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Whither Soft Power:

Divisions, Milestones, and Prospects of a Research Programme in the Making[*]

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of soft-power scholarship has made it one of the most recognisable locutions in the discipline of international relations. Yet the growing attention has not resulted in an increased agreement on how to resolve the persisting issues. Instead, soft-power scholarship has drifted apart into two separate streams: theory-centred and case-centred studies. This divide impedes the healthy academic exchange that arguably holds the key to a more resonant impact on the field of international relations. This article seeks to bridge the gap by revealing the common ground that nurtures both the unresolved problems and the conceptual and methodological achievements of the nascent research programme.

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1. Introduction

The increased use of the term soft power in political discourse around the world has been paralleled by a substantial intensification of research activity on the subject. The proliferation of studies employing the concept of soft power has made it one of the most recognisable locutions in the discipline of international relations. Yet the growing attention has not resulted in an improved understanding of how to deal with some of the persisting conceptual problems. The opinion that there is something wrong with the concept is virtually unanimous in soft-power research, though suggestions on how to overcome the issues diverge considerably. There have been few efforts to provide an overview of soft-power scholarship and systematise the key achievements and unresolved problems in the field. The authors that do engage with this task usually focus on a particular aspect of research, such as the operationalisation of soft power or the related measurement tools (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a; Pestsov and Bobylo 2015b), while a general review of what appears to be a research programme in the making is still missing from the discussion. The term 'research programme' is used here in a broad sense to refer to a body of theoretical and empirical scholarship revolving around a key central theme, as opposed to a more narrow Lakatosian reading (Lakatos 1970).

This article argues that it is worthwhile to look at the literature on soft power with a mind to an important dimension of differentiation, which can be traced along a division line between theory-centred and case-centred studies. The former group encompasses research tackling the abstract conceptual issues related to the term, while the latter includes empirical investigations using the concept of soft power as a primary tool of inquiry. Arguably, the development of detached schools of thought limits the permeability of new knowledge across the divide and stymies the progress of the nascent research programme. The overview of the accomplishments and the problems of each strand of research is meant to identify the ground where the two branches have their common roots and to argue that despite obvious differences in approaches, the challenges faced by researchers on both sides revolve around the same fundamental issues. This can be taken as an indication that their interests converge and that the persisting problems could be alleviated by means of an intensified transfer of knowledge. Several

significant innovations in soft-power research highlighted in the text suggest that the field is in a good position for a leap forward.

The discussion commences at the writings of Joseph S. Nye, employing his conceptualisation as a fulcrum that grounds the discussion in a fixed position, around which the later argument can revolve. Then the diverse streams of soft-power scholarship are set apart to emphasise their achievements, before they are brought back together, in order to crystallise the remaining challenges for the soft-power research programme. The article concludes with an outline of the requirements that a refined conceptual framework of soft power would have to meet to overcome the unresolved problems.

2. Defining Soft Power

Joseph S. Nye's work is the main reference point within the body of scholarly literature on soft power. He not only coined the term 'soft power', but has also become the most prolific author on the subject (Nye 1990a; Nye 1990b; Nye 2004; Nye 2007; Nye 2011a; Nye 2011b; Nye 2013a; Nye 2013b). There are, however, authors who would contest that the concept of soft power originated with Nye, arguing that he merely described ancient practices by eloquently framing them in a manner that fits the dominant contemporary view on world politics and that captures recent advances in technology (Demidov 2014; Kovaleva 2013; Pimenova 2017)[1]. But even if soft-power practice has its origins elsewhere, these scholars still acknowledge the fact that the Harvard professor was the one who coined the term 'soft power' and still juxtapose their arguments against his. As such, it makes sense to ground the review in his work.

Nye's conceptualisation is best developed in his books *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Nye 2004) (*Soft Power* hereafter) and *The Future of Power* (Nye 2011b), but the concept was first introduced in his earlier book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Nye 1990a), which was complemented by an article on the same topic that appeared in *Foreign Policy* (Nye 1990b). In the latter, Nye framed soft power as:

> (...) the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop

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[1]All direct and indirect quotations from the Russian language in this text are translated into English by the author.

preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own. This power tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes. (Nye 1990b, p. 168)

When considering this initial version, it is important to note that Nye's primary concern at the time was to repudiate arguments coming from realist quarters that foreboded the demise of the USA as a superpower (Kennedy 1987). Soft power was utilised by Nye in this debate as a metaphor that accentuated the comparative advantages of American power and that allowed him to build his case for 'continued American pre-eminence' (Nye 1990b, p. 155), rather than as an analytical tool that facilitates scientific inquiry. On a conceptual level, Nye aimed to transcend 'classical balance-of-power' (Nye 1990b, p. 156) understandings of world politics on two accounts. Firstly, he sought to affirm a broader concept of power that is not limited to situations of A controlling/dominating B, as realists would arguably have it, but that includes instances of A achieving desired outcomes in concert with B. Nye captures this aspect of power with the formulation 'to structure a situation' in the definition and elsewhere with the opposition between 'power over other countries' and 'power over outcomes' (Nye 1990b, p. 156). These separate understandings are more commonly known in the literature as 'power-over' and 'power-to' (Allen 1998, pp. 33–37). Regardless of its label, the importance of this qualification lies in the assertion that an agent's power can affect both other actors and the environments conditioning their actions.

Secondly, Nye differentiates between the exercise of power and the resources that enable it, which is captured by the clarification that power arises from resources (hence is different from it). Criticising realists, who arguably assume that power equals resources, Nye insists that '[p]roof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states' (Nye 1990b, p. 155). What makes an actor powerful in world politics, Nye argues, is not the mere possession of military resources, nor the ensuing capacity of 'ordering others to do what [that actor] wants' (Nye 1990b, p. 166), but the ability of 'getting others to want what you want' (Nye 1990b, p. 167), which 'tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions' (Nye 1990b, p. 167). Conceptually, Nye detaches power resources from

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power exercise and establishes a close, yet indeterminate ('tends to be associated'), connection between intangible resources and soft power (or 'co-optive power'), on the one hand, and tangible resources and hard power (or 'command power'), on the other.

