The Added Value of Biographical Approaches for the Study of International Organizations

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This paper discusses the added value of biographical approaches for the study of international, i.e. intergovernmental, organizations. It explains my personal development in this respect with a focus on political actors in international relations that were not that obvious in the main paradigm. It draws attention to the IO BIO Project, the Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations and presents some conclusions and illustrations based on an analysis of its database and the general aspects of a leadership analysis from 20 published entries, which my co-Editor Kent Kille and I made available in a paper last year. International organizations do not provide much information about their executive heads (without much exaggeration: just the dates they are in office and when awarded an important prize; no information about policies that were set up, the results of such policies and internal or external disagreements or conflicts), which illustrates the need to go into more detail about what executive heads have attempted to undertake. A biographical dictionary is a useful tool for that.

Personal Interest
Do executive heads of international organizations (IOs), or of sections of these organizations, matter? Is there an added value of biographical approaches for the study of IOs? If one tries to find a keyword for executive heads of IOs at the ISA website, one will find ‘leaders’, followed by ‘heads of government/state’, telling us that leadership is connected to nation-states and not to IOs. Kenneth Waltz is also clear when explaining that leaders of IOs are ‘not masters of the matters their organizations deal with’. They have become leaders ‘not by being experts on one thing or another but by excelling in the organizational arts’. What they are after is ‘to secure the continuity and health of the organization itself’ (Waltz 1979: 111). This combination of leadership by heads of government/state and the restricted vision of executive heads of IOs is recognizable to anyone familiar with International Relations (IR) theory and the (neo-)realist strand. But is it correct?

Let me explain why I have doubts in this respect and how I came to focus on biographical approaches. When observing politics I am essentially interested in discovering strategies and power plays, because they help me to understand and conclude: ‘aha, this is what is going on’. In this respect there is an obvious realist inside me. However, in my research career I have focused on political actors who were not that obvious in the main
paradigm, such as transnational corporations, trade unions, women groups, human rights activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and also intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). When asked to organize a course on IGOs, the organizations figured in a context dominated by the vision of Waltz. Yet, it could be asked whether IOs matter more than being a forum with heads striving to secure the continuity of the organizations disconnected from the matters that their organizations deal with: do they add something to what is going on between (major) states? In the late 1990s Bertjan Verbeek and I (1998) wondered whether developments such as the globalization of the world economy, increased regional integration and also the end of the Cold War added to what we called autonomous policy making by IOs, followed by a research programme on what was going on within IOs, in particular decision-making processes, as well as the phase of implementation of international policies by IOs (Reinalda and Verbeek 2004; Joachim et al. 2008). These research projects helped me to understand that IR theory has its limitations, given its disregard for IOs and the gap that exists between the study of IOs and the sociology of IOs that should be bridged, as was argued by Ness and Brechin long ago (1988: 269-270). They showed that IR had ‘an essentially naïve view of organizations as simple mechanical tools that act directly and precisely at the bidding of their creators’, whereas the sociological view of organizations (which also existed but was neglected by IR) saw them as ‘recalcitrant tools that come to have a life of their own, serving interests other than the rational and altruistic ends for which they were originally, at least publicly, created’.

When learning more about IGOs I also wanted to know when the process of international organization had actually started (the common answer: essentially after 1945, after the ‘failure’ of the League of Nations seemed too simple) and how it had developed. This resulted in a history of IOs since the Congress of Vienna ending in 1815, based on the creation of the first IGO in that year but also, and more important, the invention of the follow-up conference, which resulted in series of conferences on particular issues, followed by a process of institutionalization with what we now call IGOs (Reinalda 2009, 2011).

However, writing a (first) historical overview of a rather complex field with a multitude of organizations does not leave much room for individuals, while at key moments individuals other than heads of government/state have mattered. Not only Woodrow Wilson mattered, but also Dag Hammarskjöld, Jacques Delors or Kofi Annan, to mention just a few. Hence, after having written this historical overview I looked for a way to learn more about the executive heads of IOs, which took the form of the IO BIO Project or Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations (www.ru.nl/fm/iobio). In March 2014 it has a set of 30 short biographies in place on the website and is continually adding more (if you are an expert on an IO and its executive head(s), please join us by becoming an author for an entry).1

