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International Norms and Foreign Policy

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Summary and Keywords

International norms exist as constraints on foreign policy, yet norms are also the product of the foreign policies of states and other actors. Research has demonstrated how norms restrain foreign policy choice and behavior, and even alter state conceptions of national interests. Other studies point to the weakness of norms in the face of national interests and state power. Others note that the meaning of norms and their obligations are often contested, leading to problems of norm violation and norm enforcement. As social constructions, an important consideration is how and when foreign policy promotes norms and norm diffusion in the broader international community.

Keywords: norms, identity, constructivism, norm life cycle, contestation, foreign policy analysis

Introduction

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) entails the exploration of the various influences that shape decision-making in national governments. From the psychological dispositions of elites, to the domestic and international systems in which they operate, how leaders make the decisions they do is of enduring importance for scholars and citizens alike. The first purpose of this article is to review the literature on the effects of international norms on the foreign policy of states. Countless studies over decades from various theoretical perspectives have taken up the issue of whether, when, and why states comply with international norms. One way to know if norms matter is if states follow them, and whether they are changed by prevailing social expectations.

Among the different types of norms in the literature, there are regulative norms that refer to those that constrain behavior, a popular account for foreign policy analysis. Some norms are prohibitive, saying what not to do, while others are prescriptive or permissive, saying what can be or should be done (Finnemore, 1996). Constitutive norms go beyond mere constraint to change or “create new actors, interests, or categories of action” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Searle, 1995). There are norms tied to particular identity groups, and others that exist more generally. Norms are bundled in broader international regimes and institutions, and some “metanorms” provide “foundational” and constitutional architecture to more specific rules and laws (Reus-Smit, 1997).

One argument for norm conformity and acceptance is the implied punishment that comes with noncompliance. Some definitions of norms stress the aspect of social sanction for normatively proscribed behaviors. A “behavioral definition” of norms, according to Axelrod (1986, p. 1097), “exists to the extent that individuals usually act in a certain way and are often punished when seen not to be acting this way.” But a focus on “behavioral regularities” risks tautology and ignores that possibility that “not all patterned behavior is rule-bound or rooted in shared expectations about others’ behaviors” (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, p. 727). To be a norm, Helmke and Levitsky (2004, p. 272) argue that a behavioral regularity must “respond to an established rule or guideline, the violation of which generates some kind of external sanction.” The definitions provided by Axelrod, Helmke, and Levitsky assume punishment of norm violators, which may not be theoretically or empirically warranted. A second section of this article takes up the foreign policy of norm enforcement or punishment of norm violations.

Among the most common definition of norms in the international relations literature is “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 5). With this definition, we face the problem of figuring out who has the “given identity” and how shared the collective expectations are for which appropriate behaviors. This sociological approach tends to take for granted the clarity of normative prescriptions and prohibitions—that they are “shared to at least a minimal degree” (Copeland, 2000, p. 194). A third aspect of our article takes up the matter of how

shared norms are, and how successfully socialization diffuses norms throughout international society, and how much those norms are contested. If they are contested or subject to different interpretations, the strength of norms will remain in doubt.

There are various theoretical perspectives on norms, and various degrees of optimism and pessimism about their role. The assumption that norms are “good,” and have powerful influences, leads to research trying to show how good norms can replace bad, and how such good norms gain acceptance and compliance. Neoliberal and conventional constructivist perspectives tend to operate in this space. Realists and critical theorists, rather, frame norms as products of power. For realists, the lurking power behind norms is power politics, with norms epiphenomena of the power and interests of major states in the system. For critical constructivists, various forms of social and economic hegemony lie behind norms, which are products of power meant to impose one’s will and control others. Such norms are to be challenged, denaturalized, and deconstructed. From these myriad perspectives, with concomitant epistemological and ontological differences, it is hard to assess the cumulative findings of norms research definitively. The literature is hampered by a lack of generalizable studies; lack of clear and agreed definitions; and thus the lack of cumulative, refined theoretical and empirical knowledge (Desch, 1998, pp. 151–152), but the pluralism of approaches brings diversity to the puzzle of norms. While there are different perspectives and varying evidence on the impact of norms, they remain a central part of modern foreign policy analysis.

Norm Conformity and Violation

A great bulk of norms research is devoted to the fundamental question of state compliance with, and violation of, “shared expectations of appropriate behavior.” One reason to maintain a distinction between normative *belief* and normative *practice* is to examine when and how often they coincide. For example, Evangelista (2014, p. 11) notes that “leaders acknowledged that continuing hold of normative beliefs about avoiding civilian harm” after World War II but “the norm—the dominant practice—of strategic bombing of cities rendered that goal unachievable.”

