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Seeking Recognition Beyond the Liberal International Order

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Seeking Recognition Beyond the Liberal International Order

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Seeking Recognition Beyond the Liberal International Order

Abstract

The values the Liberal International Order (LIO) professes to uphold in theory, such as the promise of equal treatment, are not always lived up to in practice. In fact, it cannot always live up to this promise. The LIO's social hierarchy prevents non-Western countries from fully acquiring the recognition they believe they are entitled to, leading them to contest the legitimacy of the LIO. For some countries, the emerging multipolar world presents an alternative option to gain international status and recognition. This thesis uses South Africa as a case study to examine how misrecognition in the LIO motivates countries to join BRICS. The results and analysis indicate that the LIO's inability, but BRIC's ability, to promise recognition motivated South Africa to join BRIC. Yet, in assessing the available empirical record, and whether the collective body of evidence can support making an inference that the causal relationship existed in the case of South Africa, this thesis concludes that there is only weak confirmatory evidence.

1. Introduction

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is often explained as the visions and practices of “open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law” (Ikenberry, 2011, p. 2). Many International Relations (IR) scholars contend that the LIO is going through significant challenges today, most of which can be divided into internal and external dynamics (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018; Lieber, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2019). Internal factors can be found in, for example, its proneness to favour international institutions over domestic ones and, as a result of hyperglobalisation, rising economic inequality in the liberal world (Mearsheimer, 2019). External factors include, for instance, the (re-)emergence of hostile powers like Russia and China (Lieber, 2012). As scholars attempt to better understand the contemporary world we are living in, there is an issue that has gained much attention: the establishment and recent enlargement of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) alliance.

In January 2024, the BRICS expanded from five to ten members, turning the alliance into BRICS+ (Suri & Tripathi, 2023). The acronym BRIC (without South Africa) was coined in 2001 by the then-chief economist of Goldman Sachs who predicted that the countries were becoming central drivers of global economic growth in the future (Power, 2015). The alliance was established in 2009, and South Africa joined in 2010, thus renaming the alliance to BRICS. Early on, the BRICS alliance came to be perceived by some as an alternative power bloc to the US-led LIO, providing alternative political and financial forums (Laïdi, 2012; Stuenkel, 2013). It is also seen by some as the voice of the developing and emerging world, and their dissatisfaction with the status quo (Niu, 2023; O’Neill, 2023). Even though BRICS cannot always agree on everything, they know what they oppose (Maihold, 2023).

In 2023, over 40 countries expressed an interest in joining BRICS, according to the 2023 BRICS summit chair, South Africa (Acharya, 2023). Out of these, Argentina, Egypt,

Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were invited to join, and all but Argentina accepted the invitation since the newly elected Argentinian president, Javier Milei, decided to withdraw (Miridzhanian, 2024). The most recent expansion of BRICS has conveyed a clear signal to the world of a multipolar reality (Suri & Tripathi, 2023). “If not a new world order, the BRICS expansion is certainly an attempt at an alternative world order” (Suri & Tripathi, 2023). How, then, can we understand the enlargement of BRICS? What is it that motivates countries to join BRICS?

Scholars who have examined the appeal of BRICS have often pointed to the potential for Global South cooperation and economic and geopolitical influence (Iqbal & De Araújo, 2015; Lowe, 2016). However, while they have not looked at BRICS specifically, some scholars have recently pointed to issues of justice claims to explain state behaviour (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023; Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023). One of these justice claims is the issue of ‘recognitional justice’, which is defined here as “the denoting of *who* is considered to be a (full or partial) member of that order and *what* forms of recognition follow from membership” (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 202, emphasis in the original). Countries that do not obtain the recognition they believe they are entitled to in the LIO experience ‘misrecognition’, which this study defines as “the gap between a [country’s] desired status and how [it is] seen by others” (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 202). However, the LIO cannot, in fact, live up to its promise of equal recognition embedded in liberalism even if it promises it (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023; Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023). Because of the LIO’s social hierarchy, non-Western countries will never be recognised to the same extent as Western countries, despite living up to objective metrics of liberalism (Lawson and Zarakol, 2023). While many countries joining BRICS do not live up to objective metrics of liberalism, some non-Western countries that do in fact live up to them, such South Africa and Argentina, have become part of or shown interest in BRICS (Plummer,

2023). Studying this trend is, therefore, important as it allows us to get a better understanding of BRICS' appeal.

Issues of recognitional justice are essential to understanding the challenges of the LIO and the interest in BRICS as an alternative to the LIO. Through constructivism, recognitional justice and the misrecognition that comes from the lack of it can provide novel and important insight into better understanding the role of recognition as a motivator for joining BRICS, in particular when there is a promise of recognition from it. In light of the above, and Adler-Nissen & Zarakol's (2020, p. 613-14) encouragement to "pay more attention to the desire for recognition as a driver in political behaviour", this study seeks to answer the following research question: *How does misrecognition in the LIO motivate countries to join BRICS?*

This thesis uses South Africa as a case study and suggests that misrecognition in the LIO motivated South Africa to join BRIC for two relating reasons. First, the LIO cannot promise full recognition to non-Western countries, including South Africa, because of the LIO's social hierarchy, which in turn creates dissatisfaction and discontentment in non-Western countries that do live up to objective metrics of liberalism. Second, because BRICS can elevate a non-Western country's international status, and consequently recognition, BRICS has a particular appeal that motivates non-Western countries to seek membership in the status club of BRICS. However, in assessing the available empirical record, and whether the collective body of evidence can support making an inference that the causal relationship existed in the case of South Africa, this thesis concludes that there is weak confirmatory evidence.

