From Disparity to Sustainability: Social Identity, Perceived Fairness, and Climate Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

In the International Relations (IR) literature, inequality has been identified as a major influence on climate policy cooperation and implementation. Identities formed by the multiple inequalities in the global order have become key organizing principles for climate negotiation and significantly affect whether policies are seen as fair. We focus on these inequality-related identities (IRIs) and present an analytical framework that translates concepts from Social Identity Theory for use in IR to systematically examine how IRIs affect perceptions of policy fairness and implementation. We contend that this framework is cross-scalar in character; that is, given the social basis of climate politics, the dynamics can be understood as social processes regardless of whether they are undertaken by states, international organizations, or individuals. We offer this framework as a tool for mobilizing insights from social psychology into IR research and understanding the ways social identities affect collective climate action.

KEYWORDS climate change, social psychology, international relations, intergroup cooperation, inequality

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is widely understood to be the defining collective action problem of the modern era (HORMIO 2023). However, more than 30 years after the first United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) treaty, global temperatures continue to rise, and the goals set out in international agreements are not being met (UNITED NATIONS 2023). Within International Relations (IR), research has identified some of the primary drivers of these deficiencies as broad failures in state-level implementation of international treaty obligations and the inability of global climate actors to successfully act in collaboration (KINLEY ET AL. 2021).

One of the key variables of – and barriers to – climate policy implementation and cooperation is inequality (KLINSKY ET AL. 2017). First, inequality has significant bearing on how the current crisis came to be and how it is experienced. As Roberts (2001: 1) once stated: *"Global warming [sic] is all about inequality, both in who will suffer most its effects, and in who created the problem in the first place."* Second, identities formed through processes of inequality (hereafter referred to as inequality-related identities – IRIs) affect whether climate policies are perceived as "fair". This is crucial as *"perceptions of what is 'fair enough' are central to [climate actors'] negotiation mandates and affect the likelihood of meeting their commitments and cooperating with others"* (KLINSKY ET AL. 2017: 2). Third, these identities have become key organizing principles for policy/norm contestation in multilateral settings and, in many ways, create the structure for the current impasse (KOLMAŠ 2023; OKERKE – COVENTRY 2016).

However, despite a growing literature on the matter across IR and related disciplines, there has been significantly less research attention paid to how IRIs affect perceptions of climate policy fairness across other scales (e.g., individual, national, regional) (LUBELL – ZAHRAN – VEDLITZ 2007). We view this as a significant problem as the successful implementation of any collective climate action, be it an international accord or a neighborhood recycling program, relies on the support and compliance of actors operating at different scales (MARWELL – OLIVER 1993). Moreover, the dynamics shaping climate actors' behaviors at the international level are often directly linked to local, national, or regional politics. In essence, we contend that to understand where and why international climate policies fail, it is necessary to understand perceptions of fairness and collective action across varied levels.

On this basis, we aim to contribute to the literature by constructing an analytical framework that can be used to systematically examine how IRIs affect perceptions of policy fairness and, thus, the likelihood of successful climate policy implementation. In assembling it, we mobilize theoretical innovations from social psychology, above all drawing from social identity theory (SIT) (TAJFEL – TURNER 1979). We view SIT as particularly relevant in this case as, considering the social basis of climate change policies and politics, the dynamics at play relating to both policy creation and implementation can be analyzed as social processes regardless of where (i.e., on what level) they are taking place. In sum then, the primary contribution of this paper is to translate insights about the effect of identity on intergroup cooperation from social psychology into an analytical framework that can be used in IR to locate identity-related areas of contestation at different scales.

Nevertheless, it bears mentioning at the outset that we also align our work with the cautions offered by Hymans (2002) and Ward (2017) about the "cross-disciplinary translation" of SIT in international relations. In social psychology, the unit of interest is the individual, even as they are examined or discussed as part of a group or other social context. This is an important consideration for any proposed application of psychological theory to another area of inquiry because it defines the appropriate space for translation. In the case of IR, it precludes any attempt to directly test a psychological theory because although state actors may often be perceived or written about as persons, they "have neither conscience nor feelings" (WOLF 2011: 117). Thus, we argue for a complementary rather than collapsed effort to understand how social identities created via processes of inequality influence perceptions of climate policies and the likelihood of successful intergroup climate cooperation.

The rest of the paper will be organized as follows. Section one will situate the contribution of our analytical framework within the IR literature, specifically in the field's attempts to understand how inequality undermines climate policy implementation. We describe how cross-scalar analyses of the influence of social identities (like developed vs. developing countries) on perceptions of climate policy fairness can provide a greater understanding of why international agreements have failed to reach high levels of implementation. Section two will then discuss SIT and its applications to climate policy fairness and relevance to implementation. The third section will explain the criteria in our analytic framework and their value in examining the effect of social identities on perceptions of fairness and intergroup cooperation in a broad policy context. The fourth section will then narrow this discussion to provide examples for each criterion of how this framework can be used to examine the influence of IRIs on views and implementations of climate policy across different scales.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: FROM CLIMATE FAILURES TO CLIMATE IDENTITIES