The IO BIO Project as a Biographical Dictionary
James Walter (2014) calls biography one of the earliest modes of leadership study, which offers insights that must be taken seriously, in particular if biography is oriented to questions germane to political inquiry such as leader efficacy, achievement and dysfunction. Last year

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1 Scholars and practitioners are carrying out the IO BIO Project on a voluntary basis. More information and its Instructions for Authors, Model Biography, Tools to Find More Data and Databases 1 and 2 (respectively Persons and Entries, and IGOs and their SGs) are available at the website. To express an interest, or for more information, please contact us by e-mail: iobio@fm.ru.nl. When applying to write an entry, please provide name, institutional affiliation, and contact information, and provide the arguments for why you are a good author for this entry. Entries ‘under construction’ are mentioned on the ‘IO BIO Documents page’.
my IO BIO co-editor Kent Kille and I (2013) wrote a paper for the ACUNS conference in Lund, Sweden on Secretary-General (SG) leadership in global governance, based on an analysis of our database, which encompasses around 900 executives heads of some 130 IOs, and the 20 entries published at the time\(^2\). I borrow information from this paper (which is published on the IO BIO website) to illustrate the objectives of the project and some of its main findings.

SGs, or other executive heads with different titles, are the chief executives and representatives of international bureaucracies that vary in size and structure. The biographical literature on SGs is limited, giving an incomplete picture of the variety of people who have held these positions and the interactions between them. Thus, there is a gap in our understanding of the people in these posts, both individually and collectively, in terms of who they are and how they affect the performance of IOs, both as organizations and in IR. IO BIO is designed to provide short, but informative biographies of individual SGs as well as descriptions and analyses of the social and professional connections of these individuals (group analyses or prosopographies) in order to address this shortcoming. The short biographies (between 800 and 3,600 words; the length is determined by level of importance, with three category levels) present an accurate and coherent description of the entire life and career of each SG. IO BIO is also interested in the more private parts of the executive heads: what is the role of partners and how do they combine the public office with the private life? This information may be more difficult to find, also depending on the cultural background of the executive head.

The genre of the biographical dictionary, with short biographies of individuals whose performance contributed to the public sphere, dates back primarily to the nineteenth century, although older examples exist. While the appeal of ‘great persons’ has remained a crucial component of biography as an art, scholarly explanation has become more important, with ‘modern biography’ producing more or less coherent lives. These represent complex personalities as part of, and contributing to, their time. The descriptions are based on a combination of both primary and secondary sources, including private information. Rather than providing a catalogue of mere biographical and career details (as so-called Who’s Who publications do), all entries about the individuals are descriptions written according to scientific standards, with entries providing biographical data (the first section), a balanced account of life and work (the main section), as well as references (archives, publications and literature). These entries highlight the SGs’ contributions to their profession, their IO, and IR as a whole.

Beyond the informative individuals entries, the group perspective that IO BIO provides is also valuable. Working across the entries allows us to learn more about the group of SGs as a whole or certain sub-sets of office-holders. In particular, this includes information about their origin and background (diplomats, politicians, military, civil society, other); their training and previous careers; their ideas and visions of IR, conflict and cooperation; their

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career development (during and after a SG-ship); their contacts with different SGs as well as other actors (such as heads of state and government, national bureaucrats, and civil society representatives); and their behaviour as SGs in international politics.

**IO Agency, International Secretariats and Leadership Qualities**

There is a growing understanding that IOs and their leaders, generally referred to as SGs, can exercise leadership, based on IO agency, the international character of an IO’s secretariat and the qualities of individual leadership. With regard to agency of IOs, rational choice theory has been helpful to clarify the relationship between states and (the secretariat or bureaucracy of) an IO as one between principal and agent, in which the principal delegates, but does not surrender, authority to the agent. Although formally a principal can withdraw the delegated authority, this may be a costly measure and is complicated because IOs have not one but many principals (which an agent can set against each other). Darren Hawkins and others (2006: 8) argue that IOs are to be understood as bureaucracies that can be controlled to varying degrees by their ‘masters’. They call independent action by an agent ‘agency slack’, occurring in two forms: ‘shirking’ (when an agent minimizes the effort it exerts on its principal’s behalf) and ‘slippage’ (when an agent shifts policy away from its principal’s preferred outcome and toward its own preferences). ‘Autonomy’ is the extent of manoeuvring available to agents after the principal has established control mechanisms. Hawkins et al. (2006: 342-343) found that some measure of agent autonomy is a prerequisite for enabling states to enhance their credibility, lock in favoured policies, overcome collective decision-making problems, or resolve disputes through delegation. They also found that IOs possess varying autonomy and potential for agency slack. Unfortunately, rational choice theory has not been particularly helpful for identifying leadership in general (Rothstein 1996: 158), or in IR, given its focus on action of the most powerful states, rather than on action by IOs. However, what matters here is that IOs, even if dependent on the consent of their (most powerful) member states, may develop agency themselves, rather than that agency is made up by the member states.