This research paper proceeds as follows. First, it begins with providing a review of previous literature. Contestation of the LIO, in particular by BRICS, is discussed before looking at how recognitional justice can provide answers to our understanding of countries' motivation to joining BRICS. The causal arguments of this paper are then presented. The following section explains the research design of this study, including case selection, method

and operationalisation. Next, after the results are presented and analysed, the conclusion, limitations and recommendations for future research are provided.

2. Theory

Contestation and BRICS

Rising powers, such as BRICS, and developing countries, engage in different forms of contestation, in which they target international norms, the LIO, international authority or a combination of them. They contest in a way of showing their dissatisfaction and resentment with how the LIO has and is dealing with, for instance, the international economy and finance, as well as the dominance of the US (Barbieri, 2020, p. 159). In their ambitions to challenge the status quo, BRICS has, among other things, accomplished creating the New Development Bank (NDB), which some see as a clear challenge to the Bretton Woods institutions and, thus, Western hegemony (Cusson & Culpi, 2016). In light of their discontentment with the global use of the dollar as currency, the BRICS countries have also indicated ambitions to create a new currency (Sullivan, 2023). To Prantl (2014), the establishment of mechanisms and institutions like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can, in themselves, be viewed as a form of contestation. In addition, Laïdi (2012, p. 615) has argued that the democratic IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) also align with China and Russia in their political effort to defend the principle of political sovereignty, which they see the Western hegemony to threaten the most.

In their power political approach to norm contestation, Bettiza & Lewis (2019) analyse rising authoritarian powers who challenge normative structures of the LIO. They show that these authoritarian powers' goal is to reinforce non-liberal principles and undermine the "ideational hegemony of liberal Western-based actors and structures in world politics" (Bettiza

& Lewis, 2019, p. 1). To do this, they employ different modes of norm contestation, such as ‘liberal performance’, in which they frame Western states as hypocritical for not complying with the liberal ideals they themselves profess to uphold and promote worldwide. They do so to contest the hypocrisy of the West and thereby reduce Western influence and undermine liberal norms. However, in breaking down contestation, Newman & Zala (2017) distinguish ‘normative contestation’ from ‘contestation over representation’ and note that rising powers do not always attempt to contest the LIO’s norms and principles. Instead, they claim that rising powers are also resentful about their lack of authority in global governance institutions and, therefore, request greater representation in and access to these international institutions. Many rising powers actually contest the LIO to a large extent in aspiration for more respect and status. In fact, scholarly debate on issues of status, identity and recognition, particularly among constructivists, has provided important perspectives in improving our understanding of the challenges that the LIO is facing (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020; Murray, 2019). ‘Recognitional justice’ builds on this work.

Recognitional justice

According to constructivists, identities are created in different social settings and “actors’ identities are dependent, in a deep and profound way, on social recognition” (Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023, p. 8). In their study, in which they argue that the social aspects of grievances in international politics have been overlooked by other IR scholars, Adler-Nissen & Zarakol (2020) contend that various actors are discontented with the LIO not only for pure material and economic reasons, but largely because of misrecognition.

Recognitional justice in International Relations, as part of constructivism, has not yet gained much attention. As noted in the introduction, Lawson and Zarakol (2023, p. 202, emphasis in the original) define ‘recognitional justice’ as: “the denoting of *who* is considered

to be a (full or partial) member of that order and *what* forms of recognition follow from membership”. They refer to various groups who are members of the LIO, but who do not receive the recognition that they believe they are entitled to in the LIO. As a result of not receiving this recognition, these groups experience ‘recognitional injustice’, or with other words ‘misrecognition in the LIO’. As the introduction also presented, this study defines ‘misrecognition’ as “the gap between a [country’s] desired status and how [it is] seen by others” (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 202). In other words, when a country does not acquire the respect or acknowledgement of a certain status by others, but that it seeks to be identified with and believes it is entitled to in the LIO, the country experiences misrecognition in the LIO. Consequently, however, not all non-Western countries will experience misrecognition in the LIO.

For Murray (2019), the status of a country as “high” or “low” can only be determined in relation to the nation’s own self-identity. Therefore, a country like Iran, whose identity is based on a narrative around anti-Western imperialism, will only have its status strengthened and not undermined if it is criticised by the West (Götz, 2019, p. 236). Consequently, Iran does not experience misrecognition in the LIO. On the other hand, a non-Western country that identifies as liberal will experience misrecognition in the LIO (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023; Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023). Why is this the case?

Just like any other order, Lawson and Zarakol (2023) explain, the LIO has a certain type of social hierarchy (cultural, religious, racial and other hierarchies based on identity) that says what and who is included and excluded. However, the LIO’s promises of justice encompassed in liberalism, such as equal membership, the sanctity of individual rights and universal rationality, clash with the key requirements of order construction, like the establishing of social hierarchies (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 203). In fact, they argue that

“liberalism does not, indeed cannot, deliver fully on the principles of egalitarian, meritocratic justice on which its legitimacy is premised” (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 210).

According to Reus-Smit and Zarakol (2023, p. 9) many countries have sought to be part of the West from at least the nineteenth century to a large extent because of the stigmatisation that followed from not being part of what was interpreted to be ‘normal’ at the time. As Manners (2002, p. 253) has argued: “the ability to define what passes for ‘normal’ in world politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all”. After the Second World War, many countries decided to join the international order led by the West, even if they were not convinced by its principles (Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023, p. 9). They were not only drawn to the appeal of wealth and power but also because of the desire to acquire certain labels that were coveted, such as ‘liberal’ and ‘developed’ (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 207). Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2020) similarly argue that countries adopted Western norms and joined Western organisations to gain status.

