

# CONFLICTS OF INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM TWO UNITED NATIONS HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES

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The independence of international civil servants (ICSs) from their country of origin is often presumed but rarely accounted for empirically. In order to address this gap, we investigate whether ICSs face conflicts between national and international interests and which conditions are more conducive to the manifestation of this conflict in international organizations. We adopt a mixed-methods design, including a survey with 1,400 respondents working in two United Nations humanitarian organizations, followed by semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of respondents. The findings show that such conflicts matter for ICSs, hierarchical grade has stronger explanatory power than the other factors, and the higher the level in the international organization, the less frequently ICSs face conflict. The qualitative analysis explains these results by pointing to the effects of socialization among ICSs but also by shedding light on a related effect: dilution of national identity, as well as on the implications of locally recruiting lower-level staff.

## INTRODUCTION

International organizations (IOs) can be defined as membership organizations (McLaren 2005) where member states not only express their eminently political representation through delegates or diplomats operating at the plenary legislative level, but also provide, more or less indirectly, nationals who are hired by the IO to keep the machine running. Such arrangements have raised systematic concerns among both practitioners and scholars about the ability of IOs to remain neutral playing fields with a homogenous administrative body – the International Civil Service (ICS).

Unsurprisingly then, explicit provisions regulating the independence of international civil servants (ICSs) from their country of origin are incorporated in the founding documents of IOs. In 1945, the UN Charter stated that, 'In the performance of their duties the Secretary-General and the staff shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization. They shall refrain from any action which might reflect on their position as international officials responsible only to the Organization' (UN Charter, Article 100 Par.1). These principles are echoed by the Treaty on European Union, vigorously asserting the 'complete independence' of ICSs from member countries and the ruling that members of the Commission should 'neither seek nor take instructions from any Government' (Article 17).

In parallel to the attention granted to this issue by policy measures, scholarly works have also widely addressed IOs' independence from member countries. Some have done so under the analytical compass of principal-agent theory, by focusing exclusively, or, on the contrary, by underplaying, the role of member countries in influencing the decisions of the IO. These two opposite stances have animated one of the most heated and prolonged debates in the field of IOs; the one between rational choice intergovernmental theory and functionalism, respectively (Mathiason 2007, pp. 6–15).

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Rooted in the functionalist perspective, some works have shifted their attention away from this state-centric ontology and have begun to explicitly analyse IOs *as* organizations (Ness and Brechin 1988; Baccaro and Mele 2011, 2012). In so doing, they have provided fine-grained accounts of the way in which their bureaucratic nature and normative power may ultimately grant IOs autonomy from member countries (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

Within this scholarship, a stream of research has focused on the interplay between IOs and member countries, maintaining the ICS as the unit of analysis. More specifically, these studies have investigated the implications of such interplay for the allegiances perceived by ICSs towards their national and their supra-national interlocutors.

While the findings of this scholarship are often inconclusive (Egeberg 1999; Beyers and Trondal 2004; Beyers 2005; Checkel 2005), we can distil three interrelated elements as their common denominator. First, they recognize the intrinsic tensions between the national and international dimensions faced by this peculiar type of professional service. Some studies cast the tensions as loyalty dilemmas that ICSs face when 'serving two masters' (Gron 2007; Johns 2007). Others introduce a milder notion of 'representational ambiguity' (Trondal and Veggeland 2003, p. 73; Beyers and Trondal 2004) that leaves room for multiple loyalties to coexist and complement each other (Egeberg 1999, 2006).

Second, they share a focus on role conception – i.e. on the perception of ICSs of their own professional identities (Egeberg 1999, 2006; Drulák *et al.* 2003; Beyers and Trondal 2004; Beyers 2005). While constructs such as role, organizational identity and loyalty may assume different connotations in specific academic debates on ICSs (for an extensive analysis see De Graaf 2011), in this specific context they are largely used interchangeably to define 'expectations (norms or rules) that more or less specify the behavior of the role incumbent' (Egeberg 1999, p. 458) or allegiances towards a certain set of values and interests. When allegiances are driven by multiple obligations, as is often the case in the ICS, role conflict or 'conflict of interests' (Davalá 2012; Malonga 2012; Peters 2012) is assumed to be an intrinsic element of representativeness (Trondal and Veggeland 2003).

The third common element of these studies is indeed the investigation of the contextual factors or scope conditions under which different roles are evoked and could lead to the emergence of a supranational identity among ICSs or else may increase the impact of nationality on decision-making in an IO (Egeberg 1999, 2006; Trondal 2002, 2010, 2011; Drulák *et al.* 2003; Trondal and Veggeland 2003; Beyers and Trondal 2004; Beyers 2005; Checkel 2005; Yi-Chong and Weller 2008; Weller and Yi-Chong 2010). Conditions include institutional configurations, such as the representation of a specific nationality or whether or not the country of origin of ICSs is a member of the IO. Meso-level conditions include organizational features such as age distribution, organizational structure (e.g. strength of hierarchy) as well as the characteristics of the policy process and policy domain. Micro-level conditions include the length and intensity of ICSs' experience in the IO. Sustained participation in the activities of the IO, in turn, results in 'international socialization', a classic argument of the studies on ICSs in European institutions.

We build on these analytical and empirical premises to explore, specifically, how different staff member categories of ICSs experience conflicts of interest caused by the tensions between the IO they belong to and their country of origin. In so doing, the article aims to complement the findings of previous studies, typically focused on groups of hierarchically homogeneous ICSs, such as European Commissioners (Egeberg 2006), officials in medium-rank positions who attend Commission expert committees (Trondal and Veggeland 2003), or country directors at the World Bank (Weller and Yi-Chong 2010). The conflict

of interest we refer to is the one faced by ICSs between national versus international interests, which 'has always been identified as one of the main risks to avoid for International Civil Servants' (Malonga 2012, p. 70). It is an 'intrapersonal conflict' for ICSs related to situations of decision-making with practical relevance (Peters 2012, p. 5). Our empirical setting is represented by two humanitarian organizations belonging to the UN family: one performing mainly advocacy-related tasks and the other specialized in field intervention.

