's leading journals (Zinnes, 2002: 99). In addition, scholars have attempted to model a wide range of strategic interactions in the study of international relations from cooperation to conflict. Thus, literacy in formal modelling, in particular an ability to draw and understand relationships between variables, is important for both students and scholars to access this body of IR scholarship. This chapter will therefore provide you with a broad introduction to quantitative methods in order to allow you to both read and consume quantitative work in IR and also design and carry out your own quantitative project.

Chapter 7 provides you with an introduction to mixed methods research. Up to this point, methods have been presented as falling within defined camps: either qualitative or quantitative. However, many research projects use more than one method, and often this spans this divide. For research methods involving two different techniques crossing this boundary, we refer to the project as engaging in mixed methods. This chapter will explore strategies for mixed methods research design and also present you with examples from research practice, drawing from the ways statistical analysis can assist in qualitative case selection, and how other concepts, like triangulation, are used in the context of

mixed methods. After exploring mixed methods in practice, ranging from uses of mixed methods in making causal arguments to mixed methods and strategic and simulation models, this chapter will shift gears and return to a broader, and distinct, methodological discussion in which methodological approaches such as critical realism, analytical eclecticism, and methodological pluralism will be explored. These approaches will be discussed here so as to wrap up our introduction to the core methods families, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, and reinforce linkages between debates over how we use methods tools.

The next three chapters will dive deeper into some of the most popular methods tools and activities. These include fieldwork, interview research, and discourse analysis. The chapters on interview research and discourse analysis are new additions to RMIR that have been added in part because of how widely used both of these methods are among researchers, but also to provide more specific guidance that goes beyond an introduction to qualitative methods at large.

Chapter 8 provides you with a guide to fieldwork in IR. Fieldwork has become increasingly common in IR and has provoked significant debate as to its purpose and function. Recently, while more texts have been published that explicitly address many of the challenges and practical considerations of using fieldwork, there remains only one text that specifically addresses dilemmas of access, consent and safety that students are confronted with during field research (Sriram et al., 2009). Chapter 8 outlines the entire process of field research, including a step-by-step guide and illustrating some of the challenges encountered in the field. With examples drawn from field research in conflict and post-conflict zones, students will gain an insight into conducting research in a wide range of settings.

Perhaps the most commonly used technique for gathering qualitative data from research participants in IR is the interview method. In a brand-new chapter for the 2nd edition, **Chapter 9** introduces interviewing in its many forms. Interviews range from a long free flowing conversation to a highly structured interview with pre-scripted questions. You will be introduced to a wide variety of interview techniques in this chapter covering the strengths and weaknesses of interviewing as a method, to practical considerations concerning who to contact and how best to access those individuals that will be useful to interview, as well as how to conduct the interviews, and how to interpret your findings.

While the interview method is the most common way to gather primary data from research participants, another common qualitative method of data collection and data analysis that researchers draw upon is discourse analysis. **Chapter 10**, another new Chapter for the 2nd edition, introduces you to using discourse analysis in your own research. Discourse is the use of language in all forms of communication, but the main focus here will be its use in text and speeches, the study of which shows the power of language in shaping how we and other actors engage with the world around us. Discourse analysis is valuable for many different research agendas. This includes critical approaches, or research committed to social change, which is largely achieved through unpacking the

role of discourse in maintaining status quo (and often unequal) power relations. This kind of analysis is referred to as critical discourse analysis.

Case study research, the subject of **Chapter 11,** is one of the most commonly used research designs in IR research. Case studies come in many different forms that vary in terms of number of case studies, a single case study or a comparative case study, but also in terms of purpose. Here, you will question why and for what purpose you are conducting a case study and how your case study design will help you answer your research question. This will help you design your case study. Will you be using a comparative method in order to maximize causal inference through your case studies? If so, there are a number of case study design strategies from which you can choose. Alternatively, are you researching a case that does not conform to theoretical expectations or are you aiming to tell a specific process story? These are all different reasons why you may choose to carry out a case study, and this chapter will provide you with a comprehensive overview to case study design that will address them all.

Chapter 12 concludes this textbook with a practical guide to writing up your research. Writing-up is an exciting and rewarding part of the research process. By this point you will have done the heavy lifting of data collection and data analysis. Now, it's time to tell the reader about what you have found, why it is interesting and how it should contribute to how we understand your topic. While academic writing often takes on a special form, which will be presented to you in this chapter, you may wish to also think about sharing your results with a wider audience, perhaps in a peer reviewed outlet, or in short form as an essay that is aimed at the broader public. Either way, being a good writer is a skill that will help get your research noticed.

Looking Ahead

Before moving on to the next chapter it is worth recalling that in international affairs oftentimes bad outcomes are attributed to poor strategic decision-making. However, this is rarely the result of a lack of information. Rather, often poor decisions were the result of poor analysis of information at hand. Being able to better make sense of all of this information about our world that we have at our fingertips is what research is about. Being able to communicate your findings and make sure your research is easily understood through being well written is also a valuable part of the process.

ONE
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Why does methodology matter in International Relations (IR) research? When first embarking on the study of IR, you are introduced to a wide range of approaches to analyze international affairs. This reflects different ways of making sense of the world around us from explaining great power rivalries and the high politics of international diplomacy, to the ways that everyday experiences, the media, and culture shape international affairs. In addition to IR's varied subject matter, the academic study of IR has also drawn inspiration from a number of adjacent fields such as law, economics, political science, history, and sociology, to name a few examples. This broad scope of study and cross-disciplinary engagement helps explain why IR reading lists contain work that spans many of the disciplines noted above and also works that rely on diverse methodologies or methods. But, this diversity can also make a straightforward question – like why does methodology matter in IR? – into one that has a seemingly complex answer.