As noted above, inequality has been a significant point of emphasis in the IR literature on climate change for several decades. Broadly speaking, the literature has demonstrated how inequality has profoundly influenced the trajectory and outcomes of international climate change negotiations. Awareness of deep disparities in terms of both contemporary and historical emissions was, for example, central in structuring the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), which is fundamental to the UNFCCC and plays a key role in organizing international environmental governance (KOLMAŠ 2023). Yet, CBDR is among the most contested issues within the current climate change regime (PRYS-HANSEN 2020). Interpretations and implementations of the norm continue to be disputed, largely between groups of developed and developing countries. For example, Okereke and Coventry (2016) point out how developed countries have generally placed more weight on the “common” aspect of CBDR – therefore demanding more concessions from developing countries – while simultaneously rejecting action based on historical emissions records. Yet developing countries have instead stressed the “differentiated responsibility” aspect of CBDR and emphasized the need for both sustainable climate financing and growth-based exemptions. As Kolmaš (2023) points out, CBDR norms have become a non-starter, with the key tenets being contested between these groups to such an extent that the norm has never been fully accepted across parties, meaning coherent implementation becomes essentially impossible. The result is that the legitimacy of the climate regime itself has come under increasing question, particularly by members of the developing country bloc.

Considering these developments, we concur with Prys-Hansen (2020) that inequality not only is a source of mistrust between states but also leads to both gridlock and apathy in terms of policy compliance and implementation. In this paper, we build on this understanding of the current climate regime as being locked in a state of stasis and implementation failure largely due to the influence of IRIs on perceptions of climate policy fairness; yet, we also aim to draw out these conclusions beyond the international scale, as this is but one part of the picture relating to collective climate action.

To extend our analytical focus and incorporate the varied social engagements that produce climate policy, we bring in the concept of scale, which originates in the discipline of geography but has increasingly been integrated into the IR literature. As Prys-Hansen et al. (2024) note, scale can be used in IR to foreground the intersubjective and co-constitutive relationships between divergent socio-spatial dynamics. Rather than creating hard edges around "international," "national," and "individual" levels, for example, scalar thinking allows for a broader conceptualization of actors in particular processes and allows for relational theorization. We view this as crucial in terms of understanding the totality of climate crisis policy implementation. To give an example, beyond the inter-country inequalities that we've thus far noted (e.g., developed vs. developing countries), Wilkinson and Pickett (2024) argue that high inequality levels within a society (i.e., intra-country inequality) make it more difficult to implement environmental policies as they are more likely to be perceived as unfair. Likewise, the authors found that high-inequality societies perform worse when it comes to environmental footprint, advancement on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and cooperation in implementing international climate treaties.

Bearing in mind the variegated ways in which inequality – both inter- and intra-country – can affect climate policy, how then can areas of contestation and failure be located and addressed? We argue that climate change perceptions, policy outcomes, and the identities that structure these across scales are best understood as social processes that are constructed, changed, and leveraged depending on social situations. Given this, we further argue that research accounting for the influence of social identities (i.e., identities constructed around group memberships, see below) on climate cooperation provides a path by which we can understand the multiple inequalities across the climate regime that affect the prospect of cooperation.

Importantly, social identities influence perceptions of climate policy fairness. As previously noted, perceptions of fairness are strongly connected to policy adoption and implementation (KLINSKY ET AL. 2017). Within the IR literature, fairness refers to views about processes, including the application of rules and their results (GRASSO 2007; ŻEBROWSKI ET AL. 2022). According to Zebrowski et al. (IBID.: 2), a policy is *"understood to be fair if (1) equals are treated equally and (2) 'unequals' are treated differently, according to the relevant differences among them"*. Policies that are perceived to be fair are also more likely to be adopted, implemented, and complied with (GRASSO 2007). However, judgments of who is equal and unequal, whether the treatment is equivalent, and what differences are relevant are all influenced by social identities. To date, the IR literature has tended to approach fairness at the level of state interests; for example, there is a well-developed literature on the fair allocation of costs and burdens between developed and developing countries (E.G., PAGE 2008). Yet, we assert here that IR can further mobilize research from social psychology and SIT to develop more in-depth understandings of identity-driven variabilities in perceptions of climate fairness across scales and the success (or failure) of intergroup climate coalitions.

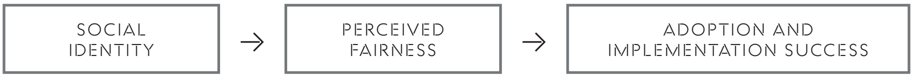
SOCIAL IDENTITY, PERCEIVED FAIRNESS, AND INTERGROUP CLIMATE COOPERATION

Social psychology has a long history of examining the relationship between group identities and social inequalities in influencing individual attitudes and intergroup behaviors (DOISE 1978). Within this field, the literature on social identity theory (SIT) is one of the most well-developed literatures. SIT describes how memberships in social groups, like a religion or social class, inform one's self-concept and affect perceptions and behaviors (TAJFEL – TURNER 1979; HOGG 2016). SIT, and the closely associated social categorization theory (TURNER ET AL. 1987), argue that people use social identities to make social categorizations that then situate the self relative to others; for example, by sorting people into ingroups ("us") and outgroups ("them"). This process of identification and categorization accentuates perceived differences (and similarities), which then influence judgments of the self and others as well as behaviors toward ingroup and outgroup members (MASSON – FRITSCHE 2021; DOVIDIO – BANFIELD 2015). In general, SIT research finds that people are motivated to see their ingroups (i.e., people with whom they share an identity) as distinct and superior to other groups (i.e., "positive distinctiveness"); (TURNER–TAJFEL 1979) and to behave in a manner that is consistent with ingroup norms and values (HOGG – REID 2006).