## REPRESENTATIONAL AMBIGUITY IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

By accepting a position within the UN, employees formally agree not to solicit or receive directives from any state and must act in the sole interest of the IO. The principle of independence is one of the primary determinants of the quality of internal relationships among different categories of staff members, while also creating the basis for the credibility and legitimacy of the system vis-a-vis the public (Lemoine 1995; Udom 2003), since 'States trust ICSs *more* than they trust each other in negotiations' (Yi-Chong and Weller 2008, p. 42, emphasis added).

This view, however, is confronted with the reality of the United Nations where staffing has always been politicized and often subject to the influence of member states (Bulkeley 1990; Salomons 2004; Sharma and Banerjee 2009). This is due to the fact that ICSs, particularly top-level ones (Sullivan 2011), are engaged in informal and formal diplomatic tasks (Kemp-Spies 2013) and their roles as neutral administrators and diplomatic facilitators are often intertwined (Mathiason 2011). Top-level officials may in fact be considered necessary channels of communication with their nations (Johns 2007) and this may result in recruitment based on a system where member states promote the appointment of one of their nationals in a top position in the attempt to increase or maintain their influence in the organization (McLaren 2005; Broome and Seabrooke forthcoming). For instance, several governments have, as part of the department of foreign affairs, a special service dedicated to the placement of nationals (Jordan 1991; David 2008). Other countries choose more informal types of influence to maximize the chances that nationals be appointed as top ICSs, given 'the importance attached to the structure of the top-echelons' (Lemoine 1995).

Against this background, our study investigates whether and why there are categories of UN staff that, while embedded in the same workplace, report facing higher conflicts between the interests of their native country and those of the IO for which they work.

Let us now sketch our research journey. Consistent with the literature review and our analysis of UN policy documents, we posited that conflicts of interest are more likely to occur for individual staff members who occupy a high position within the organizational hierarchy. We tested this hypothesis empirically with a quantitative survey. However, our findings hardly confirmed the initial hypothesis. Puzzled by the results, we further explored this issue through semi-structured interviews with a sub-set of the survey respondents. We structured the article to truthfully reflect a research process of inductive iteration (Yom 2015) based on a sequential mixed-method approach (see figure 1). In so doing, we acknowledge that we used 'inductive recalibrations in which ... we refined our causal arguments after discovering the unexpected' (Yom 2015, p. 2).

In the next section, we clarify our main hypothesis. We then account for our methodological choice to adopt a mixed-methods strategy (i.e. quantitative survey and interviews) in section three. In section four, we present our empirical findings, which are then discussed in a broader theoretical perspective and which may indicate a future research path.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The previous literature review indicates that top-level posts in UN organizations are highly political in nature. Furthermore, the modes of appointment of the professional and higher categories of staff are strongly influenced by member states. Thus, we expect that ICSs occupying a higher position in the IO's hierarchy face conflicts between the interests of their native country and those of the IO for which they work, more frequently than ICSs employed at a lower level. Our hypothesis, derived from the analysis of the literature on the UN ICSs, is consistent with a mainstream line of inquiry of public administration scholarship, i.e. the one investigating the proximity and interrelations between top civil servants and their elected interlocutors (Aberbach and Rockman 1994; Rouban 2003; Peters and Pierre 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Albeit with different nuances, this scholarship has theorized the intrinsic political dimension of top-level bureaucratic appointments. Conventionally, higher-level civil servants are taught to be 'more favorably inclined towards political aspects of the grey zone between politics and administration' (Christensen 1991, p. 308). Similar conclusions are drawn in the case of the EU, where scholars have recognized a 'divided loyalty at the top of the Commission' (Egeberg 1996, p. 726).

To define a more concrete research hypothesis, we focus on the UN categorization of ICSs working in IOs. Besides the geographical distribution principle according to which all member states have the right to have nationals working for the UN organization, another very important specificity of the UN as a workplace relates to the different staff categories and their respective recruitment procedures. The General Service staff (G category) who compose roughly 70 per cent of the UN system workforce (Secretary-General 2013) are typically recruited locally to perform administrative support tasks. In this sense, the work carried out supports the functioning of the organization and is typically procedural, technical or operational in nature (e.g. administrative, secretarial and clerical support as well as specialized technical support such as printing, security and buildings maintenance). As such, it is not considered of high political salience for member states (David 2008). Professionals (P category) and higher category staff such as Directors (D category) have ICS status (e.g. they benefit from several privileges and immunities), and are internationals recruited on a competitive basis. Unlike the G category, these professionals are often expected to serve at different duty stations throughout their career. Looking further at how member states have the capacity to influence the recruitment and placement of the UN system workforce, additional differentiation can be made among these categories depending on the level of hierarchy, and their subjection to the geographical distribution principle (see table 1).

The senior management composed of strategic posts at the P5 level and above is mostly appointed on political consideration upon the desiderata of the most powerful countries (Lemoine 1995, p. 80; Sharma and Banerjee 2009), and the P2 and P3 are entry-level posts which are mostly filled with workers subsidized by their states through the Junior Professional Officer (JPO), the Associate Professional Officer (APO) or the Associate Expert (AE) programmes, as well as all the elements described above. Therefore, we hypothesize that higher categories of international civil servants (i.e. P and D in the UN system) are more likely to face conflicts between the interests of their native country and those of the IO they work for, than lower categories of international civil servants (i.e. G in the UN system).

