


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking ‘middle powers’ as a category of practice: stratification, ambiguity, and power

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Abstract

Scholars have attempted to theorise the social structure of the international system from the perspective of the ‘middle powers’ for decades. However, scholars have struggled to agree on the essential dispositional characteristics of this category of actors, stunting theoretical progress. Drawing on sociological and literary approaches to the rhetoric of the ‘middle class’ in domestic societies, this article shifts the terms of this debate away from asking who the ‘middle powers’ *are* or what their ‘essence’ *is*, to ask what actors *do* with the term in practice. Combining this with and contributing to scholarship on hierarchy in international relations, I recast ‘middle powers’ as a *category of practice* and argue that one of the term’s main uses is to differentiate certain status-anxious states – that hold no real prospect of achieving great power status – from ‘small states’ that occupy the lowest stratum of stratification within the ‘grading of powers’. Following an illustrative case study of Australian and Canadian attempts to establish the ‘middle power’ category in the 1940s, the article then outlines the contributions of the argument for the study of status and hierarchy in world politics.

Keywords: middle powers; practice; categories of practice; stratification; power

It is hardly controversial to suggest that great power-centrism is an analytical problem for international relations (IR). One of the most concerted attempts to deal with what Sharman calls the discipline’s ‘pervasive gigantism’ has come from those nudging us to study ‘middle powers’.¹ There have been numerous articles and books published attempting to conceptualise what and who the ‘middle powers’ are. Indeed, a vast array of important and influential states are often listed as ‘middle powers’ by scholars including: Australia,² Canada,³ Japan,⁴

¹Sharman 2017, 560. For a small selection of recent and classic works on ‘middle powers’, see Teo 2022; Thies and Sari 2018; Cooper *et al.* 1993; Cooper 1997; Holbraad 1984; Teo 2018; Carr 2014; Aydin 2021.

²Higgott and Cooper 1990; Patience 2014.

³Cooper *et al.* 1993.

⁴Cox 1989.

Turkey,⁵ Mexico,⁶ Norway,⁷ and Indonesia,⁸ just to name a few. Roland Paris also includes states like India, the UK, and Germany in the category of ‘middle powers’.⁹

Despite scholars frequently identifying various important and influential actors as ‘middle powers’ in world politics, conceptual and theoretical problems have plagued these studies. Almost all scholarly analyses of the concept bemoan a lack of progress in identifying a unique set of dispositional characteristics or behaviours that distinguish middle powers as a class or category of actor.

This article looks to overcome this impasse. I draw on sociological and literary approaches to the rhetoric of the ‘middle class’ in domestic societies to shift the terms of this debate away from asking who the middle powers *are* or what their ‘essence’ *is*, to ask what actors *do* with the term in practice. Combining this with and contributing to scholarship on hierarchy in IR, I recast ‘middle powers’ as a *category of practice* and argue that one of the term’s main uses is to differentiate certain status-anxious states, that hold no real prospect of achieving great power status, from ‘small states’ who occupy the lowest stratum of stratification within the ‘grading of powers’.¹⁰ Drawing on sociological studies of stratification, the paper also posits that the term ‘middle power’ is highly elastic and ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. It is here that the appeal of the term lies, however. The deployment of the label ‘middle powers’ by actors self-identifying and self-representing as such signifies an attempt to distinguish themselves from ‘small states’.¹¹

Beyond the confines of middle power theorising, the paper makes two contributions to how we think about stratification and status in world politics,¹² especially from the perspective of actors that are not great powers.¹³ This is crucial because, as Donnelly states, to understand how stratification works, ‘in addition to the privileged, we must also consider the deprived (and those in between)’.¹⁴ This paper contributes two key insights about status and stratification in world politics for actors beyond the club of great powers.

The first contribution relates to the ‘status seeking’ behaviour of weaker actors. To date, we know that states seek status by looking to join prestigious clubs, like the club of great powers or G-groups.¹⁵ This article suggests that for those lower down ‘international pecking orders’,¹⁶ the status game consists in large part of looking to shed, escape, or mitigate negative classifications that have become attached to them. Instead of simply ‘joining those above’, the analysis here shows how a very plausibly generalisable goal of many states’ ‘status game’ is likely to be characterised in large part by ‘escaping those from below’.

⁵Aydin 2021.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Wohlforth *et al.* 2018, 531.

⁸Karim 2018.

⁹Paris 2019, 2–6.

¹⁰Wight 1978, Appendix A.

¹¹Note that this is not the term’s only use, but this is likely to be one of its principal uses.

¹²Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Keene 2014.

¹³Schulz 2017; Wohlforth *et al.* 2018.

¹⁴Donnelly 2009, 56.

¹⁵Ward 2019, 213; Paul *et al.* 2014, 7.

¹⁶Pouliot 2016.

The second contribution picks up on the elasticity and ambiguity of terms like ‘middle class’ and ‘middle powers’ to revise conventional wisdom on the relationship between ambiguity and status anxiety. Scholars like Wohlforth and Onea have posited that ambiguity about one’s social position leads to status anxiety and, in certain circumstances, war.¹⁷ The conceptual framework and the empirical findings of this article, however, complicate this story, suggesting that ambiguity is Janus-faced when it comes to its relationship with status anxiety. Building on the analysis and observations of Furbank about the inherent ambiguity of what people mean when they use the term ‘middle class’,¹⁸ the account developed herein shows how actors can deploy the ambiguity of elastic, indeterminant, and vague terms like ‘middle class’ or ‘middle powers’ to deal with their status anxiety. In this account, the ambiguity and vagueness inherent in such categories becomes a resource that actors are deploying to counteract and deal with their status anxiety.

This paper unfolds in four main steps. It begins by delineating some of the dominant conceptualisations of middle powers in the literature and common criticisms thereof. I show how these scholars invariably essentialise the term ‘middle powers’ either by looking for a set of essential features about what middle powers *are* or by exploring an identity that they are assumed to *have*. The second section outlines my alternate conceptual framework to ‘middle powers’ in world politics, shifting the discussion from who the middle powers *are* to what actors *do* with the term in practice. This section develops the main theoretical argument about one of the main uses of the term ‘middle powers’, recasting it as a category of practice. The third section of the piece illustrates the utility of this conceptualisation of middle powers empirically through an examination of Australian and Canadian uses of the term in the 1940s. The conclusion recaps the arguments and their implications and offers some avenues for future research.

Before jumping into my analysis, a brief caveat is in order. I am ambivalent about whether particular states are or are not ‘middle powers’, or if certain states succeed at ‘becoming’ ‘middle powers’ at any point in time. The argument developed here is about *how actors use the term*, not whether or not they are successful at doing so. My analysis suggests that actors themselves are trying to reify and bring into existence the category of ‘middle powers’; by taking a position on whether these actors are or are not middle powers, I would potentially be contributing to these states’ efforts to create and reify this category. In the words of Brubaker, ‘[a]s analysts, we should certainly try to account for the ways in which – and conditions under which – this practice of reification... can work. But we should avoid unintentionally doubling or reinforcing the reification’.¹⁹ Indeed, this is the advantage of the perspective taken here, as we do not have to make assumptions about who the middle powers *are* or their defining characteristics, allowing us to sidestep some of the intractable problems that have plagued the ‘middle powers’ literature.

