

Teaching Theory and Space: Human Territoriality in Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Learning theories in political science can be difficult for students. This article describes a technique that helps students to understand how a theory about human characteristics may impact behavior. I use a mini-simulation in which two volunteers are asked to enact a gimmick in front of the classroom, demonstrating the theory of human territoriality (Asal et al. 2018). As the volunteers engage in small talk, I point out that they engage with one another at a certain distance and angle that reflects social space. As the exercise progresses, students easily relate to the theory of human territoriality, which is defined as the symbolic and physical connection to a space considered as their own. This mini-simulation achieves the following learning objectives: understanding (1) that theories are relevant and help to explain human behavior; (2) the workings of the individual level of analysis; and (3) that theories are not universal and have limits to their application across culture, time, and space. This teaching technique does not require preparation time or resources, and students easily comprehend the expected learning outcomes. Having received overwhelmingly positive feedback in evaluations, I offer this as a viable technique for teaching theory in general because it helps students to comprehend what a theory is supposed to do—that is, to understand, explain, and sometimes predict behavior.


Learning theories in political science asks students to think abstractly about, for example, the psychological characteristics of humans, the mode of organization of societies, and the effects of systems and structures on behavior. Thinking abstractly about behavior and politics may be difficult for students. Traditionally, instructors seek to achieve learning objectives through lectures and assignments. Teaching a new generation of students exposed to numerous forms of social media is a task that needs reassessment and adaptation by instructors to increase their attention and retention. Resorting to different techniques and teaching styles such as gimmicks and simulations makes it easier for this generation of students, whose attention span is becoming narrower (Guàrdia, Maina, and Sangrà 2013). As Asal and Blake (2006, 1) suggested: “[s]imulations offer social science students an opportunity to learn from first-hand experience in much the same way that laboratory experiments allow students of the physical sciences

to observe actual physical processes...[this] helps to increase students’ understanding of the subtleties of theories or concepts.”

This mini-simulation illustrates the theory of human territoriality in international relations (IR), which suggests that humans attach symbolic meaning to a physical space over which they feel ownership. This theory is used at the individual level of analysis that focuses on human psychological sources of behavior. This activity also can be used to create similar classroom experiences to teach theory in general, regardless of the political science subfield.

USING DIFFERENT TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Simulations, mini-games, and gimmicks encourage students to empathize with different subject positions and to distance themselves from that particular subjectivity during the debriefing stage. These techniques require the participation of students and observers by playing assigned roles (Asal et al. 2013). Building on Schacht and Stewart (1990; 1992), Asal et al. (2018, 2) suggested the use of gimmicks as a “user-friendly and interactive approach” in which “students themselves are the data points or objects of theory applications.” A quantitative study showed that “students learn more initially from a lecture, but that students who were

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exposed to the simulation were better able to retain that information over the long term” (Wunische 2019, 37). Additionally, the Frederking (2005), Baranowski and Weir (2015), and Shellman and Turan (2006) quantitative studies on the effectiveness of simulations on student learning outcomes lend credence to using them in our classrooms.

The benefits of using different teaching strategies include increasing student engagement, retaining more of the material (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008), and attracting new majors (Shellman and Turan 2006). Political scientists have used many examples of different techniques to teach about collective-action problems and role-playing in diplomacy (Ellington, Grillo, and Shaw 2006; Hamilton 2020), world hunger (Krain and Shadle 2006), multilateral bargaining (Shellman and Turan 2006), EU decision making (Jones and Bursens 2015), election campaigns (Caruson 2005), and crises (Butcher 2012; Glasgow 2014; Taylor 2013).

THE THEORY OF HUMAN TERRITORIALITY

A challenge in teaching theory is to encourage students to think conceptually and theoretically, which requires instructors to appeal to what Bloom referred to as higher learning skills as abstraction and evaluation (Bloom 1956; Krathwohl 2002). To explain IR theories, I utilize the commonly used levels of analysis (i.e., images) to help students understand the causes and sources of behavior. To teach the second- and third-level theories (i.e., state and system), I use different and relatively straightforward examples. However, teaching first-level theories (i.e., human subjectivity and psychology) as a cause of conflict can be challenging for students who may be distracted by different tangents.

