
Lost in translation –
A methodological critique of constructivist norm research

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Paper to be presented at the ISA Annual Convention 2012, 1-4 April, in San Diego

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Abstract

Under the headline of “explaining change”, scholars in the 1990s rediscovered the importance of “non-material factors” in International Relations. Questions about the creation, the evolution, and the impact of norms obtained a prominent place in constructivist theorizing. Norm research seemed to offer the most promising alternative to the rationalist mainstream. We argue, however, that constructivist norm research entailed major conceptual and methodological problems which have not yet been spelled out comprehensively. Although norms were introduced as the product of social interaction, empirical studies defined them as expressions of a “given identity” with specifiable “regulative effects”. The insight that norms are potentially contested and thus constantly renegotiated through creative action has been lost in translation. Most authors adopted a structuralist framework explaining how norms caused a certain “behavior”, putting norm research at odds with the epistemological assumptions of previous constructivist works. By reconstructing the conceptual and methodological decisions of constructivist norm research, we show how the metatheoretical challenge to rationalism has been narrowed down to a neo-positivist research agenda. We propose to re-conceptualize the connection between norms and action from a relationalist perspective and outline an interpretive methodology that allows to deliver on the ambitious promise to explain processes of normative change in international politics.

Keywords: Norms, Constructivism, IR Theory

1. Introduction¹

During the 1990s, scholars of international relations rediscovered the importance of “non-material factors” and “ideational variables” which had been virtually blinded out by neorealist and neoliberal theories (Lapid/Kratochwil 1996; Katzenstein 1996a). While some focused on the significance of culture and identity for foreign and security policy, a group of social constructivists translated the post-Cold War scientific interest in processes of transformation into questions about the role of norms, their creation, their evolution and their impact on actors. It seemed obvious to them that “norms mattered” and that the ignorance of normative dynamics in the realm of international politics was deeply flawed (Katzenstein 1996b: 26ff). For them, the focus on norms offered a way to overcome the limits of the tiring “neo-neo-debate” and to develop an alternative to the rational actor model that pervaded the field (Klotz 1995: 13ff). This alternative seemed especially promising since it allowed investigating important phenomena of international politics which had been ignored in the rationalist paradigm. Constructivists could argue that traditional rationalist research with its focus on the stability of the international system and regularities in state behavior had some serious blind spots: Neither neorealists nor neoliberal institutionalists had much to say about the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa, the improvement of human rights legislation in third world countries or the evolution of rules of warfare (Klotz 1995; Finnemore 1996a; Risse et al. 1999). What rational interests could not explain, norms apparently could. Constructivist research on norms was regarded as an “immense promise for shaking up the IR research agenda and opening up exciting new avenues for inquiry” (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 915).

And indeed, this new avenue of inquiry was characterized by an impressive output. In less than five years, a group of scholars interested in norms theorized the formation of state interests (Finnemore 1996b), developed theoretical models about the creation and diffusion of norms (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998) and the role of non-state actors in advocating them (Price 1998; Keck/Sikkink 1998). They also produced empirical studies on the impact of international norms on human rights practices (Klotz 1995; Risse et al. 1999) and on the role of domestic normative ideas for foreign policy (Katzenstein 1996a, 1996b; Duffield 1999). Given that both

¹ Our interest in norms emerged in a graduate seminar that Tanja Brühl held at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Our examination of the methodological aspects of this literature has taken shape in conversations with Benjamin Herborth.

the theoretical and the empirical works operated from a common conceptual basis, it makes sense to speak of a distinct constructivist research program on norms which became a crucial contribution to the so-called constructivist turn in IR theory (Checkel 1998). This research program has provided many insightful empirical results and helped to broaden the scope of what is recognized as a legitimate object of analysis in IR.

However, while it was a success story in many respects, we argue that constructivist norm research also produced collateral damage which has not yet been spelled out comprehensively.² Our main contention is that as scholars engaged in the mainstream debate on how to “explain behavior”, they adopted a neo-positivist methodology and privileged social structure over agency. By treating norms as “independent variables” which account for political outcomes, constructivists propagated a mechanistic model of how norms were “internalized” by actors who followed a “logic of appropriateness”. Although introduced as the product of social interaction, the ensuing empirical studies defined norms, as expressions of a “given identity” which had specifiable “regulative effects” on the “behavior” of actors. The important constructivist insight that norms are constantly renegotiated and that they cannot be separated from the meanings actors attach to them has been lost in the translation of theoretical claims into empirical research. Thus, constructivist norm research has not tapped the full potential inherent in questions about the role of norms in processes of transformation.