¹⁷Wohlforth 2009, 38–39; Onea 2014.

¹⁸Furbank 1986.

¹⁹Brubaker 2004, 10.

Middle powers in the literature

If there is one thing scholars of middle powers agree on, it is that there is virtually no scholarly consensus on what constitutes a ‘middle power’ in the first place. Broadly, there are three traditional conceptualisations of ‘middle powers’ in IR. The first thinks about middle powerness in terms of ‘position’; the second thinks about middle powers in terms of ‘identity’; and the third is based on the notion that middle powers engage in particular types of ‘middle power behaviour’. This section presents a synthetic overview of the main currents of this literature and outlines common criticisms of this scholarship. I do this to set up the alternative perspective I proffer in subsequent sections, showing how it allows us to sidestep these issues.

Positional approaches define middle powers as those states holding a particular ranking on certain metrics, whether that be material or economic capabilities. Gilley and O’Neil’s work is the most recent iteration of this positional definition of middle powerness, as they use material metrics to determine precisely ‘who’ the middle powers are. In a somewhat arbitrary fashion, these authors argue

middle powers logically include that tier of countries that rank immediately below the eight countries generally acknowledged as established or emerging great powers; namely, the United States and China plus the six other great powers – Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and India. Assuming this tier is roughly two to three times as populous as the one above it, middle powers, then, should consist of those states with a ranking roughly in the tenth to thirtieth range across a range of capability indicators. Middle powers, in this view, belong to the set of all ‘primary states’ in the world system when contrasted to the ‘secondary states’ category to which all others belong.²⁰

This approach is rather odd in the arbitrary distinctions it makes between different ‘tiers’ of the international system, a criticism that has been often levelled against it.²¹ This criticism has merit: does a state slipping one rung up or down a list of material rankings radically change what that state ‘is’ in that instant? Moreover, some of the theoretical assumptions made here are simply bizarre: for example, why is the middle tier necessarily ‘roughly two to three times as populous as the one above it’? It is perhaps for this reason that other scholars prefer to take alternate and more inductive approaches for thinking about what a middle power is.

The second approach to thinking about middle powers seeks to define the population of middle powers in terms of *identity*.²² According to this approach, the middle powers are those states that identify as such and that hold this status. This provides us with a much smaller and less dynamic population than the first approach. Indeed, focusing on identity and status means that scholars often struggle to identify middle powers beyond Australia and Canada. Yet part of the problem here is that we cannot really agree on who the middle powers are. Some scholars deny that Canada or Australia ‘really are’ middle powers even though they identify

²⁰Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 4–5.

²¹Teo 2022, 5.

²²Teo 2018; Jordaan 2003, 175; Scott 2013.

as such, arguing that self-identification is not a reliable way of actually determining whether or not an actor fits into a particular tier or category of the international system.²³ It is not uncommon for scholars and commentators more generally to dismiss the notion that a particular state is a middle power; for example, Chapnick – the most prolific historian to write about Canada’s ‘middle power project’ – has described Canada’s middle power ‘identity’ as a ‘myth’.²⁴ In other words, it is not actually clear and there is little agreement about whether these actors actually possess the middle power ‘identity’ that proponents of this approach have assigned to them, or that these states have tried to assign to themselves.

The third and final understanding of middle powers attempts to go beyond the first two approaches by focusing on middle power *behaviour*. Middle powers are characterised by three types of behaviour, according to proponents of this approach.²⁵ The first is a preference for using multilateral institutions to restrain and constrain great powers, in addition to pursuing middle power interests through these forums. The second is ‘niche diplomacy’, and the third is the deployment of soft power to pursue their interests. The main issue with this approach to defining middle powers is that it is difficult to think of a state in world politics that does not routinely engage in these three behaviours. In other words, it is difficult to ascertain what is ‘distinctive’ about this universe of cases. Again, the ‘middle power’ concept is analytically indistinguishable from the characteristics and behaviour of other states.

Sarah Teo’s differentiation-based account of middle powers is the most recent effort to overcome some of these analytical issues. Drawing on the work of Albert,²⁶ Teo extends the behavioural approach to argue that, more precisely, middle power behaviour is characterised by attempts to engage in particular types of differentiation in world politics. In Teo’s words, ‘the framework proposed here anticipates that middle powers would seek to weaken stratification particularly where the great powers are concerned, and strengthen functional differentiation by taking on distinctive and key roles in international politics’.²⁷ She then examines this hypothesis in light of Australia’s behaviour in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Teo’s project runs into a similar problem as other approaches that are interested in defining middle powers through their behaviour: it struggles to pinpoint what, if anything, makes middle powers *distinctive*. Any non-great power could presumably be interested in weakening stratificatory differentiation with respect to the great powers, and also strengthening functional differentiation, in the way Teo defines these terms. Why this particular strategy would be exclusive to a population of actors called ‘middle powers’ is unclear.

Effectively all scholars attempting to theorise what middle powers *are* lament the problems of the literature, especially around what or who the middle powers *are*. They then go on to outline their own preferred version of who these actors *are*, often committing the very same analytic issues they have just bemoaned. The

²³Dawson 2021, 2.

²⁴Chapnick 2000.

²⁵Behringer 2013, 14–20; Teo 2022, 6–9.

²⁶Albert 2016.

²⁷Teo 2022, 14.

approach I set out below avoids these issues by not assuming there is a population of ‘middle powers’, sidestepping the thorny analytical issues that this literature has faced. Instead, I ask what actors are *doing* with the term, meaning that I make no assumptions about whether this population exists or not.

Reconceptualising ‘middle power’ as a category of practice

Until now, scholars have looked to deploy ‘middle power’ as a class of actor with essential, dispositional properties, or actors that *have* a certain ‘identity’. This has produced some thorny analytical issues. Even this literature is aware of these problems; effectively every piece written about ‘middle powers’ gestures towards these issues. It is worth reiterating that scholars often adopt ‘middle power’ as a category that corresponds to some essentialised ‘population’ of actors because they note the use of the category by state actors in the international sphere. This is evident in the puzzlement demonstrated by scholars like Carr, who recognise that there are states that claim this label but that what unites them is unclear:

*Being a middle power is clearly a coveted label, not just for the western states like Canada and Australia who claimed it in the 20th century, but also emerging powers such as South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico who claim it in the 21st. Yet identifying what holds these states together, beyond their exclusion from the minority of great powers and the mass of minnows has proven a challenge for scholars.*²⁸

Gilley and O’Neil make a similar argument, stating

*Like many important concepts in the social sciences, the idea of middle powers and middle power theory is contested. But its continued use in real-world political debates and diplomacy suggests that it has a relevance and utility grounded in some objective characteristics.*²⁹

There is, in other words, acknowledgement – albeit a tacit one – by leading scholars in this literature, like Carr, that ‘middle power’ is a ‘coveted label’ deployed by actors in the world. Carr also acknowledges that pinpointing an essence *behind* this label is very difficult. Much like Jackson’s analysis of terms like the ‘West’, then, it might be better to drop the assumption invariably made by the middle powers literature that these actors are actually referring to a notion of a middle power that is an ‘entity’ or that has an essence.³⁰ Instead, we would be better off examining middle power as what Brubaker and Cooper call a ‘category of practice’; that is, as a discursive category deployed by actors in the world to ‘do’ certain things.³¹

One of the main benefits of asking what actors are doing with the term is that we can avoid most of the analytical problems this literature has posed for itself. We do

²⁸Carr 2014, emphasis mine.