Today, many non-Western countries view the LIO as a “status club”, privileging its core Western members, even though the LIO claims to have replaced the hierarchies with "objective meritocratic metrics" (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 206-207). For instance, Western countries usually receive more recognition than non-Western countries outside the West, even if the non-Western countries score high on objective metrics of liberalism (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023, p. 207). Reus-Smit and Lawson (2023, p. 10) argue that it does not matter how much non-Western countries manage to embrace liberalism; “they would not be fully recognized as equals (...) as liberalism has never managed to fully shrug off its association with the West as a cultural grouping”. As a result, countries that have nominal membership in the LIO today accuse the LIO of maintaining the historical hierarchies that underpin the LIO (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020). Even if, arguably, the “formal ‘standards of civilization’ based on race, religion and culture have been abandoned”, (Reus-Smit and Lawson, 2023, p. 10), today’s LIO should be understood with this historical background in mind. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2020) similarly

note that one must consider the maintenance of historical hierarchies rooted in, for instance, racism and colonialism, which underpin the LIO.

When the liberal values the LIO professes to uphold in theory, such as a promise of equal treatment, are not lived up to in practice, the LIO and its full Western members are charged with hypocrisy (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023). As a result, the legitimacy of the LIO is contested. For instance, Western leaders have been accused of hypocrisy by the Global South for how the West has dealt with the wars in Ukraine and Palestine (Al Jazeera Staff, 2023) and Putin condemned the West of hypocrisy as Russia annexed Crimea (Walker, 2017). Consequently, and considering the challenges that the LIO is going through, and countries' experiences of misrecognition in the LIO, for some countries, the emerging multipolar world presents an alternative option to gain international status and recognition.

Causal arguments

This section elaborates on the causal relationship between misrecognition in the LIO and joining BRICS. In terms of entities engaging in activities, it explains the causal process from the cause to the outcome, including a two-part causal mechanism. The causal mechanism is illustrated in Figure 1. The section ends with a hypothesis.

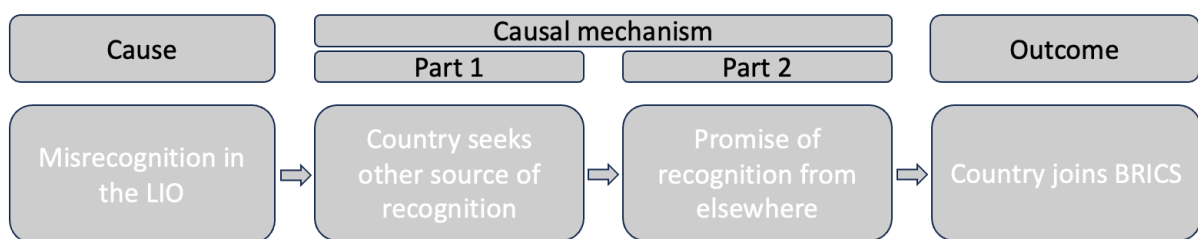


Figure 1. Causal mechanism

Cause: Misrecognition in the LIO

Scholarship has previously pointed to two groups that express resentment towards the LIO: one in the core of the West in the form of populist politicians and their supporters, and the other in the semi-periphery with authoritarian governments and their followers (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2020). Based on Lawson & Zarakol (2023) and Reus-Smit & Zarakol (2023), this thesis argues that this second group has common denominators with a third group, namely the non-Western countries that live up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism. They are also resentful towards the LIO because of the impossibility for them to gain the status and, consequently, recognition that comes with only having full membership in the LIO. These two groups are similar, but the latter of the two has a closer connection to the LIO as they aspire for recognition through its achievements of liberalism. In short, non-Western countries that cannot gain the status and recognition that come with having full membership in the LIO will be, more or less, resentful and discontented with the LIO's social hierarchy (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2020), which entities ranging from the country's government to individual citizen often express through the 'hypocrisy charge' (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023; Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023).

Two-part causal mechanism: struggle for recognition

1. Part 1: Seeking another source of recognition

The resentment and discontentment with the LIO's social hierarchy, this thesis argues, can entice a country to *seek another source of recognition* where it can acquire an elevated status and receive the corresponding acknowledgement from others. More specifically, a government can identify and engage with different sources of recognition, such as an established group in the international arena that already has a high status, to explore the potential for gaining recognition through the specific group. A government and its representatives can, for instance,

increase its attention to improving diplomatic relations with individual countries that are part of the group, as well as the group itself.

While a country may seek an alternative to the LIO, there may be other reasons than misrecognition in the LIO for why an alternative to the LIO appeals to the particular country. However, as contended by Lawson & Zarakol (2023) and Reus-Smit & Zarakol (2023), misrecognition in the LIO has a significant role to play in the resentment and discontent with the LIO. Moreover, even though any other order “would not remove the underlying recognition problems inherent in politics” (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2020: 627), because all orders rely “on forms of social hierarchy that denote who and what is inside and outside the order” (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023: 203), it is clear that non-Western countries are particularly resentful with the social hierarchy that is embedded in the LIO (Lawson & Zarakol: 2023). This thesis, therefore, argues that the LIO itself pushes away its non-Western members, enticing them to seek recognition elsewhere where it can gain status and, consequently, recognition.

2. Part 2: Promise of recognition from elsewhere

As a country’s government increasingly engages with the established group (and the group’s member states), the country’s government can assess the new group’s potential for promising recognition to the country. If and when the country’s government assesses that there is a *promise of recognition from elsewhere* for the country, this alternative new source of recognition (in this case BRICS) can potentially threaten or, rather, complement the original, limited, source of recognition (in this case the LIO). Since the non-Western country that experiences misrecognition in the LIO is more or less part of the LIO, the non-Western country will more likely complement its membership in the LIO with BRICS membership. Moreover, each country will base its assessment on its own particular demands for, in this context, recognition.

