Cooperation, echo chambers and the future of global governance

J. Carlos Domínguez
J. Carlos Domínguez is senior researcher at Instituto Mora, Mexico City. He met Dirk Messner in 2013 while being part of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) programme at the German Development Institute.

Introduction

I would like to briefly discuss what I consider to be two of the most important contributions of Professor Dirk Messner to the debates on international cooperation and global governance: on the one hand, the significance of interdisciplinary work, and on the other hand, the 'simple' proposal that cooperation is much more frequent than most scholars think, a simple idea that has changed our cognitive models and mental sets.[1]

Mental sets and interdisciplinarity

The proposal that cooperation among individuals happens much more frequently than many social scientists and philosophers would be willing to accept is nicely summarised in Messner et al. (2013). Defying a Hobbesian perspective that the law of the strongest will prevail, that the natural state of humans is permanent war and that humans are not inclined to cooperate with each other, Messner and his colleagues propose a hexagon that includes seven elements that are necessary for cooperation to emerge and sustain through time: 1) trust, 2) communication, 3) reputation, 4) fairness, 5) enforcement, 6) we-identity and, as central element, 7) reciprocity. The main thesis is that these seven components need to be enabled to increase the likelihood that cooperation emerges in a given situation. Taken to international studies, this perspective contrasts significantly with realist

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[1] Throughout this paper I will use the term 'mental set' in the way experimental and cognitive psychologists do: "a tendency to solve certain problems in a fixed way" (Luchins & Luchins, cited in Öllinger et al., 2008).

views claiming that narrowly defined interests and *realpolitik* explain the low levels of cooperation that we observe among traditional nation-states.

The cooperation hexagon is valuable precisely because it offers a different account of human exchanges, one that seems counterintuitive. In a few words, it can be summarised in a short phrase that re-frames the way we think about the subject: cooperation is not only possible but much more frequent than we usually think.

Fair enough, but how did Messner and colleagues reach this conclusion and how did they build this conceptual model? My claim is that the value of the cooperation hexagon lies not only in its content but also in the procedure that was used to put together the different elements. It is less about the building as a whole and much more about the bricks, the walls and the windows; the key lies in an approach that is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. Looking at the arguments in detail and analysing the different authors that are referenced in Messner et al. (2013), it is evident that the literature belongs to a collection of different areas: economics, international relations, history and evolutionary biology just to mention those which are most visible throughout the different argumentative steps. This multidisciplinary approach that eventually gives place to a conceptual model that is interdisciplinary is at least as significant as the discussion on cooperation itself.

This kind of academic work is urgently needed in the social sciences. We experience an era of super-specialisation in every productive activity, and the academic world is not an exception. This trend may be useful sometimes and may have some advantages in particular contexts when a problem is so complex and yet so specific that it requires, effectively, years and years of focused and narrowly defined research. However, such narrow approaches also carry significant risks, which are mainly related with the way our expertise in a particular area of knowledge shapes the way we conceive reality in general.

A number of studies within the area of experimental psychology suggest that experts may have an advantage over novices (or non-experts in general) because 'to be an expert' is equivalent to having at hand a number of analytical tools and conceptual models that have become routine ways of thinking (Öllinger et al. 2008; Wiley 1998). In other words, when faced with a problem that is familiar and that falls within our discipline or area of expertise, we can make use of knowledge that is specific to that field and take short cuts to find a solution.

However, such acquired knowledge might also become an obstacle when the expert faces a problem that cannot be solved by applying the procedures that have been cognitively absorbed through a professional

trajectory, especially when this problem also demands a 'representational change'.[2] Furthermore, expertise creates mental sets and mental sets create fixations (Wiley 1998: 718). Thus, the problem is not only that the expert always wants to solve problems with the same tools and procedures within certain field but that he or she looks at everything in the social world through the same lens.

Multi- and interdisciplinary endeavours allow us to expand and complement our mental sets because we increase the number of procedures that we have at hand. We also expand our insight on a particular problem since we are able to look at things from different angles. In a few words, if we engage in a continuous dialogue with people who come from other disciplines and hold other points of view, we tend to frame reality differently, more comprehensively. The cooperation hexagon is a good example. The counterintuitive (but convincing) proposal that cooperation is more frequent than we often assume is only possible thanks to an explicit effort to combine insights from different disciplines.

And yet, no matter how much we try to integrate different perspectives, the danger of converging in spaces where we mostly encounter people (i.e., other experts) who think very similar to us, is always there. We end up meeting in similar academic conferences, in the corridors of international cooperation agencies or at the summits organised by multilateral institutions. We engage in the same debates and we are interested in promoting specific concepts and agendas: Agenda 2030, SDGs, Paris Agreement etc. In this context, the very fact that individuals from different countries and with a variety of cultural backgrounds meet and are willing to talk about these concepts confirms the cooperation hexagon. That is, once the seven elements come together (trust, reciprocity etc.), it is more likely that people from diverse backgrounds will be willing to cooperate.

But a question lingers in my head: Aren't we creating our own echo chamber, albeit one that is better furnished and more comfortable? Are we not trapped by our own mental sets and framing of global challenges? The cooperation hexagon is useful to understand the enablers of cooperation among individuals, and the main challenge, according to Messner et al. (2013), seems to be how to *scale up* cooperative behaviour to the level of

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2 Experiments in cognitive psychology include situations where the only way to solve a problem is by using an object in ways that do not resemble its original functionality (example: to use a hammer and a rope to create a pendulum). These are good examples of 'representational changes'.

international cooperation. What an interesting intellectual provocation! Is this truly the case?