Of course, IR's diversity and richness should not be interpreted as suggesting that IR is a discipline where 'anything goes' in terms of research practice. Because your readings will cover a wide range of topics and will approach these topics from very different perspectives, an understanding of basic assumptions about how we know the world around us is essential to making sense of this rich body of scholarship that today makes up IR. This is why methodology matters. It will help guide you through existing scholarship and also help you to think about your own research choices. When beginning to consider methodology, it is helpful to take as a starting point Walt's observation that we should avoid attempts to impose a single method, or theoretical worldview, on the field (2011a). Doing this, according to Walt, would limit research agendas to a narrow scope of questions that could be addressed by the popular method of the day (2011b). It would in the end make IR less relevant and would leave IR research unable to stand the test of time.

We should instead strive to produce methodologically rigorous research that meets the standards of inquiry within the methods and methodological traditions with which we engage. This is what Jackson refers to as **methodological pluralism** (2016). According to Jackson, methodological pluralism means holding research to the internal standards and logics specific to its own distinct research practice in IR. Methodology matters because it describes a set of assumptions about how we study the social world. These assumptions are what makes rigorous, systemic, and contestable research possible. IR's openness to distinct research practices, and an attentiveness to conversations between them, requires us to make explicit our methodological assumptions (Jackson, 2016: 210).

If we are open to methodological plurality, how do we make judgments about what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' research practice? And, how do we do this in a manner that does not impose an overly narrow view of what constitutes 'good' research, which would foreclose innovative research agendas? Methodological plurality does not mean that you can approach methods like a breakfast buffet and pick and choose those methods and tools that you would simply prefer to use, or that will simply get you the 'dish' that you want. At the same time, methodological plurality does open doors to different ways of exploring your research topic each with its own research purpose.

Researching Peace

How is methodological plurality reflected in IR research? Well, let's take for an example the study of peace. The question of peace has been central to many different research agendas over the years and can be approached from many different perspectives. Some researchers want to better understand the concept of peace, others want to map broad trends in international conflict, or make conjectures about the causes of inter-state peace and conflict.

To be sure, a researcher might look for empirical evidence that accounts for periods of stable peace between states, the formation of alliances, or to the causes of war among states. One important area of research that emerged from this kind of work was democratic peace theory: or the assumption that liberal democratic states are less likely to go to war with each other than authoritarian states. In this type of research, quantitative methods were used to gather data on incidences of inter-state conflict for the purpose of making generalizable claims about the conditions of peace. Also, included, is research that sought to test some of these generalizable claims against the evidence to see which claims held best against empirical evidence, and which claims could be discounted.

On the other hand, your curiosity may lead you more in the direction of researching a more granular understanding of peace that goes beyond inter-state conflict. Indeed, your interest might direct you towards the study of intra-state conflict. For example, how has the nature of political violence changed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? When looking at twenty-first century political violence from France to Myanmar, you may ask: What animates violence in today's world? What does peace look like? Is a peace agreement merely a formal document negotiated by elites or is it something more? With this type of research, methods would be used to provide a thicker understanding of the phenomenon of political violence in diverse contexts and how this informs our understanding of conflict and peace in IR.

IR Theory and Methodology

Many of the most salient questions posed in IR theoretical debates are questions embedded within our own basic understandings of methodology. But, while we discuss theory a lot in IR, you might have discovered that finding a concise definition of what IR theory is to be more difficult than finding explanations of what theory can do for us, such as provide a means to make sense of world politics.

But what is IR **theory**? One reason for definitional confusion here is that the very definition of what makes up theory can be different depending on which methodological positions you adopt. For example, Van Evera defines theory as 'general statements that describe or explain the causes or effects of classes of phenomena' (1997: 7–8). Cristol, on the other hand, defines IR theory as 'a theory that seeks both to explain past state

behaviour and to predict future state behaviour'; yet notes that many would disagree with such a definition (2019).

Here, this textbook defines IR theory in a broad sense as a set of logically interrelated propositions about the world around us. This allows us to understand IR theorizing across methodological positions, but also to engage with theory at different levels of theorizing. To be sure, theories can take on many forms, they can be grand theories of international politics, like liberalism, realism, neorealism, neoliberalism, or constructivism that advance more general propositions about world politics. Other theories can be more 'middle range' in that the focus on an issue-oriented puzzle (Lepgold, 1998), such as Democratic Peace Theory. There is also grounded theory, which has application in IR as a bottom-up approach to theory building on the basis of observed empirical data (Tucker, 2016). Moreover, critical theory advances a theoretical project that seeks to disrupt oppressive structures that are maintained through social practices (Horkheimer, 1972). Here you might want to consider Cox's (1981) proposition that theory is always for somebody or some purpose as highlighting a view that theory-building in IR is not a neutral project, but rather reflects the preferences of powerful international actors (1981).

Asking Questions about our World and Disciplinary Knowledge

IR's disciplinary history is often told along the lines of 'great debates'. While these debates will not be retold in great detail here, in brief this refers to debates between idealists and realists, behaviouralists and traditionalists, and also positivists and post-positivists (Schmidt, 2002). The first of these debates, between idealists and realists became part of the foundational myth of IR as a discipline and was said to be centred around the question of studying the world as it ought to be or studying the world as is. While widely recognized as a foundational myth as opposed to an actual historiography of IR, this debate was said to pit realists on the one hand and idealists on the other (Schmidt, 2002). However, on closer inspection, those who were labelled as idealists or utopian actually held much more nuanced views that hardly warranted the label that was ascribed to them (Schmidt, 2002).

The second great debate was said to have been between behaviouralists who sought to apply mathematical language to the study of IR and traditionalists who argued that mathematical models could not capture the historic, contextual, and linguistic milieu that makes up IR (Bull, 1966; Kaplan, 1966). One way to simplify this is to think about what kind of knowledge is most valued in IR? Or in other words, how do you think your IR program could be better designed? Should we place more of an emphasis on studying the history of IR to better understand the historical contexts in which ideas and practices emerged, or do we need more advanced mathematical, or digital training to make us better analysts of world affairs?

When discussing the 'third great debate', Schmidt (2002) observes that this debate highlights why telling our disciplinary history along the lines of simplified great debates

is troubling. As with earlier debates, there were actually a number of debates that cannot be easily reduced into a binary A vs. B division. These include debates between neo-liberals and neo-realists, rationalists and constructivists, and communitarians and cosmopolitans.