Unlike the LIO, BRICS' social hierarchy can offer full recognition to non-Western states. However, the recognition that non-Western states seek in the LIO is *not* the same as it would seek from BRICS. The particular recognition in the LIO takes the form of living up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism, which in turn entails an elevated status and, therefore, privileges and acknowledgement (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023 and Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023). However, in BRICS, a country does not gain recognition for living up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism, nor attempting to, according to the BRICS members themselves, establish "a more equitable and fair world" (Nkoana-Mashabane, 2012). Instead, this thesis argues that a newly admitted BRICS member country acquires an elevated status in international politics, and consequently recognition, for two implicit reasons. First, because BRICS is an exclusive membership group (Cooper, 2021). Even though the recent expansion of BRICS reduces its membership exclusivity, BRICS will still continue, for now, to be an exclusive group because of its selective admission process.

Second, because BRICS boldly challenges the status quo. Even if BRICS has been limited in its success (Ashby et al., 2023; Duggan et al., 2021; Ösekin & Sune, 2023), it tries to challenge the US-led LIO (Mulrenan, 2023). Since BRICS can be seen as "an attempt at an alternative world order" (Suri & Tripathi, 2023), and is a group that is recognised for its vision to create a multipolar order instead of the US-led LIO, the BRICS label also weighs heavier than other groupings. Consequently, this thesis argues that BRICS membership elevates a country's status and that a country will, therefore, acquire greater recognition in the international arena.

Outcome: Joining BRICS

The non-Western country's government will, once invited or admitted, and when it has *positively* assessed the potential and promise of recognition in BRICS, join BRICS. Countries

that have created or become part of notable groups in the international arena, such as BRICS, G7 and G20, have gained status as dynamic powers and greater role in international politics, and acquired additional authority, legitimacy and recognition (Läidi, 2012; Stuenkel, 2013). This thesis contends, however, that for non-Western countries, BRICS stands out from other groups, such as the G7 and G20. While a non-Western country can gain significant recognition through, for instance, the G7 and G20 as well, BRICS has a particular connotation and status in world politics since it challenges the status quo of the US-led LIO. Unlike other groups like the G7 and G20, BRICS addresses the misrecognition that non-Western countries experience in the LIO.

Due to its internal contradictions, the LIO itself has paved the way for non-Western countries to apply to *join BRICS*. Within this setting, the countries will not be ‘less than’ the ‘normal’ actors within the LIO. There may be different reasons why a country decides not to seek recognition in BRICS despite experiencing misrecognition in the LIO. For instance, the non-Western country may assess that it has more to lose than gain in joining BRICS. Various factors at both the international and domestic levels can affect this decision. Domestic factors, such as the political orientation of the country’s government, can, for instance, affect whether or not the country decides to join BRICS. Yet, the more misrecognition a non-Western country experiences in the international arena in the LIO, and the more BRICS can offer in comparison to the LIO, the more BRICS membership will appeal.

In light of the above, this thesis hypothesises that *as a non-Western country experiences misrecognition in the LIO, it will become motivated to seek recognition from alternative platforms like BRICS, which can make a promise of recognition, and where it can, once joined, acquire the recognition that it believes it is entitled to.*

3. Methodology

Case selection

Theoretically, the ideal case for this study, as per Beach and Pedersen (2019), would be a country that 1) has been admitted as a member to BRICS, and 2) experiences a relatively high degree of misrecognition in the LIO. I discuss each briefly and, thereafter, how I make a trade off. First, even though, according to the 2023 BRICS summit chair South Africa (Acharya, 2023), more than 40 countries have expressed an interest in joining BRICS, solely showing interest does not suffice to indicate that a country will actually join. For instance, Turkey has expressed interest but not applied for membership (Chivvis et al., 2023). Argentina applied but withdrew after the newly elected President Javier Milei made the decision to pull out (Plummer, 2023). There are five countries that have been newly admitted: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE (BBC News, 2024). In addition, the former BRIC expanded when South Africa became a member in 2010 (Smith, 2016).

Second, a country that experiences some degree of misrecognition in the LIO is largely non-Western (Lawson and Zarakol, 2023). Since all countries are unique, the degree of misrecognition in the LIO among different non-Western countries will vary. It is, nevertheless, a methodological challenge to measure (mis)recognition (Daase et al., 2015, p. 4). It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to fully compare the degree of misrecognition among different countries. This study, therefore, argues the following: the higher the non-Western country scores on objective metrics of liberalism, the more the non-Western country will expect to receive recognition in the LIO. However, since it does not matter what it does (because it will never be seen as an equal to Western countries in the LIO's social hierarchy), it will experience more recognitional injustice and, thus, more misrecognition in the LIO. In

short, the higher the score on objective metrics of liberalism, the higher the probability of misrecognition.

The methodological challenge of measuring mis(recognition) is a notable limitation that is recognised in this thesis. Yet, since this thesis aims to explore a country's misrecognition in the LIO and how it motivates the country to apply to BRICS alliance, by opting for a non-Western country that scores the highest on objective metrics of liberalism, I argue, is an indication of a higher degree of recognitional injustice, and thus, misrecognition in the LIO. It will still allow me to trace a specific country's misrecognition in the LIO until joining BRICS. Furthermore, by looking at V-Dem Institute's liberal democracy index, which incorporates measures of liberalism, such as civil liberties, the rule of law and an independent judiciary (Interactive Maps – V-Dem, n.d.), I can measure how a country scores on objective metrics of liberalism over time.