TABLE 1 *Overview of the UN system workforce*

Hierarchy level/ Number of staff		Type of recruitment	States' influences / Strategic importance
Professionals and higher	D1–D2: 689 P4–P5: 5,306	Internal promotions, lateral transfers, external hiring	P5 and above: Strategic importance of policy-making, work programmes preparation, staff supervision, networks with governments, budget, information, research.
	P1–P3: 5,564	P1: Competitive process P2–P3: National competitive recruitment examination	JPO/AE/APO: These recruitment and sponsorship programmes were created to provide additional resources to the system, to develop a pool of experts and officers, as well as to provide on-the-job training and learning for young high-potential professionals for the United Nations. Nationals of unrepresented or underrepresented countries are favoured.
General service	G5–G7: 8,730 G1–G4: 13,659	Decentralized to operating departments/offices Generally not subject to geographical distribution principle	Initially trusted by Great Britain and United States. Only recently considered more and more strategic by other member states (David 2008).

Sources: 'Report of the Secretary-General: Composition of the Secretariat: Staff Demographics', A/68/365 (Secretary-General 2013).

## DATA AND METHODS

The empirical setting is based on research within two key IOs belonging to the UN system and dealing with humanitarian issues. Their premises and operations are located both in the headquarters and in the field all around the world. Historically the humanitarian field, composed of humanitarian interventions and human rights advocacy, is based on values of impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These values define the mandate of the IOs, while serving as an ethical compass for their workers (Harrell-Bond 2002; Fresia 2009). However, over time, the field has undergone two profound transformations: professionalization of its workforce, and politicization of its mandate, due in particular to the increase in earmarked government funding. In addition, humanitarian crises and human rights controversies receive extensive media coverage and are under greater

scrutiny of public opinion (Barnett 2011). In sum, political salience for IOs and national government characterizes this policy domain, while the requisite of clear independence from state interference defines the organizational and professional mandate of the actors. This combination makes the humanitarian organizations of the United Nations a context that fits with our research endeavour.

### **Mixed-methods strategy**

In addition to desk research on the current policy developments (i.e. codes and ethical regulations documents) that were used to substantiate our claim about the policy relevance of conflicts of interest and independence of ICSs, our findings are mainly based on the analysis of a unique quantitative dataset (approximately 1,400 individuals) and 17 in-depth qualitative interviews with staff members that had been previously surveyed (see figure 1).

This study adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design based on a process of inductive iteration (Yom 2015) consisting of two distinct phases (Creswell and Clark 2007). The quantitative data and their subsequent examination provided a general understanding of the research problem while the qualitative data and their analysis refined and explained those statistical results by addressing emerging contradictions and by exploring participants' views in greater depth (Teddlie and Yu 2007).

'Integration' of quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell and Clark 2007) occurred in the intermediate stage when the results of the data analysis of the first phase informed the data collection of the second. We sought integration through two points of connection. First, we selected the interviewees among those who responded to the survey and agreed to possibly be contacted for a follow-up ( $n = 163$ ). This 'gradual sampling' (Teddlie and Yu 2007) requires a sequential selection of interviewees based on their potential contribution to the research questions instead of their representativeness. Second, the protocol for the semi-structured interviews was grounded in the results of the first phase, i.e. the research questions were aimed explicitly at illuminating those results.

### **Survey: data collection and characteristics of the sample**

The quantitative data were gathered in the context of a large research project. For this study, we retained a subsample of two IOs who preferred to remain anonymous. The data were collected by means of an anonymous online questionnaire designed by the researchers and distributed by the Human Resources Department to all staff members who possessed a professional email address. The collection was carried out in two phases (November 2011–January 2012 for Organization A; July–September 2011 for Organization B). Response rates were quite different for the two organizations. For Organization A, 393 (out of 1,168) valid questionnaires were gathered (33.65 per cent response rate). Most of them work in headquarters (in Geneva, Switzerland) with short periods in the field. On the other hand, Organization B has more employees working in the field in remote and dangerous locations performing emergency work. This may be the explanatory factor for the low response rate of 13.6 per cent for this second organization (1,050 valid questionnaires from 7,700 invitations).

Regarding the representativeness of the dataset: for Organization A, the survey's participants are fairly representative of the base population in terms of sex, age, types of employment as well as employment category distributions. The sample of employees of Organization B is slightly biased in terms of sex (women are overrepresented in our sample as they compose 38 per cent of the base population) and category of employment, with an overrepresentation of the professionals and higher category of employees (in the



TABLE 2 *Description of the quantitative dataset*

		Int. Org. A	Int. Org. B
Sex	Women	138 (35.1%)	317 (30.2%)
	Men	89 (22.6%)	305 (29%)
	No response	166 (42.2%)	428 (40.8%)
Grades	D1–D2 and Above	4 (1%)	26 (2.6%)
	P4–P5	34 (8.7%)	176 (17.7%)
	P1–P3	216 (55%)	294 (29.5%)
	G5–G7	75 (19.1%)	389 (39%)
	G1–G4	20 (5.1%)	112 (11.2%)
	No response	44 (11.2%)	53 (5%)
Age categories	<30	21 (5.3%)	46 (4.4%)
	30–39	79 (20.1%)	195 (18.5%)
	40–49	80 (20.4%)	188 (17.9%)
	50–59	40 (10.2%)	137 (13%)
	>59	–	9 (0.9%)
	No response	173 (44%)	475 (45.2%)
Work location	Headquarters	174 (44.3%)	157 (15%)
	Field	75 (19.1%)	416 (39.6%)
	Frequent moves between both	24 (6.1%)	91 (8.7%)
	No response	120 (30.5%)	386 (36.8%)
Region of origin	Africa	29 (7.4%)	114 (10.9%)
	Asia	42 (10.7%)	144 (13.7%)
	East Europe	24 (6.1%)	55 (5.2%)
	Carib. and Latin America	22 (5.6%)	33 (3.1%)
	West Europe and Anglo-Saxons	87 (22.1%)	242 (23%)
	No response	189 (48.1%)	462 (44%)
Organizational tenure in average years ( <i>std. dev.</i> )		6.47 (5.42)	10.16 (7.42)
Number of cases		393	1,050

base population, 77 per cent of the staff are employed in the General Service category). Conversely, for both organizations, the diversity of the respondents in terms of country of origin is comparable to the base population. Table 2 (Description of the quantitative dataset) sets out the main characteristics of our respondents.