This article describes a mini-simulation at the individual level of analysis. I used this technique across different cultures and, based on the positive feedback in student evaluations, I have improved it in the past 15 years. This “organic simulation” exemplifies the workings of the theory of human territoriality with the assistance of volunteers in the classroom (Kollars and Rosen 2013). During the simulation, two volunteers interact with one another and unintentionally reveal to the class that they carry social spaces around themselves. For me as a scholar who teaches both mainstream and critical approaches in IR, this mini-simulation achieves the following learning objectives: understanding (1) that theories are relevant and help to explain human behavior; (2) the workings of the individual level of analysis; and (3) that theories are not universal and have limits to their application across culture, time, and space. Accordingly, this article contributes to a growing literature on alternative teaching methods.

The theory of territoriality has roots in anthropology, psychology, and sociology and has been used by political scientists (Johnson and Toft 2014; Sack 1986). The literature provides anthropological and psychological explanations for the causes of behavior, making it a useful example of a theory located at the first level of analysis. A classic study referred to a territory as “an area occupied exclusively by [subject’s] means of repulsion through overt defense or advertisement. This definition emphasized the behavioral basis of territoriality without overemphasizing one possible mechanism of spacing at the expense of other possibilities (e.g., mutual avoidance based on olfactory or visual markings)” (Dyson-Hudson and Smith 1978, 23).

Several scholars have studied territoriality in international conflict. In their quantitative studies, Senese and Vasquez (2003; 2008) suggested that territorial claims and disputes make militarized interstate disputes more likely (Vasquez 1995). For Huth (2009, 6), territoriality is a factor that must be analyzed in the broader framework of foreign policy. Accordingly, Allee and Huth (2006) and Huth and Allee (2002) used territorial disputes to theorize about second-level explanations of interstate conflicts by analyzing international legal rulings and scrutinizing the democratic peace theory. These works suggest that territoriality also can be used as a psychological foundation for second-level theorizing.¹ Teaching the theory of territoriality also lays the foundation for future topics in class that focus on the historical transformation of political space, organizational turf wars, and development of ideologies such as nationalism. For example, the Westphalian sovereign-state model transformed medieval notions of space to a territorial statehood that forms the basis of the modern international system (Ruggie 1993; Tagma and Lenze 2020).

THE MINI-SIMULATION

After the initial introductory weeks in the course, I introduce the levels of analysis and how they are used to categorize the sources of behavior. I then briefly define the individual level of analysis before mentioning territoriality because volunteers should not be primed for pedagogical purposes. As an example of a theory at the first level, territoriality argues that human beings attach psychological importance to physical space because they regard it as their own. Simply stated, the theory argues that individuals have invisible spaces they carry around themselves. Rather than rely on a standard lecture, the mini-simulation is visually appealing and provides students with a hands-on approach to understanding the theory.

Before I begin lecturing on territoriality, I ask for two volunteers to come to the front of the classroom and engage in a simple performance.² They are asked to assume that they have just met for the first time at a social event and to engage in friendly small talk (e.g., the weather, reality TV, or sports). I ask the volunteers to simply start talking and inform them that I will be going to the computer for a couple of minutes to find a PowerPoint slide for the subsequent topic. At this point, I stop engaging the volunteers and appear to mind my own business at the computer. Instructors should allow students to believe that they are on their own and that the instructor is not observing them. To make this simulation more enjoyable, instructors can tailor and tweak the exercise as they see fit. For example, the instructor can ask volunteers to assume that they are at a social event and that the instructor is the host. The instructor might say, “Hey, thanks for coming! You both just arrived. Why don’t you introduce yourselves to one another, and I’ll go get some chips and salsa from the kitchen?” The rest of the class is entertained as the volunteers engage in a fun conversation. Throughout my experience, I have found that volunteers tend to be more extroverted and find it easy to start a conversation while others are watching.

After about two minutes, the volunteers are relaxed and organically enjoying their small talk while the class is attuned to their conversation. What follows is crucial: instructors who want to use this technique must come back at the right moment when there is a pause in the conversation. At that moment, I return and ask the volunteers to “freeze,” retaining their exact physical distance and

posture. I repeat the request to hold their position for several minutes because this is a crucial point in the exercise. I then give a brief synopsis of the theory of territoriality, emphasizing how humans carry social spaces around themselves. Next, I show [figure 1](#) on the PowerPoint. This image is a bird's-eye view of two individuals' physical distance from one another at an approximate 20- to 45-degree angle.