Nevertheless, moving on, the 'fourth great debate' is said to be one that places a number of critical perspectives such as critical theory, IR feminism, and critical constructivism, among others, against approaches that relied on more traditional, or positivist epistemological commitments that cast the researcher as an impartial observer to world politics (Schmidt, 2002). Here we begin to see some of the methodological divisions that will be explored in greater detail in this chapter become increasingly visible.

Positivism and Interpretivism in IR Research

In mapping out different perspectives on research in IR, crucial distinctions in how researchers think about global politics can be noted. On the one hand is **positivist research.** A researcher with a positivist approach to IR finds it possible to identify, and test, causal phenomena for generalizable law-like regularities. If certain conditions are met, outcomes can be predicted, for example the Democratic Peace Theory's assumption that democracies do not fight wars against other democracies. On the other is **interpretive** research. Interpretive researchers suggest claims about IR are tied to a particular context or time that gives them meaning which may change, making it impossible to generate hard-and-fast, generalizable laws. Instead, there is often an emphasis on the importance of ideas, concepts, or ethical standards. For example, how do gendered understandings of masculinity shape how violence is carried out, or researched, in conflict settings?

The picture becomes more complex when we include other research choices: levels of analysis, the role of theory, and the scope of your research project. Of course, different types of research and the theoretical and methodological choices you make are decisions which can cut across these two fundamentally distinct positions. How to navigate these choices will be dealt with in this next chapter.

Here it must be emphasized that methodology and research methods are much more than toolkits for research, but they play a key role in the very making of our discipline. In the past, efforts to impose a unitary logic over all IR research produced exceeding narrow standards for what constitutes 'good' research. The oft-told founding story of IR is one that is presented in terms of 'great debates' recounted in brief in the previous section. The 'great debates' story traces the origins of IR to the early 20th century. Whether between idealists and realists, between rationalists and traditionalists, or positivists and post-positivists, these debates framed IR as a discipline struggling over basic questions of how to study the world around us. Over the course of the last three decades, the field of IR has witnessed a remarkable growth. In sheer volume terms, there is more IR research going on, but also the variety of research agendas has radically expanded. There has been a growth in interpretive, critical theory and normative theory scholarship that moves

beyond a narrow focus on managing great power relations that the once dominant state-centric paradigms of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism held at their core.

IR constructivists first challenged the ways neo-realists and neo-liberal institutionalists viewed the world as being made up of unitary state actors that could be studied by an unbiased researcher identifying objective laws that govern inter-state relations. Such a narrow positivist logic of research was further challenged by feminist IR scholarship. Feminist IR highlights the limits of positivism and recognizes the researcher's own relationship with their research subject and how positivist methodological assumptions limit our ability to engage with important research subjects such as inequality, gender, and race.

As has been pointed out by Henderson (2013), Vitalis (2015) and Sabaratnam (2020), many of our understandings of IR are deeply embedded in racialized understandings of hierarchy and power that reinforced Western dominance, imperialism, and colonialism. Postcolonial and decolonial scholars have also drawn attention to how IR remains a discipline where existing scholarship and journals are largely dominated by scholars situated in Europe and North America (Noda, 2020). Moreover, Darby highlights this western-centricity in IR scholarship when pointing out 'One of the extraordinary things about IR – at least until recently – is how few Western scholars did field work or even spent much time in Africa or Asia' (Parashar et al., 2016: 467).

Absent this contextualization of IR's emergence and how IR is practiced today, it is impossible to understand how many of the commonly told founding stories of IR, with their foci on inter-state war and peace, and great power politics, made invisible some of the most fundamental ordering principles in world politics of the twentieth century, such as race, empire, and inequality.

Indeed, de Carvalho et al. (2011) explored in great detail how the founding myths of IR, the myth of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the myth of the post-First World War founding continue to perpetuate a disciplinary narrative that does not stand up to historiographical scrutiny and perpetuates a very narrow understanding of the discipline.

Race and IR

In *Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory*, Henderson highlighted the centrality of race and racism at the birth of IR in the early twentieth century. Henderson also demonstrated how racist understandings of notions that remain central to many IR theories, such as anarchy, continue to reproduce racist understandings of the world politics that are not historically supported. This raises an important question about how and why a disciplinary silence emerged around racism, despite racism being central to IR at its founding.

Henderson, E.A. (2013) "Hidden in plain sight: Racism in International Relations Theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26 (1): 71–92.

The centring of an IR founding story in post-First World War Europe, when the first Chair of International Relations was established in Aberystwyth in 1919 (Burchill, 2001: 4; de Carvalho et al., 2011), left a deep imprint on IR scholarship, as many of our debates in IR have engaged with primarily cases drawn from European history and draws heavily upon European political theory (Sabaratnam, 2020). Today, there are numerous calls to decentre research methodology from this largely European and North American experience (Smith, 2002).

As you will understand from this brief foray into the discipline's recent past, your methodological choices will say a lot about what you consider to be important in making sense of IR. Therefore, when you embark on writing research papers, you will need to justify your underlying assumptions about how you interpret the social world. Every research article you have read within your IR studies, and every research paper you will write is embedded within a certain methodological framework.

When first introducing the methodological pluralism of IR, it can be helpful to consider a wide range of choices that will guide your research in the form of a broad, but fluid typologies of research practice that spans **positivist** and **interpretive** work. When categorizing, though, keep in mind that different approaches to methodology do not exist in isolation. While ideal-type labels are used here for the purpose of simplicity, this should not be taken to mean that each approach operates in complete isolation from others, or that these labels constitute some sort of strict binary divide. Rather, it is meant to help make our methodological assumptions explicit. This in turn allows for conversations to take place among diverse bodies of research (Jackson, 2016).