Relevant for the agency of IOs is the international character of the secretariats. The idea that international civil servants have to serve their IO rather than their member states was officially proclaimed in the League of Nations’ Covenant (1919), with other IOs following the League in this respect. In principle this point of departure allows the main executives of IOs to show agency by developing autonomous policies. In order to be successful they must make sure that their policies are impartial or neutral in the sense of not favouring some member states over others and not provoking a specific state or group of states. The extent to which they can use the room to manoeuvre for self-directed action also depends on the tools of influence they have at their disposal (formal and informal) and on when they become involved in the various phases of the policy cycle (agenda setting, decision making and implementation).

Finally, it should be taken into account that qualities of individual leadership, in particular the capacity to lead, matter, even if not all executives of IOs are noted leaders. Leadership then refers to both the large bureaucracies the SGs are heading (internal leadership as a quality by itself) and the representation of their IOs in the environment of states and other international actors, such as other IOs, internationally active NGOs and the media. The combination of internal and external leadership qualities can greatly affect the leadership provided by an SG to their respective IO.

**The IO BIO Database**

Analysis across the IO BIO database as a whole provides further perspective on patterns of SG leadership across a large number of IOs, and reveals distinctions about the organizations
themselves as well (more details in Kille and Reinalda 2013: 14-17). Drawing together the data in this manner allows us to better grasp the types of titles used (e.g. Secretary, Director, Administrator) and to begin to consider more closely the significance of title variation and frequency of use, including the manner in which the titles have changed over time within certain organizations. A much broader sense of which countries are represented in global leadership through holding SG positions is also established. Distinctions between the approach to serving as SG can also be drawn across acting SGs versus permanent office-holders and those who have held the office more then once, either within the same organization or across different organizations. This cross-database analysis reveals that such situations are relatively rare, but also that they have occurred frequently enough to warrant closer examination. Finally, the particular characteristics of SGs across time – including gender, age, and time in office – provide a clearer picture of the averages overall, as well as signalling where there are distinctive exceptions from the norm, in addition to what this means for the relative standing of a particular SG.

This points to the useful analytical interaction of the database as a whole and the ever-expanding individual biographical entries. For example, in relation to the time spent in office, the database provides a clearer sense of how long a particular SG has served in relation to his or her peers, and allows us to target those that have been in office for a much longer time relatively to explore how being in office too long might set boundaries on a SG’s leadership. A good example from an existing entry is Edouard Saouma of the Food and Agriculture Organization, who was in office between 1 January 1976 and 31 December 1993, i.e. 216 months in total, which is much longer than the average found in the database of 60 months. Saouma’s third term was his least successful, and it reflected tiredness of the person and on the part of governments an attitude of ‘business as usual’. Similar situations can be explored to see whether the assumption that this boundary to leadership of an IO’s SG can be found with other long-serving executive heads and here the combination of IO BIO entries and the averages the IO BIO database will be helpful.

Leadership Analysis from 20 Published IO BIO Entries

For our initial analysis of 20 published entries Kille and I discussed three ways of categorizing the SGs (more details in Kille and Reinalda 2013: 11-14). First, we looked across all 20 SGs to explore the degree to which they showed strong internal and/or external leadership (see above). Based on the assumption that in order to play a significant role SGs must combine internal and external leadership, we examined the group of ten SGs who actually combined these two forms of leadership (called the Combiners). Second, we drew out the seven Frontierspersons, those SGs who set up the administrative machineries for their respective IOs, to consider the relative leadership that they provided coming from serving as SG at a similar stage in their IO’s history. Finally, we examined a group of five Reformers, those who had to reform the organization, due to the circumstances of the IO and/or demands by important member-states.