The figure reflects the relative physical distance and the angle of the volunteers. Students understand that the image was made before the simulation, predicting the volunteers' relative distance and angle. By this time, the other students are highly engaged, and both the volunteers and the class are intrigued by the image and its

directions in a crowded elevator. For example, after entering an elevator, most people turn around to face the door. To make the learning experience more enjoyable, I show a short clip from *Seinfeld* in the episode in which a character called "Close Talker" illustrates the logic behind the theory of territoriality.⁴ Instructors also may use the "Drill Sergeant" image from the movie *Full Metal Jacket* in which the sergeant gets into the recruits' faces.

The lecture continues to make this exercise relevant to the first level of analysis and provides examples from international conflict. One example is the 1982 Falkland/Malvinas Islands war in the South Atlantic Ocean between the United Kingdom and Argentina. I mention how in the absence of a strong economic

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resemblance to actual behavior. This becomes the perfect learning moment for the instructor because all of the students are paying close attention.³

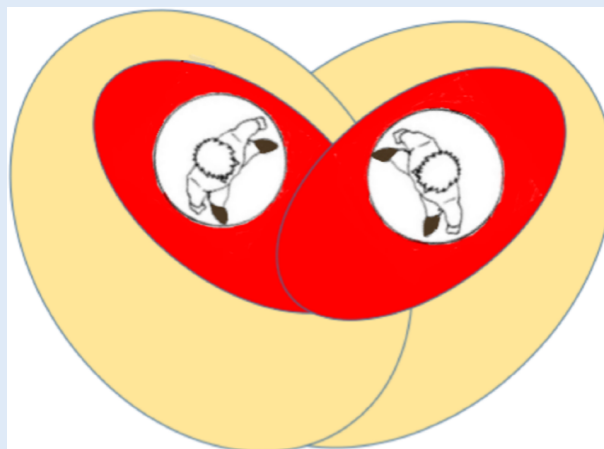
As Asal and Kratoville (2013, 132) argued, "effective simulations are designed to strike a balance between students' perceptions of what happened and [compare it with the] existing theory as to why it happened." I ask my students what might be a possible explanation for this resemblance. I then show how human beings create social spacing associated with their comfort zone. If PowerPoint is not accessible, instructors can draw [figure 1](#) on the board while the volunteers are conversing. As illustrated in the figure, this space is usually somewhat more in front of the individual and a little less in the back. Typically, when human beings engage in a friendly conversation, they talk several feet apart at an angle that respects one another's space in front of them. I point out that humans may find it uncomfortable if an individual enters too closely their personal space, triggering a "fight or flight response." I show how humans attach meaning to the physical space around them. I then talk about how a similar logic applies to facial

and geopolitical interest, Argentina regarded the Falkland/Malvinas Islands as part of its territory and took over the islands under British sovereignty. This created an emotional response in the British public and was used as a rallying cry to protect overseas territories. Instructors can show newspaper headlines from the start of the war to highlight the psychological and emotional aspects involved (Johnson and Toft 2014).⁵

At this point in the simulation, students are excited and paying close attention, so it is beneficial to introduce the relative power of theories because it can help them understand and predict behavior. As Wedig (2010) argued, instructors should develop diverse strategies to maximize the learning outcomes of simulations. After defining a theory at the individual level, students have a much better understanding of what a theory is in general and what it is supposed to do—that is, to understand, explain, and sometimes predict behavior. I also remind students that this theory is not exhaustive of other possible explanations for why conflicts happen. Instructors can mention how territories become socially constructed in the modern age by ideologies such as nationalism

Figure 1

Example Distance and Angle Reflecting Human Territoriality.



(Anderson 2006). They also can discuss turf wars in bureaucracies as another example (Allison and Zelikow 1999).

I find it beneficial to open my lectures to a critical conversation about the theory by asking, “Can you think of spaces and times in which this theory can be shown to be contingent or non-explanatory?” Students offer scenes including a crowded bus, subway, or dance party where territorial spaces begin to shrink. They learn how the theory that was satisfactory on one occasion may not be universally valid because it is contingent based on time and space. I continue by highlighting that the explanatory power of theories is conditioned by historical, temporal, and cross-cultural understandings. This introduces students to abstract thinking skills and is a preliminary step toward critical IR theories that criticize mainstream theories (e.g., feminism and postcoloni-

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alism). For example, some literature suggests that the social construction of masculinity is associated with territorial identifications and representations of sovereignty and autonomy (Malmberg 2019; Spaaij 2008).⁶ Instructors can explore ways to introduce feminist perspectives on the social construction of state sovereignty and territoriality, which mainstream approaches take for granted (Mann 2013; Weber 1995). This can lead to a class discussion on how and why such mainstream theories (including