Nye's earlier work is mostly concerned with U.S. foreign policy, whereby soft power is used only as a metaphor that helps explain it. It is in his later books *Soft Power* (Nye 2004) and *The Future of Power* (Nye 2011b) that Nye shifts his attention to engaging in more focused concept formation and theory building. The most frequently cited definition of soft power comes from the former book and reads: '[soft power] is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye 2004, p. x). Notably, it captures the opposition between soft power (working through attraction) and hard power (working through coercion or payments), but could, at the same time, be misleading as it includes only power exercise (the behaviours of coercion, payments, and eliciting attraction) as a determinant of the differentiation, while omitting resources as the other determinant. Elsewhere in the book, Nye writes that '[t]he distinction between [soft and hard power] is one of degree, both in the nature of the behavior and in the tangibility of the resources' (Nye 2004, p. 7). By arguing that *both* resources *and* behaviours are part of the distinction, he frames the two referents as necessary conditions of the distinction, contrary to the view purveyed with the definition, in which only behaviours perform this function. The tension between the formal definition and its later usage in the book might seem innocuous at first, as resources are implicit in behaviours: after all, an agent cannot perform an action unless the enabling resources for that action are available. However, a key element of Nye's argument is that different types of resources generate different types of behaviours (Nye 2011a, p. 12). If resources are bracketed as a variable, the possibility of capturing certain differences in behaviour (e.g. between coercion and persuasion) is impeded.

A more detailed, though not as frequently cited, definition of soft power can be found in *The Future of Power*: 'soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes' (Nye 2011b, p. 21). Compared to earlier formulations, this one is more specific about the types of behaviour that identify soft power ('framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction'). In addition, this

definition illuminates Nye's underlying understanding of power – an ability to obtain preferred outcomes by affecting others – which is: (1) actor-centric (not structural); (2) a relation (not an attribute); and (3) strategic (not contingent). Firstly, Nye's take on power is actor-centric, as it puts agents and targets in the spotlight, thereby leaving aside considerations about the production of subjects within overarching structures of power (Foucault 1982). This, however, should not be taken as an indication that Nye generally disregards structural aspects of power, as his concept of resources is well-suited for encapsulating some (e.g. historical narratives or language landscape), even if not assigning them primacy in his understanding of social reality. Secondly, in an objection to realists, Nye locates power in the interaction between actors, not in actors themselves, thus framing the concept in relational terms. According to this view, the power of an actor is not constant across relationships, but specific to each agent-target dyad. Finally, Nye deals with outcomes that are 'preferred', that is, they are the effect of strategic behaviour and not a haphazard result of circumstantial developments. In Nye's work, the story of power is a tale about the deliberate pursuit of recognised objectives.

In *The Future of Power* Nye does not clarify the issue about the position of resources as markers of difference between soft and hard power that harks back to his earlier publications (Nye 1990b; Nye 2004). Arguably, he even complicates matters further by suggesting that '[m]any types of *resources* can contribute to soft power' (Nye 2011b, 20, emphasis in original), even military (Nye 2011b, p. 48) and economic resources (Nye 2011b, p. 85). If the variation in the type of resources ('many types of resources') is considered irrelevant to the distinction between soft and hard power, then only behaviours are retained as an attribute in the definition. Paradoxically, resources are in this sense enabling disparate effects (e.g. soft-power resources are enabling both hard- and soft-power behaviours). Initially, intangible resources *tended* to be associated with soft-power behaviours (Nye 1990b), at a later stage *both* resources *and* behaviours determined the distinction between soft and hard power (Nye 2004), until, finally, resources were formally bracketed as a marker of difference (Nye 2011b). To be sure, Nye persistently argues that resources are important for the study of power and has been fairly consistent about which resources are linked to soft power – culture, political

values, and foreign policy (Nye 2004, p. 11, Nye 2007, p. 164, Nye 2008, p. 96, Nye 2011b, p. 21) – yet his ambiguity on the position of resources in the distinction between soft and hard power has precluded the affirmation of a clear conceptual framework.

Another feature of the conceptualisation of soft power that impinges on the differentiation problem outlined above is the type of classification constructed by Nye. In his view, the difference between soft and hard power is a difference-in-degree, not a difference-in-kind. This is imputed already in the indeterminate 'tends to' (Nye 1990b) from the earlier works and is later explicitly confirmed in the statement: '[t]he distinction (. . .) is one of degree' (Nye 2004, p. 7). What follows from such a classification is that soft and hard power are poles on a continuum, whereby empirical observations of power relations can be located at unique distances from each pole using the measure(s) of differentiation, i.e. either resources and behaviours or only behaviours, depending on the employed conceptualisation. Accordingly, the distinction between soft and hard power is the sharpest at the edges of the spectrum, whereas the middle section evidences overlaps between the two in the absence of a clear-cut borderline. By contrast, other classifications of power employ sets of conditions that generate categorisations based on differences-in-kind (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Lukes 2005). These typologies are composed of sub-categories of power, which are mutually exclusive in conceptual terms.

Barnett and Duvall (2005) construct a two-by-two taxonomy in accordance with variation on two dimensions of difference: (1) kind of social relation (interaction vs constitution); and (2) specificity of social relation (direct vs indirect). Their typology bears semblance to the classification that grew out of the 'power debate' in social theory (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Dahl 1957; Lukes 2005), which is traditionally understood to include three distinct faces (or dimensions)[2]. Lukes relies on four definitional attributes to distinguish between the three dimensions of power: (1) field of interaction (institutional vs non-institutional); (2) issue of contestation (actual vs potential); (3) type of conflict (overt vs covert vs latent); (4) type of interest (subjective vs objective) (Lukes 2005, p. 29). Nye repeatedly addresses

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[2]Though Digeser (1992) later added a fourth face to the discussion, which represents a Foucauldian interpretation of power (productive power in Barnett and Duvall's terms). As already mentioned, Nye steers away from such readings, as their insights 'are purchased at too high a price in terms of conceptual complexity and abstraction' (Nye 2011a, p. 16).

this debate in his writings and describes the first face as: 'A uses threats and rewards to change B's behaviour against B's initial preferences and strategies' (Nye 2011b, 14, Table1.1), the second face as: 'A controls the agenda of actions in a way that limits B's choices of strategy' (Nye 2011b, 14, Table1.1), and the third face in terms of: 'A helps to create and shape B's basic beliefs, perceptions, and preferences' (Nye 2011b, 14, Table 1.1).

