

The Theory-Practice Divide in International Relations

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Motivation and Overview

In recent years a number of commentators have bemoaned the uselessness of academic research on international relations (IR) to policymakers and practitioners. In early 2014 New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote, “My onetime love, political science...seems to be trying, in terms of practical impact, to commit suicide.” David Rothkopf, editor of *Foreign Policy*, echoed this assessment: “academic contributions,” he argued, are often too “opaque, abstract, incremental, dull” to be relevant to policy practitioners. After perusing a recent issue of the peer-reviewed journal *International Security*, influential war correspondent Tom Ricks lamented the “extraordinary irrelevance of political science.”

Over the last decade the IR discipline has engaged in no small amount of hand wringing and finger pointing of its own about the discipline’s relationship with the policy community and the “real world.” In a 2009 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. criticized a growing academic-policy divide in IR, attributing this split to an academic culture that values abstract theory and mathematical methods over policy ideas. In such a culture, according to Nye, scholars are rewarded professionally when they write primarily for each other, and their careers may suffer if they write for policymakers. Stephen M. Walt similarly claimed that academic norms and incentives discourage many IR scholars from pursuing policy-relevant research. And Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch find in their 2014 study that while policy officials follow social science research, they do not find the quantitative research found in academic journals useful to their policy work.

Not all IR scholars have joined the chorus. Bruce W. Jentleson and Ely Ratner blame practitioners’ limited interest in academic work for the gap between the

theory and practice of IR. Others argue that the standard for evaluating academic work is and should be its scientific rigor, not its policy relevance; writing for a policy audience, these scholars worry, may compromise the objectivity necessary to produce sound scholarship. As New York Times columnist Noam Scheiber noted in response to recent revelations that a Ph.D. student falsified data in a study published in *Science*, “[T]he benefits to academics of generating media attention may be subtly skewing their research.” If scholars want to credibly speak truth to power, Ido Oren argues, they must maintain their distance from government.

These claims notwithstanding, there is considerable agreement among IR scholars that the academy should help to solve international policy problems. A 2011 Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey of IR scholars at U.S. universities revealed that respondents overwhelmingly believe there is a gulf between the academic and policy worlds, and the bridges between these worlds should be strengthened. Eighty-five percent of IR scholars in the United States think that the academic-policy divide is as large as, or larger than, it was 20 to 30 years ago, and 92 percent think there should be greater links between policy and academic communities. As IR scholar and then-President of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Robert Gallucci, noted in 2012, “The worlds of policy making and academic research should be in constant, productive conversation, and scholars and researchers should be an invaluable resource for policymakers, but they are not.”

Amid the myriad calls to bridge the gap, few students of the discipline have considered the nature of the gap itself: how large is it, and how does it vary over time and across different IR subfields? These are the central issues we address in this book. We ask whether and to what extent the academy has produced knowledge that is relevant to and used by practitioners, and whether and how the gap varies across eight issue areas (nuclear security and proliferation, interstate conflict, trade, finance, development and foreign aid, environment, intrastate conflict, and human rights). We pair academics and practitioners who are experts in their respective subfields to reflect on the gap. This approach allows us to investigate the relationship between the theory and practice of IR, as well as variation in that relationship across the discipline.

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