What makes good research? As you will learn in the following pages, different methodological approaches to research have different internal logics that must be consistently applied in order for your research to produce findings that will be seen as convincing by your readers. For example, **positivist** work will be evaluated on how robust your causal claims turn out to be. Interpretive work could be evaluated on consistency between the interpretations presented in your work and your sources. However, **critical theory**, which will be presented in greater detail shortly, takes as its starting point the pursuit of knowledge for the explicit purpose of emancipation. In this case, we might ask, does your work demand a revaluation of assumptions that you have sought to question? Whereas **normative theory**, takes as its starting point the study of morality and ethics in IR to elucidate standards of appropriate behaviour and conduct. Here, we could evaluate your work on how authentic and complete was your excavation of sources that underlie ethical standards that you have advanced.

So, methodology matters as it tells you more about what you as a researcher of IR consider to be important and why. It also serves as a signpost for how your research will be evaluated. Without an understanding of our own assumptions about what is important to study and why we cannot structure own research in any logically consistent manner, which brings us to the next section on how methodology matters.

How Methodology Matters

Now that it has been established *why* methodology matters, we can look deeper into the question of *how* methodology matters. In short, it is your methodological assumptions that will help you navigate the process of designing and carrying out your research project. There are many different ways of doing research, or research practices, in IR that all contribute to advancing knowledge in the discipline (Harvey and Brecher, 2002; Sprinz and Wolinsky-Nahmias, 2004; Klotz and Prakash, 2008). As noted earlier, these research practices cannot be treated as a breakfast buffet whereby you simply mix-and-match various 'dishes'. Instead, you might approach the buffet as being organized into distinct affinity groups. Remember the two main groups of work presented here. Positivism and interpretivism are used as broad labels to help in understanding the logics behind methodology. They are not meant to be read as static *-isms* in the sense of being rigid and fixed dichotomies. In order to make sense of these choices and logics, let us now turn to setting out some key terms.

Key Terms: Methodology, Epistemology and Ontology

Methodological debates within IR have long been at the heart of theoretical contestations within the discipline as researchers attempt to better make sense of world politics. As you will now understand from the 'great debates' narrative of disciplinary evolution in IR, and from critiques of this narrative as far too narrow, many of the most significant debates were not about which theory of the day provided for the best account of world politics, but rather the question of how we even begin to make sense of the complex social phenomena that make up IR. **Methodology** refers to a coherent system of ideas that allows us to go about acquiring knowledge through a logical structure of inquiry (Jackson, 2016: 27). Two important building blocks of this coherent system of ideas and logics are epistemology and ontology (Hawkesworth, 2015: 28). **Epistemology** refers to how and what kind of knowledge we value as scholarly, while **ontology** refers to the objects that we study. Research **methods**, on the other hand, refer to the specific tools we use to collect and analyze data.

It should be emphasized that all three concepts, methodology, epistemology, and ontology, are important for establishing at the outset the *why*, *what*, and *how* of our research. Ontology frames the object of study: what is it that we can know. For interpretive research agendas, ontology can also be at the centre 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. For example, rather than studying compliance with international law, which could lead you down the path of a counting exercise of the number of instances of compliance and non-compliance, you could try to unpack the meaning of international law in one particular context or several different contexts. Epistemology, or the study of knowledge and knowledge production shows how it is we come to know. Thus, it gives us the standards that we use to

evaluate whether knowledge is of disciplinary value or not. Michel Foucault's critique of how power structures knowledge focused largely on how power and standards of what constituted valuable knowledge were interlinked (2002). In the United States, Robert Vitalis showed how the narrow focus of IR as a discipline in the twentieth century acted to marginalize a vibrant body of IR scholarship centred around the historically African American Howard School (Vitalis, 2015). Critiques of dominant approaches to under-standing the history of IR (de Carvalho, 2011), such as those grounded in critical race theory (Sabaratnam, 2020), often critique narrow epistemological standards that do not provide a space for projects that do not conform to the dogmatic epistemological standards of the day.

As we will go into more detail later in this chapter, positivist and interpretive research agendas make epistemological claims about what forms of knowledge have value and employ different standards for evaluating knowledge claims. Are valuable contributions to scholarship those that involve rigorous testing of variables to explain a certain out-come? Or are they those that explore the ontology of actors in international politics, such as states? Taken together **methodology**, or the systems 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 methodology IR will help unlock appropriate research designs and methods for your particular research project.

Now that we have explored assumptions that underlie how we approach research we can begin to think about how these assumptions will inform our research choices.

Getting Started: What do you want to know?

Many research essays in IR are empirically grounded in some aspect of, or event in, international politics, and can encompass issues like inequality, migration, or climate change. Some research also aspires to be directly policy relevant. As I demonstrated above, the methodological choices you make will shape your research design you choose. Table 1.1 uses the topic of climate change to highlight how different research purposes are intertwined with different methodological worldviews and different research designs.

Given the examples above (positivist, interpretive, critical theory, and normative the-ory, which will be explained further in this chapter), you can begin to reflect on what kind of research project would best align with your own interests. However, keep in mind that critical and normative theory projects share broader interpretive assumptions about the relationship between the researcher and the world being studied. Therefore, when thinking about how you approach your research topic, it can be helpful to think of your research as being located upon a spectrum of research practices. Table 1.2 takes as its starting point two distinct basic assumptions that will help elucidate what kind of research project you would like to undertake and how different questions assume distinct methodological assumptions.