The different ordering principles of the two typologies (faces vs soft/hard) makes the relationship between them confusing, which can be evidenced from a contradiction in Nye's own work. In two separate works that were published in 2011, Nye initially argues that the first face 'is the basis for hard power' (Nye 2011a, p. 16), while the power of the second and third faces 'contributes to soft power' (Nye 2011a, p. 16), thereby squaring the circle of the 'faces' typology with his own, before taking a step back and suggesting that 'soft power fits with all three faces or aspects of power behaviour' (Nye 2011b, p. 90), thereby implying that the classifications cover different aspects of power. Given the incompatibility of these arguments, it remains unclear if the typologies can be blended or not.

While Nye's understanding of what soft power is underwent some changes, most notably with respect to the markers of difference, his conception of how it works remained stable. Firstly, soft power functions through transforming the attitudes of target audiences in foreign countries, which are then translated into preferred outcomes (Nye 2004, p. 44). Nye outlines two 'models' of how soft power operates: (1) directly, through affecting decision-makers and changing their behaviour in line with preferred outcomes; and (2) indirectly, whereby affected publics exert pressure onto their leaders to act in line with the preference of the country wielding soft power (Nye 2011b, p. 94). In both cases there is a linear progression beginning with available resources, continuing through behaviours, and concluding with a particular outcome. The two models are not unique to soft power, as hard-power processes proceed in a similar manner. For instance, some economic sanctions are directed in an unmediated mode at the ruling elite, while other economic sanctions are addressed at the population of a target country in an attempt to instigate it to mount pressure against its government. Crucially, this aspect of Nye's conceptualisation remains underdeveloped, as he does

not present more detailed accounts of how soft-power mechanisms operate or of the exact parts comprising them. Secondly, Nye suggests that soft power has a longer operational time-horizon compared to hard power and is more suited for the attainment of general rather than specific goals (Nye 2004, p. 16). According to him, 'when a government is concerned about structural milieu goals or general value objectives, such as promotion of democracy, human rights, and freedom, it is often the case that soft power turns out to be superior to hard power' (Nye 2011b, p. 84). Thirdly, Nye avers that the control over soft power does not lie exclusively with a state's government, but is shared with civil society (Nye 2011b, p. 83). He notes that 'soft power does not belong to the government in the same degree that hard power does' (Nye 2004, p. 14) and adds that 'many soft-power resources are separate from the American government and are only partly responsive to its purposes' (Nye 2004, p. 15).

3.   Debating Soft Power

Nye's introduction of the concept of soft power spurred the development of a vast body of scholarly literature using the term. The concept was picked up by many authors and was employed in a wide variety of contexts and meanings. Despite the impressive growth of this body of knowledge, it is still difficult to speak of a soft-power research programme, as scholarly work has developed into separate strands, running in parallel, at best, and in opposing directions, at worst. Researchers employing the concept as a tool in empirical investigations (case-centred research) rarely go beyond a brief discussion of the seminal texts of Nye and generally neglect the conceptual work of others, while those who engage in the more abstract conceptual issues related to soft power (theory-centred research), for the most part, remain nonchalant about the findings accrued through empirical applications of the concept.

The following subsection presents the state of the art of soft-power research by dividing the literature according to its focus of research into: (1) theory-centred; and (2) case-centred studies. The discussion identifies major achievements and unresolved problems within each strand of soft-power research in an attempt to find a common ground for the research programme in the making.

3.1. *Theory-centred research*

Theory-centred studies of soft power are generally critical of the original conceptual framework designed by Joseph S. Nye. The majority of authors share an appreciation that the concept of soft power is in need of revision, even though they agree with some central tenets of Nye's understanding that might be considered problematic. In particular, the notable points of agreement relate to: (1) bracketing resources as measures of differentiation; (2) employing a difference-in-degree distinction between soft and hard power; and (3) conceptualising how soft power works. First and foremost, scholars of soft power are generally content with a distinction to hard power that omits resources as a definitional attribute (Gallarotti 2011; Kearn 2011; Kroenig et al. 2010; Mattern 2005; Rothman 2011). This finding is difficult to reconcile with the widespread dissatisfaction about the indeterminacy of Nye's distinction between soft and hard power. Discontent with Nye's formula, some authors employ alternative measures of differentiation, such as interest (Gallarotti 2011; Lukes 2007) or 'physicality' (Rothman 2011). Most, however, either fall back to (Kearn 2011) or deliberately reproduce (Kroenig et al. 2010; Mattern 2005) a classification which treats the type of behaviour as the single variable determining the difference between soft and hard power (Nye 2011b). Feklyunina takes a more nuanced stance on this issue by arguing that resources matter for the study of soft power to the extent that they trigger a reaction in a target actor, but not simply by virtue of their existence (Feklyunina 2016, p. 775). Contrary to the general consensus, Patalakh (2016) builds a case against omitting resources as measures of differentiation in the study of soft power.

Secondly, scholars of soft power acquiesce to Nye's insistence on a difference-in-degree approach to the distinction between the two types of power. As a rule, this aspect of the conceptualisation is implicitly taken for granted and is rarely discussed. The few authors that address the issue directly, subscribe to the view that power relations vary on a continuum where pure soft and pure hard power occupy the two opposing poles while the multitude of residual representations populate the space in-between (Fan 2008; Rothman 2011). In unison with Nye's understanding, empirical observations of power are categorised in theory-centred research as more or less soft/hard, but not either soft or hard. Arguably, the alternative case for a distinction between

soft and hard power based on a difference-in-kind has thus far been absent from the discussion. At the same time, some authors group soft power together with the second and third face of power, and hard power – with the first face of power, which amounts to a synthesis with a categorical distinction. In his analysis of the relation of soft power to the different faces of power, Gallarotti argues that the first face corresponds to hard power, while the second and third faces are similar to soft power, but different when there is a conflict of interest involved (Gallarotti 2011, pp. 29–30). Equally, Bilgin and Elis suggest that hard power analysis is limited to a one-dimensional view of power (first face), while soft power expands the scope of investigation into the second and, to some degree, the third face of power (Bilgin and Elis 2008, p. 13). In both cases, the implications of grouping together two diverging differentiation approaches (difference-in-degree vs difference-in-kind) remain unaddressed, thereby leaving the question about the compatibility of the two typologies open.