The time seems to be ripe for a critical evaluation of past weaknesses and how they might be overcome. At the ISA’s Annual Convention in 2010, Kathryn Sikkink, Peter Katzenstein, and Martha Finnemore critically reflected upon their previous work at a roundtable with the title “Explaining Change in International Relations”. Most notably, Kathryn Sikkink contended that “structural constructivism” had proven to be too static for the explanation of dynamic processes. While it had succeeded in describing how norms diffuse, it did not provide satisfactory answers to the question why actors eventually comply with norms nor was it able to explain how new norms emerge. Such self-criticism is rather unusual in a highly competitive discipline characterized by paradigm wars (Herborth 2010: 264ff). It opens up the opportunity to renew the discussion about how to conceptualize the interrelation

² For earlier critical examinations of particular aspects of constructivist norm research see Sending (2002) on the logic of appropriateness, Herborth (2004) on Wendt’s conceptualization of the agency-structure problematique, Wiener (2004) on the intricacies of norm compliance and Rosert/Schirmbeck (2007) on the possibility that norms erode.

between social norms and collective action and, on the basis of such a conceptualization, of how to approach research on norms and their political implications methodologically.

We proceed in this article in three steps. First, we comment on the emergence of constructivism in IR in the late 1980s because it provides the background against which the later norm research was developed and because it helps to understand its position in the discipline. In a second step, we reconstruct and criticize important conceptual decisions of constructivist norm research. We illustrate this critique by discussing the two most prominent models of norm dynamics. In section three, we propose to re-conceptualize the connection between norms and action from a relationalist perspective and outline its advantages. We argue that this goes hand in hand with an interpretive methodology that allows to deliver on the ambitious promise to explain processes of normative change in international politics.

2. The emergence of constructivism in IR

The standard textbook account of IR in the 1980s featured neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism as the two dominant approaches. While these two were interlocked in the so-called “neo-neo-debate” about the possibility of cooperation between states under anarchy (Baldwin 1993; Jervis 1999), a new school of thought emerged that was not yet clearly defined. Drawing on the English School as well as on a wider philosophical and sociological literature, a number of scholars refused to study international politics from the dominant narrow perspective in which outcomes were traced back to strategic interactions among rationally calculating states with differing material capabilities. First labeled as “interpretive analytics” (Kratochwil/Ruggie 1986: 766) and “reflectivist approaches” (Keohane 1988: 389), this intellectual current later became known as “constructivism” (Palan 2000: 586f; Adler 2002).

Broadly speaking, early constructivists argued that world politics was socially constructed in the sense that power constellations, rules, and institutions were not self-evident conditions pushing states in a certain direction, but the products of social interaction whose meaning could not be separated from the interpretations of the actors involved (Wendt 1992). Thus, instead of assuming an objective reality whose laws had to be uncovered, constructivists claimed that actors collectively shaped their reality. It was “a world of our making” (Onuf

1989). In order to avoid the pitfalls of both structural determinism and reductionism, constructivists proposed to conceptualize agency and structure as being mutually constitutive (Wendt 1987: 350ff; Dessler 1989: 451ff). Such a counter position to the prevailing structural determinism promised to better account for processes of change at the international level.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, constructivism succeeded in shaking the previous consensus that studies of international politics should be based on epistemological realism, a positivist methodology and a rational-actor model (Fierke 2007: 172f). Exponents of established theories were thus challenged to justify their research endeavors on a more fundamental level than before (see e.g. Mearsheimer 1994: 37ff; Wendt 1995). But obviously, strong reservations to the new approach remained. Constructivism was confronted with the objection that while it may offered an interesting new perspective, it had yet to develop a clear research agenda and demonstrate its value in empirical studies. Probably the most prominent statement of this skepticism was Robert Keohane's claim as President of the International Studies Association. He argued that the established patterns of thought could only be challenged by engaging in empirical research and by establishing a clear research program:

“Indeed, the greatest weakness of the reflective school lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective research program that could be employed by students of world politics. Waltzian neorealism has such a research program; so does neoliberal institutionalism, which has focused on the evolution and impact of international regimes. Until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues in world politics, they will remain on the margins of the field, largely invisible to the preponderance of empirical researchers, most of whom explicitly or implicitly accept one or another version of rationalistic premises.” (Keohane 1988: 392)

His conception of a “research program” obviously presupposed an epistemological view in which theories can be tested against “facts”. It also rested on a methodological stance that demanded of scholars to develop a ready-made program that could be employed in studies of different empirical phenomena, allowing a balanced comparison with the explanatory power of other programs. This request, articulated by one of the key representatives of the established patterns of thought turned out to be a Trojan horse. Keohane's suggestion to develop a consistent research program expressed the expectations of the discipline's mainstream. With

hindsight, the concessions made to these expectations resulted in safeguarding hegemony of a positivist conception of science since the still young constructivist current split into two separate streams (Wight 2002: 40f; Hopf 1998: 171).³ There were those who did not heed Keohane's call and continued to work on philosophical arguments about normative transformations in international politics (Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Walker 1993), discursive representations in security policy (Klein 1990; Campbell 1992; Weldes et al. 1999) or the constitution of collective identities (Neumann 1996, 1999). Constructivist norm researchers, however, adopted the course asked for by Keohane. Trying to operationalize their theoretical arguments, they proposed a standard definition of norms, specified hypotheses, and developed explanatory models that were supposed to be applicable in empirical research across different issue areas. For the first time, constructivists felt to be in a position to meet the established theories eye to eye because their accounts could be tested against rationalist explanations (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 916f).