Table 1.1 Climate Change: Research Purposes, Research Questions, and Research Design

Research Purpose	Research Question	Methodological Worldviews	Research Design	Example of a research paper
I want to explore the role of policy experts in shaping public opinion on the climate crisis	Can policy experts in climate change affect public support for particular policies?	Positivist	Causal inference, theory testing, and hypothesis testing	Maliniak et al. (2020) 'Epistemic communities and public support for the Paris Agreement on Climate Change", *Political Research Quarterly*
I want to explore different discourses on climate change and how these might shape policy	What climate discourses can be found in national climate plans?	Interpretive	Discourses and meaning, data visualization	Jernnäs and Linnér (2019) 'A discursive cartography of nationally determined contributions to the Paris Climate Agreement', *Global Environmental Change*
I want to understand how environmentally harmful social practices are reproduced and legitimized in IR so that these practices can be exposed and delegitimized.	How do gender relations shape a community's ability to adapt to climate change?	Critical theory	Emancipatory research, discourses and meaning	Bhattarai (2019) 'How do gender relations shape a community's ability to adapt to climate change? Insights from Nepal's community forestry', *Climate and Development*
What moral obligations do members of international society have to address common threats such as climate change?	Who should pay the costs associated with anthropogenic climate change, how much should they pay, and why?	Normative theory	Normative research, identification of moral and ethical standards	Vanderheiden (2011) 'Globalizing responsibility for climate change', *Ethics & International Affairs*

Table 1.2 Mapping Methodologies: Core Aims & Evaluating Claims

Basic Assumptions	How do you go about answering your research question?	Major Methodological Tradition
The researcher is independent of the world they are studying and seeks to uncover law-like regularities through the testing of conjectured relationships among variables.	• Hypothesis testing • Falsification	**Positivist**

Basic Assumptions	How do you go about answering your research question?	Major Methodological Tradition
The researcher cannot be separated from the world studied as the researcher is part of the social world. The views and context of the researcher has a bearing on the analysis of inter-state relations.	• Genealogical mapping of ideas, concepts and practices • Studying discourses and meanings • Investigating how certain practices in IR became 'possible'	**Interpretive**

Causality in International Relations

It is important to emphasize here that there are no firm boundaries between research practices, but rather the distance between them can be fluid. For example, causality is not an exclusively positivist concept. Interpretive research also makes causal claims, albeit not in the same way positivists do.

For positivists, causal claims are made in the form of **hypotheses**, or proposed explanations for phenomena. This can take the form of a conjectured relationship between a causal variable and the outcome being explained. These causal claims come from observed constant correlations and can be confirmed by studies that identify a **causal mechanism** whereby a change in one variable brings about a change in the other.

Where do hypotheses come from? Often you will build your hypotheses from proposed explanations implicit in theory or even from a 'hunch' you might have about the phenomena you are studying. For example, think about the following question: 'What explains why states voluntarily signed up to join the International Criminal Court?' Is there a specific causal factor that we can identify, such as material self-interest or ideas and norms? And can we, through our research, link this cause to our outcome, the decision to join the International Criminal Court? How can we be sure that we have identified the correct cause and not just some correlating factor that has nothing to do with the outcome?

Although the forthcoming chapters will provide guidance on how to go about exploring the above questions in a positivist sense, we can also ask: 'How did an international criminal court come about in the first place?' While such a question won't give you a specific cause and effect claim, it will illuminate broader causal forces that could account for a deepening legalization of international criminal justice. Such an approach would be drawing you closer to an interpretive methodology and how to go about answering interpretive causal questions will also be addressed in greater detail. Remember, many of the concepts that we will introduce such as explanation, causality, and understanding have cross-cutting usages and meanings. Not all causal research is positivist. To be sure, interpretive research explains events and processes in IR.

That being said, there are different ways of approaching the world that will lead us to ask different questions that will have their own distinct assumptions and means of evaluation. Some of us see ourselves as independent of the world we study, and focus on researching material outcomes, like 'do democracies go to war with other democracies?'. Other questions push us more towards the immaterial and cannot easily be answered through the compilation of large datasets in any meaningful way, for example, 'when and under what conditions is war legitimate' is a very different kind of question.

IR research practice today is about much more than the study of great power rivalries, but rather brings together a wide range of methodological approaches that range from understanding how lived experiences of international affairs shape how we engage with the world around us, to **philosophy of science**-oriented debates over how and what we can know about our world. Each of these approaches contains its own logic of research. According to Jackson (2016: 217), this means that there are different philosophical 'wagers' or 'commitments' we bring with us when designing our own research.

Philosophy of Science in IR

The *Philosophy of Science* refers to a branch of philosophical inquiry that focuses on a number of inter-related questions that include what makes scientific inquiry distinct from other types of inquiry, what is science, the logic by which scientific claims are made, the relationship between theory and data, and establishing what scientific fields have in common (Stemwedel, 2014).

Methodological Choices and Research

Pole and Lampard (2002: 2) define research as 'a process we use to understand our world'. With this definition of research in mind, it is not surprising that the preceding question of our relationship to the world we study has been at the heart of philosophy of science debates and has also produced a wide range of responses that span from the application of a natural scientific method to understand the social sciences to a complete rejection of the scientific method.

Of course, at the very outset of the research process it is important not to get lost or misdirected. IR's plurality in methodologies and its diversity in research methods often generates a significant amount of confusion. This was highlighted by Robert Keohane's call for feminist IR scholars to develop a positivist research agenda that would allow for testable conjecture and hypothesis testing, something explicitly rejected on epistemological grounds by many feminist scholars (Tickner, 2005: 1–22). It is essential to remember that distinct methodological traditions not only deploy different methods, but also emerge from distinct traditions, theories, and ways of reasoning that have shaped research in the field. Therefore, they ask fundamentally different questions with distinct logics of evaluation. If methodology is about logical coherence when it comes to

research choices, we should not evaluate research using logics of evaluation that don't fit the methodological worldview of the study at hand (Jackson, 2016). It therefore must be recognized that it is entirely appropriate that how we answer our questions will differ and that this will also be reflected in differences in terms of evaluative criteria.

King et al.'s *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994) makes a case for a single positivist logic of causal inference and is illustrative of a tendency to adopt a dogmatic view of methods that discounts alternative logics of reasoning, or ways of asking questions and finding answers. In order to capture a broader perspective on IR research methods the next section will use positivism and interpretive research to highlight the plurality of IR research today. This is not to make a claim that all research fits nicely along this axis, nor should the labels of positivism and interpretive research be conceptualized as firm, or always mutually exclusive. Instead, it is helpful to think of the positivist-interpretive axis as a fluid continuum along which researchers use a wide range of methods to collect and analyze data.