Thirdly, there is a general consensus within theory-centred research about many of the features of soft power's modus operandi as described by Nye. There is widespread agreement with respect to the argument that soft power has a long-term operational horizon in contrast to hard power's short-term time span (Fan 2008; Gallarotti 2011; Kearn 2011; Roselle et al. 2014). Furthermore, the diffusion of soft-power ownership between the government and civil society is commonly recognised by scholars in the field (Fan 2008; Roselle et al. 2014). As regards the mechanisms of soft power, some authors (Daßler et al. 2018; Gallarotti 2011; Kroenig et al. 2010; Roselle et al. 2014; Rothman 2011) have built more sophisticated models than Nye's, without rejecting his basic assertion that soft power can operate in both direct and indirect modes connecting resources, behaviours, and outcomes in a linear fashion. Kroenig et al. (2010), for example, describe a mechanism comprising three distinct steps. First, a country wielding soft power communicates a message to a target audience within a marketplace of ideas. In a second step, the merit of the message is acknowledged by the target as superior to others and the attitudes of the target audience change. Finally, the target audience adopts a behaviour that results in a change in the environment that suits the objectives of the country wielding soft power. Rothman (2011) develops a similar direct mechanism, which he brands 'rhetoric and discourse control' (Rothman 2011,

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p. 59). He also brings four causal links together into another – indirect – soft power mechanism, which he calls 'attraction through norm diffusion' (Rothman 2011, p. 56). First, a state implements a successful domestic or a foreign policy. As this becomes recognised in other countries, success is transformed into credibility and the policy – into a norm. In a next step, the norm is diffused through epistemic communities and transnational advocacy networks. Finally, the adoption of norms by foreign countries comes to constitute a practical representation of attraction, i.e. soft power (Rothman 2011, p. 59).

The apparent convergence on some fundamental conceptual points is by no means an indication of a truce: neither between Nye and his critics, nor among critics themselves. Theory-centred scholars of soft power identify major critical issues in Nye's work, which revolve around the following points: (1) scope of the concept; (2) nature of attraction; and (3) liberal-democratic bias. Firstly, some authors are discontent with Nye's actor-centred understanding of power relations, criticising it as too narrow and oblivious to structural representations of power in a Foucauldian sense (Bilgin and Elis 2008; Cheskin 2017; Gallarotti 2011). Gallarotti issues the caveat that a limited actor-centred reading of power can mislead analysis by disregarding the broader constellation of power relations in which a soft-power situation is embedded. He argues that 'even losing a struggle for immediate power within the prevailing bargaining space may, in fact, still be winning the bargaining game if some greater set of social relations can skew the bargaining space in favor of the compliant actor' (Gallarotti 2011, pp. 28–29). Similarly, Bilgin and Elis argue that the scope of soft-power analysis should be extended to include inquiries into how fields of knowledge constitute actor subjectivities (Bilgin and Elis 2008, p. 16), i.e. into the fourth face of power (Digeser 1992). In a densely theoretical introduction to an empirical investigation of Russian soft power in Ukraine, Cheskin too argues for the adoption of a structural perspective to soft power in the language of the fourth face of power, according to which power is dispersed within a structure of relations, not concentrated in individual actors (Cheskin 2017, p. 2).

Secondly, an arguably ambiguous conceptualisation of attraction in Nye's work appears as a recurring target of criticism in theory-centred research (Bilgin and Elis

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2008; Kearn 2011; Kiseleva 2015; Mattern 2005; Solomon 2014; Szostek 2014). Mattern was the first to illuminate the tension in Nye's usage of the concept of attraction, criticising him of 'assigning two ontological statuses to attraction – one as essential condition and one as a result of social interaction' (Mattern 2005, p. 591). In a self-styled 'Habermasian-inspired approach', Mattern insists that 'attraction is constructed in communicative exchange' (Mattern 2005, p. 585), meaning that it is neither natural, nor universal. The theme was soon picked up by other authors, such as Solomon who joins Mattern in criticising Nye for 'neglect[ing] to more fully theorize what mechanisms attraction actually entails' (Solomon 2014, p. 723) and Kearn who suggests that Nye conflates a concept of attraction as a 'force', contained in a target actor's structure of preferences, with attraction as an 'action', directed at manipulating a target actor (Kearn 2011, p. 73). These critics all point to the existence of a dual nature of attraction: (1) a condition resembling a resource of power; and (2) an action representing an exercise of power. Authors, however, diverge in their approaches to resolving this tension. Some discard attraction-as-condition altogether (Bilgin and Elis 2008; Mattern 2005), while others choose to preserve both aspects in the analysis (Kearn 2011; Solomon 2014). Notably, the problem of attraction is a rare example of a theme that has migrated through cross-references from theory-centred scholarship to become widely addressed in case-centred research (Cheskin 2017; Kiseleva 2015; Szostek 2014).

Thirdly, Nye's treatment of soft power has been revealed by critical scholars to possess a Western-centric slant, which limits its heuristic potential (Bilgin and Elis 2008; Demidov 2014; Fan 2008; Hall 2010; Keating and Kaczmarska 2017; Kiseleva 2015; Pimenova 2017). Authors have come to challenge the view 'that only the West or countries with democratic institutions can produce soft power' (Fan 2008, p. 180) and have exposed Nye for taking a presumed universal appeal of liberal-democratic values as central to soft power in general (Bilgin and Elis 2008, p. 11). As a result, some authors have come to understand soft power as 'a manipulative tool for the implementation of self-serving plans' (Demidov 2014, p. 88). Hall argues that when certain values are treated as inherently attractive, the concept of soft power is 'serving to reaffirm the policies and values that political actors – Nye included – advance' (Hall 2010, p. 196). Having unveiled the confirmation bias of this approach, Hall concludes

that Nye's conceptual framework falls short of presenting a category of analysis, instead qualifying only as a category of practice (Hall 2010, p. 197). This theme has been readdressed by case-centred authors as well, in an attempt to remedy a conceptual flaw that arguably undermines empirical soft-power analysis (Keating and Kaczmarska 2017; Kiseleva 2015). In contrast to authors who question the existence of a transcendent soft-power substance some understand the liberal-democratic bias as an essential feature of the concept (Gallarotti 2011; Kearn 2011). Gallarotti suggests that '[i]n order to affect soft power, the context of actions (whether tangible or intangible) must be a manifestation of politically liberal principles' (Gallarotti 2011, p. 35) and refers to liberal-democratic values as 'the cannons of soft power' (Gallarotti 2011, p. 38). Similarly, Kearn avers that the existence of a liberal-institutional system of interaction where actors share 'necessary domestic political attributes' (Kearn 2011, p. 81) is an essential condition for the functioning of soft power.