3. A methodological critique of constructivist norm research

More than a decade and several IO-publications later, constructivist norm research lies at the heart of what is considered to be exemplary "social constructivist" research in International Relations. While rationalist theories are depicted as interest-based, constructivist theories are characterized as norm-based. A logic of consequentialism to explain behavior is contrasted with behavior that is based on a logic of appropriateness (Deitelhoff 2006: 14ff). Norms are treated in a separate article in the Handbook of International Relations (Hurrell 2002) and the theoretical status of norms is used as a criterion to distinguish between rationalism and constructivism (Fearon/Wendt 2002: 61f). The conceptual framework laid out by constructivist norm research in the 1990s is applied in many empirical studies (see e.g. Gillies 2010; Kelley 2008; Percy 2007).

³ Until today, constructivist approaches in IR are divided into critical or hard constructivism on the one and conventional or soft constructivism on the other (Fierke 2007: 172ff; Palan 2000: 576ff; Hopf 1998: 172ff). John Ruggie distinguished the conventional constructivism from the radical one by terming it "social constructivism" (Ruggie 1998: 862).

Distinguishing themselves from the earlier works, constructivist norm researchers sought to demonstrate the applicability of their theoretical arguments in extensive empirical studies.⁴ Some decided to demonstrate the significance of norms in fields such as national security that were dominated by realist theories (Katzenstein 1996b; Jepperson et al. 1996). Denouncing the overemphasis of material aspects, Peter Katzenstein wanted to challenge neorealism on its home-turf. He offered a “norm-based explanation of the policies that the police and military pursued as ‘agents of violence’ in prewar Japan” (Katzenstein 1996b: 14). Similarly, Audie Klotz (1995: 13ff) and Martha Finnemore (1996b: 5ff) both questioned the self-evident nature of “national interests” in rationalist theories. They argued that interests like “the security of the state” should not be treated as stable properties which could be posited in abstract definitions. Instead, research should investigate how state interests and preferences were generated in processes of social interaction in the first place. Within these processes, norms were granted “crucial roles in defining identity and interest, rather than simply functioning as a weak constraint on more fundamental strategic or economic interests” (Klotz 1995: 9). Thus, norms analytically took precedence over interests and preferences, both of which were considered to be “malleable” and dependent on a normative social environment (Finnemore 1996b: 11ff).

On a theoretical level, these were powerful arguments that cast doubt on central assumptions and categories that had previously been treated as self-evident. Unfortunately, the ensuing research designs did not tap the full potential inherent in these arguments. On a methodological level, the norm research program unequivocally remained located within the established camp of neo-positivism in IR, rejecting alternative conceptions of social science advocated by post-modernist or post-structuralist authors. Although they shared with them an interest in questions about identity and culture, norm constructivists preferred to start from abstract theoretical assumptions, logically deriving hypotheses from these assumptions and then testing these hypotheses against empirical “facts” that were regarded as neutral and self-evident (Finnemore 1996b: 25ff).⁵ Obviously, this ideal of science is based on the

⁴ For example, Martha Finnemore (1996a: 32) indicated that Wendt, Dessler, Kratochwil, Ruggie, Onuf, “and other early proponents of these sociological approaches” had been repeatedly “criticized for not demonstrating empirical applications”.

⁵ While we draw in broad strokes here, there seemed to be awareness of this methodological decision. However, the resulting tensions have not been solved. For example, Finnemore (1996a: 9) criticizes the positivist “aspirations of scholars to construct a generalizable and deductively-derived theory of international politics on

epistemological assumption that a social reality exists independently of the researcher. Only if this is assumed, it makes sense to act as if real events can be objectively observed and subsumed under the categories of the scientist. Starting from these premises, norms were conceptualized as “standards of appropriate behavior” and treated as an independent variable to explain political outcomes (Finnemore 1996b: 22-25; Risse/Sikkink 1999: 2f). Their mode of operation was illustrated in figures that indicated the direction of presumed “causal pathways” (Jepperson et al. 1996: 52; Klotz 1995: 20f). Thanks to such neat research designs, the expected effects of norms on the behavior of actors could be specified in advance. On this basis, constructivist norm research was credited with offering more “explanatory power” than competing approaches. In fact, the ensuing publications gave constructivism “for the first time [...] a critical mass of research” which was qualified to meet the established approaches at eye level (Checkel 1998: 347). The production of empirical studies of processes of interest formation and normative change was regarded as the “added value” of constructivist norm research (Adler 2002: 101f).

