

Student Perceptions of Dominant and Counter-Narratives in IR Theory

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INTRODUCTION

This equity-minded SoTL project (Chick 2023; Gannon 2020) is a qualitative content analysis of student reflections on dominant and counter-narratives in International Relations Theory (IR). Dominant narratives are widely accepted cultural perspectives and histories that appeal to universal truths or universal values (Lyotard, 1979). Counter-narratives productively challenge conventional wisdom by considering marginalized stories, lived experiences, and perspectives. In my IR Theory course, students were asked to reflect on the dominant vs. counter-narrative debate within the field by responding to four prompts throughout the semester: (1) the relationship between power and knowledge in IR; (2) the major concepts relevant to IR; (3) why we study IR; and (4) which IR theories they subscribe to.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES, COUNTER-NARRATIVES, AND IR

In the field of IR, dominant narratives follow several common tenets:

1. Teaching the discipline through the paradigms approach—focus on “isms” (i.e., realism, liberalism, and constructivism).
2. Adopting a state-centric approach to the study of IR (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer 2001).
3. Favoring a positivist philosophy of science approach.
4. Choosing quantitative over qualitative methods (King, Keohane, Verba, 1994).
5. Supporting value-neutral research (i.e., the role of theory is to explain).

Counter-narratives challenge these assumptions in several ways:

1. Teaching the discipline through critical lenses (i.e., feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, normative theory, and Green theory).
2. Critiquing the state-centric approach.
3. Acknowledging the value of a post-positivist philosophy of science (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2016).
4. Highlighting the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods—methodological pluralism (Brady and Collier, 2010).
5. Understanding that IR can and should be both an empirical and normative endeavor.

What is IR and Why is It Important?

Introducing the Idea of Master/Counter Narratives in IR

Week 2 Prompt: Consider your previous exposure to international relations (i.e., intro courses, other world politics courses, etc.) and the information discussed in the past week related to master and counter-narratives in International Relations Theory. What that in mind, answer the following open-ended questions to the best of your ability.

A. What is the relationship between power and knowledge in IR?
B. What are the major concepts/themes relevant to IR?
C. Why should we study IR? Why is it important?
D. Which IR theories are you familiar with? Which IR theories, if any, do you subscribe to?

Studying IR Through the Master Narrative Lens

Week 7 Prompt: Consider our discussion of the major paradigms in international relations (i.e., realism and liberalism.) After an in-depth analysis of realism and liberalism, and considering your attitudes/perceptions/interpretations coming into the semester, answer the following open-ended questions to the best of your ability.

A. What is the relationship between power and knowledge in IR?
B. What are the major concepts/themes relevant to IR?
C. Why should we study IR? Why is it important?
D. Which IR theories are you familiar with? Which IR theories, if any, do you subscribe to?

Studying IR Through a Counter-Narrative Approach

Week 15 Prompt: Consider our discussion of the middle ground (i.e., constructivism and English School) and critical approaches in international relations (i.e., feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, normative theory, and Green theory). After an in-depth analysis of these approaches, and considering your attitudes/perceptions/interpretations coming into the semester, answer the following open-ended questions to the best of your ability.

A. What is the relationship between power and knowledge in IR?
B. What are the major concepts/themes relevant to IR?
C. Why should we study IR? Why is it important?
D. Which IR theories are you familiar with? Which IR theories, if any, do you subscribe to?

Questionnaire

METHOD

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

My project employs a qualitative content analysis. This method categorizes data, in this case, student responses to various prompts, inductively as a result of close reading (Forman and Damschroder, 2008; Morgan 1993).

Students responded to open-ended prompts, and these open-ended responses were used for in-depth analysis to draw on themes and sub-themes. Most notably, it was crucial to see whether various themes and sub-themes resonated with students after they were exposed to counter-narrative perspectives in IR Theory.

As seen in the questionnaire above, students were asked to reflect on four prompts at various points during the Fall 2023 semester—after being introduced to the themes, dominant narratives, and counter-narratives, after studying the dominant narratives in-depth, and after challenging the dominant narratives. Following their responses, I examined the reflections, leading me to draw on themes and sub-themes expressed by my students.

INSTRUCTOR REFLECTION

I have had a chance to initially reflect on these findings—one part of that being this SoTL presentation—but a more holistic reflection will be prepared for submission to a SoTL journal in the coming months (Poole, 2018).

REFLECTION INSIGHTS

PROMPT 1: POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Theme 1: There is an interaction between knowledge and power.

1. “Knowledge carries with it power.”
2. “The relationship between power and knowledge in IR is a direct relationship.”
3. “Knowledge itself can be viewed as a form of power.”

Theme 2: Historically, those in power have been the ones who have produced knowledge.

1. “Those who hold power in the international system are the ones who have knowledge and are the ones who write the theories that we study today.”
2. “Power is how political entities control and mitigate the political environment around them.”

Theme 3: Knowledge and power are situational, often derived from particular lived experiences and viewpoints.

1. “The knowledge in IR is typically gained through experience and then relayed through specific viewpoints.”
2. “Power and knowledge historically come hand in hand with the European, affluent, educated, men who ran states and wrote history.”

PROMPT 2: CONCEPTS

Theme 1: Paradigms

Theme 2: Sovereignty and States

Theme 3: War and Diplomacy

Theme 4: Power and Anarchy

Theme 5: Norms, Values, and Ethics

Theme 6: Intersectionality

As the semester progressed, students highlighted a greater diversity of concepts that are important in the study of IR. Early in the semester, major concepts were related to the paradigms, sovereignty and state-centrism, power, and war—all elements of a dominant narrative of IR. Later in the semester, students were speaking to the intersectionality of IR, and additionally, the role of ethics, norms, and values in IR—elements associated with critical approaches.

PROMPT 3: WHY STUDY IR

Theme 1: It helps us understand state behavior, especially conflict and cooperation.

This theme was prevalent throughout the semester, but students were more likely to speak to the importance of states earlier on, with little reference to non-state actors.

Theme 2: IR can help us understand interactions at different levels of the state and among states and non-state actors.

Toward the end of the semester, students’ responses were more holistic, although many still acknowledged the dominance of the state in IR.

Theme 3: It helps us understand human behavior.

Several reflections touched on the importance of IR in understanding human behavior subjectively while recognizing the difficulties associated with obtaining objective truths.

PROMPT 4: THEORY

Theme 1: Major Paradigms

Theme 2: Critical Theories

It is evident that students coming into an IR class are most familiar with dominant narratives (in some cases only dominant narratives). This shifts significantly at the end of the semester. Students are more comfortable and accepting of alternative approaches.



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