Strong Internal and/or External Leadership Among the 20 SGs were four ‘weak’ ones, with both internal and external leadership qualified as weak. Five SGs showed internally strong leadership combined with externally weak leadership. No SGs showed internally weak leadership combined with externally strong leadership, although one SG was in office too short to tell, but was externally strong. Ten SGs counted as Combiners, because they combined strong internal and strong external leadership. All of them qualified as entrepreneurial in the sense of Oran Young’s (1991) leadership in international relations.
Internal Leadership Aspects of Combiners Among the assets that Combiners mobilized, according to this review, were: relevant experience; previous plans; new ideas (e.g. new public management); new procedures; organizational shifts (e.g. decentralization); and investments in staff and resources. Among the personal qualities of Combiners were elements such as: a consultative style; being trusted as manager; experience (as politician or military); an attitude relevant with regard to the issues; knowing what someone wants to reach; an ethical imperative; organizational capacity; finding allies among the staff; and being a broker in disputes. Notable among the personal qualities of weak leaders were bad relations with staff, with the exception of an eccentric person who was not a leader of a bureaucracy at all but was aware of the personal motivation of his staff members.

The general conclusion here is that personal characteristics and the ability of SGs to motivate staff and use assets do matter.

External Leadership Aspects of Combiners All of the ten Combiners took initiatives in international relations; hence they were representing their IOs actively as SGs. All of them did this to solve the international problems the IO was confronted with. Many of these problems were contested internationally and various SGs did not mind going against the hegemon or Western opposition. Strong external leadership could be related to good relations with other IOs as well as to improving relations with other IOs. But competition with other IOs also played a role. As a general impression: inter-organizational relations have been relevant for a long time, with SGs initiating and acting on behalf of their IOs and heading for certain purposes they regard as important.

Cox and Jacobson’s (1973: 382) general conclusion about the eight organizations they examined in their Anatomy of Influence for the time period 1945-1970 with regard to conflicts between IOs was that executive heads tended to be the most active with regard to boundary issues, being well motivated (identification with the organization’s growth and survival – but in a different and broader way than Waltz assumes) and best informed (like the prime minister of a state). The addition of names to these inter-organizational relations, based on the IO BIO Biographical Dictionary entries available, confirm that individuals make a difference with regard to leadership. To mention only a few examples, US policies with regard to competitive organizations brought the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart into a difficult position, but this encouraged him to find his own resources and look for windows of opportunity to strengthen his organization. GATT’s Eric Wyndham White set out to build up a real secretariat of an arrangement that lacked organization and used competition by UNCTAD as a means to adapt. Personal relations between executive heads also matter. Cooperation between organizations is easier when leaders get along well (for instance, IBRD Eugene Black’s good relations with ILO’s David Morse and UNESCO’s René Maheu) and collaboration is more difficult when relations are strained (for instance, between WHO’s Halfdan Mahler and UNICEF’s James Grant or between Mahler and James Ingram of the World Food Programme).

The general conclusion here is that external leadership deserves attention of IR scholars, because leadership is not only a matter of heads of state and government, but also of SGs of IOs, both with regard to international problems and inter-organizational relations.

Frontierspersons Seven out of 20 SGs were so-called ‘frontierspersons’, similar to the idea of American settlers who had only just come to live on the edge of what they regarded unclaimed territory. They were the ones who started as the first SG of an IO, mapping the unclaimed issue area and tasked with building up its administrative machinery, based on a constitution drawn up by the founding states. What kind of leadership did they show? Leaving one SG out since he died in his first year in office (with strong external leadership that far),
three SGs were ‘combiners’ and three SGs showed weak external leadership. The three combiners all built up their secretariats from scratch, doing many things themselves, such as finding resources, collecting information and initiating processes and procedures. These three men worked with relatively small secretariats, picking qualified and devoted staff members, who were instruments in their hands, and all of them had clear external objectives. The other three had internal leadership qualities but remained externally weak due to restricted leadership qualities and external restrictions.

The examples seem to signal that ‘frontierspersons’ need to be both good internal and external leaders, but need to be extremely good external leaders if environmental conditions are hostile to the visions developed by the SG of an IO.