This adjustment to the research routines of the field’s mainstream was problematic for two reasons. First, constructivist norm research stopped short of developing an alternative to established ways of conducting empirical research in IR. The critique of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism remained limited to their assumptions about actor’s goals and motivations. In other words, the liberating move against the rationalist straightjacket only had an ontological dimension. The proposed alternative was still based on a positivist epistemology, searching for self-evident facts to prove the regulative effects of norms on the behavior of actors. In order to demonstrate that “norms matter”, research on them was “mainstreamed” (Checkel 1998: 347). Thus, much of the initial constructivist critique of an epistemologically flawed approach for the analysis of the social world can also in large part be applied to the constructivist norm research as well (Kratochwil/Ruggie 1986: 774f).

Second, from the outset, constructivist norm research inherited a strong structuralist bias. Conceptualizing norms in terms of a theory of institutions and as expressions of an existing ideational structure, it lost sight of the action-theoretical dimension which would enable to analyze norms as being created and transformed in communicative processes between social

the model of economics or the natural sciences”. Later, she herself selects her cases to “allow for generalization” on the ground of deductively derived concepts (Finnemore 1996b: 32).

agents. By doing this, the constructivist claim that agency and structure are mutually constituted was disregarded in “structural constructivism”. Changes in behavior were understood as the direct result of structural forces. The appropriateness of a norm was simply taken for granted. It accounted for the adaptive behavior of automaton-like actors who had been reprogrammed by the insertion of new norms. In short, this kind of norm research thus wound up as a structuralist explanation of why actors comply with norms.

As we argued above, the most problematic aspect of conceptualizing norms in such a way is that it suggests that a norm existed independently of human agents and can directly “regulate” behavior. Thus, agency is transferred to the systems’ structure of norms and ideas (Finnemore 1996b: 14ff, but also Katzenstein 1996b: 27f). Agents become mere “throughputs” for environmental structures (Jackson 2003). Action, understood as “the concrete, meaning-oriented activity of an agent”, is reduced to “something that approaches stimulus-response behavior” (Goddard/Nexon 2005: 14). Norms were conceptualized as expressions of the social structure and not as the result of meaningful action (Goddard/Nexon 2005: 37f). In fact, they simply “emerge[d] from within previously existing social institutions” (Klotz 1995: 22). Constructivist norm research appears to have reproduced IR's preference of systemic theorizing. If we look at the research design of Finnemore/Sikkink for example, a norm, once it is established, is seen as a “system variable” that directly navigates the “behavior” of human agents. A single norm is distilled out of a broader normative context and then conceptualized as being stable and determining the behavior of actors. The influence of communicative practices is completely ignored for the sake of specifying causal pathways and ensuring explanatory parsimony (Wiener 2004: 200ff). We will put flesh on the bones of this two-folded critique by discussing the two most prominent models of norm dynamics: the “norm life cycle” and the “spiral model”.

Illustrating our critique: the two models of norm dynamics

The two important theoretical models of norm dynamics within constructivist norm research were the “norm life cycle” proposed by Finnemore/Sikkink (1998: 895ff) and the “spiral model” introduced by Risse/Sikkink (1999: 3ff). These models classify various stages in the development of a norm from its creation until its full-scale internalization. However, already

the term “creation” for the first stage is somewhat misleading as neither model deals with the question how a norm emerges in the first place, i.e. from which social contexts it arises and in which discourses it is embedded. Instead, the existence of a norm is simply taken for granted. Both models begin with individuals or groups of “norm entrepreneurs” who pick up these norms, champion them on a global scale and mobilize support by powerful states (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 896f; Risse/Sikkink 1999: 11ff).

Not every norm reaches the stage where it obtains “prescriptive status”. It can get stuck in the middle if it does not gain enough support. Thus, a “life cycle” and a “spiral” can be completed or not. However, as soon as a norm reaches a “tipping point” of sufficient acceptance, there is no escape. Its eventual internalization by all actors becomes virtually unstoppable as they “cascade” upon actors until all of them finally abide to the norm (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 895).⁶ As such, both models are hardly about normative “dynamics”. Socialization is conceptualized as a one-way street. The socialized agent is not endowed with the capacity to act otherwise by interpreting the norm differently or by convincing her socializers to reconsider their position. Such actions can only be observed in these models as tactical moves, as obstacles to eventual compliance; after all, the “goal of socialisation is for actors to internalize norms” (Risse/Sikkink 1999: 11). Once this is accomplished, a norm becomes part of the social structure and works top-down, pushing actors into “rule-consistent behavior” (Risse/Sikkink 1999: 20). Thus, changes in behavior are explained in both models by reference to a normative structure that is successfully imposed on recalcitrant agents. Neither model includes the possibility that the meaning of norms might change.