²⁹Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 4, emphasis mine.

³⁰Jackson 2006, 8.

³¹Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Leira 2019.

not have to make any assumptions about who the middle powers *are*, what their essence *is*, or if they *have* an ‘identity’. Instead, we can study how actors use term, and ask what they are trying to do with it.

What could one be ‘doing’ with the term ‘middle power’? The next section begins to ruminate on this question by examining work in sociology and literary theory that has considered a similar question through the practical uses of the category of ‘middle class’. This provides us with some propositions to explore about the potential uses of ‘middle power’ as a category of practice in IR.

‘Middle class’ and ‘middle powers’ as categories of practice

Thinking about ‘middle powers’ as a category of practice is similar to how Furbank encourages us to think about the category of the ‘middle class’. Indeed, Furbank takes an approach that thinks about the category of ‘middle class’ not as an unproblematic ‘entity’, a ‘thing’ or a ‘fact’ out there in the world, but as a *discursive or rhetorical category* deployed by actors in the world for certain political ends.³²

Furbank rejects the notion that we should think about the term ‘middle class’ in a ‘scientific way’; that is, as a term that refers to an actually existing group with essential characteristics or a defined criterion of membership. In contrast, Furbank recommends treating the term ‘middle class’ not as a ‘noun’ or an actually existing ‘object’ with an essence, but rather, as an ‘epithet’. In his words, the use of the term ‘middle class’ is

nearer to the language of ethics (which is entirely a matter of epithets) than we tend to think and were we always to remember this when we use [the term middle class, it] would pose less of a puzzle; but then [the category] would also lose half of [its] seductiveness. For [its] power and attraction seem to lie, partly, precisely in the scope that [it] offer[s] for prevarication, deviousness and the playing of social and political games.³³

It is because of the deviousness and almost deliberate ambiguity of terms like ‘middle class’ that Furbank calls such categories ‘rhetorical’; they refer not to an actually existing ‘thing’ but they are distinctly political categories that people in the world deploy with particular ends in mind.³⁴ He argues that such rhetorical categories are often extremely elastic, which enables the users of such concepts to ‘fill’ them with a range of content that is convenient for their users.³⁵ In this sense, the category also has the qualities of a ‘floating signifier’. It is in this very ambiguity and indeterminacy that the power of the term lies, according to Furbank.³⁶ I detail this further below and show how this particular point qualifies the relationship between ambiguity and status anxiety in world politics.

³²Furbank 1986; see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000; for an application of a similar approach in IR, see Leira 2019.

³³Furbank 1986, 5.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 12.

³⁶Ibid.

In his historical analysis, Furbank hints at the idea that the category of ‘middle class’ was initially developed by certain people to escape the idea that they were part of the ‘lower’ or ‘working classes’ and the stigma that came with such a social classification. Of course, this is not the only use of the term today; it is common for relatively wealthy people to also identify as ‘middle class’ to ensure their audience or interlocutor does not judge them for the stigma sometimes associated with being wealthy or privileged. The varied use of this term is crucial because, as Furbank notes, “‘the middle class’ is not a thing but a concept, and a distinctly tendentious concept, involving a judgement of value”.³⁷ In other words, Furbank argues that the category of ‘middle class’ is best understood as a category of practice deployed by people in the world to escape negative classification.

This is important because there is often a tendency to commit what Furbank calls the ‘species-fallacy’, misunderstanding rhetorical categories as if they were ‘scientific’ classifications. Just as we can ‘delineate the *species* rabbit or tiger, it seems to those people that it should likewise be possible to delineate the *species* “middle-class person”’.³⁸ Indeed, it is easy to treat the term ‘middle class’ and many class classifications in general as if they were scientific. Furbank notes that the language of “‘class” makes a powerful rhetorical gesture towards the “scientific” and value-free: it seems to suggest that what is involved is something like natural-history classification’.³⁹ Rather, such terms represent a sort of political intervention; they are ‘performative statements which seek to bring about what they state’.⁴⁰

When considering rhetorical categories, Furbank suggests that often these are *negative* in nature; that is to say, they are frequently concerned with articulating a sense of what an individual is *not*, as opposed to what they *are*. This is because, Furbank argues, terms like ‘middle class’ ‘seem to correspond to, and to represent, a tendency towards social dispersion and separation’. He continues: ‘[a] Species or Family in natural history classification is, after all, not something positive, it is arrived at by exclusion and merely represents what is left when everything else has been excluded; and this exclusive character is carried over into “class” as a social concept’.⁴¹ Ross makes a similar remark about the category of the ‘gentleman’ in everyday language in England, recommending understanding the use of the term as saying more about what one is not, more than what one actually is: ‘[i]t is essentially a process of ruling *out*. If you examine the accumulated code of precepts which define “the gentleman”, you will find that almost all are negative’.⁴²

‘Middle powers’ as a *stratificatory* category of practice

It is relatively easy to translate the ‘middle class’ as a category of practice to the literatures on stratification and hierarchy in IR.⁴³ Indeed, the term is inherently hierarchical. Take, for instance, how users of the phrase ‘middle class’ are also

³⁷Ibid., 53.

³⁸Ibid., 9.

³⁹Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰Bourdieu 1991, 225.

⁴¹Furbank 1986, 115.

⁴²Ross 1956, 74.

⁴³Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Pouliot 2016.

making a judgement not just about where they stand but also about where others stand; they are in the ‘middle’, *above* and *below* other actors. Furbank notes how the term is therefore inherently stratificatory, containing a broader ‘image of inequality’ not just of the ‘middle class’ itself but also of how this category fits into a tripartite division of society.⁴⁴ As Crossick has argued, descriptions of social stratification in society like that of the ‘middle class’ are ‘no mere reflection of external reality, but an intervention within it’. Thus, these are not simply attempts at describing the world, ‘they [are] at the same time an attempt to shape it’.⁴⁵ Hierarchy and stratification are ‘baked into’ the term, as those self-identifying with the term are implying ‘that some people are socially “higher” and “in the middle” and “lower”’.⁴⁶ I draw on these insights to develop what is ultimately a more linguistic-based account of practice-theoretic approaches of ‘international pecking orders’.⁴⁷ The conceptualisation of ‘middle powers’ I endorse is therefore similar to Furbank’s idea of how we ought to think about the ‘middle class’ (i.e. argument by analogy), albeit with a sharper focus on the hierarchical and stratificatory aspects of the term.