This has clear implications for how international actors relate to each other, as parties who see themselves as sharing an identity are more likely to share perceptions and behaviors, and to cooperate (and by the same token, actors are less likely to align or cooperate with outsiders). Indeed, SIT has been used to examine variables of interest in IR such as status and respect (E.G., LARSON 2017), securitization (E.G., HAYES 2012; MERCER 2010), and the influence of supranational identity, notably in the development of European identity and European Union integration (CURLEY 2009). Past research has also demonstrated the significance of social identities in models predicting participation in collective action in general (VAN ZOMEREN – SPEARS 2008) and intergroup climate action in particular (MASSON – FRITSCHE 2021).

SIT also has important implications for how inequality affects intergroup climate cooperation. Inequality increases the salience of social identities, as well as awareness of identity differences (E.G., KRAUS – PARK – TAN 2017), status anxiety (WILKINSON – PICKETT 2024), and polarization (E.G., ANDERSEN – CURTIS 2012). IRI differences have also been shown to undermine intergroup coalitions (WILKINSON – PICKETT 2024), threaten cooperation in public goods studies (MARTINANGELI – MARTINSSON 2020), erode social cohesion (BUTTRICK – OISHI 2017), and increase intergroup competition and prejudice, especially with groups that are viewed as resource threats (LISNEK ET AL. 2024; FIELDING – HORNSEY 2016). Thus, social identities have significant implications for how a climate policy is seen across different IRIs. As shown in Figure 1, we focus here on how social identity affects climate policy adoption and implementation via its influence on perceived fairness. Social identity and its accompanying psychological processes are vital to understanding how climate policies are likely to be interpreted across inequality-related groups and thus for developing collective climate actions that are more likely to be broadly adopted and implemented (HASLAM 2012; MACKAY ET AL. 2021).

FIGURE 1: EFFECT OF SOCIAL IDENTITY ON THE PERCEPTION OF FAIRNESS AND CLIMATE POLICY



SECTION III – ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, we conceptually define each criterion in our framework and lay out what the SIT literature predicts will lead to higher levels of perceived fairness and intergroup cooperation in a broad policy setting. We draw from Gordon Allport's intergroup contact theory (1954), as well as the broader social psychological literature. Intergroup contact theory states that contact between groups can facilitate cooperation, but only under certain circumstances, those being equal status between groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of institutions and authorities (PETTIGREW – TROPP 2005). Allport's criteria are well-validated (PETTIGREW ET AL. 2011); however, over time research has found additional conditions that increase cooperation. Our framework thus includes three additional criteria: perceived trustworthiness, procedural justice, and recategorization. These criteria account for additional sources of variability in intergroup cooperation, and their cooperation-enhancing potential is also well supported across the social psychological literature (TROPP 2008; DE CREMER – TYLER 2005; FIELDING – HORNSEY 2016).

TABLE 1: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Criteria	Definitions
Equal Status	The perception that group members are afforded equal status in a given interaction or contact situation.
Perceived Trustworthiness	The perception that the outgroup is trustworthy.
Procedural Justice	Belief in the fairness of the processes regarding how decisions and allocations are (or will be) made as well as in how disputes are (or will be) resolved.
Common Goals	A common purpose or superordinate goal.
Intergroup Cooperation	The outgroup having a positive reputation for reciprocity and cooperation either directly with the ingroup or with similar others.
Support of Institutions and Authorities	The support of authorities and institutions that are relevant to both groups, endorsing and evidencing the existence of shared norms and guidelines.
Recategorization	The shifting, or recontextualization, of social conceptions about the self and others into a superordinate category.

EQUAL STATUS

The importance of status to collective beliefs regarding identity and its influence on international engagement has been explored in the IR literature (E.G., LARSON – SHEVCHENKO 2014; VOLGY ET AL. 2014). In the context of our framework, equal status refers to the perception that groups are being afforded equivalent consideration in a given interaction or contact situation

(PETTIGREW – TROPP 2005). Importantly, research indicates that this condition can be satisfied within a specific context, even if the groups are not seen as equal in status outside of this interaction (e.g., a climate meeting structured to prioritize affording equal status to participating groups that might otherwise, and in other contexts, be considered unequal). Similarly, this can be analyzed using both objective measures (e.g., GDP) and subjective status. Based on past research (E.G., VAN PROOIJEN – WILKE 2002), if the parties view their statuses in general, or within a given setting, to be equal, this will increase perceived fairness and thus intergroup cooperation. By the same token, if the parties do not feel that they are afforded equal status, policies are less likely to be perceived as fair, and therefore cooperation toward implementation will be less successful.

PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trust is a feeling characterized by *"security and confidence in others' good intentions and goodwill"* and *"implies an absence of perceived threat"* (TROPP 2008: 93–94). Greater perceptions of outgroup trustworthiness have been demonstrated to facilitate cooperation (DE CREMER – TYLER 2005); however, rates of intergroup trust are often low, especially in situations involving competition, resource scarcity, or past histories of conflict (DOVIDIO – BANFIELD 2015). Outgroup trustworthiness can be enhanced by cross-group relationships, including both direct contact (e.g., a friendship between an ingroup and an outgroup member; (TROPP 2008) and indirect contact (e.g., knowledge of an ingroup member who is friends with an outgroup member) (DOVIDIO – HEWSTONE 2011). Thus, if an outgroup is viewed as trustworthy, based on past experience or reputation, this will increase perceived fairness, and thus intergroup cooperation; however, if an outgroup is not seen as trustworthy, this is a negative predictor of intergroup collaboration.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Procedural justice, that is, the fairness of formal and/or informal processes, is associated with prosocial behaviors and stronger feelings of trust and commitment (TYLER – BLADER 2003). In the same vein, intergroup cooperation is more likely when there is mutual trust in the procedural justice of how decisions and allocations are made, as well as in how disputes are resolved across identity groups (DE CREMER –TYLER 2005). Just procedures indicate that one is a valued partner, and according to Urbanska et al. (2019: 2), *"authorities who use principles of procedural justice are more likely to be seen as legitimate, increasing compliance and cooperation from the public."* However, social identities influence whether procedures are believed to be fair and, thus, are likely to be accepted. Therefore, if an identity group believes that the procedural aspects of a policy are justly applied across all parties, this will increase the perception of the policy's fairness, and thus intergroup cooperation toward its adoption and implementation. If the procedures are not perceived as just by one or many identity groups, then a policy is unlikely to succeed.

COMMON GOALS

Intergroup cooperation is more likely in circumstances when social groups are working toward a common purpose or superordinate goal (ALLPORT 1954). Cooperation is most likely when these shared goals involve interdependent, non-competitive outcomes that *"no one group could accomplish on its own"* (DOVIDIO – BANFIELD 2015: 14). Even between groups that hold negative beliefs about each other or that have competed in the past, the activation of a common goal can act to reduce stereotyping and antagonism (SHERIF 1961). If the groups feel they are working toward a shared goal, with shared outcomes, they will be more likely to view a policy relevant to the common goal as fair, and thus cooperate on its adoption and implementation. Absent this shared understanding and purpose, groups will be less likely to perceive a policy as fair, and thus will be less likely to cooperate on its adoption and implementation. Important here, is that two parties agreeing to a common solution (e.g., emissions reduction) is not the same as, nor is it sufficient evidence of, holding a common goal.

INTERGROUP COOPERATION

In its original use by Allport (1954), this category reflected findings that cooperation with an outgroup member can act to reduce prejudice (e.g., White United States soldiers who fought in racially integrated units during World War II were more likely to show reduced racial prejudice than those who did not) (DOVIDIO – BANFIELD 2015). However, its use here also accounts for ensuing research demonstrating that, in addition to prejudice reduction, cooperation begets cooperation. Past research using game theory models, like the prisoner's dilemma, indicated that a group-level positive reputation for reciprocity acts to enhance intergroup cooperation (MILINSKI – KRAMBECK 2002; OSTROM 2010). There is also evidence for "cooperation spirals" in intergroup interactions (FERRIN – KOHLES 2008), meaning that cooperation from one group (Group A) with another (Group B) predicts whether Group B will subsequently cooperate with Group A; this then "leaps" between the two parties into an iterative spiral of continued mutual cooperation. Thus, a policy that implicates multiple groups is more likely to be perceived as fair, and thus to be more successfully implemented if the outgroup actors involved are viewed as reliable partners in intergroup cooperation. If the involved groups have not successfully cooperated in the past, or one group is known to have been a bad actor in a past intergroup agreement, this would make it less likely that a policy would be perceived as fair, and therefore successfully implemented.

SUPPORT OF INSTITUTIONS AND AUTHORITIES

The support of institutions and authorities can also act to increase the likelihood of intergroup cooperation (PETTIGREW – TROPP 2005). First, institutional involvement or support enables intergroup cooperation by backing the application of shared norms (e.g., UN support for a policy suggests it upholds the norms of the UN). Second, authorities serve an important role in endorsing guidelines for intergroup interactions that increase trust in their fairness (IBID.). Finally, the "explicit social sanction" of important authorities promotes "norms of acceptance" for intergroup interactions (PETTIGREW 1998: 70). Hence, if an institution or authority voices support for a specific policy, and they are viewed as a legitimate or just actor by a given group, then the policy is more likely to be perceived as fair and thus acted upon. However, if that institution is not understood as legitimate, or if its validity varies across identities, then the policy is more likely to be perceived as unfair, and therefore to fail.