## Measures

The purpose of this study is to explain which categories of ICSs working for two IOs in the humanitarian domain face conflicts between the interests of their country of origin and those of the organization they work for. Therefore, they were asked: 'Please indicate how often you face conflicts among the interests of your native country and those of the international organization you work for.' They answered on a 5-point Likert frequency scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always.

The two-step multivariate model of regression contains organizational tenure, 'Work location' and 'Values dilemmas' as control variables as they appeared to be linked to significant mean differences in conflict of interest. To grasp the specific work context of ICSs, 'Work location' was recoded into two categories (Headquarters = 1 and Field missions and frequent moves = 2) for parsimony and conceptual reasons. Accordingly, the political nature of the decisions taken by higher-level ICSs working in headquarters increases the likelihood of being scrutinized by member states. Furthermore, it should also be easier

for member states to avoid agency costs linked to moral hazard problems, by controlling them.

Finally, those civil servants are more likely to be sanctioned by their country of origin, which may refuse to support them for their next appointment. According to this principal-agent approach, we thus expect ICSs working in headquarters to face conflicts of interest of a political nature more often than those working in the field. Hence, we expect to observe that those employees who face conflicts between the interests of their native country and the IO they work for are also likely to face more general contradictions between values (i.e. those of their organization and those of human rights or their own personal values). This second control variable, labelled 'Values dilemma', was computed with two items created to reflect the values conflict (details of their wording and measurement properties are in appendix 1). Finally, in order to statistically analyse how individuals working in different categories of employment have varying probability of facing conflicts of interest, we have recoded the different grade groups in a dichotomous variable ( $G = 1$ ; P and  $D = 2$ ).

### Interviews and content analysis

In the second phase of the research, we conducted semi-structured interviews. The nature of the puzzle emerging from the quantitative findings represented the basis on which we selected interviewees. As we discuss in the next section, the puzzle lies in the mismatch between the hierarchical level of ICSs and how frequently they face conflicts of interest. Consequently, we identified four profiles. Two profiles reflect the findings we would have expected: low hierarchical level and low level of conflict, high hierarchical level and high level of conflict. The other two profiles, instead, reflect the more surprising set of results we found: low hierarchical level and high level of conflict, high hierarchical level and low level of conflict. We grouped our respondents accordingly. Next, we divided the 163 respondents to the questionnaire who had expressed their availability to possibly be contacted for a follow-up by profile (45 for Organization A, and 118 for Organization B) and we selected 32 of them.

Our sampling for this qualitative phase is a 'purposive sampling', and is thus not a representative one (Teddlie and Yu 2007). The respondents have been selected for the relevant information they can provide and that could not be gained by other means (Maxwell 2012).

Our final interviewees (17) included the two critical profiles, low hierarchical level and high level of conflict (six), high hierarchical level and low level of conflict (seven), but we also included the two less surprising profiles to corroborate our findings: low hierarchical level and low level of conflict (two), high hierarchical level and high level of conflict (two). Between September 2013 and February 2014 we conducted the semi-structured interviews mostly on Skype and in a few cases (three) on the mobile of respondents working in conflict zones or in rural areas. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were organized around ten open questions. Our interviewees were reassured that results would be completely anonymous and would be used solely for the purposes of an academic project.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts' analysis combined deductive a priori broad themes emerging from the quantitative phase with data-driven inductive coding, thus allowing for original themes to emerge directly from the transcripts (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2008). Coding was performed with the support of the software program ATLAS.ti. The final data structure is provided in figure 2, while detailed illustrative quotations are provided in appendix 2.



TABLE 3 *Multivariate linear regression on conflict of interests*

	Step 1 Standardized beta ( <i>Std. Error</i> )	Step 2 Standardized beta ( <i>Std. Error</i> )
Tenure	-.118 *** (.006)	-.080 * (.057)
Work location	.182 *** (.083)	.184 *** (.080)
Values dilemmas	.340 *** (.037)	.343 *** (.036)
Grades		-.253 *** (.078)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.156	.218
R <sup>2</sup>	.159	.222
R <sup>2</sup> variation	NA	.063
F variation	47.226	60.429
Sig. F variation	***	***

Sig. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative analysis: puzzling findings

This study is a primary empirical and systematic inquiry with a certain exploratory character that has led us to adopt a prudent approach. First, we have performed several means comparison tests (one-way ANOVA) and related Tukey post-hoc tests to identify whether mean levels are significantly different for all the variables displayed in table 2. This enabled us to select the most relevant variables to insert into the regression model, as well as to show which categories of employees are the most likely to face these types of conflict of interest. In a second procedure, we performed a two-step model of multivariate linear regressions (presented in table 3) to verify whether the observed results about differences still hold when the study variables are jointly taken into account.

The comparison of mean levels between the General Service (2.33) and the Professional and higher categories of employees (1.70) is statistically significant ( $F(1,801) = 58.299$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). According to a Tukey post-hoc test on the detailed categories (that compares each possible pair), mean differences remain statistically different ( $F(4,798) = 16.309$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), but only between the two broad categories (Professionals and above versus General Services), and this can be seen in the graphical representation (see figure 2).

The same procedure was carried out to analyse whether the level of conflict of interest faced by employees depends on the location where they work. As a result, mean levels of faced conflicts of interest are statistically significantly different depending on work location ( $F(2,843) = 13.371$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ): those who work mainly in the field report facing certain conflicts of interest more frequently (2.12) than those who work principally in headquarters (1.67).

Conversely, there are no statistically significant average differences of conflicts of interest between Organization A and Organization B, men and women, age groups, or among ICSs coming from different regions of the world. These variables will not be inserted in the multivariate model.