In sum, ‘middle powers’ – just like the term ‘middle class’ – contains a hierarchical vision of society and can therefore be thought of as a *stratificatory category of practice*. Brubaker thinks about categories of practice as categories in the world that actors ‘do things with’.⁴⁸ A stratificatory category of practice is, building on this, a category that actors deploy in an attempt to discursively construct or reconstruct stratificatory differentiation and divisions between actors; these are categories that actors ‘do things with’ and the ‘thing’ they are looking ‘to do’ is hierarchy. In rethinking ‘middle powers’ as a stratificatory category of practice, therefore, I am positing that actors use the term in an effort to ‘do hierarchy’ in world politics; that is to differentiate oneself from an ‘other’ in a stratificatory or hierarchical way.

Combining these insights with the discussion of Furbank’s analysis of the use of ‘middle class’ in the previous section, I postulate that one of the main uses of the ‘middle power’ label, and particularly self-identification as a ‘middle power’ is a practice that is largely rhetorical, designed specifically to escape classification of some kind. Intuitively, it is likely that those calling themselves ‘middle powers’ are looking to avoid being classified as a ‘small state’ or a ‘small power’ given how coveted ‘great’- and ‘super’-power status are in the international system.⁴⁹ As per this interpretation, the hierarchy that actors that look to construct themselves as ‘middle powers’ are trying to establish is a division between themselves and the ‘small states’ of international society. These actors are trying to put what Bottero has called ‘social distance’ between themselves and the ‘small states’ of international society.⁵⁰

The term ‘middle power’ serves as a vehicle for those who use the term to describe themselves by differentiating themselves from ‘small states’ in international society. One of the principal distinctions in IR over the past two centuries has been

⁴⁴Furbank 1986, 5; Bottero 2004.

⁴⁵Crossick 1991, 152–53.

⁴⁶Furbank 1986, 53.

⁴⁷Pouliot 2016.

⁴⁸Brubaker 2004, 23.

⁴⁹Paul *et al.* 2014, 7.

⁵⁰Bottero 2004, 5.

between the ‘great powers’ and ‘small states’, or more usefully put, the ‘great powers’ and ‘the rest’.⁵¹ This ‘grading of powers’ has been a constitutive feature of the international system for the past 200 years, with ‘regional’ and ‘normative’ powers also being added to the types of power that one can be named, although these are more recent additions to this discourse.⁵² The discourse of ‘middle powers’ therefore ought to be understood as a discursive intervention into this division, in a bid by the category’s users to differentiate themselves from ‘small states’ by using the language of ‘powers’.

Calling oneself a ‘middle power’ is therefore a practice that is geared towards producing the idea of a middle power as distinctive and differentiated from ‘small’ powers in the international system. In this respect, the category is largely ‘negative’, saying more about what a user of the term is *not* – a ‘middle power’ is not a small state – than about what the user *is*. As a linguistic practice, the use of the term is as much about differentiating oneself from others as it is about producing an idea of ‘middle power’ – however vague it might be – in the first place. In sum, as a category of practice, the term is both rhetorical and productive.

This framework draws inspiration from, and is indebted to, existing work on differentiation in IR and Teo’s study on middle powers in their bid to engage in forms of differentiation. I understand differentiation slightly differently from Albert and Teo,⁵³ however. I understand differentiation as ‘the process through which social groups become dissociated from one another’. Teo’s study of middle powers, despite its important insights, treats ‘middle powers’, as a pre-existing ‘population’ or ‘universe of cases’ that refers to certain states in world politics and this population engages in certain ideal-typical forms of differentiation.⁵⁴

My approach, on the other hand, sees the deployment of the term ‘middle power’ by actors in the world as an attempt to (re)produce the notion that ‘middle powers’ are a distinctive and existing social category that is separate from the ‘small states’ in the international system. This process of distinguishing the so-called ‘middle powers’ from ‘small states’ in the international system is never fully achieved or successful, however. In Jackson’s words, any attempt to ‘stabilise’ the meaning of the social world ‘never ceases, never finishes, and in a certain sense never fully succeeds’.⁵⁵ In this respect, unlike Teo and other scholars, I make no assumptions that there is a ‘population’ or a set of ‘things’ called ‘middle powers’ but am interested in how the term is used.

In light of this theoretical discussion, it is therefore unsurprising that scholars have struggled to pin down what unique dispositional characteristics or behaviours define ‘middle powers’. The reason for this is that the term ought to be understood not as a concept that is ‘grounded in some objective characteristics’,⁵⁶ but rather as what I have referred to as a category of practice. Retheorising the term in this way allows us to escape the idea that ‘middle powers’ can and do possess some sort of

⁵¹Hironaka 2017, 3–4.

⁵²Wight 1978, Appendix A; Keene 2013.

⁵³Albert 2016; Teo 2022.

⁵⁴Teo 2022.

⁵⁵Jackson 2006, 39.

⁵⁶Gilley and O’Neil 2014, 4.

unique set of behaviours or characteristics, overcoming a core assumption in the literature. Rather, this reconceptualisation of the term as a category of practice can help us avoid these thorny analytical issues.

A potential objection here is to argue that I am simply providing an ‘identity’-based account of ‘middle powers’. My account rejects the notion that we can treat self-labelled ‘middle powers’ as if they *have* an ‘identity’ as ‘middle powers’ or that they *are* ‘middle powers’ simply because they refer to themselves as such.⁵⁷ To assume that these states ‘have’ a ‘middle power identity’ simply because they refer to themselves as such ‘risks conflating a system of *identification* or *categorization* with its presumed result, *identity*’.⁵⁸ I am agnostic on the question of which states ‘really are’ ‘middle powers’ but focus instead on what actors are attempting to *do* by deploying the term in the first place. One answer is that it is a category of practice that actors are deploying to ‘do’ hierarchy in world politics, an interpretation I flesh out empirically in the next section.