RECATEGORIZATION

The final item in our framework, recategorization, builds on insights from contact theory, SIT, and social categorization theory. Recategorization is a process by which social conceptions of the self and others are shifted, or recontextualized, into a superordinate category (DOVIDIO – BANFIELD

2015), meaning the shift of *"people's representations of others from 'us' versus 'them' to a more inclusive 'we'"* (DOVIDIO ET AL. 2008: 4). Recategorization can take the form of a shift toward holding *dual identities*, in which the original "us" group is preserved within a new "we," or in the creation of a new superordinate category, meaning the relevance of the original "us" group is subsumed into the new and more pertinent "we" (IBID.). Although pre-existing histories, conflicts, or inequalities between social identity groups can present an obstacle to recategorization, when successful, these identity shifts foster more cooperative outcomes. For example, the common ingroup identity model has demonstrated across broad identity contexts (i.e., education, business, family, race/ethnicity, nations) that *"inducing members of different groups to see themselves within a common ingroup identity promotes more positive attitudes toward members of other groups"* as well as increasing outgroup cooperation (DOVIDIO – BANFIELD 2015: 9). Thus, if one identity group has recontextualized its identity relative to another group (e.g., placing itself and the other group into a new shared identity or an overarching superordinate identity), they will be more likely to perceive an agreement with this group as fair, and thus cooperate on its adoption and implementation. However, if one or more groups do not shift their identities toward each other, they are less likely to perceive an outcome as fair and cooperate toward its implementation.

ACTIVATING THE FRAMEWORK

We view our analytical framework as providing a lens that can be used to locate identity-related areas of contestation. Instrumentalizing this in IR means utilizing it as a starting point from which to generate research questions and hypotheses about the likely outcomes of climate summits and policies across identities and at different scales. Our discussion will give a primary focus to the use of the framework in IR research and therefore to the international scale; however, for each criterion we will also discuss applications to state- and individual-level research. Finally, in keeping with the cautions offered previously about the appropriate scope for translations of social psychology, the application of SIT to IR (and political science) suggested here is as a foundation for complementary inquiry and analysis, rather than as a direct test of SIT itself.

EQUAL STATUS

As discussed, in the psychological literature equal status refers to the perceptions that identity groups are being afforded level standing in an intergroup interaction. Applying this to an IR setting, this may mean, for example, examining how beliefs about one party's sovereignty being over- or undervalued relative to another (e.g., countries in the Global North having more influence over climate agendas) may influence climate outcomes. Status considerations could be used as a lens with which to examine views of agenda-setting or policies known to be up for debate in an upcoming climate meeting; for example, by looking at who wrote these items, who was consulted, who is expected to act upon these items, or what implicit (or explicit) power dynamics are present in these materials. Status threats are also relevant to analyses of shifting power dynamics between established and rising powers; for example, they were relevant in conflicts between the United States and China over fairness in emissions reduction obligations that led to the US rejection of the Kyoto Protocol (OKEREKE – COVENTRY 2016).

As the IR literature already represents (E.G., LARSON – SHEVCHENKO 2014), the relative status of states is constantly being shifted, reinterpreted, and negotiated, and thus analyses of climate policy successes and failures would greatly benefit from a social-psychological perspective on status. In this, IRIs are particularly relevant as they directly bear on judgments of standing. For example, if an IR researcher wanted to determine how IRIs like the "Global North" and the "Global South" facilitate or undermine perceptions of fairness and cooperation in a climate meeting, their analyses could center on status differences between the actors involved. Likewise, the power dynamics that both played and play a major role in creating status could be examined. To give a concrete example, one could examine how status threats underpin the manner in which different IRIs interpret climate dialogues about CBDR. Frequently, developing countries have foregrounded the historical responsibility of developed countries for emissions and hardships in the Global South as an important determinant for allocations of the climate burden; this can be interpreted as a threat to the prestige of developed countries. Developed countries, on the other hand, tend to present their responsibility as a duty to lead and assist because of their *"superior economic and technological capabilities,"* which is both status-enhancing for the Global North and a threat to the status of the developing world (OKEREKE – COVENTRY 2016: 837). Moving forward, research could also explore what structures may be put in place to address these dynamics and facilitate the perception of a level playing field in climate negotiations.

At other scales of analysis, researchers could look at how IRIs influence status at the domestic or individual levels. For example, those working at the national scale may examine domestic narratives about the state's status relative to other parties in an international agreement, or how different political parties within a state are being afforded status in actions to implement internationally negotiated agreements at the state level. They might also examine how a group currently in power domestically may be utilizing a positive framing of status to facilitate climate policy adoption or, alternatively, how rival parties are using status in the context of climate to undermine competitors (e.g., in the United States, Republicans deploying narratives that Democrats' climate policies weaken the USA's international standing). At the individual scale, researchers could examine the relationship between a person's view of the status afforded to "people like them" in the context of climate policy and their perceptions of policy fairness (e.g., what status members of the working class view their group being afforded relative to the wealthy in the design of climate regulations). These variables could then be used to study the likelihood of individual-level behavioral changes to comply with these policies.

PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS

Addressing climate change will require sacrifices from all actors, and trust in climate partners is essential for motivations to adopt and faithfully enforce climate policies (MARION SUISEEYA – PAUL 2021; VOGLER 2010). However, intergroup trust is especially challenging in the context of international climate policy because of salient concerns about existing inequalities, competition for scarce resources, and histories of conflict. Thus, a state that agrees to a costly climate policy would be less likely to perceive the agreement as fair and to follow through on its commitment in the absence of trust in the other parties to the agreement. Building on this, research in IR (or other disciplines) could analyze the historical and present ties between states, including their actions in past agreements, to determine if they have a reputation for trustworthiness. In addition, one could examine how climate actors integrate cases of indirect or direct contact with relevant outgroups into their perceptions of trustworthiness (e.g., how a developed country's evaluation of the trustworthiness of a developing country considers either their direct contact or relationships with similar developed countries). In the domain of climate financing, for instance, past actions have led to low trust in commitments made by developed countries to provide significant and predictable investments to meet the needs of developing countries in addressing the climate crisis, considerably affecting the implementation of climate policy (ROBERTS ET AL. 2021). A recent study of representatives of sub-Saharan African countries found that these violations of trust between low- and high-income countries have resulted in negative opinions of climate finance actors beyond just these countries (e.g., the Green Climate Fund) (DEBEUF 2024). IR researchers could expand upon data like these on the effect of trust (or the lack thereof) to examine the mechanisms that might be put into place based on past negotiations to increase faith or past actions that states have taken to repair their reputation.

At the domestic scale, one might examine how the trustworthiness of international agreements is framed in national dialogues or how different IRI groups perceive the trustworthiness of state-level political actors who enact and enforce climate policies. For instance, since the early 2000s, many inter- and intra-national actors have implemented climate-smart fishing policies, yet these policies were developed without adequate attention to the perceptions of the fisherfolk upon whose compliance the policies rely (MATIĆ-SKOKO – STAGLIČIĆ 2020). Recent data indicate that compliance among fishers was undermined by a lack of trust regarding the fairness of the allocations of costs and benefits between the local fishers and wealthy fisheries and that policies would reflect the actual proportion of responsibility for resource degradation (FABINYI – MACINTYRE 2013). In contrast, their compliance was increased by participation in decision-making and strong feelings of solidarity (HAUZER – MURRAY 2013; NOGUÉ-ALGUERÓ – ORTEGA 2023).

Finally, at the individual level, trust across social groups, in governments, and in policy fairness has been consistently found to influence support for climate change policies (DREWS – VAN DEN BERGH 2016). Future studies could expand on these findings to test whether judgments about the trustworthiness of inequality-related outgroups, both in the context of climate and in completely different attitudinal settings, influence climate beliefs and behaviors (e.g., do outgroup freeloading concerns vary between people who identify as high, middle, and low class, and does this affect the perceived fairness of and support for costly climate policies?).

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

The social psychological literature indicates that intergroup cooperation in the context of climate governance can be increased by perceptions that procedures are just. Similarly, past research in IR examining procedural legitimacy (E.G., FRANCK 2001; BÄCKSTRAND – NASIRITOUSI 2021) has found that the perceptions different actors hold about a rule in general, or those involved in climate engagements in particular, can act to increase conflict or cooperation. Here too IRIs play a role in determining how decision-making processes are viewed. As stated by Grasso and Sacchi (2011: 6), *"climate negotiations are characterized by the inequality among the political, economic, scientific and diplomatic power, capacities and possibilities of countries: poorer and smaller states, typically from the South of the world, are manifestly much less able to express their interests, and to have them ultimately recognized and accepted. It is, in fact, usually only richer countries that can afford platoons of skilled negotiators, while poor parties can field only a few negotiators"*. Given this unequal access to knowledge and diplomatic resources, IRIs are highly relevant to actors' fairness perceptions about the procedures used in climate meetings and agreements, as well as of the mechanisms in place for addressing disputes. Past research indicates that access to accurate, complete, transparent, and reliable information is essential to judgments of procedural fairness in international climate negotiations (IBID.; NEWELL ET AL. 2021). IR research could use these facets to examine procedural justice considerations of climate negotiations, policies, and outcomes. This criterion could also be used to examine the procedures that were used in past international negotiations involving actors from different IRIs to determine which were most frequently perceived as just across groups and thus may be used in the future to enhance the likelihood of successful climate cooperation. For example, the "one country one vote" structure has been described as a mitigator for developing countries' *"inability to participate on an equal footing with developed countries"* (OKEREKE – COVENTRY 2016: 838).

At other scales, researchers could examine how domestic political procedures related to the adoption of climate policies are viewed across

IRIs within a state. Finally, at the individual scale, one might examine how social identities can be experimentally manipulated to influence judgments of procedural justice in the domain of climate policy.