Hirata (2008, p. 239) summarizes the conditions affecting compliance with norms, including the international or domestic power structure in which norm politics takes place; Material interests of policymakers; Transnational socialization of policymakers; and a Positive match (or congruence) between an international norm and domestic culture. This catalog of factors suggests various rationalist and cultural perspectives on norm conformity.

Realist and neoliberal institutional perspectives have approached norms through rationalist models of cost and benefit to state interests. Realists tend to view norms as “geopolitically constructed,” reflecting “the broad interests of powerful states” (Thomas, 2001, p. 31). Realists maintain that the following international norms are a matter of national interest, to be selfishly disregarded at by those with the power and interest to do so. Realists are largely unconvinced about the independent power of norms to compel behavior in the face of power asymmetries and the “absence of mechanisms” and authoritative institutions for determining how to behave (Krasner, 1999, pp. 3–6). Other realists are unconvinced about the ability of norms to overcome issues of uncertainty and relative gains (Copeland, 2000; Mearsheimer, 1994/1995). Neoliberal institutionalists afford norms greater attention through a rationalist lens in which they served to coordinate states’ interest maximization. The functional nature of norms is meant to overcome problems of uncertainty, allowing states to cooperate and build trust for mutual gain. From the perspective of regimes and institutions, norms constrain states largely by altering incentive structures for cooperation (Axelrod, 1986; Reus-Smit, 1997, p. 560).

While interests and power no doubt influence the record of norm compliance, constructivists have sought to theorize and empirically demonstrate the social power of norms to constrain even Great Powers. While coercive power may have a role in “being heard and having the opportunity to persuade,” Finnemore (2003, pp. 88–90, 143–145) questions the assumption that “material conditions impose a necessary behavioral logic” on normative choices. Studies have shown how even Great Powers have been constrained and even changed by norms. Bower (2015, p. 349) argues that, even without the United States “and other emerging global leaders like China, India, and Russia,” such as the ban on antipersonnel mines, treaties “generate informal compliance and adaptation among non-party states even as these actors remain outside the formal legal agreement.”

Beyond constraining behavior, Bjorkdahl (2002, p. 11) adds that the constructivist literature offers “a theoretical explanation of interest (re)-formation.” Klotz’s (1995) landmark study demonstrates the anti-apartheid cause as a “coercive and socializing force in its own right,” showing the “moral principle of racial equality influenced policy on a different, often conflicting, level from economic and strategic factors” (Gerhart, 1997). For constructivists, the constitutive force of norms is in biasing choice or reducing choices to the level of unthinkable (internalized taboo) or unconscious habit (Abdelal et al., 2006, pp. 697-698).

Two examples of normative constraints in the security realm are the nuclear proliferation regime and the nuclear taboo. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is among the most widely shared institutions in contemporary world politics, yet puzzles remain about who develops and who foregoes nuclear weapons programs in both an anarchical and normative environment. Sagan (1996/1997, p. 76) elaborates a norms model of proliferation that hypothesizes that nuclear weapons acquisition has gone from a “prestigious” pursuit to an effort that is “illegitimate and irresponsible” under the norms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The nuclear taboo is a popular example of the power and problems of norms on states, including Great Powers. Tannenwald has argued that the United States has been constrained for decades, even at the risk of national interests, due to social and domestic pressures of the moral prohibition against nuclear weapons (Tannenwald, 1999). The record on the nuclear taboo’s power, however, has been challenged by recent studies questioning if the taboo is so strong or absolute (Dolan, 2013; Press, Sagan, & Valentino, 2013). Press and colleagues (2013) find evidence to suggest the American public has “only a weak aversion to using nuclear weapons,” and a willingness to use nuclear weapons when nuclear weapons provide advantages over conventional weapons in destroying critical targets (Press et al., 2013, p. 1). Tannenwald (2005) finds that decisions to violate the nuclear taboo depends on the extent to which the perception of a normative conflict is shared by other decision-makers and society more generally.