These models, abundantly illustrated with empirical examples, at first seem so suggestive that it is easily overlooked how they press social communication into an mechanical and unidirectional steering process. First, the models do not allow for a normative shift in direction. What if those who should comply can convince the initial norm entrepreneurs that they have been wrong? Such a development is certainly possible, e.g. in the controversial debates about the legitimacy of “humanitarian interventions”, but it is completely ignored in both the “life

⁶ Note that Finnemore/Sikkink explicitly follow Cass Sunstein with regard to their norm life cycle, who – although partially critical of economic game-theory-models, clearly draws her insights from such assumptions and conceptualizes norms in a very narrow, almost exclusively regulative way (Sunstein 1997: 32ff).

cycle” and the “spiral model”. Instead, both focus on predetermined stages that every norm passes through. They design a course of events that runs from A to B to C. Second, modifications and reinterpretations of the content of a norm are not considered at all. What if the meaning of a norm changes in the process between its creation at one point in time and its juridical implementation at another point in time? What about diverging interpretations of norms? These problems are simply blinded out by theoretical models which consider norms as the independent variable to explain behavior.

With such structuralist and unidirectional models, constructivist norm research is not able to account for normative changes, but only for norm-consistent changes in behavior. Interested in regulative effects, constructivist norm research has mainly developed theoretical arguments about the unquestioned adherence of actors to normative social structures that surround them. As central element of social structure, norms define what the right thing to do is: “norms create patterns of behavior in accordance with their prescriptions.” (Finnemore 1996b: 23). It is thus not surprising that constructivist norm research embraced the “logic of appropriateness” as a theory of action that supports their arguments (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 912). Derived from James March and Johan Olsen (1989: 21ff), this norm-based logic of action is supposedly an alternative to a logic of consequences, based on actor’s rationality and utility maximization. The logic of appropriateness fits well in the structuralist framework since it excludes the possibility of norm-deviant behavior and rules out that actors consciously reflect on norms. Actors simply “internalize the roles and rules as scripts to which they conform, not out of conscious choice, but because they understand these behaviors to be appropriate” (Finnemore 1996b: 29).

In this view, actors are institutionally programmed, they are not endowed with agency, i.e. with the ability to act different than the institutional context suggests. It is a logic which is not able to take into account changes of normative structures (Sending 2002: 461). Once again, the illustration of the two models of norm dynamics clearly showed that the early constructivist’s meta-theoretical challenge has been translated into a neo-positivist research design that mainly provides a structuralist explanation why actors comply with norms. Thus, the same critique that Axel Honneth leveled against the conceptualization of culture in early critical theory, can equally be applied to constructivist norm research: It has failed to

demonstrate “that socialized subjects are not simply passively subjected to an anonymous steering process but, rather, actively participate with their own interpretative performances in the complex process of social integration” (Honneth 1987: 355).

4. How are norms and action related?

Our reconstruction of constructivist norm research showed that it conceptualized norms as structural givens with an unequivocal meaning. Research designs such as the “spiral model” depicted them as independent variables within unidirectional schemes of large scale social change. From a methodological stance that operates with a clear-cut distinction between independent and dependent variables, it was determined at the outset of research that norms cause changes in behavior. Accordingly, they had to be held constant throughout the analysis. This adherence to a neo-positivist methodology entailed that constructivist norm research conceptualized the relation between norms and action in a way that did not necessarily follow from its (meta-)theoretical arguments. If interests were malleable and subject to continuous redefinition, one should expect that the same applied to norms. Instead, norm researchers stipulated a one-sided causal relation in which stable norms performed the role of the impetus while agency was reduced to the question whether or not a norm was accepted and internalized.

In the terminology of a “relational sociology” outlined by Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) and picked up in IR by Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon (1999), constructivist norm research in the 1990s drew on a “substantialist” understanding of social phenomena. Substantialism presupposes the existence of fixed units with a specifiable substance that distinguishes them from other units. Substantialist theories “presume that entities precede interaction, or that entities are already entities before they enter into social relations with other entities” (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293). In constructivist norm research, these actors are states or groups within a state, who are confronted with norms coming from outside their boundaries. These actors then have the choice either to reject them or to embrace them, i.e. to make them a part of their substance. As Jackson and Nexon (1999: 294) accurately note, such an account contains only the “illusion of agency” since it is not the actors themselves who do something but rather

the “variables - attributes of entities - which do the acting”. The “actor” is merely the location where changes take place (see also Blumer 1969: 127ff). In other words, changes in behavior are not endogenous to the actors and their interpretations but rather externally induced by norms which supposedly exist independently of actors. These norms, in turn, at least in the above mentioned unidirectional models, are not amenable to change themselves; they are treated as stable things whose existence is simply taken for granted; they are the real actors as they change the “behavior” of the purported agents, understood as adaption to external forces (Herborth 2004: 62).

From a relationalist perspective – the methodological counterpart to substantialism –, the relation between norms and action is more complex. Just as actors are not fixed units with an identifiable substance, norms are not stable things with an unambiguous meaning. Rather, both are products of ongoing processes of signification in a social reality that is thought of as “brimming with indeterminacy” and “pregnant with possibilities, waiting to be completed and rationalized” (Shalin 1986: 10). In such a perspective, norms can be conceptualized as moral points of orientation that are invoked and re-interpreted in the process of acting. In terms of a theory of action this approach is based on (1) the sociality of action and (2) the situated creativity of agency.