Table 3 presents the results of the multivariate linear regression. The selected independent variables analysed explain more than 22 per cent of the variation of the frequency

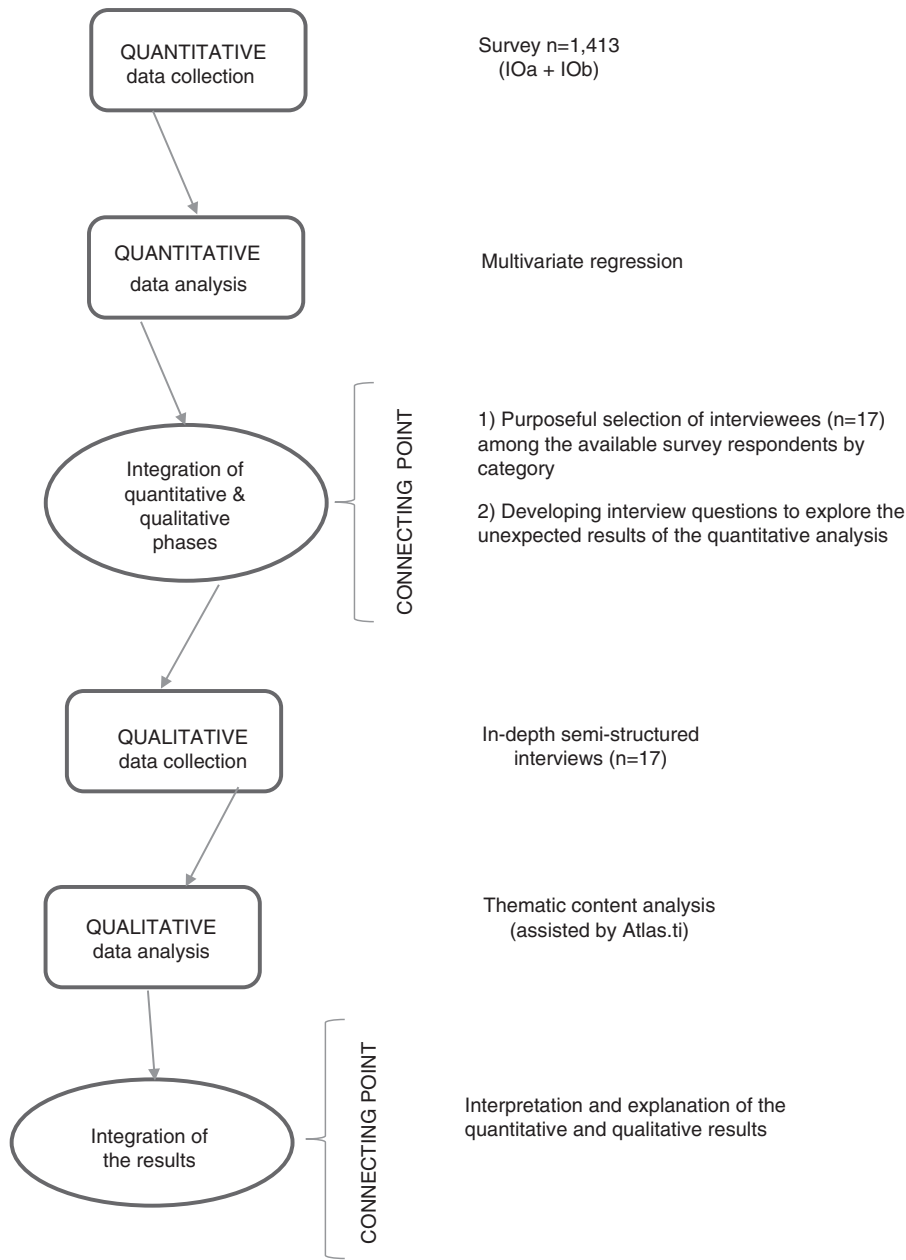


FIGURE 1 *Mixed-methods sequential explanatory design*

of facing conflicts between the interests of the employees' country and those of the organization they work for. However, the results also confirm that ICSs working in General Service posts and those who work mainly in field missions more frequently face contradictory interests between those of their national government and those of their organization. Also, organizational tenure appears to attenuate the appearance of conflicts

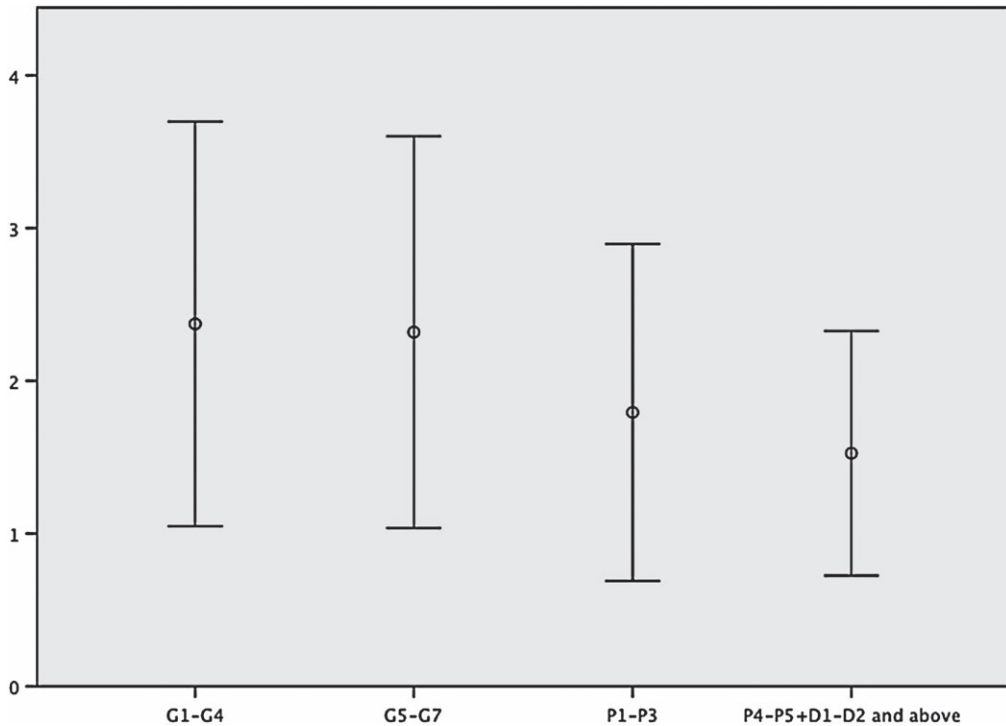


FIGURE 2 Mean levels of conflict of interest per Grade groups

of interest as the longer an employee stays in the organization, the less they report facing this issue. Finally, those employees who report facing frequent conflicts of interest are also those who report facing more general value dilemmas. In other words, this group of respondents may be more likely to feel a misalignment between different types of interests or values.