Out of the countries that have joined BRIC(S) after it was established, South Africa scores the highest on the Liberal Democracy Index (see Figure 2 and Table 1). When it joined BRIC in 2010, it scored 0.66 on the V-Dem Institute's liberal democracy index. Out of the other countries that joined BRICS in 2024, Egypt scored the highest in 2023, which was 0.13. Argentina, though it decided not to join BRICS, scored 0.69 in 2023. Furthermore, as earlier pointed out, according to the 2023 BRICS summit chair, South Africa said in 2023 that more than 40 countries had expressed an interest in joining BRICS (Acharya, 2023). I have not found or been able to access information regarding which all these countries are, but out of the ones that I have found, no country has a high score on the Liberal Democracy Index (see Figure 2 and Table 1). While one can only speculate which other countries have shown an interest, I argue that the countries (if any at all) that have shown interest but have not publicly expressed it, are more likely to have scored high on the Liberal Democracy Index, simply because of the sensitive nature of joining a group that challenges the US-led LIO. There is, nevertheless, a

low number of countries that have a higher score on the Liberal Democracy Index and that have expressed an interest in BRICS. Yet, because of the potential consequences of countries possibly expressing an interest in BRICS in the future, it is important to better understand what role recognition justice plays in the LIO and BRICS.

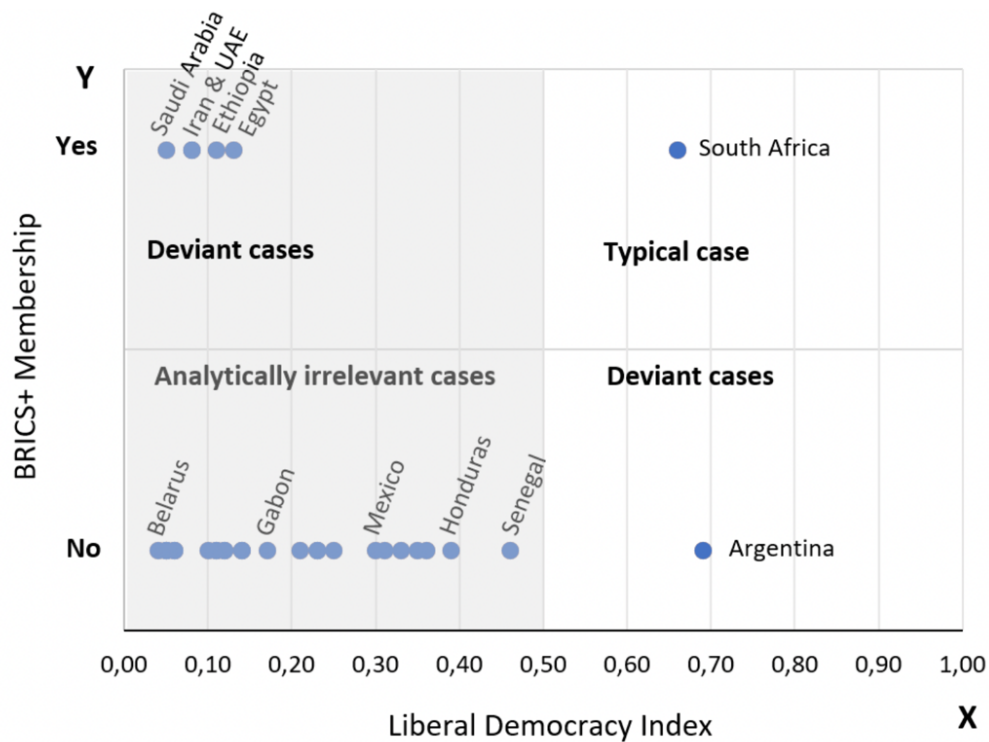


Figure 2. South Africa is a typical case

With this in mind, I have opted for South Africa in this thesis. As I aim to trace the cause to the outcome, using the most positive typical case will allow me to make the strongest possible causal inferences (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Although it applied to BRIC in 2010, South Africa offers a significant opportunity to trace its misrecognition in the LIO from post-apartheid in 1994, which signified a significant improvement in liberalism until it joined BRIC in 2010. It also provides critical insight into understanding how a country's misrecognition in the LIO motivates countries to join BRICS, in a quest to move from a LIO to a multipolar order.

Table 1. List of countries that have shown interest in or joined BRICS since its creation.

Country	Liberal Democracy Index	Admitted BRICS+ Members
Argentina	0,69	
South Africa	0,66	Yes
Senegal	0,46	
Honduras	0,39	
Indonesia	0,36	
Bolivia	0,35	
Nigeria	0,33	
Kuwait	0,31	
Mexico	0,30	
Morocco	0,25	
Guinea-Bissau	0,23	
Thailand	0,23	
Pakistan	0,21	
Gabon	0,17	
Kazakhstan	0,14	
Palestine	0,14	
Egypt	0,13	Yes
Algeria	0,12	
Democratic Republic of Congo	0,12	
Ethiopia	0,11	Yes
Turkey	0,11	
Vietnam	0,11	
Bangladesh	0,10	
Iran	0,08	Yes
United Arab Emirates	0,08	Yes
Cuba	0,06	
Venezuela	0,06	
Saudi Arabia	0,05	Yes
Sudan	0,05	
Syria	0,05	
Yemen	0,05	
Belarus	0,04	
Bahrain	-	
Comoros	-	

Research method and operationalisation

As a qualitative research method, process tracing aims to explain the causal relationship from the cause to the outcome in order to make within-case inferences (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Since process tracing permits me to study the causal mechanism, it will be used as a method in this thesis. Studying the mechanism will provide contextual understanding and the opportunity to analyse the process in depth. In addition, since this study aims to trace misrecognition in the LIO as a motivator for joining BRICS, process tracing fits well with this study's constructivist approach.