Many of the fallacies undermining soft-power analysis have been emphasised by authors with a mind to repairing the defects of the concept, thus making it better-suited for further use in research. However, others, who are far more sceptical about the prospects of soft power as an analytical tool, disagree that a revision would suffice as a remedy for its conceptual woes. Instead, they put forward alternative concepts to replace soft power and appropriate its content and functions (Fan 2008; Hall 2010; Roselle et al. 2014). Roselle and colleagues concede that 'soft power is central to an understanding of international relations today' (Roselle et al. 2014, p. 74), yet they identify three insurmountable problems that undermine its analytical utility to an extent that renders the concept dysfunctional: 'it is still difficult to (1) identify soft power resources, (2) identify the processes through which soft power operates, and (3) understand under what conditions soft power resources can be used to support foreign policy' (Roselle et al. 2014, p. 74). Instead they put forward the concept of 'strategic narrative', which can arguably enable scholars to break away from the soft-power 'straightjacket' (Roselle et al. 2014, p. 70) and 'solve many of the fundamental questions associated with our understanding and analysis of soft power' (Roselle et al. 2014, p. 74).

Likewise, Hall adopts a critical stance towards the understanding of soft power as

an independent analytical category with definable characteristics and identifiable limits. In contrast, he sees it as an umbrella term for various 'soft powers': institutional power, reputational power, and representational power (Hall 2010, pp. 208–211), without a single unified core. He advocates 'disaggregating the notion of soft power into separate analytical categories and abandoning the assumption that these mechanisms are unified by anything other than the fact that none is a type of hard power' (Hall 2010, p. 207). Unlike Roselle and colleagues and Hall, who criticise Nye's conceptualisation from an analytical perspective, Fan is more concerned about the practical implications of soft power. He suggests that 'nation branding' is a more suitable term that goes beyond strategic political considerations, thereby providing 'a more focused, culturally unbiased and more useful approach' (Fan 2008, p. 157).

Some case-centred studies have also moved into the direction of substituting soft power with other concepts. Forsberg and Smith seek to escape 'the existing biases that burden the concept of soft power' (Forsberg and Smith 2016, p. 129) by employing the concept of 'cultural statecraft', which arguably does not carry assumptions about right or wrong values and good or bad actors, but focuses on what are seen as the more important questions about 'the influence techniques and instruments that are available for the leadership' (Forsberg and Smith 2016, p. 129). Similarly, Sherr keeps distance from Nye's terminology by employing the term 'soft coercion' in his analysis of contemporary Russian foreign policy (Sherr 2013).

3.2. *Case-centred research*

Nye developed the concept of soft power with a mind to studying U.S. foreign policy (Nye 2013a, p. 22), however its rising popularity has translated into a multiplication of research on the foreign policies of many other actors. Contemporary case-centred soft-power scholarship has shifted its focus away from traditional soft-power actors (i.e. the USA and the EU) and onto subaltern ones, such as the BRICS countries, Iran, and South Korea. Chinese (Breslin 2011; Callahan 2015; Hartig 2015; Holyk 2011; Zanardi 2016) and Russian (Andreev 2016; Cheskin 2017; Feklyunina 2016; Filimonov 2010; Hill 2006; Keating and Kaczmarska 2017; Kiseleva 2015; Korneeva 2016; Szostek 2014) soft power attract the most attention, including from a comparative perspective

in studies that analyse both actors in parallel (Guangzhen and Zhuravleva 2015; Nye 2013b; Rawnsley 2015; Wilson 2015b; Wilson 2015a). The soft-power endowment of Japan (Watanabe and McConnell 2008), India (Thussu 2016; Wagner 2010), and South Korea (Janelli and Yim 2007) have been an object of research for some time now, while more recently the literature was enriched with studies on Brazilian (Antonichev 2014; Chatin 2016), Iranian (Wastnidge 2015), and South African (Westhuizen 2016) soft power.

The body of empirical research shows that the foreign policies of some countries are better attuned to the use of soft power than others. As an illustrative example, Brazil has not been involved in any military conflicts with its neighbours since the end of the nineteenth century and is considered to lack crucial hard power resources (Chatin 2016, p. 372). In contrast to Brazil, Russia and India have a record of employing military resources in their foreign policies (e.g. Russo-Georgian and Indo-Pakistani conflicts) and possess substantial hard-power resources, including offensive nuclear capabilities. From a methodological perspective, the foreign policies of countries that have traditionally abstained from the use of hard power provide a more likely setting (Bennett and Elman 2007) for confirming hypotheses emphasising the impact of soft power. Conversely, the foreign policies of countries with a history of engaging in coercive behaviour offer a less likely ground for finding evidence of soft-power effects, as the over-reliance on sticks and carrots would feed expectations that any outcomes they accrue are the product of hard power.