Even if leaders have internalized a norm willingly in the abstract, the complexity of real-world events create sometime a gray area about when norms apply, or when multiple norms conflict. Barkin (2003, p. 337) notes that “even if all actors in the international system ... accept the same basic set of normative structures, they will differ in their interpretation of those structures, whether for rationally self-interested reasons or for psychological (ones).” This leaves open the question of on what basis will interpretations match or diverge. Because of social and ego costs of being perceived in violation of rules, leaders who seem to violate fuzzy norms can offer accounts to argue that the act in fact is not a violation, or that it is an exception (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Shannon, 2000).

For all the attention to norms, culture, and identity in international relations, Hudson and Sampson (1999, p. 670) observe a remarkable lack of “interest in what psychology has to say about those subjects,” despite being long-standing subjects of well-developed research in the field. This has led some to call for an “ideational alliance” between psychology and constructivism, to complement each other’s shortcomings and provide a

fuller view of ideational effects in the policy realm (Shannon & Kowert, 2012). Psychological approaches take norms seriously, yet remind us that “international actors are bombarded with large numbers of normative messages, many of them conflicting, from both external and domestic sources” (Rublee, 2008, p. 426) that are triggered by different situational contexts and which need to be interpreted through agents with different perceptions. Goertz (2004, p. 16) posits the model of “decision making under constraints” as the interaction “between a decision maker and her or his normative environment.” The model’s first step includes eliminating alternative policy options that are “unacceptable on key dimensions,” beyond mere expected utility (Goertz, 2004, pp. 14–15). Similarly, Houghton’s (2012) analysis of the Iranian Hostage Crisis applies a two-step analysis of choice, starting with similar normative elimination of options, followed by a rational choice of remaining alternatives. Working from a psychological standpoint, Hymans (2006) argues that domestic elite role identities shape decisions about weapons programs, with “oppositional nationalists” distrusting and unconcerned with the international arena. Rublee (2008, p. 425) deploys social psychology to explain nuclear restraint as the result of social conformity as well as identification—“behavior resulting from the desire or habit of following the actions of an important other.”

Other psychological studies find that some leaders have personality traits demonstrating a lack of concern for social acceptance or social constraints, let alone international ones. One study of multiple cases of intervention decision-making concluded “in none of the five cases did I discern a significant concern among top decisionmakers with the implications of international norms and laws when they made their decisions to intervene,” concluding that “decisionmakers pay much more attention to the law of the land than to the law of nations” (Vertzberger, 1998, pp. 402–403). If norms are environmental constraints, knowing if leaders are “constraint respecters” or “challengers” becomes a plausible variable in the enactment of international norms (Keller, 2005). Distrustful or nationalistic leaders may entertain different policy options that others call “unthinkable.” Shannon and Keller (2007) show that in the Bush administration debate about the Iraq War, officials high in “distrust” levels supported unilateral attack without UN authorization more than those lower on that leadership trait. U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump publicly entertained resuming torture, to some fanfare in his political base (Johnson, 2016).

As can be shown, norms, power, interests, and psychology complicate easy conclusions about the power of norms in the foreign policy process. Whereas rationalist wisdom suggests states on narrow and material self-interest calculations, and constructivists suggest the logic of appropriateness, these two positions are not mutually exclusive. Socially appropriate choices can make strategic sense, and rational choices can be socially constrained or filtered (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Shannon, 2000). Monroe (2001, p. 159) argues that self-interest is “balanced by human needs for sociability, defined as a feeling of belonging to a group or collectivity.”

If norms are social expectations of appropriateness, states have to learn about appropriateness through socialization, and part of socialization is argued to come through punishment for transgressions. If norm enforcement is inconsistent, the socialization process will suffer as well. Among those chiefly positioned to enforce norms and punish violators, are states. Enforcement, then, becomes a foreign policy choice. We turn to the topics of norm enforcement and socialization in the following sections.

Norm Enforcement

Whether and how states enforce a norm is a key area of research. Some highlight the role of the powerful in assisting in norm promotion (Voeten, 2014, p. 303). Great Powers are arguably best positioned to enforce international norms against violations with any credibility, either through direct coercion or political power through international institutions (DeNevers, 2007). This suggests that some norms fulfill a “power-maintenance function” in normatively prohibiting actions or developments in the system that the powerful see as a challenge to their positions (Thomas, 2001, p. 32). To the extent that Great Powers matter, knowing when major powers will enforce norms and punish violators is of special importance. Ever since the League of Nations failed to save Manchuria and Abyssinia from encroachment, realists have stressed the folly of assuming self-interested states will rescue others in the name of international principles and obligations. Herrmann and Shannon (2001) surveyed U.S. elites’ response to experimental conditions affecting willingness to “defend international norms,” and found that willingness to enforce norms varied greatly by perceptions, interests, and other situational factors.