In order to determine where your own research falls along this continuum, you should first establish your research topic. Then, once you have done this, you can reflect upon the purpose of your research. Ask yourself how do you see your research contributing to knowledge in the field? Only then, will you begin to make choices about how you will collect and analyze your data. Will you be collecting data for the purpose of making some sort of conjecture about cause and effect? Or will you be taking a more **hermeneutic**, or interpretive approach, to making sense of your data?

Figure 1.1 presents how these core assumptions will lead you in different directions in your own work.
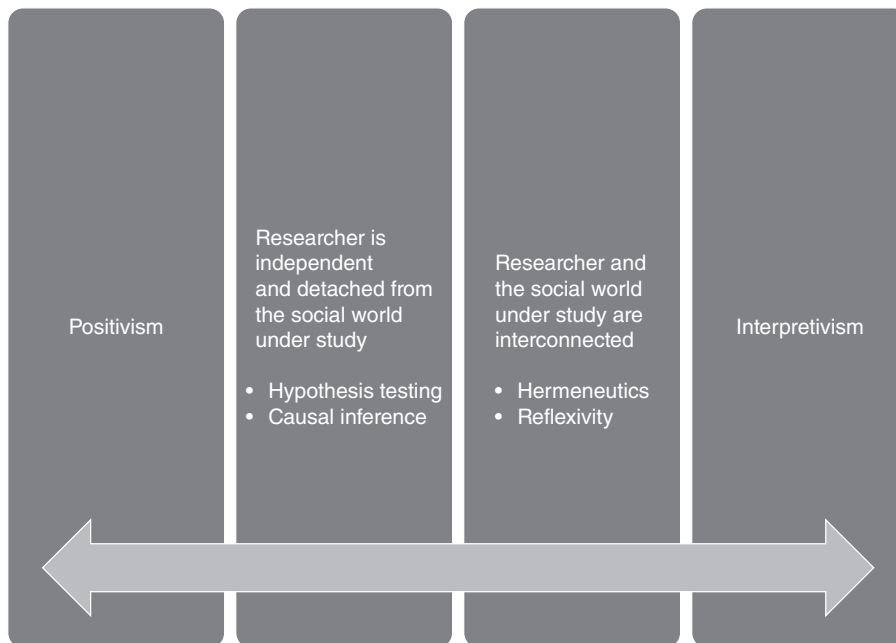
Figure 1.1   Positivism and Interpretivism Spectrum in IR

24   RESEARCH METHODS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Your IR reading lists will no doubt contain works adopting divergent methodological logics, and also a wide range of different ways of doing research. This alone has probably already led you to understand that IR is defined in part by its *inclusiveness* of different methodologies, 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 those seeking straightforward methodological guidance, because unlike in other fields within the social sciences where there is greater consensus regarding dominant methodologies, in IR no such over-arching unitary logic of research exists.

Thus, rather than provide you with a unitary logic of research methodologies or methods, the following sections will introduce you to choices with which you will be confronted during the research process. And, it will be these choices, addressed in the order you are likely to encounter them, that will serve as your guide to both the research process and research methods. The next sections will therefore provide you 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.

Methodological Pluralism in IR Research

In this section positivism and interpretivism will be presented in greater detail. **Positivism** refers to work that aims to uncover law-like regularities and generalizable statements through the testing of observations and experimentation (King et al., 1994), and **interpretivism** refers to reflexive research that interrogates ideas, norms, beliefs and values that underlie international politics (Hollis and Smith, 1990; Linklater, 1992; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2015). In addition to presenting these two positions, there will also be a brief introduction to **critical theory** and **normative theory** research. Critical theory, which contends theorizing in IR is never neutral, and normative theory, which advances moral and ethical arguments in IR, are two theoretical traditions that will be presented independently in this chapter, and in Chapter 2. This is in part because they are defined by either a critical ethos towards revealing structures of oppression, or are explicitly not empirical, in the sense that the focus is more on philosophical reasoning in the context of ethics and morality in IR.

Here this textbook, the labels of positivism and interpretivism are used for simplicity's sake. RMIR does not try to subsume all work under these two labels. For that reason, critical and normative work is also introduced in its own right. Indeed, as you will see later in this textbook, IR methodology cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies. As noted earlier, we should be careful not to make distinctions between causal and non-causal research, because rather than seeing positivist research as causal and interpretive as non-causal, both do address causality, albeit in different ways (Kurki, 2008). Table 1.3 highlights different positivist and interpretive responses to the questions: How do we study IR? And, why do we study IR?

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Table 1.3 Positivist and Interpretive Research in IR

	Positivist	Interpretive
How do we study IR?	Specification of fixed, given and unchanging variables which can be generalised and allow for law like causal inference	Objects under study are social artefacts that are subject to change, thus context- and time-dependent.
Why do we study IR?	Discovery of empirical regularities	To add to, or challenge, existing understandings

Finally, we should not confuse labels we are using here with theories of IR. For example, there is a broad body of IR Constructivist research that employs a positivist methodology (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). Moreover, researchers such as Molloy apply critical discourse methods to provide a genealogy of realist thought that challenged many assumptions held by IR realists (2006). It is therefore instructive to take a step back from theoretical debates, and approach questions of methodology and methods from the perspective of your research purpose. 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 positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism

As mentioned earlier, **positivism** 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. For those who see IR as a positivist social science, IR should be studied in a systemic, replicable, and evidence-based manner (King et al., 1994; Gerring, 2012).

Positivism and Research in IR

The topic should be consequential for political, social, or economic life, for understanding something that significantly affects many people's lives, or for understanding and predicting events that might be harmful or beneficial.

Source: King et al., 1994: 15.

For positivists, 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. We are to be explicit in specifying our variables when testing causal claims. There is a rich tradition of positivist 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* (1979). Likewise, neoliberal institutionalists 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 neorealist cousins. These theories seek to observe and explain state behaviour while also testing falsifiable hypotheses derived from observations of empirical facts.

There are four core characteristics of IR positivism:

1   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,
3   hypotheses tested in IR research should be falsifiable,
4   'good' research is research that provides for broad law-like generalizations.