Case-centred studies of soft power are for the most part detached from the conceptual debate in the field. While few authors forego the theoretical discussion altogether (Antonichev 2014; Callahan 2015; Chatin 2016; Guangzhen and Zhuravleva 2015; Rawnsley 2015; Trilokekar 2009), most limit it to a dialogue with Nye's original rendition (Nye 2004; Nye 2011b) only. Hardly any representatives of the theoretical scholarship on soft power are acknowledged in case-centred studies, with the notable exception of Janice Bially Mattern (2005). More recently, case-centred authors have come to recognise the work of Hall (2010), Gallarotti (2011), Kearn (2011), and Roselle et al. (2014), yet to a far lesser extent than that of Mattern. Knowledge flowing in the opposite direction is even more difficult to trace. The conceptual advancements

achieved by case-centred authors largely go unnoticed in theory-centred scholarship, though Feklyunina (2008; 2016) provides a notable exception as a case-centred author, who has gained traction with theoretically-minded scholars of soft power. At the same time, similar problems seem to be troubling both strands of soft-power research, in particular: (1) the distinction between soft and hard power; (2) the tension between structural and agent-centred perspectives on soft-power analysis; (3) the dual nature of attraction.

Firstly, the obscured distinction between soft and hard power, which harks back to the original work of Nye and which is reproduced in theory-centred research, is a recurrent cause for concern among case-centred authors (Rawnsley 2015; Stuenkel 2016; Szostek 2014; Wojciuk et al. 2015). Some identify the 'practical difficulty of drawing a clear line between power that is "hard" and power that is "soft"' (Szostek 2014, p. 465) as an unresolved problem in soft-power research, leading others to concede that 'discussions about soft power are inevitably somewhat vague' (Stuenkel 2016, p. 354). Chikharev and Stoletov identify the fragmentation in the understanding of the concept as a major risk attending its usage (Chikharev and Stoletov 2014, p. 57) and Rusakova warns that the commonplace indeterminacy in the usage of the concept could lead to its 'theoretical devaluation' (Rusakova 2013, p. 53). There are also authors, who leave categorisation issues aside and employ a lax usage of the term, thereby reproducing the existing conceptual inconsistencies in their empirical work (Callahan 2015; Chatin 2016; Trilokekar 2009). Whether explicitly or implicitly, the differentiation problem related to distinguishing soft and hard power persists both in case-centred and in theory-centred scholarship.

Secondly, attempts to broaden the scope of soft power by adapting the concept to the analysis of structures of power relations have shaken the ontological basis of case-centred research. The predominant perspective has traditionally been one that focuses on actors (agents and targets), who interact in accordance with their relative power capacities. This consensual understanding varies only in terms of the importance that researchers ascribe to the relational aspect of power, that is, whether soft power is: (a) an attribute in the possession of an actor, constant across relationships (typical of rationalist accounts); or (b) a feature of a relationship between actors, relative

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to each dyad of actors (typical of relational accounts). Authors like Kiseleva (2015) and Cheskin (2017) have brought the existing consensus into question by challenging the underlying assumption that the soft-power story is one about actors. Instead, Kiseleva argues that soft power 'is a hegemonic discourse that produces power and relations of power of its own' (Kiseleva 2015, p. 316) and suggests that the soft-power capacities are not determined by individual actors, but by the positions they occupy within the hegemonic discursive structure. Similarly, Cheskin (2017) disapproves of the consensual actor-centred model and criticises top-down, resource-focused approaches to soft power. He insists on a structural reading of power, according to which '[soft power] surrounds us and does not come from a single actor' (Cheskin 2017, p. 2). Notably, the work of authors that have pushed for a structural reading of power within theory-centred scholarship (Bilgin and Elis 2008; Gallarotti 2011) goes unnoticed by Kiseleva and Cheskin. While they provide important contributions to the conceptual discussion about soft power, their work remains detached from the parallel discussion in the other strand of soft-power research.

Thirdly, the disambiguation of the dual nature of attraction has recently come to occupy the attention of case-centred authors (Cheskin 2017; Kiseleva 2015; Szostek 2014). In a reference across the divide, Kiseleva acknowledges Mattern's (2005) work and agrees with her that an essentialist view on attractiveness is untenable (Kiseleva 2015, p. 318). Similarly, Szostek notes the 'problematic conflation of distinct understandings of power through attraction in Nye's work' (Szostek 2014, p. 465) and Cheskin questions the fixity of attraction, typical of Nye's understanding, by arguing that it 'hinges upon personal subjectivities rather than concrete realities' (Cheskin 2017, p. 3). Evidently, case-centred authors have picked up the theme on the dual nature of attraction and have sided with Nye's critics. The discussion, however, remains on an abstract level and the soft-power research programme is still lacking an operationalised translation of the conceptual qualification that attraction can be understood as both a condition and an action. By extension, there is no clear explanation of how these two aspects of attraction interact.

As outlined above, case-centred researchers have in several important respects stumbled upon the same hurdles as theory-centred authors, making the disjuncture between

the two communities of authors an unfortunate state of affairs. All the more so, given the important ways in which empirical research on soft power has pushed the inchoate research programme beyond the limits of the theoretical discussion: (1) by designing rigorous research strategies; and (2) by analysing the impact of soft power.

Firstly, while empirical studies of soft power, in general, rarely venture further than a discussion of illustrative evidence, some authors in the case-centred tradition employ more rigid methodological frameworks: Szostek (2014) complements a qualitative content analysis of news items with interviews, Hudson (2015) combines an original survey with a set of focus groups in a mixed-methods approach, while Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) and Köse et al. (2016) employ large-scale survey data in statistical analyses. In a similar quantitative approach, Holyk (2011) employs original survey data from six countries in a correlation analysis of the relationship between individual perceptions and attitudes, on the one hand, and soft power and perceived influence, on the other. In a rare example of systematic review, Pestsov and Bobylo summarise the advances achieved in the existing literature with respect to some key research design themes, thereby offering enlightening insights into the issues of soft-power operationalisation (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a) and soft-power measurement approaches (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015b). Meanwhile, methodological considerations have largely been absent from theoretical discussions and the debate within theory-centred literature has hardly moved beyond Nye's reluctant reliance on opinion polls (18 Nye 2004; Nye 2013a, p. 25) and his qualified[3] endorsement of process tracing (Nye 2011b, pp. 94–95).