The last part of this section further elaborates the implications of this analysis for our understanding of status and stratification in world politics. First off, many scholars have articulated that ambiguity is a source of status anxiety. The logic here is that when there is ambiguity about one’s position, one gets anxious because there is uncertainty around whether or not an actor actually holds such a position.⁵⁹ One of the consequences of this can be war, because fighting and winning a war is an effective public signal of one’s status.⁶⁰ The framework developed here, however, shows that ambiguity is Janus-faced in its relationship with status anxiety. Building on the analysis and observations of Furbank about the inherent ambiguity of what people mean when they use the term ‘middle class’, the account developed herein shows how actors can deploy the ambiguity of elastic, indeterminant, and vague terms like ‘middle class’ or ‘middle powers’ to deal with their status anxiety.⁶¹ Analogising ‘middle class’ and ‘middle powers’ with the status of the ‘gentleman’, Furbank argues,

The social status of ‘gentleman’ gains its suggestive force, and its enormous potential for rhetorical and ideological exploitation, *from its vagueness and lack of semantic anchorage*. It has ranking implication – for one of the subsidiary connotations of ‘yeoman’ is ‘not-gentleman’ – yet it is not a rank and has no such fixed field of reference as a rank. (One is not a ‘gentleman’ in the uncontentious way that one is a viscount or a colonel or an Under-Secretary.) Again, it carries a claim to ethical qualities, yet its leading meaning (or as you might say, its meaning of last resort) refers to outward social position and dignity.⁶²

Interestingly, Bourdieu has made a very similar point about the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the social world offering its agents opportunities, noting ‘[o]bjects

⁵⁷Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Michaels 1995, 60–61, fn. 39.

⁵⁸Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 26, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹Wohlforth 2009, 38–39; Onea 2014.

⁶⁰Renshon 2017, 65–66.

⁶¹Furbank 1986.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 97.

in the social world always involve a degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness, and thus present a definite degree of semantic elasticity'.⁶³ This, however, is not an obstacle but an opportunity and resource for 'political action' in stratified social orders. In Bourdieu's words, 'the degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness in the objects of the social world... is the Archimedean leverage point that is objectively offered for political action proper'.⁶⁴ This framework brings this to the fore for scholars of world politics, using 'middle powers' as an example of this. I highlight the often vague and ambiguous notions that surrounded Australia and Canada's use of the term in the next section.

The second implication relates to the status seeking of entities and actors that are not great powers and that have no realistic chance of achieving great power status. Current work has shown how status is often conferred through membership in elite clubs like the 'club of great powers' or G-summitry.⁶⁵ The logic of this has been one which involves 'joining those above'. This conceptual framework – and the case studies below – go to show that for these actors lower down 'international pecking orders',⁶⁶ a key part of the status game consists of looking to shed, escape, or mitigate negative classifications that have become attached to them. In the case studies below, Canada and Australia are looking to escape the classification of 'small state'. Instead of simply 'joining those above', the analysis here shows how a very plausibly generalisable goal of many states' 'status game' is also likely to be characterised in large part by 'escaping those from below', especially when 'joining those above' might not be entirely possible for a large portion of states in the international system. This has implications for practices of status recognition and accommodation too because, as Freedman has said, 'just as we cannot separate an actor's status from their recognition, we can also not separate an actor's status recognition from their subjective perception of what such recognition *ought* to look like'.⁶⁷ We can see this 'escaping those from below' motive below in the case studies. Indeed, as one historian has put it, Canada used the term 'middle power' to ensure it was 'not to be lumped in with the impotent riffraff whose sovereignty was no more than nominal and whose contribution to the maintenance of world peace would be negligible'.⁶⁸ Likewise, Australia was trying to find a way 'to distinguish its position from that of the small powers', and 'middle power' became one of the core methods Australian diplomats used to do this.⁶⁹

'Middle power' in Australian and Canadian foreign policy

This empirical section uses the interpretive framework set out above to develop an account of 'middle power' as a category of practice in Australian and Canadian foreign policy in the 1940s. The reason for the focus on these two states is straightforward: they are ubiquitously mentioned in the 'middle power' literature

⁶³Bourdieu 1987, 13.

⁶⁴Bourdieu 1985, 201–2.

⁶⁵Ward 2019, 213; Paul *et al.* 2014, 7.

⁶⁶Pouliot 2016.

⁶⁷Freedman 2016, 815–16.

⁶⁸Fraser 1966, 7.

⁶⁹Holmes 1979, 236.

as the two states that have historically identified themselves as ‘middle powers’. This is not to suggest that other states have not also used this label. However, recovering the meaning of ‘middle power’ through the linguistic practices of these two states is particularly fruitful for the literature on middle powers and middle power status given the ubiquity of them – as the middle powers *par excellence* – in this broader field of scholarship. I look specifically at how these states used this term in the 1940s because this is the period in which the category entered the lexicon and vocabulary of these states.

I argue that Australia and Canada both deployed the phrase ‘middle power’ as a category of practice. Specifically, these states used the term in an attempt to differentiate themselves from ‘small states’ in international society. Status and stratification were crucial to this effort, as Australia and Canada essentially tried to ‘break out’ of the small states category through linguistic practices which insisted they did not belong in such a category. Australian and Canadian diplomats claimed that there was an essential difference between themselves and other (‘smaller’) states. Often this essential difference was not entirely clear, as not only the great powers but also ‘small states’ contested the Australian and Canadian argument and denied the existence of an alternate category of ‘middle powers’.

In the 1940s both Australia and Canada were increasingly concerned about their status in the world in light of discussions about the composition of the post-war world.⁷⁰ The precise composition of the United Nations (UN) was up in the air but a common problem faced both states. The great powers were intent on ensuring ‘small states’ were cut out of the process of establishing the new organisation. As Chapnick summarises: ‘From the beginning, the great powers assumed that they would take the lead. As Roosevelt explained to his undersecretary, Sumner Welles: “This [was] not the time to talk about the post-war position of small nations”’.⁷¹ Australia and Canada’s omission from post-war discussions at Cairo Conference in 1943 saw both states take an increasingly activist position to secure their status.⁷²

As shown below, the division of the international sphere into great powers and small states posed problems for both Canada and Australia.⁷³ Diplomats in both states began to ponder different representational strategies in order to ensure their places in discussions about the organisation of the post-war world.

The Canadians, according to Chapnick, quickly ruled out trying to represent themselves as even comparable to the great powers. In January 1943, Canada went to bat for the ‘smaller nations’, arguing they too ‘have an important contribution to make’.⁷⁴ Canada, in a sense, was conceding that it was indeed a small state but did so in a way that suggested this type of actor had a contribution to make to

⁷⁰Holbraad 1984, 57–58. Despite similarities in their use of the term ‘middle power’, there were of course differences in Australian and Canadian foreign policy too. Australia vehemently opposed while Canada supported the great power veto on the UN Security Council.

⁷¹Chapnick 2005, 25.

⁷²Saul 2011, 424.

⁷³‘Small states’ were not, of course, just ‘small states’ in the material sense. Given the historical context we are dealing with here, for states like Canada and Australia, the term ‘small states’ almost certainly has racial and colonial connotations to it. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to recognise this.