Barnett (2011, p. 19) poses two questions in the name of enforcing norms: (1) whether it is a permissive or compulsory responsibility, and (2) “who has duties to whom.” A third enforcement question is how to do it, especially, since some forms of punishment themselves may violate norms. Enforcement can take many forms. Pattison (2015) argues that states have a “moral duty to criticize” perpetrators of “mass atrocities and serious external aggression,” leaving of course questions of whether this happens empirically to others. It also suggests the conundrum of determining the slippery notion of what constitutes “mass” atrocities and “serious” aggression (Shannon, 2005).

To enforce norms, or punish violators, Carpenter (2013) said “the appropriate course of action would be to, first, independently verify who violated it.” The United States vowed “no doubt” that Syria was responsible for the 2013 chemical attack, but who decides and how remains the problem of international order. The second issue is to consider who responds and how, which becomes a matter of debate. On the “Red Line crisis” in Syria, the Obama administration for a time “made norm-enforcement the primary, professed basis for attacking Syria,” but Zenko (2013) notes that norms became an argument against

intervention, such as Senator Ted Cruz's claim that "I don't think that's the job of our military, to be defending amorphous international norms."

Humanitarian Intervention is a form of norm enforcement, but the norms surrounding expectations of the international community are far from clear and developed. Finnemore (1996) traces the evolution of humanitarian intervention to stress multilateralism and to encompass more of humanity, but still considers it a permissive (not compulsory) norm. Western's (2002) study of humanitarian decisions in Somalia and Bosnia shows competing beliefs about obligation and interests in 1992, with decisions to act resulting from growing public and administration pressures to "do something."

Humanitarian intervention is complicated because it merges human rights norms with issues about the legitimate use of force. The classic paradigm of sovereignty is challenged by the more recent notion of the "responsibility to protect" (R2P). A recent international set of principles about the need to respond to mass atrocities when a home government is unable or unwilling, debate about the efficacy of humanitarian intervention goes from the optimistic (Glanville, 2015) to the pessimistic (Hehir, 2010). Shannon (2005) points to the differing views of legitimate meaning of humanitarian crises and how to respond to them in the Balkans. Barnett (2011, p. 12) reminds us that "any act of intervention, no matter how well intended, is also an act of control" and thus can arouse suspicion by those who distrust the motives of the interveners.

Sociological and social-psychological perspectives also acknowledge the tendency for inconsistency in enforcing norms, related to prior judgment of the violator and violation. It is often assumed that the violation has occurred, and states merely debate and decide how to enforce and punish. But judgment of an act as violation is itself variable, such as diverging Russian and American perceptions of Balkan atrocities and the legitimacy of NATO responses in the 1990s (Shannon, 2005). Herrmann and Shannon's (2001) experimental survey of American elites show that the same, allegedly norm-violating act generated different responses from U.S. elites depending on who did it. Those with positive images of Israel were more forgiving than those with negative images of Israel, for example, not to mention the same act committed by Iran. But perspectives premised on needs for positive social and self-esteem also can explain motivations that cause states to act. Barnett (2011, pp. 26–28) observes that "ethical awakenings are produced by a crisis of faith and a process of atonement" in which a "horrific event" "demands a response" so that we continue to "tell ourselves ... that we are good, loving individuals."

Socializing States? Norm Diffusion and Contestation

The norm life cycle suggested by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argues that norms emerge and spread over time, and with it comes more compliance and internalization of the norm. This leads to a final question of the politics of norm diffusion and the process of contesting or accepting new norms from the international system. Two factors that Legro (1997, pp. 42, 45-52) tied to compliance relate to how shared a norm is (concordance) and, how clearly codified is it (specificity)? On the matter of concordance, conventional wisdom that the more people who support a norm, the more likely it is to be followed; the fewer who abide by a norm, the less likely violators are to be punished, which permits further violations (Axelrod, 1986). How and when states adopt norms in the first place becomes of vital importance to those seeking to spread norms. Even widely held norms in the system are “hegemonic, not totalizing,” meaning that norms still may be contested (Reus-Smit, 1997, pp. 567-568).