Secondly, case-centred authors have made a significant step forward by engaging in the analysis of soft-power effects (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012; Szostek 2014). Theory-centred scholars have either avoided the discussion about the causal implications of their theory or have discounted the possibility of attributing causation through it. Hall (2010), for instance, is strongly sceptical towards any causal explanations based on the idea that soft power works through a mechanism of attraction (Hall 2010, p. 206). In her reading of soft power Feklyunina asserts that 'we cannot attribute any individual foreign policy decision of the second actor to the exercise of soft power by the first

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[3]Nye issues the caveat that the use of process tracing would be 'very expensive and very cumbersome' (Nye 2013a, p. 25) and relegates the task to 'journalists and historians' (94 Nye 2011b; Nye 2013a, p. 25).

actor' (Feklyunina 2016, p. 778). Daßler and his collaborators, on the other hand, seek to refute this argument by investigating the interaction of soft- and hard-power effects in the domain of institutional adaptations in world politics (Daßler et al. 2018). While the development of more rigorous methodological tools for the study of soft power by case-centred scholars has contributed to the addition of impact analysis on the research agenda, some authors driving the methodological advances have been content with studying soft-power potential alone (Holyk 2011; Köse et al. 2016). In a critical reaction to this trend, Szostek argues that 'scholars have limited themselves to describing what countries do under the banner of soft power; they have not assessed the impact of such activity on the outcomes of foreign policy' (Szostek 2014, p. 465). Attempting to remedy this shortcoming, Szostek (2014) estimates the effects of Russian influence on news content in Ukraine by studying fourteen leading Russian-language news outlets. Similarly, Goldsmith and Horiuchi study the effects of public opinion about the USA on other countries' foreign policy behaviour in order to illuminate 'the conditions under which soft power might have "hard" political consequences' (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012, p. 556).

The efforts of case-centred authors to gauge the impact of soft power represent an important breakthrough for the nascent soft-power research programme, as this analytical aspect has remained underdeveloped in theory-centred scholarship. However, two key contributions to the study of soft-power effects by Russian scholars Pestsov and Bobylo have largely gone unnoticed in both theory- and case-centred research: (1) a distinction between results-as-attitude and results-as-behaviour; and (2) a shift in analytical focus from actor onto process. Firstly, Goldsmith and Horiuchi make a subtle distinction between 'short-term political outcomes' and 'underlying institutional or structural effects' in a footnote to their analysis of U.S. soft power (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012, 556n8). This idea is more fully developed by Pestsov and Bobylo (2015b) who specify a difference between results-as-attitudes (measured by opinion polls) and results-as-behaviour (measured by observable behavioural changes). Their qualification carries significant implications for the study of soft-power impact, as it challenges researchers to go beyond the estimation of soft-power effects on public attitudes in target countries as some scholars do (Holyk 2011; Köse et al. 2016; Szostek

2014), and investigate the soft-power impact on the actual behaviour of target actors. The problem with results-as-attitudes is that they give an indication of potential for the achievement of a desired outcome or of an enabling environment for further action towards that end, but they do not capture the generation of that outcome itself. In this sense, treating results-as-attitudes as final outcomes in a causal analysis carries the same risks as using resources for the same purpose, i.e. they are ultimately probabilistic measures of impact. Equally, the similarity between the observable implications of resources and results-as-attitudes can lead to measurement errors (if the wrong element in the event sequence is considered) and, more specifically, endogeneity bias (if results-as-attitudes are treated as causes, instead of outcomes) in the analysis of soft power. For this reason, Pestsov and Bobylo issue the caveat that the use of opinion polls as measurements for both resources and results of soft power represents a conflation of functionally interdependent, but conceptually independent, categories(Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a, p. 110).

In another notable contribution to the soft-power research agenda, which has unfortunately passed under the radar, Pestsov and Bobylo argue that many of the criticisms levelled at the conceptualisation of the term (e.g. related to the differentiation of resources, instruments, and results, or to the nature of attraction) can be attributed to what they see as an 'excessive reduction of the concept of soft power' to three simple elements: resources, attraction, and desired behaviour (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a, p. 111). One possible way to rectify this 'could be an attempt to "expand" it by presenting it in the form of a more detailed and developed logical scheme capturing the whole process of realising "soft power"' (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a, 111, emphasis added). To this end, they propose a conceptualisation entailing a process with 7 stages that is arguably attuned to the full complexity of soft-power relations. What they suggest is to shift the focus of analysis away from actors and onto the process of interaction between them with the added benefit that: '[v]iewing "soft power" as a process enables the ordering of this concept's substantive elements in the frame of a common model, in which the transformation of antecedent conditions into final outcomes occurs' (Pestsov and Bobylo 2015a, p. 111). This offers an innovative approach to systematising the analysis of the empirical observations of soft power in a way that

might enable their disentanglement. While this proposition might hold the key to resolving some of the persisting conceptual and methodological issues that have stifled progress across the different strands of soft-power scholarship, it is yet to be fully developed, let alone deployed in empirical research.

4. Refining Soft Power

The previous section traces the fault lines running across the surface of soft-power scholarship, but the purpose is not to establish the ensuing territories as independent. On the contrary, the aim is to unearth the superficiality of the divide and to find the common ground where the nascent soft-power research programme has its roots. In this sense, the current review should be read as a physical map that describes the notable features of the terrain, rather than a political map that defines boundaries between separate units. If the map is to meet its purpose, it should: (1) provide a scaled representation of the field where scholars of different background and intent meet; (2) locate the whereabouts of contested territories where cultivation approaches are continuously debated; and (3) indicate directions towards land where further exploration is required.

The point of departure for all soft-power scholarship is the recognition that there is more to world politics than sticks and carrots. Preoccupation with the analysis of coercion and inducement poses the risk of missing important phenomena in the dynamics of international relations. While soft power is by no means unanimously acknowledged as a useful concept to study situations in which influence operates by intangible means, all scholars, including those who seek to do away with Nye's conceptualisation, build their argument in juxtaposition to his work. Whether he is perceived as an authentic innovator or as a descendant of an age-old tradition, his seminal publications are the benchmark in this tradition of research. Nye's vocabulary, if not his theoretical framework, dominates scholarship on the impalpable representations of power in international relations. But the influence of the Harvard professor has not been limited to a promotion of a set of terms within academic discourse. Even if various aspects of his conceptualisation are frequently subjected to criticism, many of his ideas about soft

power, particularly regarding how it works, have been picked up by scholars across the divide in the field. Hardly anyone engaged in soft-power research, for instance, would question that the operational time span of soft power is longer compared to that of hard power, or that the ownership of intangible resources is dispersed between a country's government and its population. However, as it appears from the review, there is more consensus about how soft power works than about what it is. Questions related to the nature of soft power have pitted scholars against one another and discussions have remained for the most part inconclusive.