First, in the relationalist perspective, there is no such thing as an atomistic actor. Authors like Hans Joas and Mustafa Emirbayer would contend that actors can only be conceived of in relation to other actors and their social expectations. In fact, actors can consider themselves “actors” that are able to interact with their environment only on the basis of their sociality. It is their entanglement in intersubjectively held structures of meaning which allows them to make sense of experiences and enables them to assess and choose between different courses of action (Joas 1997: 184ff). Individual preferences and interests, necessary preconditions to act, are not individual properties of agents but instead constituted “coterminously within contexts”, involving relations with others (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967). Within these contexts, much like Katzenstein and Finnemore acknowledge on a theoretical level, socially shared norms play an important role. But rather than conceptualizing them as causes of behavior, norms should be thought of as points of orientation that actors can refer to when they perform and legitimate their actions. Invoking and interpreting norms in a particular way enables them to make sense

of particular course of action. As they constantly face situations in which they have to act and accommodate the “obdurate character of the empirical world” (Blumer 1969: 22), norms help actors to sustain their capacity to act.

Second, this process of acting is quite different from the “norm guided behavior” that norm research has put forth. Due to the indeterminate nature of social phenomena, action always “involves defining that which is as yet undefined, rather than simply making a different selection from a reservoir of situation components that are either already defined or have no need of definition” (Joas 1997: 133). How the actor assesses and defines the situation at hand, which moral points of orientation she chooses and how she interprets and incorporates them into action by ascribing (potentially new) meaning to it depends to a great range on her imagination and inventiveness. This creativity is played out in concrete situations of crisis that are themselves “ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction of the part of the reflective intelligence” (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967f). Although actors develop certain routines to ease processes of constant reflection and evaluation, no two situations are exactly the same and sooner or later established beliefs are called into question. In such “problematic situations”, actors are in need of developing new beliefs to guide and (re)stabilize actions (Hellmann 2009: 639f). Thus, creative intelligence refers to the ability of agents to cope with new situations, for example by (re-)interpreting existing norms or choosing different ones as new points of orientation. Accordingly, action is understood as indeterminate and non-teleological. Norms, but also goals and the plans how to realize them, creatively emerge in the process of action itself (Joas 1997: 160ff).

Having sketched these two dimensions of human agency assumed by a relationalist perspective, the paper is now in a position to outline an understanding of the relation between norms and action that allows to conceive of transformative dynamics in a non teleological way. Human action distinguishes itself from mere instinct-driven behavior precisely through the reference to socially held structures of meaning and the capacity to reflectively and creatively evaluate new contexts and update meanings accordingly. Referring to norms is an important component of these processes of reflection and evaluation. For the actors, they serve as moral points of orientation which *structure* the realm of possible actions and, at the same time, *are being structured by* human action. Norms, as expressions of intersubjectively held notions of

what is appropriate obviously influence the choices that can be made. They are an integral part of the available cultural reservoir on which actors can draw to legitimate their actions. At the same time, by referring to norms in particular contexts, the meanings of these norms are continuously reconstructed and modified. Confronted with previously unknown situations and problems, actors reconsider their previous commitment to a norm and the way they used to interpret it. As such, norms are constantly put to the test in new contexts which have to be made sense of. While drawing on norms for guidance, the actors' acceptance of a norm is only a temporary one and the meaning of a norm remains ambiguous – it is not fixed beyond a temporary “determination of the indeterminate” (Shalin 1986: 12f).

This implies that norms are explicit formulations of social expectations. They rest on beliefs and world views that remain implicit most of the time. In other words, norms emanate out of historically engrained patterns of interpretation and express those in the form of “should-phrases” that have an obligatory character. However, they do not operate as fixed programs that regulate behavior. Rather, they are assumed as valid only for the time being and, because they are explicitly formulated, they are potentially open to debate. The temporal acceptance of norms is likely to change, or at least reexamined when new situations and problems arise which leave the actor in uncertainty how to act. Put differently, the transformation of normative commitments appears to be the rule rather than the exception, at least if we conceive of actors not as automatons reacting to static norms but as reasoning and communicating subjects which are constantly pressed to make decisions in uncertain situations and legitimate these decisions to themselves and others (Oevermann 2002: 12f; Oevermann 2008: 23ff).

One major contribution of a relationalist norm conceptualization is that it creates space for the analysis of communication processes. Instead of observing the behavior of actors and asking whether they complied with a norm or not, it calls for the interpretation of how these actors refer to norms in order to legitimate their actions. This does not mean to take rhetorical enunciations at face value. When an actor invokes a norm, it is no evidence of alleged compliance. While in the perspective of the agent, the norm might have been what subjectively motivated him to do something, for the social scientist analyzing this statement this particular reference to a norm is only the point of access for a reconstruction of the patterns of interpretation that have been actualized in this articulation. The researcher should not treat the

assertion as evidence but as empirical material that allows access to implicit beliefs and world views. It is through the thorough interpretation of what was objectively stated that latent structures of meaning, like self-conceptions or unreflecting world views, can be disclosed (Oevermann et al. 1987).