COMMON GOALS

Cooperation is more likely if climate actors feel they are joined by a common goal, but the reality of the climate crisis is that inequality-related factors often result in different actors responding to different climate-related problems. Hence, IR studies about climate policy success rates could focus research questions on common understandings of goals across climate actors. One could examine whether official statements about goals, including their content and who is implicated (i.e., expected to bear some cost or change), differ across IRIs. Consider, for example, the relevance of IRIs in the context of UNFCC COP meetings. Every year, news stories emerge about how the conference betrayed the Global South, the youth, and the poor in favor of business-friendly climate policy (e.g., *"Indigenous people and climate justice groups say COP28 was 'business as usual'"*) (LAKHANI 2023; GROSSE – MARK 2020). Similarly, much of the writing on these meetings concedes that for some parties the most relevant and immediate threat is climate change itself, and for others, it is the economic threat of addressing climate change (FALKNER 2016). The goals of island nations facing the immediate threats of sea-level rise, for instance, are different from those of states with oil-dependent economies. It is also understood that the former are typically the less powerful, less wealthy parties (IBID.; OURBAK – MAGNAN 2017). Future research could examine how IRIs influence or even undermine perceptions of common goals at COP meetings and how this bears on perceived fairness and implementation. If one were to find, for example, that going into a COP meeting, the Global South presented the primary goal as being addressing the immediate material effects of the climate crisis, whereas the Global North stated their goal was finding a path for climate-friendly economic growth or a more long-term climate solution, this would lead to a prediction that this climate meeting will not succeed. Similarly, one could look at the role of common goals in cases of successful international collaborations to address climate, like the Montreal Protocol, the success of which has been attributed to the clear, targeted goals of the agreement (GONZALEZ – SHERMAN 2015).

Once again, looking to other scales, researchers could use this criterion to analyze the perception of common goals across IRIs that are relevant to the domestic politics of climate cooperation (e.g., the goals of rural identity groups in developing national climate policies relative to urban communities) or study how IRIs affect the likelihood of perceiving an outgroup as sharing a common climate goal or stakes in a climate outcome (e.g., cross-social class variability in climate goals).

INTERGROUP COOPERATION

Past histories of intergroup cooperation influence present likelihoods of climate collaboration. Here again, IRIs are particularly relevant because histories of exploitation or partnership play into the judgment and implementation of climate policies across groups (SULTANA 2022). A similar perspective, that cooperation (vs. conflict) in foreign policy is, at least in part, influenced by *"long- and short-term institutional memory,"* is represented in IR literature (WARD 1982: 87). Therefore, an IR analysis could look at the past actions of the parties to an agreement or attendees of an upcoming summit to determine whether they have engaged in intergroup cooperation in the past. To return to the example of the Montreal Protocol, one might look into why the success of that policy has not manifested into a "cooperative spiral" in climate policy development and implementation. What has changed in the relations between countries since that agreement was made? Was it too narrow an issue space to serve as the basis for intergroup cooperation in broader, more costly policies? Were the costs undertaken by high-income and low-income countries perceived differently in terms of their fairness, leading to a lack of motivation to replicate that effort? In this and other climate domains, research could look at whether there is variability in states' cooperation across IRIs – for example, whether powerful states are more likely to cooperate and follow agreements between themselves, and similarly, whether less powerful states are more or less faithful to agreements with similar parties.

At the domestic scale, researchers could examine past histories of intra-state cooperation between IRIs to analyze the likelihood of domestic intergroup climate cooperation. Others could employ this criterion to examine how social identities related to inequality influence perceptions of an outgroup's past actions and how this affects behavioral intentions related to compliance with climate policies.

SUPPORT OF INSTITUTIONS AND AUTHORITIES

An examination of the likelihood of climate policy buy-in would benefit from an analysis of the institutions and authorities used to validate a policy, as well as whether there are systematic variations within or between scales in terms of their legitimacy (E.G., DELLMUTH – TALLBERG 2014). For example, the legitimacy of the UNFCCC has been undermined among developing countries as a result of its favoritism of market-based policies *"at the behest of capitalist countries, especially the United States"* (OKEREKE – COVENTRY 2016: 838). IR research could determine how IRIs influence these types of negative perceptions of authorities and also find the actors that do have broad support across identity groups and thus could be powerful voices in aiding climate policy implementation. For example, Walker and Biedenkopf (2020) used confidence in the chairs of UN negotiations to explain the failures of the 2009 Copenhagen meeting and the 2015 adoption of the Paris Agreement. According to the authors, *"[w]hen negotiators trust the chair, they allow her to go beyond her formal procedural role by acting as a mediator, fostering the reaching of agreement. [...] They cede parts of their control over the process to the chair when they are confident that the chair is competent and acts in good faith and everyone's interest"* (IBID.: 440). An IR analysis building upon this type of work and centering this criterion could further examine how trust in authorities, like UN meeting chairs, varies across IRIs and influences perceptions of climate policy fairness and outcomes.

This category could be used in a similar manner at the intra-national scale to study variations in the views of domestically relevant institutions and authorities across IRIs and how this informs the perception of policy fairness and the likelihood of successful state-level adoption and implementation. Studies about individual beliefs and behaviors could use this part of the framework to develop and test hypotheses about the influence of different authorities on attitudes and fairness beliefs about a given climate policy and how this shifts behavioral outcomes like consumption or voting choices.