During the debriefing discussion, the simulation also reveals to students that theories are not universal but instead are contingent in their explanations based on time, space, and culture. Given the pandemic experience, future exercises can be incorporated into lectures to show the workings of social space and its relation to behavior.

the theory of human territoriality) historically emerged as gendered and Eurocentric representations of the world (Peterson 2004; Tickner 2005). By the end of the lecture, and without using the word “epistemology” (which some students may find intimidating), students are equipped with basic tools to think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of theoretical analysis and knowledge production in general.

We also can reflect on the potential impact of space and audience on the distances and angles of the participants in the exercise vis-à-vis the audience. For example, in different courses, I asked the volunteers to stand in various parts of the classroom to gauge the effect of the audience as a viewing bloc and a possible “front-stage effect.” In these different locales, students remained at a similar physical distance and roughly comparable angles to that shown in figure 1, which slightly fluctuates based on the atmosphere in a particular classroom.⁷ Given the pandemic year, we also might think about how the awareness of social distance may impact future exercises and how it may be easier to help students comprehend the theory. Having gone through a pandemic year with

tensions in crowded settings, individual students might be open to further interesting conversations.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the challenges of using simulations in the classroom, Glazier (2011, 375) suggested that “instead of investing a great deal of time and effort into running a complex simulation, I recommend developing low-intensity simulations.” Furthermore, Mendenhall and Tutunji (2018, 440) suggested that alternative teaching methods should have “low preparation time, minimal resource requirements, and ease of integration with existing curricula.” Similarly, Asal et al. (2018) pointed out that using simple gimmicks can be effective in teaching political science methodology. This mini-simulation follows those valuable sug-

gestions in that there is little to no preparation time, no extra resources are required, and it is a low-intensity activity that students positively comment on in evaluations months afterwards.

This mini-simulation of territoriality is a simple but effective way to teach how theories are relevant and help us to understand and contingently predict human behavior. During the debriefing discussion, the simulation also reveals to students that theories are

not universal but instead are contingent in their explanations based on time, space, and culture. Given the pandemic experience, future exercises can be incorporated into lectures to show the workings of social space and its relation to behavior.

As a practitioner across different student cultures, I have observed that the physical distance between two volunteers varies. For example, with American students, the volunteers are comparatively more physically distant than European and Middle Eastern students—volunteers from these two cultures seem to stand slightly closer to one another while engaging in a conversation. Pedagogically, this highlights that the audience and the setting are important. To improve our teaching, we should strive continually to relate to our students’ geographic and cultural backgrounds.

This simulation can be used in introductory and specialized political science courses and other subfields such as political theory and political sociology. Having used this teaching technique across different learning cultures, I recommend that my colleagues consider using this or similar techniques to assist students in achieving learning objectives. ■

NOTES

1. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this.
2. This simulation was conducted in 33 introductory and advanced-level courses between 2006 and 2020. Twenty-six of these courses were at an introductory level averaging 50 students; seven were at the junior/senior level averaging 18 students. The size of the total student body was approximately 1,500 students. My earlier interactions with the late Richard Ashley refined this exercise. This article is dedicated to his memory. I also thank my graduate assistant, Yu Cao, for her assistance.
3. At the end of the exercise, I ask the class to applaud the volunteers for their time and energy, which they appreciate. After class, I allow the volunteers to take notes from the PowerPoint slide and to ask questions so that they are not hindered from learning by volunteering.
4. This scene is in *Seinfeld* Season 5, Episodes 18/19. "Close Talker" is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRZ5RpsytRA (accessed November 23, 2019).
5. Anecdotally, in one debriefing, a student from Argentina had a valuable experience. After the class ended, he politely asked me to correct my reference to "Falkland Islands" as "Malvinas Islands." Giving credit to his perspective, I reminded him how territoriality might help us to understand the very "naming" of the islands. The student grinned and tellingly mentioned that although neither he nor his relatives had ever been to the Malvinas, "it still felt like those islands belonged to his nation." This was a memorable pedagogical experience for both the instructor and the student.
6. As one anonymous reviewer suggested, instructors might pair different gender identities to observe whether there is any variation in the spaces and, if so, how it might be theorized from a feminist perspective. This also could serve as a further segue to introduce critical IR theories.
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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