At the outset of designing your own research, it is necessary to understand which side of the divide your own research interests gravitate toward. If you wish to explain specific outcomes, developments, or the behaviour of actors in international politics to generate generalizable findings, then you will be designing your research with a positivist methodological logic in mind.

Interpretivism

Interpretive research also draws upon a rich tradition in IR among scholars whose aim is not to necessarily identify law-like regularities in IRR. Instead, interpretivism, also referred to as reflexivity or post-positivism, focuses on **hermeneutics**, or the study of interpretation. In IR, hermeneutics is associated with the interpretation of meaning embedded within international politics. If positivist research finds the methods of natural science applicable to understanding the social world, interpretivist researchers posit the need for an alternative framework to analyze IR. The social world depends on the interactions of people, and these can change over time. Interpretivist research agendas seek to understand identities, ideas, norms, and culture in international politics.

The principal claim advanced by interpretivists is that the distinction between the researcher and the social world, implied by positivists, should be rejected. This, interpretivists argue, is because the researcher intervenes in, or creates, observed social realities through their own role in knowledge production and thus alters the object under study. 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.

Up until now, the implication has been that to study IR – and the two ways to go about this (positivist and interpretive) – is to study 'real world', that is empirical, concerns. IR research is to research what *exists* out there. In fact, the field is broader than

empirical examples. A researcher of IR might also look to investigate what *should be*, by engaging in normative theory. Finally, an additional research agenda, critical theory work, cuts across these divisions, with its explicitly emancipatory focus. I touch on these two categories in the following two sections.

Critical Theory

Critical theory in IR draws upon the work of the Frankfurt School and Max Horkheimer who saw the purpose of social scientific research to be the liberation of humankind from social processes of domination and oppression (1972). For critical theorists, knowledge itself is implicated in maintaining existing social orders (Foucault, 2002). Therefore, methodology and methods cannot be seen as a neutral project (Aradau and Huysmans, 2013). Today there is a rich body of IR scholarship that has taken on the critical theory call of exploring how knowledge acts to maintain systems of power and how reflexive scholarship can better situate these processes so as to expose and transform them.

Examples of critical theory in IR include groundbreaking contributions by scholars such as Richard Ashley (1984) and Robert Cox (1981) who cautioned the positivist epistemological position that limits acceptable knowledge in the field to empirical observation fails to question the underlying social and power structures of international politics.

Normative Theory

Normative theory explores and evaluates ethical standards for behaviour in IR. It has a long genealogy that stretches back to inquiries as to when the use of force could be justly used by rulers. A seminal example from IR would be Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), in which Walzer traced debates regarding ethical standards and the use of force. Here, the aim of research is not necessarily to provoke social change, as we see with critical theorists, but rather to engage in ethical and moral inquiry as to the standards of appropriate action in IR. Normative theory has produced debates of the types of moral obligations that states have to those living outside their borders and also the extent to which state sovereignty can act to restrict intervention in the context of the debate over the Responsibility to Protect (Mills, 2015).

Now that positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and normative theory have been explored in greater depth, we can begin to use these positions to better understand research design and research methods. 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? To answer this question, we will need to understand how methodology, theory, research design, and methods come together.

Navigating Research Practice: Methodology, Theory, and Research Design

Making research choices is really about telling your reader about the why, what, and how of your research project. This is where making methodology explicit matters the most. Let's start with the *why*. When we think about a particular event or issue 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 down widely divergent research trajectories and also provide us with distinct theoretical insights. What theories you engage with, whether grand theories such as neo-realism, or mid-level theories such as democratic peace theory, will be determined by your understanding of why you are carrying out your project. For example, you might want to tell your reader about how processes of state collapse can lead to violent conflict to better inform existing theoretical debates on the causes of civil wars. In relation to the former Yugoslavia, those who saw the war as the result of the aggressive behaviour of a select few autocratic leaders seeking to maintain their hold on power came up with theories that focused on how elite behaviour acted as the catalyst for violent conflict. On the other hand, those who saw the conflict as the product of an inter-ethnic security dilemma sought to apply concepts derived from realism to explain the Yugoslav wars.

Alternatively, we could look at the 2003 Iraq War, where competing theoretical claims on whether or not Saddam Hussein could be deterred from aggressive behaviour as well as on democratization and democratic peace offered divergent policy prescriptions and forecasts for the likely aftermath of the initial U.S.-led invasion. Your research on this topic could aim to contribute to one of the above theoretical debates with the aim to better inform policy on deterrence or democracy promotion.

How about *what* you are researching? This will also depend on what your methodological and theoretical assumptions tell you about what is important to focus on as the most appropriate mode of analysis. You could focus on explaining the behaviour of state actors, ethnic groups, or individual leaders. You can look at documenting the actions of these actors overtime, or you may focus on what these actors are telling us. Do we look at instances of violence and record them in a dataset? Or should we look at discourses of violence and interpret their meanings?

Methods Choices: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

Next, it's time to think about *how* you will carry out your research. In order to start thinking about methods, it is helpful to recall that research methods are techniques for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. These techniques for collecting and analyzing largely fall into two main categories: **quantitative** and **qualitative**. In terms of data collection, quantitative approaches typically include gathering structured data through questionnaires, social network research, or analyzing datasets, and qualitative approaches collect unstructured data, which is typically text-based from interviewing, observing cases, ethnographic research, or focus groups. Once we have the data, it must be analyzed, and

here a split between quantitative and qualitative methods also applies. Quantitative analysis often involves statistical analysis of large datasets while qualitative methods allow research to delve deeper into specific events, places, organizations or personalities. Note that while qualitative methods and quantitative methods are the subjects of Chapters 5 and 6 respectively, strategies for mixed method designs will also be explored in Chapter 7.

However, before embarking upon data collection it is imperative that the researcher has a clear idea of what data to collect, why they are collecting it, and how they will interpret it. This is especially the case now given the massive body of data that is within easy reach of students of IR.