Thus, this norm conceptualization offers a methodological perspective which tells us what phenomena to look at, how to look at them and how to make sense of them. We take the constructivist aspiration to explain processes of normative change seriously. It is an epistemological interest that fundamentally distinguishes it from structuralist approaches. Following this, we propose to adopt a relational (and by implication processual) conceptual apparatus that corresponds to this epistemological interest. Some works of constructivist norm research might have already done this allusively in programmatic theoretical statements. So, even more important for constructivist norm research is the orientation towards an interpretive methodology that allows to deliver on the ambitious promise to explain processes of normative change in international politics (Herborth 2010, 2011; Jackson 2006). To better understand these processes of normative change already marks an important constructivist tenet which distinguishes this paradigm from the structuralist perspective of rationalist accounts. At the same time, rethinking the relation between norms and action (1) increases analytical specificity of research questions and methodologies (2) helps to conceptualize normative change in a non-teleological manner (3) allows to conceive both norm success and norm failure.

First, in terms of analytical specificity, norms understood as orientating points for action can be distinguished from norms conceptualized as legal rules that regulate behavior. While the latter might be described as “standards of behavior”, the former rejects the image of a fixed and clear-cut standard as it implies that the social construction of a norm is never concluded in the form of an unequivocal and non-controversial definition. Defining norms as “standards of behavior” reinforces a conception where normative action is reduced to stimulus-response behavior. Although this distinction appears to be obvious, it was not consistently present in constructivist norm research in the 1990s. In fact, most authors addressed and mixed together both conceptualizations as they were interested in explaining the compliance (of states) to legal rules while proclaiming they could also explain change and the transformation of the normative structure. Put differently, one should be analytically more precise and concise when using the

term. More analytical specificity with regard to the distinction introduced above in terms of legal codification, normative binding force, level of aggregation and specificity as well as regional and cultural scope appears to be desirable.⁷

Following this distinction, there are at least two different kinds of questions that can be asked concerning the role of norms in international relations. Each of these questions originates in different research interests and implies different methodological consequences. On the one hand, a constructivist norm research that is committed to a neo-positivist methodology might be useful for explaining the compliance or non-compliance to formalized legal rules. For this objective, it may be adequate to treat norms as self-evident and stable things that can be defined at the beginning of analysis and be translated into variables. On the other hand, scholars interested in normative change should take the claim seriously that norms are “collective social facts” that are constructed in processes of meaning ascription and thus remain open for modifications (Pouliot 2004: 328ff). If the research interests lies with such broader issues of normative change, norms, while providing a sensible access points for analysis, should be conceptualized as dynamic and cannot be squeezed into a variable-model. Instead, references to norms by actors allow to reconstruct and disclose latent structures of meaning and thereby make patterns of interpretation explicit that the agent has only implicitly, and perhaps unconsciously, invoked in her statement (Oevermann 2000: 64ff).

Second, the interesting question then is how and why normative change occurs. It seems promising to look at the interpretations, reasons, and justifications that agents state for their actions and investigate how these change. Thus, instead of taking an established and legally fixed rule and search for its compliance effects on behavior, studies of normative transformations have to focus on the meanings social and creative agents ascribe to their actions in specific situations, how they refer to norms to legitimate these actions and how norms are modified in these communicative processes. In other words, instead of taking a certain interpretation of a norm for granted, researchers have to interpret the interpretations of actors (Guzzini 2000: 160ff). This allows insights to the important question of what is

⁷ Note in this context how many different phenomena in IR are referred to as norms. Among others, racial equality and the abolishment of apartheid (Klotz 1995), women’s rights and suffrage (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998), the abolishment of land mines (Price 1998), human rights *per se* (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999), international election monitoring (Kelley 2008), and corporate social engagement (Flohr et al. 2010) have been described as norms.

“appropriate” and what is not for an actor in a specific situation. Especially if the interpretations of actors express new meanings or aims to justify the fixation of previously loosely defined norms into legal rules or concrete obligations, one can expect a highly contested struggle of competing norm interpretations.⁸

Third, as norms and their effects depend on the permanent reproduction through social interaction, this perspective allows to take into account both norm success and norm failure. Although not discussed by Finnemore/Sikkink (1998) or Risse/Ropp/Sikkink (1999), there is no guaranteed happy ending for norm life cycles nor does each norm spiral succeeds. Within both models, widely shared norms may “erode” if they are not continuously reaffirmed (Rosert/Schirmbeck 2007: 284f). Even long accepted and almost “taken-for-granted” normative notions such as the prohibition of torture can be questioned and interpreted in modified ways. Put differently, the social construction of the meanings of a norm do not end with its official transcription into a legal code nor can the impact of norms be guaranteed by successful “norm internalization”. In fact, although a norm might be widely shared and accepted, we argue that there is no such thing as complete norm internalization. If we take seriously that norms per definition are intersubjectively constructed in the communications between actors, they cannot be isolated and simply “internalized” individually. Actors can internalize habits and routines of behavior implied by a norm, but not the norm itself. In the end, emphasizing the possibility of norm internalization and focusing on norm success only appears more to be owned to the functionalist optimism inherent in constructivism than to an empirical interest in normative change as these might occur in directions normatively not wished for (Checkel 1998: 339).⁹

⁸ The negotiation rounds involved in the Kyoto regime come to mind as the protection of environment as a loosely defined norm had to be gradually translated into legally binding obligations.