RECATEGORIZATION

Recategorization into a superordinate identity can lead to successful climate cooperation across inequality-related identity groups (BATALHA – REYNOLDS 2012). An IR perspective might examine whether and how recategorization narratives are deployed by different actors to determine the conditions under which an attempted identity shift is successful – for example, how different IRI groups formulate and/or receive recategorization narratives that attempt to shift outgroups into a "we" in the context of the climate crisis. Climate narratives often make appeals to our common identity as "humanity" or "mankind" (e.g., *"So let's fight together – and let's win. For the 8 billion members of our human family [...]"*) (GUTERRES 2022), which can be studied as an attempt at recategorization, as it raises the salience of common identities among the negotiating parties. Past research has demonstrated a growth in the importance of international social identities, that is, identities tied to global culture and cosmopolitanism (ARNETT 2002; MAKRI –SCHLEGELMILCH 2021). Further, studies across diverse samples have shown that identification with the superordinate category of "humanity" relative to more parochial identities is associated with broader intergroup cooperation, pro-sociality, and public goods contributions (BUCHAN ET AL. 2011; GRIMALDA – BREWER 2023). IR researchers could examine how these types of identity recategorizations come into play in international climate policy to determine the conditions under which it enhances a policy's perceived fairness and implementation across IRIs. IR researchers could also look into where these narratives originate or which states are more likely to use them; for example, whether recategorization frames tend to come from, or be deployed more by, powerful states or if they are used by less powerful countries to bring them into closer proximity to power.

Here again, researchers studying regional or intra-state climate politics could use this section of the framework in a similar fashion to examine how different IRIs employ or interpret recategorization narratives relevant to climate policy. For example, past research has found that the endorsement of a supranational European identity influences support for EU expansion and support for "European" values and norms (CURLEY 2009; ZAPRYANOVA – SURZHKO-HARNED 2015). Similar analyses of supraordinate European identity could be used to examine the likelihood of EU climate policy implementation.

At the individual level, others could use this category to test the types of recategorizations that are effective (or not) in shifting identification with inequality-related outgroups and their effect on climate beliefs and intergroup behaviors.

SUMMARY

The seven criteria in our analytical framework represent insights from the SIT literature that can be integrated with IR concepts to evaluate factors that affect the perceived fairness of climate policies and the success (or failure) of climate governance. Each criterion may be employed on its own or in combination with the other facets to inform research questions and cross-scalar analyses. For example, analyses of common goals held across climate actors may benefit from complementary research on perceptions of the proposed procedures to achieve the said goals. Similarly, analyses of recategorization narratives may include research on how perceived status acts to undermine or encourage attachment to superordinate identities. We have further argued here that analyses of the influence of IRIs on perceived fairness represent a key direction for future research on climate policy implementation. As agreements that are viewed as fair are more likely to be adopted and implemented (KLINSKY ET AL. 2017), frameworks like ours, which offer an avenue through which to analyze those very views, are essential to addressing the climate crisis.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to mobilize and translate concepts from SIT to the discipline of IR and cross-scalar analyses of climate policy. Focusing on IRIs, which we consider central elements that must be accounted for to adequately mitigate the climate crisis, we have developed a framework of 7 factors (equal status, perceived trustworthiness, procedural justice, common goals, intergroup cooperation, support of institutions and authorities, and recategorization) that can be used to determine why certain initiatives or actions either gain or lose support. In essence, the framework organizes the findings on intergroup cooperation from social psychology that we view as having the greatest bearing on climate negotiations and explains their unique and interactive utility in explaining climate policy successes and failures. We contend that this framework is cross-scalar in character;

that is, given the social basis of all climate change politics, the dynamics can be understood as social processes regardless of whether they are being undertaken by states, international organizations, or individuals. We have sought, particularly in section 4, to outline the ways in which these factors can be used in future research, as well as to provide examples of where we see their influence in extant climate agreements – for example, how clear, shared goals contributed to the success of the Montreal Protocol or how the absence of intergroup trust across developed and developing countries has undermined climate finance initiatives. However, we have also advised caution with respect to the appropriate translation of SIT outside of psychology. Although our framework can be used as an analytical or interpretive tool, and psychological theories more broadly provide useful points of departure for research question and hypothesis generation in IR, there would be significant limitations inherent to any attempt to directly test psychological theory outside its appropriate context (i.e., the individual).

We consider this paper as responding to recent calls for research on climate governance that is inclusive of perspectives on equity, as well as calls for interdisciplinary applications of social psychology to climate research and policy (E.G., FERGUSON – MCDONALD – BRANSCOMBE 2016). As highlighted in this special issue, the complexity of the climate crisis requires an interdisciplinary effort to understand the motives and narratives that influence how multi-scalar actors make sense of the climate crisis and their actions (or inaction) toward meaningful solutions. We offer this framework as a tool for translating insights from social psychology into new and impactful research toward this end so that we may understand and intervene when social identities act to hinder collective climate action.

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