⁷⁴Chapnick 2005, 40.

international order too. It would be a smaller contribution to international order than the great powers were able to offer, but it was a contribution nonetheless. This argument came to be known as the ‘functional principle’: which refers to the idea that there were certain small states that could functionally contribute to international order more than others.⁷⁵ Canadian diplomats represented their state as a significant contributor not only to the fight against the Axis powers in the Second World War, but also to the outcome of the First World War. Historically, they depicted Canada as having a track record of contributing to international peace and security.⁷⁶ Canadian diplomats increasingly used this argument in post-war discussions to differentiate their state from the mass of small states that it was categorised with.

Efforts to differentiate between Canada and other so-called ‘small states’ were framed around the functional contribution Canada had made and was able to make to international order. Chapnick outlines that initially the Canadian foreign office saw two different ways to present the Canadian case at the UN; at the outset, these alternatives were seen as competitive rather than complementary. The first was the functional principle outlined above, while the second was the proposal for ‘a group of medium belligerents’ to which Canada would belong.⁷⁷ The functional principle won out initially, although the ‘medium belligerents’ idea would eventually be resurrected, albeit in a different guise: that of the ‘middle power’.

At the same time, Australian diplomats also made a similar type of functional argument in their own linguistic practices. Like Canada, they largely accepted – initially at least – that they were part of ‘the so-called small powers’ but did not accept that this necessarily meant that Australia would be shut out of discussions for the post-war world. Australian diplomats made an almost identical argument to the Canadian ‘functional principle’. Bringing up the contributions Australia had made to the two world wars, Australian diplomats argued ‘[r]egard should of course be paid to the claims of those allied nations who have, both in this war and the last, largely contributed to the overthrow of the aggressors’.⁷⁸ Mirroring similar logic to the Canadian ‘functional principle’, Australian representative Herbert Evatt tried to draw distinctions between so-called ‘small powers’, arguing that some – like Australia – were of ‘vital importance’.⁷⁹

Australian representatives also presented an argument that was far more difficult to make for the Canadians; this argument was based around regional representation in the organisation of the post-war world. In addition to mentioning the contributions they had made to both world wars, Australian diplomats also brought up the question of regional representation. They argued ‘[e]very distinct region of the globe should be considered, and no important group of nations should remain unrepresented upon such executive bodies’.⁸⁰ The Canadians did not make such an argument about regional representation because ‘North America’ already had

⁷⁵Chapnick 2002.

⁷⁶MacKay 1969.

⁷⁷Chapnick 2005, 27.

⁷⁸Evatt 1946, 13.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

its own representative in the USA. There was no general push to represent the Americas either, as Canada did not feel very optimistic about securing Latin American support for their own cause.⁸¹

The chief architect of Australian diplomatic efforts to secure Australian status in the post-war world, Herbert Evatt, later invoked the idea of 'security powers' to characterise those states that deserved to play a major role in the composition of the UN and the post-war international order. Put otherwise, arguments made earlier about Australia's potential contribution to international order were repackaged under the 'security power' label. Unsurprisingly, Evatt very firmly cast Australia as one of these 'security powers'. The contribution that Australia had made to both world wars was presented as evidence that Australia was indeed a 'security power'. Evatt articulated that:

Australia's claim to an adequate part in the forthcoming peace settlement is based not merely on its war effort; it is also founded on the combination of an essential strategic position and readiness, which Australia has now demonstrated in two world wars, to act instantly as a security power.⁸²

Evatt continued:

We think it should be recognised that outside the great Powers there are certain nations who, by reason of their resources and geographical position, will prove to be of key importance for the maintenance of security in different parts of the world. Moreover, there are certain of these Powers, and Australia is obviously one of them, who have proved their record in two world wars that they have not only the capacity and the resources but the determined will to put everything they have into the struggle against aggressors who threaten the world with tyranny. Surely these powers have a claim to special recognition in any security organisation. In urging this claim, we are not trying to push any purely selfish national interest. We believe that the new organization can work effectively only if it is based on the whole-hearted support of those security powers.⁸³

To briefly summarise, both Australia and Canada were anxious about their status in the early 1940s. Both states were looking to make arguments and differentiate themselves from the 'small states' that were not taken seriously by the great powers in discussions for the post-war world. This effort often relied on arguments about the contributions both states could make to international order. Crucially, 'middle power' was not a term deployed by these actors at the outset. Canada flirted with similar ideas about 'medium belligerents' but decided to discard this way of differentiating itself in favour of the functional principle, initially casting itself as a particularly useful 'small-state'. Australia was similarly playing around with different arguments and different labels in order to differentiate itself

⁸¹Chapnick 2005, 92–93.

⁸²Evatt 1946, 23.

⁸³Ibid., 27.

from 'small states', primarily through arguments about regional representation but also through the 'security power' label. Nevertheless, both states quickly hit upon the category of 'middle powers' as a means to do precisely what they were attempting to do with these other, initial, arguments and terms: differentiate themselves as distinctive, different, and ultimately higher status than 'small states' in international society.

Canada began using the language of 'middle power' before Australia did; the available sources suggest that Australian diplomats did not begin using this term until 1945. As outlined above already, the Canadians were using extremely similar language to describe themselves as early as August 1942. This phrase was used alongside the functional principle, the thinking being that Canada 'could campaign for the creation of "a group of medium belligerents" that might receive treatment different from that afforded the rest of the smaller states'.⁸⁴ The logic behind this was that Canadian diplomats simply did not want the UN to 'be divided into one group of great powers exercising responsibility for political and military settlements, and another group excluded from responsibility regardless of size and importance'.⁸⁵ Instead of accepting the dichotomy between the great powers and the small states, and then looking to differentiate Canada as a more important small state, Canadian representatives attempted to essentially create an alternate category that was neither a great power nor a small state. The logic behind this was the same as the logic behind the functional principle: 'to distinguish its position from that of the small powers'.⁸⁶

It was not until February 1944 that the term 'middle power' became a seriously considered representational strategy on the part of Canadian diplomats. Lester Pearson wrote a memorandum which discussed the social situation facing Canada and how the 'middle power' category was a possible solution to this problem:

Canada is achieving, I think, a very considerable position as a leader, if not the leader, among a group of States which are important enough to be necessary to the Big Four but not important enough to be accepted as one of that quartet. As a matter of fact, the position of a 'little Big Power' or 'big Little Power' is a very difficult one, especially if the 'little Big Power' is also a 'big Dominion'. The big fellows have power and responsibility, but they also have control. The little fellows have no power and responsibility; therefore [they] are not interested in control. We 'in between' States sometimes get, it seems, the worst of both worlds. We are necessary but not necessary enough!... There is, I think, an opportunity for Canada, if we desire to take it, to become the leader of this group...[of] middle powers.⁸⁷

Some Canadian diplomats continued to protest the idea that simply having great power standing meant that particular states were deserving of higher status in world politics, insisting the functional principle was a more just way of dividing

⁸⁴Chapnick 2005, 27.

⁸⁵Ibid., 29–30.

⁸⁶Holmes 1979, 236.