⁹ To elaborate on this argument, the norms chosen for analysis by constructivist norm research were all “good” norms whose diffusion and eventual implementation was desirable, at least from a liberal western position. Constructivist norm research was thus deeply influenced by the political agenda to demonstrate that normative progress is possible and that material interests and power politics can be transcended if norms are anchored in the cultural structure of a state and in international relations (Barkin 2003: 334f; Jackson/Nexon 2004). In this vein, it was desirable that states “internalize” human rights norms and complied with them. The respective definitions and research designs were developed with those “good norms” in mind and thereby perpetuated the structuralist understanding of norms: because of its normative agenda, norm research was tailored to the question how implementation can be achieved, not how norms might change.

5. Conclusions

In a review article entitled “The constructivist turn in International Relation Theory”, Jeffrey Checkel (1998) critically assessed constructivist norm research. While he stated that better research designs and specifications of key terms as well as developing middle-ranged theory were still needed – changes he considered as “easy fixes” –, constructivism in his view had for the first time reached a critical mass and was in a position to confront mainstream IR with empirical results. Being in that position, the crucial question for him was “what kind of constructivism do we want” (Checkel 1998: 347). The answer he saw implicitly given by constructivist norm research was to translate loosely defined constructivist tenets into a more coherent research program. In fact, for him “their emphasis on dialogue and causal analysis suggests a fairly standard concern with building a rigorous and coherent body of research that speaks to and plays off other literatures within IR” (Checkel 1998: 348). Given the predominant status of rationalist accounts within the 1990s, their modest aim obviously was to relate constructivism to both and synthesize different approaches into the “via media” (Checkel 1997: 488ff).

The first aim of this paper was to appreciate and critically evaluate the constructivist norm research of the 1990s. In retrospect, assessing this literature illustrates how a new research agenda was successfully established within the disciplinary mainstream. Today, norm research is firmly established as one of the major reference points of IR constructivism. Within handbooks and introductions, constructivism can neatly be summarized in contrast to other paradigms: while realist theories focus on power, institutionalist theories on interdependence, and neoliberal theories on preferences, it is constructivist theories than look at norms to explain the behavior of actors in international relations (see e.g. Zangl/Zürn 2003: 140ff). Moreover, constructivist norm research is not a phenomenon of the 1990s. Instead, the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual decisions that we have discussed still have strong repercussions on how norms are conceptualized in current IR (Kelley 2008: 226; Percy 2007: 371).

The reconstruction of constructivist norm research has shown that by establishing itself as a research program, constructivist norm research subscribed to the mainstreaming force of widely shared positivist ideals of science (Katzenstein 1990: 19). These ideals were so strongly

anchored within IR that alternative approaches were heavily criticized for not being “scientific enough” (Jackson 2010). “Unable to shake the positivist orthodoxy because it never really understood it” (Wight 2002: 40f), constructivist norm research accepted established neo-positivist research designs instead of developing a methodologically consistent alternative. With regard to early constructivist works on rules and norms (Kratochwil 1989, Onuf 1989), we argue that this decision to “go mainstream” implied certain translation errors. Speaking broadly, the early constructivist approaches were translated into a structuralist research agenda. The initial potential of questioning the self-evident quality of interests got lost when various scholars heeded Keohane’s call and pressed complex social processes into linear causal models so they could be confronted with “empirical facts”. Interestingly, although early constructivists stated that the effects of norms “on human action [are] not adequately captured in probabilistic statements about future conduct” (Kratochwil 1989: 100ff), this is exactly what the latter norm research did. Instead of contributing to a broader understanding of social dynamics of norms, it merely added a “cultural” variable to the already established “material” ones.

Beyond this reconstruction, the second aim of this paper was to outline a broader understanding of the relation between norms and action and to indicate why such an understanding might be a productive approach to the analysis of normative transformation in international relations. While we do not claim that our ontological commitments and wagers to relationalist thinking are either “true” or “exhaustive” of the phenomenon which we discuss as norms (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 292), we believe that conceptualizing norms as moral points of orientation is better suited to asking and answering questions about normative change. If one is interested in such issues – and we believe constructivist norm research rightfully was – one has to leave behind the notion of norms as regulative “standards of behavior” and instead look at the interpretations, ascriptions of meaning, and justifications provided by creative and social actors in the political sphere. It is here where the social scientist can access latent structures of meaning and assess whether or not they change over time.

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