To summarize, our quantitative analysis leads to the invalidation of our initial theoretical expectation (high-ranking ICSs working in the professional or top-management posts category would face higher conflicts of interest with those of their country of origin). According to the inductive iteration research design adopted, we have employed semi-structured interviews to further investigate these findings.

### Qualitative interviews: solving the puzzle

Based on our interviews, we offer explanations of how G staff more frequently face tensions between national and international interests than the high-level staff (Ps and Ds). In figure 3, we provide the data structure of our codes.

Our interviews highlight the fact that G staff members are typically selected through local hiring processes. In the words of our informants, this has three significant implications. The first and most obvious one is that they have stronger linkages with the local communities and therefore are more susceptible to pressure from specific requests. This effect is exacerbated when the staff member works for a UN mission in the field as opposed to working in headquarters, mostly located in truly international settings where ICSs face less direct pressure from their communities.

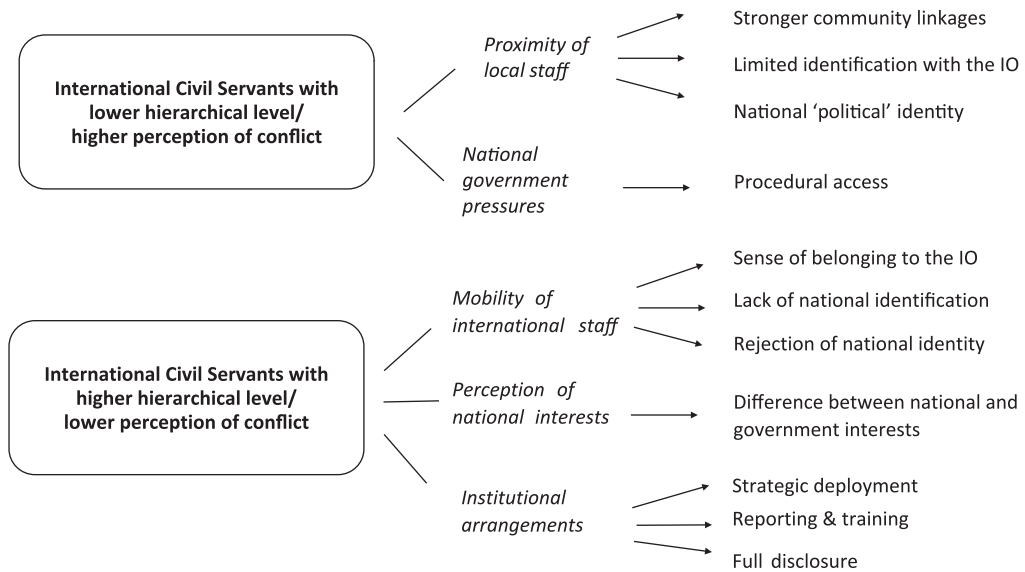


FIGURE 3 First-order and second-order codes emerging from the interviews

The second implication of hiring local staff may lie in their limited identification with the organization compared to international staff:

G staff are in the same place, it's different. They're mostly in their own country. So ... their life would not be very different from someone who works in a bank.

The third implication concerns the conflict of interest between the international identity and the political conception of the national one. This tension arises when ICSs may feel a strong need to participate in visible political activities, such as electoral campaigns or even protests, but they are expected to maintain a neutral profile.

The results of the survey also indicate that tenure attenuates how frequently ICSs face conflicts of interest. With regard to this point, our interviews offer two interrelated explanations. On the one hand, more time in the organization is thought to lead to higher levels of identification with the UN political agenda, as well as with acquiring 'self-respect for your career in the organization' and, consequently, more distance from the country of origin. On the other hand, more time means higher career advancement and therefore relative independence.

Another explanation lies in the specific type of challenges that G staff may face – in terms of governments' potential pressure to disclose sensitive information. This request, which may be brought forward by the country mission at the UN, seems less related to the staff's direct responsibility and more to their access to specific procedures of the IO they work for.

We now turn to the second portion of our explanation focusing on higher-level ICSs and why they face relatively less frequent conflicts of interest. Unlike G staff, especially in the humanitarian organizations we have studied, higher-level staff are subject to mobility, which may be linked either to the IO's mandate (i.e. operating where the need for humanitarian assistance arises) or to mandatory staff rotation. This mobility tends to be conducive to a stronger sense of belonging and to attenuate the national identity.

In the same vein, some of our respondents explained that the lack of conflict of interests is rooted in the fact that they no longer identify themselves with their nationality. This may be due to the emergence of their cosmopolitan identity, so that they do not even 'register with their national embassy when they are abroad because they don't identify themselves with their government'. It could also be the result of an explicit decision to give up their national identity to embrace the UN identity: 'I guess I've removed myself as a citizen of the country of my nationality, since whatever my country does is not reflective of me as a person.'

Staff with more than one nationality may also decide to pick the least 'problematic' one in order to avoid conflicts of interest. Over time, the identification with the IO's mission may lead to a very different notion of national interest. Several of our respondents, indeed, have pointed to a substantial difference between the national interest of a ruling government and the national interest of its people. Consequently, the activities of international humanitarian organizations may be perceived as a threat from national political leaders but could hardly be thought to challenge the interests of the citizens.