In order to make causal inferences in this study, I trace the process by observing empirical fingerprints (Beach & Pedersen, 2019: 4), which in turn are analysed within the particular context of the case. Below, I present what kind of empirical fingerprints that the mechanism is expected to leave. By describing the relationship between each part and the whole process, I can later assess what can be updated (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 184). Since “there are no prior case studies of the relationship”, there is a low relative prior confidence for each part of the mechanism and the overall process (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 184).

First, a non-Western country that lives up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism will experience misrecognition in the LIO (Lawson & Zarakol, 2023). Therefore, South Africa, because of its non-Western status, experiences misrecognition despite its achievements of liberalism. With full membership in the LIO comes certain acknowledgements and privileges, which South Africa cannot acquire in the LIO. I, therefore, expect South Africa, through its government, to accuse the West of hypocrisy during the years leading up to BRIC membership, as it indicates the resentment and discontentment with the privileges that Western countries, and not a non-Western country like South Africa, have in the LIO. For instance, I expect representatives of the South African government to voice discontent and resentment in different forums, such as the United Nation’s General Assembly (UNGA), which provides a space where

countries can express their opinions, for instance towards the LIO. The closer South Africa approaches membership in BRIC, I expect to observe this ‘hypocrisy charge’. Despite South Africa’s relations with the West in the LIO, through the ‘hypocrisy charge’ I expect, more specifically, representatives of the South African government to criticise the LIO for being an unjust order.

Second, I expect the South African government to indicate an interest in other groups, in particular BRIC, that it believes can be another source of recognition. I expect South African representatives to show an interest in BRIC as it engages with BRIC and its member countries, for instance during country visits or BRIC forums. More importantly, as representatives of the South African government engage with the other parties, I also expect the South African representatives to express BRIC as a group where it believes it can achieve a higher status and receive acknowledgement.

Third, this thesis argues that the promise of recognition from BRIC is implicit. BRIC membership itself is proof of the important role a country plays in regional and international politics, and as a leader in advancing a multipolar world. Some countries, for instance in the West, might not perceive BRIC membership with high status for, according to the BRIC countries, their attempt to establish a more fair and equitable world (Nkoana-Mashabane, 2012). Instead, BRIC membership is associated with high status because of 1) BRIC being an exclusive membership club with much influence in world politics, and 2) because it challenges the status quo of the US-led LIO. While the promise of recognition is implicit, in the speculations of South Africa’s potential BRIC membership by officials from various countries and other IR experts, I still expect to observe statements by other countries, including BRIC members, that acknowledge South Africa’s enhanced status. This, in turn, entails recognition of South Africa’s potential new role in international politics through BRIC.

Fourth, I finally expect to observe South Africa experiencing an increased sense of recognition once the country joins BRIC. It will not take the form of recognition for it living up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism, but instead, by association to the status club. I expect South Africa to perceive itself and to be perceived by others, such as by other states, including BRIC countries and experts in IR, as having acquired an elevated status and increased influence in world politics.

I have searched for the empirical fingerprints from different sources, including foreign policy documents and official statements by officials and representatives from South Africa and other countries, including the BRIC countries. I have also looked at research reports, newspapers, political commentaries and scholarly literature that could provide information relating to South Africa's misrecognition in the LIO and interest in BRIC. Moreover, the empirical fingerprints are particular to South Africa since "the same mechanism can leave different predicted evidence in different cases" (Beach & Pedersen, 2019: 187).

As we interpret the world differently, our knowledge is socially (re)produced and situated (Haraway, 1988). This is important to have in mind since my positionality will inevitably affect the research. I have aimed to be as transparent as possible and to minimise the privileging of certain kinds of empirical material, which could, however, result in bias (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Subjective evaluation of evidence and prior research is, nevertheless, inevitable (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 177). While I do not expect to overcome these issues completely, I will attempt to be self-reflexive, which means "taking account of [one]self or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated" (Hobson, 2004, p. 364).

4. Results and analysis

4.1 South African misrecognition in the LIO

After the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa enacted an impressive liberal democratic constitution and “in recognition of South Africa’s continental preeminence, the country became a leading member of multilateral institutions in Africa and the developing world” (Leon, 2010, p. 18). South Africa also became part of the G20 in 1999 (*International Relations*, n.d.). While South Africa faced several issues after the end of apartheid, such as inequalities and failure to address unemployment issues (Leon, 2010), it continued aligning with the values of the LIO, such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law. President Mbeki, for instance, argued in 2006 that certain issues, such as access to housing, health, education, and water had still improved (Pottinger, 2008). Despite the challenges of living up to objective meritocratic metrics of liberalism, by assimilating into the Western liberal order, South Africa attempted to rid its stigmatising attributes of not acting in accordance with liberalism. Yet, in line with Lawson & Zarakol (2023) and Reus-Smit and Zarakol (2023), because South Africa is a non-Western country, it could never fully achieve full recognition in the LIO.

I have searched for statements by South African officials accusing the West of hypocrisy and an unjust order, since it indicates the resentment and discontentment with the privileges that Western countries have in the LIO. While I have not found any explicit charges of hypocrisy, the ruling party at the time, the African National Congress (ANC), accused the world order of being “unjust” (*Developing a Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy*, 1997).