Reformers of IOs Three out of the five SGs who had to reform their organizations were ‘combiners’. All of them understood the reform demands and generated ideas to reform. The three combiners succeeded in keeping their IO alive and in reforming the organization, also because their external leadership was strong enough (and too weak with the other two).

The general conclusion here is that the reform of an IO is also a matter of both internal and external leadership capacities.

Some General Conclusions
In the ACUNS paper on the IO BIO perspective Kille and I discussed various attempts to better understand leadership of IOs. Among these are three older approaches, launched between 1956 and 1991: Inis Claude’s (1966) ‘leader versus clerk’ image, the research programmes of Ernst Haas (1964) and Robert Cox and Harold Jacobson (1973) to ‘open up the black box’ of IOs, and Young’s leadership typology in the context of international regimes. More recent approaches discuss leadership styles (Kent Kille (2006, 2007)) and political roles of UN Secretaries-General (Simon Chesterman (2007)), problem solving by international bureaucracies (Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner (2009)), and IO leadership as a result of multilateral ‘clubs’ of states, such as the G7 and G20 (Colin Bradford and Whonyuk Lim (2011)). The understanding of leadership of IOs has been enhanced by the use of organization theory and the analysis of IOs as political systems (for details see Kille and Reinalda 2013: 4-10). Both Haas and Cox and Jacobson, as well as Barnett and Finnemore (Barnett and Finnemore 2004) and Biermann and Siebenhüner, have used various forms of organization theory. Using organization theory has proved useful by improving our perception, but this does not mean that there are no limitations left. What organization theory has added can be summarized in six conclusions.

1) Secretaries-General have assets and means that allow leadership if they use the bureaucracy for the organization’s aims and objectives. Haas, Cox and Jacobson, as well as Biermann and Siebenhüner show this.

2) The somewhat blunt hypothesis that (SGs of) IOs simply want to maximize their staff, budget and the like may better be replaced by the idea of Biermann and Siebenhüner that IOs want to help solve real problems and that ‘organizational leadership’ matters in this respect. Chesterman also assumes this; recommendations that focus on changes that should take place (such as the guidance given by multilateral clubs of states) confirm this insight.

3) Organization theory has added to our understanding of the requirements for successful leadership of an IO. Both Cox and Jacobson (success) and Biermann and Siebenhüner (strong leadership) discuss and explain the conditions of successful leadership. However, we should also take into account Michael Schechter’s (1987) criticism that organizational characteristics as such do not lead to effective leadership,
because personal factors may make the difference. Not every SG will lead in the same way, as Kille’s work stresses as well.

4) We do not yet know much about unsuccessful leadership of SGs of IOs, although Barnett and Finnemore’s focus on pathologies may be helpful in analysing failures of leadership. Here it should also be mentioned that limits of bureaucratic organization (groupthink, bureaucratic politics) have been applied to national institutions, but scarcely to IOs.

5) We have more elaborated typologies of leadership available than the traditional duality of leader and clerk, with Young’s idea of entrepreneurial leadership that has found its way into IR theory, including Chesterman’s analysis of political roles of SGs, and Kille’s leadership styles (manager, strategist and visionary). Biermann and Sienbenhüner’s roles (knowledge brokers, negotiation facilitators and capacity builders) are helpful too.

6) Under-researched are new challenges to IOs, such as inter-organizational relations and the roles of IOs in the context of intergovernmental clubs of states (G7, G20 and the like), and the impact they have on the leadership of IOs.

Conclusion

Now that we have the Internet, do we really need an IO BIO? I would argue that one should test the hypothesis underlying this question by trying to find out about a specific SG’s career. Although some executive heads have smaller or larger life descriptions in Wikipedia (a source to be discussed anyway), many have incomplete ones or none at all. Furthermore, the IOs themselves are not producing much information about their executive heads. Generally speaking, they tend to inform about the dates (or just years) of the time in office and may add few general remarks and, more obvious, prizes that were awarded. What is lacking most is information about the policies of a SG, hence: ideas, efforts to realize, compromises or failures; even achievements are rarely mentioned. It may be understandable that IOs are restrictive in publishing about internal or external conflicts, but these may be essential to understand what an IO, or its executive head, is trying to do. This refers to both internal developments and external activities. In order to find such elements, IO BIO needs experts who are well informed about the organization and its staff.

References