Another set of reasons that explain why higher-level staff face lower levels of tensions between national and international identities is a direct consequence of ad hoc institutional arrangements. Our interviews reveal three types of such arrangements put in place to protect the staff from conflicts of interest. First, these IOs aim not to deploy international staff in their own country or in countries where they would face potential tensions due to turbulent bilateral relations between the country of origin and that of deployment. Second, ICSs may make an official report if they feel a threat to their independence and integrity, seek expert advice within the organization and, if needed, ultimately opt out of a mission. Reporting can be officially channelled through an Ethics Office or similar structural set-ups, or more informal mechanisms. Third, in specific circumstances the IOs have decided to remove a potential source of tensions, namely government requests to ICSs to access sensitive information, by adopting a full-disclosure policy.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have investigated, in the context of two UN agencies, whether and why different staff categories embedded in the same workplace may face higher conflicts between the interests of their native country and those promoted by the IO they work for. Conflicting values and inconsistent demands are inherent elements of public governance and service (De Graaf 2011; Steenhuisen and Van Eeten 2012) and they ought to be studied by delving into the empirical details of daily practices (de Graaf *et al.* 2014). Our study confirms that a specific type of such conflict, the one between national and supranational interests, represents a substantive issue for IOs (Egeberg 1999, 2006; Trondal and Veggeland 2003; Beyers and Trondal 2004). Specifically, our findings indicate that conflicts of interest faced by UN staff are higher for members of the General Service than for the Professional and higher categories of employment, thus invalidating our expectations based on previous knowledge of state interference in the UN staffing processes, as well as on classical public administration research on top civil servants.

Our interviews confirm that 'socialization' within international elite networks matters (Johnston 2001). Our findings, however, enabled us to provide a more fine-grained account of the dynamics of socialization.

First, consistent with a classic, albeit not unanimous (Hooghe 2005), argument in the literature on EU integration (Egeberg 1999, 2006; Trondal 2002, 2011; Trondal and

Veggeland 2003; Checkel 2005), we have found that socialization relies on an intense and sustained exposure to the activities of the IO, resulting in ICSs more often evoking their supra-national identity. Socialization also leads to a reframing of the notion of national interests in a way that does not conflict with international interests, consistent with the attitude of ICSs to rework intergovernmental conceptions to limit their role conflict (Beyers and Trondal 2004).

Second, we have found that socialization is reinforced by an effect we have labelled 'national identity dilution', which tends to blur national identities and perspectives. These dynamics are certainly more marked in international than in local staff. Unlike foreign officers (i.e. civil servants pursuing a diplomatic career), UN staff are not cyclically reassigned to their national base after their duty as expatriated staff. Therefore, they are more likely to lose their national perspective through a mechanism of alienation and to acquire a new international identity through assimilation (Reymond and Mailick 1985). These findings resonate with the mechanisms of '*dépaysement*' and then enmeshing or '*engrenage*' that Shore (2000) observed in his ethnographic study of the politics of European integration.

In addition, our findings also reveal that dilution of national identity is activated both by institutional and intentional mechanisms. Institutional mechanisms include the rotation requirement – i.e. the mandate for international staff to change post after a certain amount of time (e.g. two years) – as we have observed in one of the two UN agencies under analysis. Rotation and duty station assignment prevent the ICSs putting down roots in a new country and maintain the truly cosmopolitan nature of the international workforce. Intentional mechanisms of 'national identity dilution' entail a careful selection of the identity to be evoked, i.e. choosing between two national identities or considering the UN blue passport a sort of new identity, up to the point of dismissing the national identity if it systematically conflicts with the supranational set of values internalized by ICSs.

Third, the study has also shed light on the implications of what we may call the 'proximity to the local environment' faced by the UN staff. Not only are local employees less affected by affirmative socialization and national identity dilution mechanisms but, perhaps more importantly, they remain an easier hostage to local patronage, political pressures and expectations from the local community. Our interviews revealed an overlooked source of role conflict for local clerical staff. While often removed from sensitive decisions with implications for their country of origin, they may still be requested by their government officials to ensure access to procedural information or to intervene in policy implementation. The interviews allow us to also isolate the political component of the national allegiances felt by ICSs. The national political identity may take its toll in terms of role conflict: while expected to keep a politically neutral posture, it may be harder for UN staff embedded in their own country setting to drop their prerogatives as *cives* of the polity they belong to, such as in the case of abstention from seeking an electoral mandate. The interviews thus suggest a distinctive component of national identity that had previously escaped scholarly attention, namely its political dimension.

Fourth, a repertoire of institutional arrangements devised to limit the tensions between those dual identities emerges from our analysis. While the study was not designed to assess their effectiveness, several arrangements were spontaneously mentioned by our informants: these institutional instruments enable international staff to decrease the pressure coming from the context. This UN policy differs markedly from the EU staffing policy as well as from the 'one bank, one staff' policy of the World Bank, according to which local staff and internationally recruited staff receive the same treatment in ranking and performance assessment (Weller and Yi-Chong 2010). The UN humanitarian organizations we



have analysed do not deploy international staff in their country of origin, thus removing potential sources of role conflict, albeit at the price of losing local expertise and political sensitivity (Dijkzeul 2004). In the same vein, if a conflict of interests escalates, international staff may exert the right to opt out from a mission. Therefore, the design of institutional arrangements may help to explain the puzzle of our quantitative findings.

Finally, this study has answered three open calls. First, the call to bring people back in to the research on IOs (Mathiason 2007; Yi-Chong and Weller 2008), considering that ICSs have remained invisible; almost a 'taboo' in studies on IOs for several decades (Yi-Chong and Weller 2008, p. 36). In particular, we provide fresh empirical ammunition to the scholarship investigating the scope conditions that may be more or less conducive to the emergence of a supranational identity in ICSs, therefore exacerbating or attenuating conflicts of interest.