In particular, there are several unresolved problems that persistently stymie the progress of soft-power research. Firstly, there remains a differentiation problem concerning the measures of difference in Nye's classification of power. Perhaps owing to Nye's spat with realists in the 1990s, when he built his case for 'co-optive power' in opposition to dominant understandings of power as coercion, many authors have developed a paradigmatic approach and have come to see soft power as the domain of liberals (and possibly constructivists) and hard power as the heartland of realists (Bilgin and Elis 2008; Daßler et al. 2018; Gallarotti 2011; Kearn 2011; Rusakova 2012). By implication, some of these authors have invested much effort in cleansing the concept of soft power from any realist residues inadvertently retained after the split. Notably, Nye does not subscribe to this paradigmatic approach and notes that: '[s]ome authors cast the difference between hard and soft power in the tradition of realism vs. idealism, but the shoe does not fit' (Nye 2007, p. 170). Nonetheless, reliance on resources as a category of analysis in soft-power research has come to be considered a realist fallacy that should be dispensed with. The aversion to realism has thus triggered a drive towards bracketing resources and towards the development of distinctions based on behaviours alone or on other measures of difference. None of these approaches, however, has proven to be a reliable basis for a clear-cut conceptual differentiation and none has helped resolve the paradox of disparate effects, related to situations where one type of resource (e.g. hard-power resource) generates opposite types of power exercise, i.e. soft- and hard-power behaviours.

In addition to the indeterminacy of the measures of difference, the differentiation problem is compounded by the type of distinction between soft and hard power that is

generally accepted in the literature. The difference-in-degree approach carries certain limitations that undermine its utility in the context of measurement tasks, due to the blurred lines in the middle section of the soft-hard power continuum. Obvious instances of attraction, such as the subscription of a target actor to an appealing political idea, especially when generated through intangible resources, can be easily retraced to the immediate vicinity of the soft-power pole. Equally, blatant use of tangible resources, such as in the case of hostile military activities, is straightforwardly ascribed to the hard-power end of the continuum. However, the categorisation of more nuanced empirical observations, such as the provision of development aid, can cause much trouble, especially if only the type of behaviour is used as a measure of differentiation. On the one hand, development aid is a behaviour that is heavily reliant on the tangible financial resources of the agent, but, on the other, is often employed in an attempt to elicit attraction from a target. These considerations provide reasonable ground to expect that this observable implication of power will have an equal pull from either pole in the continuum, which would preclude a determinate classification.

The pertinence of another crucial unresolved problem – the unit-of-analysis problem – is reinforced by the ongoing debate between advocates of structural and of actor-centred (both rational and relational) understandings of soft power. Authors who insist that more attention should be given to the productive effects of power structures have undoubtedly enriched the discussion, however, there is a notable caveat appended: this reading of soft power has not been consistently translated into empirical research yet. Arguably, Kiseleva (2015) and Cheskin (2017) are the only two authors who engage in an earnest attempt to accomplish this, yet they both fall short of the mark, as their applications correspond much more to the rational and relational views they criticise than to the structural one they propose. In her study Kiseleva focuses almost exclusively on Russia as a soft-power agent in the context of a competitive discursive struggle against other actors, while Cheskin investigates relation-based effects of Russian soft power in Ukraine. Feklyunina attempts to find a middle ground between structuralists, relationalists, and rationalists by proposing that scholars should 'acknowledge the importance of structures and yet place the agents in the focus of empirical analysis' (Feklyunina 2016, p. 779). However, the difficulties of translating

this balanced approach into an operationalised framework of analysis persist.

Finally, the persisting issues accompanying the study of soft-power effects should also be considered in revisions of the conceptual framework that aim to capture the dynamics of soft-power interaction. Many scholars across the divides remain sceptical about the prospects of the analysis of soft-power impact, arguing that the concept cannot serve as a reliable basis for inquiries into causation leading some to discard it altogether. Others disagree and engage in the development of rigorous research designs that bring the research programme closer to causal inference. While developing a toolkit for the study of soft-power causal effects would undoubtedly benefit researchers by adding depth to the analysis, it would be unfortunate if that came at the expense of conceptual consistency. Some authors driving the methodological advances in the field have been negligent in drawing the distinction between resources, instruments, and results, as well as between results-as-attitudes and results-as-behaviour. Furthermore, the existing linear models tend to overlook changes occurring within the elements they seek to connect into explanatory frameworks. These fallacies can raise concerns about measurement validity and endogeneity bias, and should therefore be given due consideration in further research. In this sense, revisions of the existing soft-power conceptual framework should aim to strike a balance between overcoming the shortcomings of static models and avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism.

Despite the complexity of the challenges faced by the nascent soft-power research programme, its prospects are not at all that bleak. Scholars across the divide have achieved crucial advancements in both conceptual and methodological terms. The compartmentalisation of the research programme might have obstructed the dissemination of knowledge, but it has not precluded it completely. Both strands of research now benefit from a more critical understanding of soft power that recognises the specific socio-historical situation in which the concept originated, and are thus better placed to challenge dogmatic thinking. Scholars of soft power have developed rigorous research designs and have forged more precise measurement tools that boost confidence in the validity of findings, though more effort should be invested in fine-tuning the instruments and adapting them to the conceptual advancements. Notably, the groundwork for the study of causation in the context of soft-power exercise has been

laid, which opens the possibility for conducting more thorough analysis and for accruing more resonant findings. In a crucial development, there has been a call, as quiet as it is progressive, for a change in perspective, entailing a shift in focus away from actors and onto processes. The process-centred approach to the study of soft power offers a promise to bring the elements of the analytical framework into conceptual order and to streamline the analysis of event sequences for the purposes of causal inference.

With an identifiable common ground under their feet and equipped with innovative ideas and tools, scholars of soft-power should be in a good position to meet the persisting conceptual and methodological challenges impeding their work. But in order to move the research programme forward, it should first be recognised as such and the existing division should be transcended.

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