South Africa could have been somewhat careful with any direct criticism or charges of hypocrisy because of its relations with the West. A country that is a part of the LIO is less likely to criticise it than a country that does not perceive itself of being a part of the LIO. However,

it is also possible that there was criticism, but only that I have not been able to find or access it in the empirical record. Nevertheless, in line with Lawson & Zarakol (2023) and Reus-Smit and Zarakol (2023), because South Africa is a non-Western country, this thesis contends that there remained a gap between South Africa's desired status and how it was seen by others. It, therefore, experienced misrecognition in the LIO.

4.2 South Africa seeks other source of recognition

After 1994, South Africa endorsed the creation of a G-South or G-8 South group (Soulé-Kohndou, 2014), which Mbeki, who was president between 1999 and 2008, believed could act as an opportunity for developing nations to coordinate to strengthen the Global South's interests (Landsberg, 2006). South Africa also became a member of several groups, such as the G77, G20 and India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum. As the only African country in the G20, South Africa sought to represent African interests ("Framework Document on SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL INTEREST and Its Advancement in a Global Environment," 2023), which this thesis argues also was an attempt to elevate South Africa's status. Yet, membership in, for instance, the G20, G77 or IBSA was arguably not enough as South Africa also sought to complement these memberships and their associated recognition by becoming a member of another group: BRIC.

In 2010, President Zuma went on trips to visit each BRIC member country (Hervieu, 2011). The South African BRICS Think Tank (SABTT) noted that South Africa had worked tirelessly and lobbied intensely for the country to be admitted to BRIC (*About BRICS*, n.d.; Soulé-Kohndou, 2013; Timse, 2011). Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the then Minister of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, also wrote a letter to the heads of states of the BRIC countries, conveying South Africa's interest in joining BRIC (Soulé-Kohndou, 2013). Even though other political leaders of African states had not agreed on South

Africa being the gateway to Africa, in lobbying for their membership, South Africa emphasised this specific role (*Brics Membership Boosts South Africa's Global Standing*, 2013; Pheko, 2011; Pinto, 2012; Soko & Qobo, 2011; Soulé-Kouhndou, 2013). For instance, Jacob Zuma, then President of South Africa, said that South Africa's "participation in BRIC would mean that an entire continent (...) is represented", in its various efforts to change the world ("South Africa Wants to Join So-called BRIC Nations," 2010). A couple of months before South Africa's invitation to join BRIC, Nkoana-Mashabane (2010) also said in a speech that the rise of emerging powers, like the BRIC countries, had opened up opportunities for developing countries to influence the global system in ways that had previously not been possible. The combination of being perceived as a leader of Africa and what BRIC represented points to what South Africa sought: an important role in an important grouping, which, because of BRIC's reputation, would entail the recognition it sought.

As expected, the empirical evidence indicates that South Africa sought membership in BRIC because it, *inter alia*, entailed a higher status in international politics. It would elevate South Africa's role and provide them with the recognition it sought. Furthermore, emphasising the mutually beneficial South African role in BRIC was central to its application. By expressing BRIC as an important group for influencing the global system in new ways, and highlighting South Africa's own potentially important role in reinforcing BRIC's ability to influence the global system in new ways, this thesis argues that South Africa was particularly drawn to BRIC, *inter alia* for the recognition membership entailed. However, the actual reasons behind South Africa's interest in BRIC is arguably still open to interpretation since the empirical evidence does not explicitly prove that South Africa was interested in BRIC solely *because of* the recognition it would receive from membership. However, this thesis argues that the issue of recognition has a significant role to play.

4.3 Promise of recognition from BRIC to South Africa

Because membership in BRIC entails recognition as an influential leader in world politics, the promise of recognition is, as previously explained, in itself implicit. Membership is proof of the important role a country plays in international politics, and as a leader in advancing a multipolar world. In the G20, for instance, South Africa retained a high status in international politics, and through the IBSA Dialogue Forum, South Africa was also able to project itself as an emerging international player (Soulé-Kohndou, 2014, p. 5). However, in BRIC, South Africa would be promised recognition as a member, and the sole (and leading) African representative, of a spearheading exclusive group that is challenging the LIO.

Marvin Zonis, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, said that inviting South Africa to join BRIC “legitimises South Africa as a future global power and as an investable country” (Stabroek News, 2011). Mohau Pheko (2011), the High Commissioner of the Republic of South Africa to Canada, said that “the invitation for South Africa to join an expanded BRIC partnership (...) is an astute recognition by the other partners that South Africa has a significant contribution to make in the grouping”. Nkoana-Mashabane had also said, as a response to the invitation to join BRIC, and similarly to what Jacob Zuma had said prior to the invitation to join BRIC, that South Africa “will be a good gateway for the BRIC countries (...) we don't just speak for South Africa, we speak for Africa as a whole.” (Seria, 2010). As previously noted, even if not all African countries saw South Africa as its spokesperson, the perception of South Africa as a continental leader in BRICS, in particular, was significant for it to gain international status in world politics.

In the speculation of South Africa's membership in BRIC, the confirmation of South Africa's promised recognition by experts in IR and officials from other countries than South Africa is scarce. It seems evident that South Africa would portray itself in such a light. Not finding the expected empirical evidence does not necessarily, however, mean that other

countries, including the BRIC members, did not perceive South Africa in such a light as well. While the empirical evidence is relatively weak, the promise of recognition is still, as argued in this thesis, implicit. Furthermore, while the reasons to have invited South Africa to join BRIC may have varied, it does not mean that there was still a promise of recognition through BRIC membership. In short, irrespective of the reasons to have invited South Africa, BRIC membership entailed a promise of recognition for South Africa because of what BRIC represented.