⁸⁷Pearson cited in Chapnick 2005, 69–70.

up the small states of the international system.⁸⁸ Most states were simply unable to functionally contribute anything to international peace and security. Not only would Canada be able to do so, Canada had already done so through its participation in, contribution to, and performance in the two World Wars.

As time went on, the 'functional principle' and some ambiguous notion of 'middle powerdom' became folded into one another. While initially understood by Canadian diplomats as competing rhetorical strategies, the functional principle was now used as evidence for the existence of an alternate class of actor in world politics that was neither a 'small state' nor a 'great power', but rather a 'middle power'. This was not a category or classification that had previously existed. As one Canadian commentator of the time put the matter, Australian and Canadian diplomats had to engage in 'advocating a Middle Power classification'.⁸⁹ These advocates looked to produce 'middle power' as a social category.

At the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in late 1944, Canadian diplomats like Lester Pearson continued to pursue the 'middle power' idea as a rhetorical strategy, approaching both the UK and the USA for their help in supporting a special standing for 'middle powers'. In a proposal to the British, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King argued 'we would win our own right of representation, if not as one of the Big Three or Four, at least as one of the *middle powers*, medium powers that should be brought into the world organisation in same way that would recognise that power and responsibility go together'.⁹⁰ The goal here was to ensure Canada was 'not to be lumped in with the impotent riffraff whose sovereignty was no more than nominal and whose contribution to the maintenance of world peace would be negligible'.⁹¹ The British – desperate to maintain their great power status – turned down Canadian desires to push for this type of differentiation, worried that it would undermine and dilute their own status and influence; Britain 'remained reluctant to differentiate the secondary states formally in the United Nations Charter', and could simply not accept 'the *arbitrary* and divisive nature of the middle power idea'.⁹²

What I want to highlight with this brief discussion is that Canadian and Australian diplomats were looking for ways to escape the dichotomy that stratified the international system between the great powers and small states. Both states searched for a vocabulary that allowed them to characterise themselves as more than 'small states'. The Canadians got to the 'middle power' idea first, but it was one amongst many representational strategies under consideration and was by no means universally popular amongst Canadian diplomats, with some preferring the functional principle as a basis on which to represent Canada and its position in the world. 'Middle powers' was one way Canadian diplomats were considering representing themselves in the stratification of international society; the Australians had not gotten there yet.

⁸⁸Chapnick 2005, 70, 82.

⁸⁹Gelber 1945, 283.

⁹⁰William Lyon Mackenzie King cited in Fraser 1966, 7.

⁹¹Fraser 1966, 7.

⁹²Chapnick 2005, 87, emphasis mine.

Canada in particular began to embrace the 'middle power' idea much more forcefully in the lead up to the San Francisco Conference in 1945. One of the major problems facing Canadian diplomacy in this period was actually outlining what a 'middle power' was and who the middle powers subsequently were. The Americans in particular were intrigued by the idea of a 'middle power' but were worried about the arbitrary nature of middle powers' differentiation from the rest. As outlined above, the Brits had also raised questions about the arbitrary nature of the middle power category that the Canadians had proposed to them. As Chapnick notes, the problem was that the Americans believed

it would be impossible to create a list of middle states. It was too difficult to differentiate fairly and consistently between the medium and the small. In response, Pearson reiterated that the Canadian government felt that 'the contribution of actual military forces' should be the key criterion, but his comment was not received enthusiastically [by the Americans].⁹³

It is perhaps therefore no wonder that Chapnick, Canada's most esteemed historian of middle powers, has referred to the term as 'the amorphous middle power concept'. He argues that Canada

vaguely demanded that a distinction be made on the world organization's executive committee – the United Nations Security Council – between the moderately powerful states, like itself, and the utterly powerless. Once again, the Canadian negotiators were unsuccessful. It was simply too difficult to devise reasonable and widely acceptable criteria by which to differentiate among the nongreat.⁹⁴

While not an account of San Francisco specifically, Canadian diplomat Arthur Andrew's more general description of what he refers to as 'the middle power model' in Canada's foreign policy strikes a similar tone. He argues that 'the middle power model' was designed to challenge the assumption that

the [great] Powers [sic] would made decisions and the less-than-great would decide how best to conform to them. Instead, it sought Great Power [sic] recognition that there were countries that did not have the near-universal interests of a Great Power but which were 'great' for some purposes.⁹⁵

Andrew continues by saying it became the Department for External Affairs' task to 'have the concept accepted within the international community'.⁹⁶ In other words, the Canadians were deploying 'the middle power model' as a category of practice with the aim of reifying and bringing this category into existence.

⁹³Ibid., 100.

⁹⁴Ibid., 5.

⁹⁵Andrew 1993, 25.

⁹⁶Ibid., 26.

And while the Canadians had invested considerable amounts of political capital in trying to push for this category, it was not even mentioned in the formal Canadian address to the San Francisco conference. It is nevertheless certain that the Australians heard of the Canadians' use of the category 'middle power' in these negotiations because only a few days later, Australian representative Evatt began deploying the term too. He argued that there was a

need to recognise the distinctive position of the nations which are coming to be called the 'middle Powers,' but which, in effect, belong (like the five Great Powers) to what may be called the 'Security Powers'.⁹⁷

Note how, in this formulation, Australia proposed a distinction between the 'security powers' and the 'rest'. For obvious reasons, this did not go down well with the great powers. Although the great powers were initially sympathetic to the need to differentiate between the 'small states', Evatt's attempt to ignore the special rights and privileges of the great powers in favour of the 'security powers' category was not particularly popular amongst the 'Big Five'.⁹⁸ This great power reluctance incentivised Australia to take a different approach, which brought to the fore the middle power theme that Australia had picked up from the Canadians. Thereafter, the 'security power' category receded into the background.

As the conference went on, Australia moved away from the position that it was a 'security power' in the same general category as the great powers. Instead, it began to take a very different approach to ensuring its status in the post-war world. In what was effectively a 180-degree turn, Australia became the champion of 'Middle and Small powers'.⁹⁹ Australia evidently saw itself fitting into the former category. Reynolds argues that the Australians began to embrace the Canadian category of "'Middle Power" status', and that this decision was basically a 'claim that Australia was something more than a small power, but in reality it was as the advocate of a small power that much of [Australia's] behaviour becomes explicable'.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the only reason Australia became desperate to call itself a middle power was because it was worried it was seen as a 'small power'.

This section has examined how the category of 'middle power' was developed and used in Australian and Canadian foreign policies in the 1940s, when the term became popularised. The main argument I have put forward is that the category was a discursive device deployed by these actors to differentiate themselves from the 'small states' that the Australians and Canadians thought they ought not to be lumped in with. To recall an earlier quote, the middle power idea was deployed so that these states would 'not to be lumped in with the impotent riffraff whose sovereignty was no more than nominal and whose contribution to the maintenance of world peace would be negligible'.¹⁰¹ Both states toyed with different words and arguments – the 'security power' category and the functional principle

⁹⁷Evatt cited in Chapnick 2005, 112.