The second, interrelated, call we have addressed is the one to further unpack the dynamics of socialization among ICSs, a phenomenon that, from an empirical point of view, has remained 'curiously understudied and misunderstood' (Shore 2000, p. 148). On the one hand, we have identified the dynamics of national identity dilution, discriminating between institutional and intentional mechanisms. On the other hand, we have pointed to the effects of proximity to the local context.

Third, we have addressed the call to combine qualitative and quantitative methods, therefore providing more nuanced accounts of the dynamics within IOs (Pollack 1997) and, in so doing, we have addressed a broader call to report a process of 'inductive iteration' when it occurs, instead of mimicking the steps of a deductive template (Yom 2015). In other words, we have reported the process through which unexpected results not in line with our initial hypothesis led us to further exploration.

Both the findings and the limitations of this study call for an ambitious research agenda. Our dependent variable was measured with one item – a critical case for statistical robustness – and according to our interviewees, conflict of interests is a multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore, there is a need for a more accurate conceptualization and measurement of the notion of conflict between national and international interests. One way to address this call might entail developing a sound scale aimed at enhancing conceptual validity. Furthermore, since the impacts of role, identity and multiple loyalties have emerged from the interviews as potential explanations of conflicts of interest, we propose scrutinizing new hypotheses about the impact of explanatory variables. In addition, our statistical analyses have revealed the 'values dilemma' to be the most significant explanatory variable of the model. We posit that this specific result requires a more fine-tuned analysis in order to discern whether staff members who declared frequently facing conflicts of interest with the government of their country of origin are not prone, for unknown reasons, to distrust the integrity of their organization. Finally, the external validity of the findings could be enhanced by comparing our results to those of other policy domains, such as the environment, economic development or trade.

We believe the study may also offer fruitful insights into current policy debates on the strategies that IOs should devise to ensure their independence from member countries (Davalá 2012; Malonga 2012; Peters 2012). In particular, it confirms the importance of the role played by socialization among international civil servants, and even more so if they are subject to rotation requirements at work. However, the findings also point to the need for closer consideration of the effects of institutional arrangements and specifically the effects of proximity on how frequently conflicts of interests are faced by (local) staff of IOs.

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## APPENDIX 1: ITEMS IN THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

Description of the variables		
Variable	Items used	Measurement
Conflicts of interest * Mean: 1.95 Standard Deviation: 1.18	Please indicate how often you face ... ... Conflicts between the interests of the country you belong to and those of the IO you work for	Likert frequency scale ranging from: 1 = Never to 5 = Always
Values dilemmas * $\alpha = .830$ Mean: 2.03 Standard Deviation: 1.06	... Conflicts among the values of the IO you work for and Human Rights values ... Conflicts among the values of the IO you work for and your personal values/convictions	

Source: \*Self-developed items.

## APPENDIX 2: EXEMPLARY SENTENCES OF FIRST- AND SECOND-ORDER CODES

ICSs with lower hierarchical level/ higher perception of conflict		
Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative quotes
Proximity of local staff	Stronger community linkages	'Lower-level staff are affected more. Yes, because they are in the country of origin; I'm now in country X, before I was in country Y and in both there's a very strong local host community which is demanding sometimes, like the hiring of people.'
	Limited identification with the IO	'I think to some extent that happens to staff when you move around, over time you assume a different identity and I think the staff have a very different cultural experience. The G staff who do not rotate and stay in the same place, and the P staff who do rotate and are subject to a completely different life experience.'
	National 'political' identity	'Our national staff in some of the countries involved in the XY conflict they felt this conflict strongly, and they wanted to go out in the streets and protest, because they felt strongly about the various dictators in power and whatever. But they could not.'

*Appendix 2: Continued***ICSs with lower hierarchical level/ higher perception of conflict**

Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative quotes
National government pressures	Procedural access	'They can find out the report hasn't been submitted to translation yet so I can still go back to the professionals and tell them they can still make some changes or you can still give it to us to look at because you still have this much time. I've had a couple of experiences like that, where I could tell that a particular mission knew more than I knew about the status of the document; so people in certain positions, G staff, can be quite useful for small things, so I have seen that the missions do cultivate those relationships.'

**ICSs with higher hierarchical level/ lower perception of conflict**

Mobility of international staff	Sense of belonging to the IO	'When we enter an international organization we become a member of that organization and therefore our loyalty is to the organization and the Secretary-General.'
	Lack of national identification	'You probably know which is our international passport; there is no nationality.' 'When I decided to work for the United Nations and I work on an everyday basis I feel that I've worked on behalf of humanity and not on behalf of this population of the XY country.'
	Rejection/selection of national identity	'Well I've removed myself as a citizen of the country of my nationality. I can take it objectively that whatever my country does is not reflective of me as a person who works in an international organization.' 'I have a double nationality. I entered with the selection of the X country but I was raised in the Y country. I choose my identity to be perceived as X because it suits me as an international civil servant, especially since the other country is at war with everybody!'
Perception of national interests	Difference between national and government interests	'So if you internalize this very well then protecting national interest is not a matter of protecting government interest. Protecting national interest would mean something equal to promotion of the international principle that your organization is promoting.'
Organizational arrangements	Strategic deployment	'International staff are not deployed in the countries where they could have a conflict of interest. UN try not to deploy managers from the same country in that country. Like Iranians working in Iran.'
	Reporting & training	'There are two lines of reporting here. One is the formal line, but if they feel uncomfortable, reporting then they can report to me for confidential advice and I would give them my opinion about what I can do. I would ask for details on the nature of the conflict or nature of the pressure or the issues and then we would go from there.'
	Full disclosure policy	'We try to act in a very flexible way and to arrange for staff to take these challenges ... especially in some developing countries that can be a bit more dangerous, such as X. The most difficult thing is when people are requested by governments to report what is going on in the office. The answer of our organization is that you report everything. We do not have much to hide.'