Collecting and Analyzing Data in IR Research

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 for the interpretation of data. 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.

Crafting Your Own Research Project

Research is about making choices. From the very outset of the research process, you will be confronted by choices that inform what kind of research essay to write. I suspect that you will have no trouble identifying topics of interest, such as international terrorism, human trafficking, or civil conflict, but there may be a gap between your interest and detailed knowledge of a particular phenomenon, event, or geographic area and the process of distillation of that interest and knowledge into a methodologically cogent and theoretically informed research paper. This can result 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 behaviour 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. Both of the above observations you might have encountered in feedback on essays you may have written for classes in IR.

This is why it is important to be able to understand that research choices that you will be making in your own research. Good research papers have an internal logic that draws a red line from research topic and research question to research design and method. As mentioned earlier, essay or thesis writing often begins with the prospective author deciding to write on a topical event or issue in international politics. For example, a student's interest could be in the Arab Spring uprisings that began in Tunisia in December

2010 and was followed by a period of political turbulence and conflict across the Middle East and North Africa. The student, having closely followed 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 contributes 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 methodological spectrum outlined earlier: positivism 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 some particular development in IR? Are you interested in explaining why the United States intervened to topple Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, but did not intervene to remove Bashar al-Assad in Syria? Or do you want to identify the causes of the diplomatic crisis that erupted between Japan and South Korea in 2019 over historical controversies stemming from the legacy of the Second World War? Perhaps you are interested in the consequences of the rise of China in global politics. For example, what role will China play in the emerging global order? If these are topics you wish to explain, then a positivist approach will allow you to select a research design and methods that will allow you to begin to tease out causal relationships and explain events and outcomes.

Or is your interest more reflexive? Are you interested in exploring how past atrocities or wars are remembered or commemorated? Are you interested in how certain taken-for-granted practices or concepts in IR emerged, for example state sovereignty or national interest? Or perhaps, your interest in understanding how certain voices and perspectives have been marginalized within the discipline by a narrow focus on the management of great power relationships? Or would you like to explore how self-perception of identity can shape foreign policies? If so, you will find that an interpretivist approach to your research, and research method selection, will prove most helpful.

Relations between Japan and South Korea

In 2019, relations between Japan and South Korea, two key pillars of the US-led security architecture in East Asia reached a nadir as both states downgraded military, intelligence, and trade ties with each other. However, just a few years earlier, in 2015, both states had reached an agreement that was to 'irreversibly' resolve one of the most contentious legacy issues of the Second World War, that of the wartime legacy of sexual slavery, known as the 'comfort women' issue. What explains this most recent downturn in relations? The table below sets out some research topics that you could explore.

Table 1.4 Spotlight on Researching Japan–South Korea Relations

Researching Japan–South Korea Relations: Positivist, Interpretivist, Normative, or Critical			
Positivist	**Interpretive**	**Normative**	**Critical**
I want to explain the reasons why Japan and South Korea reached an agreement on the comfort women issue in 2015.	I want to understand how understandings of the comfort women issue differ in Japan and South Korea.	I want to know whether or not the 2015 agreement was a just agreement.	I want to know how sexual violence is legitimized in IR.
I want to explain Japan–South Korea relations in the context of a changing regional security environment.	I want to understand how perceptions of China as a threat are understood in Japan and South Korea.	I want to know whether or not the post-second world war order in East Asia was just.	I want to know how states marginalize narratives that contest their view of history.
I want to examine the role of the United States in Japan–South Korea relations.	I want to understand how the United States is perceived as an ally in Japan and South Korea.	I want to know under what conditions the use of force by the U.S. in East Asia would be legitimate.	I want to know how imperial power relations are maintained in East Asia.

Table 1.4 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 the topic area more deeply and to 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 our student argued *the wars in the former Yugoslavia were caused by ancient ethnic hatreds*. Such an essay, explicitly positivist 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 an explanation of the causes of internal conflicts in the aftermath of the Cold War to decision-makers, 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. The essay 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 a similar 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 were rich in detail, neither succeeded 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, you must bridge the gap between your 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 positivist-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.

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 theoretical debates. One way to arrive 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 effective? 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 below 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.

Source: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (n.d.) 'About the ICTY', https://www.icty.org/en/about (accessed May 19, 2021).

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: positivism. 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. Alternatively,

what standards of justice should we adhere to and why, is another set of normative questions that could come to mind. And finally, what role, if any, does the current practice of international justice play in maintaining processes of domination?

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, understanding, or contesting 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 positivist/interpretivist divide?
- Do you aim to contribute to critical theory or normative theory?

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 at times fail to communicate with one another, the positivist-interpretivist spectrum was presented to help understand evaluate the utility of each set of methods tools presented later in this book. It was emphasized that questions of methodology 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 the how the question you pose will in turn determine which methods are most appropriate for your research.

Suggested Further Readings

1   The following article provides a critical theory introduction to methods that moves away from positivistic neutral understandings of methods and methodology

towards a more critical understanding of both: Aradau, Claudia and Huysmans, Jef (2013) 'Critical methods in international relations: The politics of techniques, devices, and acts', *European Journal of International Relations,* 20 (3): 596–619.

2   This second article provides an overview of how the foundational myths of IR continue to perpetuate a narrow understanding of the discipline: de Carvalho, Benjamin, Leira, Halvard and Hobson, John M. (2011) 'The big bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919.', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39 (3): 735–58.

3   Choi, Selmeczi and Strausz highlight how critical methods can contribute to our understanding of world politics. The following text will be of interest in particular to students who are interested in more critical research designs: Choi, Shine, Selmeczi, Anna and Strausz, Ersébet (2019) *Critical Methods for the Study of World Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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

5   See Chapter 1 for a discussion of how the term 'science' has been used and understood in the study of politics and IR: Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus (2016) *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (2nd edition). New York, NY: Routledge.

6   This edited volume includes numerous concise and helpful essays on critical methods in security studies that reflect upon a wide range of topics from methodology to research design and research practice: Salter Mark B. and Mutlu, Can E. (eds) (2013) *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.