⁹⁸Watt 1972, 66.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Reynolds 1996, 150.

¹⁰¹Fraser 1966, 7.

are two prominent examples – to try to differentiate themselves from the small states, before finally arriving at the ‘middle power’ idea to engage in this differentiation. Indeed, in one of the first ever issues of IR’s flagship journal, *International Organization*, a 1947 article by Glazebrook asserts: ‘the term “middle power” is a convenient one that has come into general use as a means of avoiding the unreality of a simple division of states into “great” and “small”’.¹⁰² My reading of the origins and intention behind Australia and Canada’s use of the ‘middle power’ category therefore reflects and builds on one of the earliest scholarly considerations of the concept as a category of practice.

Generalisability

How far does this interpretation travel? There is a *prima facie* case that South Korea has at times used the term ‘middle power’ in a similar way to how Australia and Canada deployed in the 1940s.

Indeed, in Jeong’s analysis of the ways South Korea has constructed itself since the end of the Cold War, she strongly alludes to the stratificatory notions my conceptual framework introduces. She argues South Korea’s use of the term has often gestured to an international ‘environment *comprised of the dominant and less dominant countries*. As [a] less dominant country, South Korea has *utilized the middle power title* to balance and neutralize the asymmetrical power relations and create an environment more conducive to South Korea’s national interests’.¹⁰³ Moreover, Jeong alludes to how South Korea has used the term to position itself in a stratificatory way. The language used by Jeong is particularly interesting and has strong affinities to the conceptual framework I have set out above. Jeong argues the term has been used by South Korea as it ‘has sought to re-define itself and its relationships, away from being called “a frog in the well”, and “*a shrimp amongst the whales*”’.¹⁰⁴ Of course, Jeong indicates that South Korea also uses the term in other ways – something my framework does not preclude – but the language she identifies and uses provides *prima facie* evidence that the conceptual framework and empirical case studies presented in previous sections have broader generalisability.

Sarah Teo’s work is also instructive, pointing to similar trends to those identified by Jeong. For example, Teo has analysed how South Korea has used the category in a way that positions it ‘to be a less “advanced” state than the United States, Japan and the European countries’, but that, at the same time, South Korea insists that it holds ‘more significance than the smaller states’.¹⁰⁵ Just as Australia and Canada were attempting to escape being classified as ‘small states’ and ensure greater influence in world politics through the ‘middle power’ category, South Korea is attempting to claim ‘more responsibilities and contribute towards global decision-making’, Teo argues.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰²Glazebrook 1947, 307.

¹⁰³Jeong 2020, 250, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 260, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁵Teo 2018, 232.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 233.

As shown above, Australia and Canada used the category ‘middle power’ in a very similar way to how Jeong and Teo describe South Korea’s use of the term. Of course, Jeong implies the way South Korea uses ‘middle power rhetoric’ is unique to South Korea. At the same time, neither Jeong nor Teo explicitly tie South Korean attempts at constructing itself as a ‘middle power’ to notions of hierarchy and stratification as I have; what my framework does is draw out the more general concern with hierarchy that states are navigating when deploying the term. This additional case of South Korea is just one extra example, and it is a fairly brief one at that, but it does provide good evidence that the conceptual framework and empirical case studies presented ‘travel’.

Conclusion and implications

This article has argued that we can rethink ‘middle powers’ as a category of practice. More specifically, this category serves as a rhetorical tool deployed by certain states in world politics, which themselves hold no real prospect of being great powers but are nevertheless anxious to distinguish themselves from ‘small states’ who occupy the lowest stratum of stratification within the ‘grading of powers’. One of the major advantages of reconceptualising ‘middle powers’ as a category of practice, I have suggested, is that one can sidestep and avoid some of the major issues that have plagued the existing literature on middle powers. This too has important implications set out above for how we understand the workings of status and stratification ‘from below’.

The case studies and theoretical framework presented here also provide new insights into how stratification works, especially from the perspective of non-great powers actors. These novel theoretical propositions come at the end of the piece because they are interpretations of the paper’s findings. Two main implications stand out.

The first implication that follows from this relates to the ‘status seeking’ of weaker actors. My analysis suggests that a core part of these states’ status game is escaping or mitigating negative classifications that have become attached to them. The ‘middle powers’ label was the means that Australia and Canada adopted in the 1940s to escape their classification as ‘small states’. Seen from the view of ‘rising great powers’, the status game might consist of joining prestigious clubs like the club of great powers or G-groups,¹⁰⁷ but for those lower down the pecking order, perhaps the best weaker states can do is look to mitigate or escape negative classifications that disempower them. Instead of simply ‘joining those above’, the analysis here has focused on the very plausibly generalisable goal of many states to simply ‘escape those from below’.

The second implication reveals the Janus-faced nature of ambiguity in its relationship to status anxiety. As set out in the Introduction, scholars have often theorised ambiguity about one’s position in international hierarchies as a source of status insecurity. Both Wohlforth and Onea argue this is the case, noting how ambiguity about one’s position can, as a result of the status insecurity produced, lead to war.¹⁰⁸ The relationship between ambiguity and status insecurity is not as

¹⁰⁷Ward 2019, 213; Paul *et al.* 2014, 7.

¹⁰⁸Wohlforth 2009, 38–39; Onea 2014.

one dimensional as these scholars suggest. This paper – in both its theoretical and empirical accounts – has complicated this relationship. Drawing on Furbank, the paper has shown how the elasticity and the ambiguity inherent in terms like ‘middle power’ and ‘middle class’ can be instrumentalised by actors to deal with their status insecurities. Therefore, ambiguity can be both a source of status insecurity but ambiguity – especially in terms like ‘middle power’ – can be used as a resource to deal with an actor’s status anxiety.

There are a few avenues for future research that could build on the implications of the paper’s main argument presented in the previous section. The first is to investigate other rhetorical or discursive categories that actors have used to escape negative classifications in world politics. I have provided and investigated one but there are almost certainly more. Investigating, for instance, other types of ‘powers’ might be once place to start because this discourse is itself highly elastic. In Keene’s words, ‘talking about “powers” is an exceptionally fluid, changeable language’,¹⁰⁹ allowing actors to bend this discourse to mitigate their inferiority. Likewise, the language used by Keene to discuss the idea of Europe as a ‘normative power’ is particularly interesting in light of the theoretical findings of this paper. He says ‘a crucial theme of the normative power Europe thesis has been to stress the *difference* that exists between the EU and other (perhaps generically labelled as “Westphalian”) international actors’.¹¹⁰ In this way, the framework herein could be elaborated to think about ‘emerging’ and ‘rising’ powers as categories of practice. Like ‘middle powers’, the boundaries of what constitutes an ‘emerging’ or a ‘rising’ power are incredibly vague beyond a notion of economic growth. To explore what actors are doing when describing themselves as such could refine and develop some of the insights developed above.

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¹⁰⁹Keene 2013, 277.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

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