The threat of 'echo chambers'

The concept of an echo chamber, developed by mass communication theorists, describes how people tend to group and join individuals who are like-minded and how their beliefs tend to be reinforced by systems of communication that are relatively closed. Although research in this direction has reached mixed conclusions, the general line of argument is that heterogeneous ties increase ambiguity whereas hanging out with similar people increases certainty. The whole argument is about social expectations: if an individual prefers certainty, this means that he wants to know what to *expect* from the others and he will tend to hang out with people that are like-minded (high degree of social homophily); if an individual does not mind ambiguity, this means that she is less anxious regarding her peers showing social behaviours or expressing political preferences that are different from hers (low levels of social homophily).

For example, the research undertaken by Boutyline and Willer (2017) suggests that people located at the extremes of an ideological spectrum will show greater levels of social homophily. In other words, extreme ideologists are less likely to tolerate different opinions and ideas regarding a particular political issue. They will tend to hang out mostly with people that are like-minded. Then, of course, if we take this trend to the on-line world, algorithm dynamics that characterise many social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram etc.) will also play a role exacerbating the problem.

At the basis of the discussion lies the issue of trust, which is the angular stone of cooperation (Messner et al. 2013). People with high levels of social homophily, who meet and interact in the context of echo chambers, do not need (and do not want) to confront their beliefs in any way. They share similar mental sets and similar ways to frame the world. They only need to hang out with like-minded individuals to confirm that their beliefs are right and to feel that they trust each other. They are less likely to change their mind or to understand other points of view.

If we consider that some echo chambers are characterised by particular political ideologies, this has a huge and direct impact on global governance issues. At the end of the day, populist leaders who have shown little interest in supporting responsible policies regarding climate change are the product of electoral politics where both grassroots movements and some sectors of the middle-classes have voted nationalist conservative

agendas. In this respect, the research undertaken by Lockwood (2018) explores the links between right-wing populism and the climate change agenda. According to his findings it is not that people refuse to act on climate change because they fear that policies will affect their jobs and their economic well-being. The factor that seems to be stronger is merely ideological.

Lockwood's explanation is that the rhetoric is very important because populism is by definition nationalist and anti-elitist. Some right-wing movements and political parties might even include climate change concerns as part of their agendas, but this is very rare, not because they think that climate change policies pose a threat to their material interests but because the relevant electoral cleavage is merely ideological, it is constructed as a case of cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism. Thus, since climate change policy refers to something that is – apparently – very remote from everyday problems, it can be constructed and easily perceived as a preoccupation that belongs to an elitist, cosmopolitan minority. The very fact that climate change and other global governance challenges can only be tackled through supranational agreements increases the feeling among 'the people' that such 'global' efforts pose a threat to sovereignty.

Although labelling climate change and other global challenges as 'cosmopolitan concerns' may sound very harsh, perhaps there is something of our particular mental sets and ways of framing social reality that 'we', the people preoccupied for global governance, and 'we', the professionals in the international cooperation sector, may need to consider. Perhaps we have created our own little echo chamber.

The question is whether we have only expanded the size of our echo chamber to include a wider variety of colleagues, from various disciplines, cultures and nationalities. We have allowed that our walls are painted with new, more lively colours, but we are still hesitant to let the folk artisan and the graffiti artist to decorate our living room (although more than one of us would love to own a Banksy). We know that individuals coming from different cultures will cooperate if the seven components of the hexagon are enabled in the right way. At the meso-level of politics, individuals from dissimilar cultures will meet in the corridors of international venues such as the different UN agencies with the legitimate and honest intention to cooperate and to reach agreements. In this process, we may tend to defend global governance and ignore the ineffectiveness of a system which is still rooted in a post-1949 world and which remains disconnected from the preoccupations and everyday reality of regular citizens.

The challenge, however, does not lie in our differences but in our *similarities*. Said otherwise, I have the impression that there is an analyti-

cal layer at which the cooperation hexagon presupposes individuals that do share a similar mental set, one that is indeed cosmopolitan and, yes, unfortunately, to a certain extent also elitist. And thus, many of our valid and honest preoccupations regarding global governance challenges do not trickle down to society in general.

The passer-by

In this respect, I kindly invite the reader to go out to the street once he or she finishes reading this text and to ask a few passers-by their thoughts regarding Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement or the World Health Organisation. I suspect that, even in the middle of a global pandemic that has literally transformed the lives of almost every human being on this planet, the average passer-by will have little idea about what we are talking about. No matter which country we take as an example, the mental set of the average citizen differs enormously from the way in which we, 'the experts', frame global problems. In other words, we also need to become aware of how our very own fields of knowledge shape and become an obstacle to understand the mental sets that others, with less 'expertise', may have.

I do not intend to underestimate the importance of professional experts. Our job is indeed very important to identify paths of possible action at a time when the future of humanity is uncertain to say the least. However, as long as the population in general gets trapped in their own echo chambers, showing high levels of social homophily and feeling that our ideas are remote elitist preoccupations, it becomes more likely that electoral politics in democratic systems will end up producing populist leaders who are not interested in promoting policies for the common good that contribute to solving immediate global challenges.

Thus, the question is not so much how we scale-up cooperation from the meso-level (i.e., the individuals who meet at concrete policy venues) to the level of international (macro) cooperation but how we scale it *down*, so that global concerns are shared by the general public, by the average citizen, by the concrete person that goes to the ballot to elect those leaderships that will eventually help us to scale up.

In this respect, Messner's hexagon is a conceptual model that has changed the way many of us think about cooperation. Our echo chambers are now larger, more rich and diverse. Let's use such great intellectual stimuli to go further and trickle down these ideas to the grassroots, to the level of electoral politics or, simply put, to the level of the layperson.

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