4.4 South Africa joins BRIC

According to Soulé-Kohndou (2013, p. 5), “BRICS ... allowed South Africa to project its identity as an emerging international player beyond being an accepted regional powerhouse in its immediate subregion”. She also contends that being a member of BRICS enabled South Africa to produce “an image – even if only symbolically – of being the leading emerging African power”, and that South Africa’s membership in BRIC supported its “foreign policy objective of assuming the role of leading African spokesperson in the international arena” (2013, p. 11). Asuelime (2018) has similarly contended that even if other African states did not recognise South Africa as the gateway to Africa, becoming a member of BRIC advanced the perception of South Africa being seen as a voice for Africa. He also argues that South Africa would not have been as successful in addressing various issues if it had not been for its membership in the BRICS club.

In 2012, the government news agency said that joining BRICS “has raised the country’s standing as an influential global leader“ (*Brics Membership Boosts South Africa’s Global Standing*, 2013). In 2012, Nkoana-Mashabane (2012) also said that “South Africa enjoys recognition as a dedicated and committed global and regional player within the ranks of BRIC”, and that South Africa’s membership was “an affirmation of what this country has achieved in

creating a better Africa in a better world”. For Singh and Dube (2013), South Africa had, through its membership in BRICS, acquired international credibility.

The empirical evidence clearly points to the perception of South Africa as having acquired a high status due to its association with BRICS. However, this comes from other experts and South African officials themselves. I have not been able to find or access any statements by officials from other states where they express their perception of South Africa after joining BRIC. I have, however, not found any empirical evidence of experts or country officials disagreeing with South Africa’s self-identity after joining BRIC. Yet, as this thesis has argued, since the promise of recognition through BRIC membership is implicit, once South Africa joined BRIC, South Africa had gained recognition because it became associated with a particular exclusive membership club with much influence in world politics that was and continues to openly challenge the LIO.

5. Conclusion

This thesis suggests that the misrecognition that South Africa experienced in the LIO motivated it to join BRIC, where it could acquire recognition. BRIC was appealing to South Africa for two relating reasons. First, an implicit resentment and dissatisfaction with the LIO because of the LIO’s inability to promise the status that South Africa believed it is entitled to in the LIO. Thus, it experienced misrecognition in the LIO, or in other words, recognitional injustice. Second, membership in BRIC entailed a more prominent role in world politics, where South Africa became a member of an exclusive membership group that boldly challenges the status quo US-led LIO. In addition, the role and affiliation to BRIC reinforced the perception of the view of South Africa as a, if not the, leader of Africa. It thus entailed higher status for South Africa in world politics, which aligned with South Africa’s self-perception. South Africa, thus, gained recognition through its membership in BRIC. Yet, in assessing the available empirical

record, and whether the collective body of evidence can support making an inference that the causal relationship existed in the case of South Africa, this thesis concludes that there is weak confirmatory evidence. I, therefore, argue that I can only slightly increase the confidence of the validity of the causal mechanism and the overall process.

I have not managed to find or access certain empirical evidence that I expected to find in the empirical record. Some of the empirical evidence found in this study has been public statements, which are limited as they "cannot be used to measure the real motivations behind a decision" (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, p. 220). Since I have not gained access to, for instance, private meetings, I cannot be certain about the particular degree to which misrecognition in the LIO actually played in South Africa seeking recognition in BRIC. Furthermore, this paper has also not been able to find empirical evidence where BRIC members or other country officials confirm South Africa's self-identity, which would have strengthened the mechanistic evidence. Another limitation includes that the LIO is not completely comparable to BRICS as the latter is, despite being an attempt to an alternative to the LIO, not an order. The recognition that comes with membership in the respective settings is, therefore, somewhat different. Consequently, the theory and causal mechanism that this thesis provides are limited.

While struggles for recognition do not always destabilise orders (Pouliot, 2016), this thesis still suggests that misrecognition in the LIO contributes to making alternative constellations, in particular BRICS, so appealing. This is important insight since it has the potential to further increase the appeal of BRICS and contribute to the destabilisation of the LIO. Even though the newest members of BRICS+ do not fall into the same category as South Africa did, the inability of the LIO to ensure recognition can potentially lead to further destabilisation of the LIO in the future, encouraging other non-Western countries that do not gain the recognition they seek in the LIO to seek other sources of recognition.

Future research is encouraged to better understand the role of recognitional issues in order to understand the challenges that the LIO is going through, and the interest in BRICS. For instance, conducting interviews on the topic could provide more in-depth insight and address some of the methodological limitations in this study. Future studies can also explore other forms of justice issues than recognition, such as distributive justice claims, to gain a more holistic understanding of justice issues. In addition, future studies can also build on this study and, for example, look at Argentina to better understand where the mechanism breaks down. Since some other non-Western countries that score high on the Liberal Democracy Index, such as Uruguay and Jamaica, have endorsed the BRICS' NDB (Medupe, 2012; New Development Bank, 2023), this thesis also encourages future research to explore the appeal of the NDB to non-Western countries that score high on the Liberal Democracy Index.

As Beach and Pedersen (2019) contend, other theories can also explain an outcome. While, for instance, various material and other political incentives can also explain the appeal of BRICS to a certain extent, it does not mean that the theory in this thesis does not carry any weight. Instead, it, in itself, does not necessarily explain the outcome. Yet, as Adler-Nissen & Zarakol (2020, p. 613-14) have encouraged, we should “pay more attention to the desire for recognition as a driver in political behaviour”. This thesis contributes to this aim, and points to significant insights that will continue to be important to understanding the crisis of the LIO, the motivations of other non-Western countries to join BRICS+, and the move towards a multipolar world.

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