Domestically oriented constructivists recognize that different notions of “appropriate or desirable political ends” and means sometimes “come from inside states” (the “internal locus of causation”) and sometimes come “from changes in the social rules constructed among states in dealings with one another” (Finnemore, 2003, pp. 93-94). The problem of concordance and the presumed cultural uniformity and consensus at the international level is challenged by domestic differences in social expectations and values. If foreign policy is partly about domestic politics, norm concordance within societies is another question for consideration to explain norm compliance. Rousseau (2006, p. 12) refers to this as a “fractional view of norms,” highlighting that norms are rarely 100% accepted, and proponents of certain norms “often compete vigorously with proponents of alternate beliefs and values for hegemony within a society.” Rousseau acknowledges the norm life cycle model but notes “there are no absolute thresholds” for defining when norms are strong, weak, or “dead.”

Checkel’s (1999) concept of cultural match between domestic and international norms suggests the myriad possibilities of assessing and accepting global norms. These insights show that disjoint in international and domestic norms yields a pluralistic patchwork of normative structures and behavior rather than a universal consensus over right and wrong. Domestic cultural variability opens possibilities for norm entrepreneurship and violation, thus the need to account for understanding how foreign policy elites negotiate the social and political world that shapes them. Different domestic structures are more amenable to the influence of outside transnational networks of influence (Checkel, 1999; Risse, 2016).

If different states internalize different norms, which themselves are at different degrees of strength and clarity, it is hard to assess the power of norms on policy or the power of policy on norms. Norm diffusion matters in that norms are said to “matter” the more they are adopted by others. In the study of “how ideas spread” (Acharya, 2004), dynamics of socialization to help “teach” states about proper behavior and roles (Thies, 2013), run up against perspectives focusing on the socializees and “norm takers.” States can be entrepreneurs, or “norm makers” pushing for changes, or “norm takers” under social pressures from “above” and “below” (Checkel, 1999; Wunderlich, 2013, p. 33). Lantis (2011) shows elites pushing new norms by challenging the legitimacy or meaning of existing ones (Wunderlich, 2013, pp. 33–34). Giraldi (2012) examines policy diffusion as the “spread of specific instruments, standards, and institutions, both public and private, to broad policy models, ideational frameworks,” while others see norms “diffused via mimicry, professionalization, and coercive isomorphism” (Kim & Sharman, 2014, p. 424).

States as “norm takers” are lobbied and pressured by others to adopt new norms or comply with existing ones, leading to the question of when states in fact change. “New-adopter” states sometimes take on new norms out of dependency on international resources, or to improve legitimacy in the international community (Ayoub, 2015). In line with realist theories, “extrinsic events” that “upset the existing international order” may “render normative commitments obsolete” (Wunderlich, 2013, p. 30). Raymond (1997) demonstrates that the power of the norm of neutrality varies based on structural changes in the balance of power.

States adopt norms for reasons other than clear material interests, or despite them. Scientific and technological innovations are another cited factor for change, such as the professional communities fostering new views on appropriate organ trafficking (Efrat, 2015). One path to inculcating new norms is to build on previous norms. Price’s (1995) “genealogy of the chemical weapons taboo” built on other existing norms to frame specific prohibitions based on precedent or as part of a broader norm such as civilian protection. Linde (2014) argues that the enshrinement of children as rights holders “mirrors international consolidation of authority over human rights in general after World War II, as the international community increasingly became the arbiter of acceptable treatment of citizens by states.” Human Rights INGO’s empower pro-abolition constituencies and influence governments by lobbying and framing capital punishment as a human rights violation. Kim (2015) analyzes 158 states from 1967–2010, controlling for regime type and regional demonstration effects, finds an important role for “local engagement” in leading to “complete abolition” of the death penalty.

The assumption that shaming, persuasion, and socialization will bring states in line with new norms is not foreordained. Within constructivism, there is great variety in the notions of norms and logics at work in politics. Wunderlich’s (2013, p. 24) review distinguishes between first-wave norm studies and second-wave, the former being “stuck to a structuralist perspective” by treating norms “as stable and constant phenomena.” Second-wave studies problematize norms as both “structuring and socially constructed

through interaction in a context,” focusing on contestation of their meaning (Wiener, 2004; Wunderlich, 2013, p. 26). Employing and analyzing surveys of permanent commission officials in 1996 and 2002, Hooghe (2005) demonstrates that, while support for supranational norms is high, the support comes from prior, national experiences and party loyalty. With norms and foreign policy analysis, all politics may be local.

Knowing state and elite identities and roles, then, may be important determinants of their perceptions of the legitimacy of existing normative structures. Checkel’s (1999) cultural match concept illustrated the role of existing domestic norms have on adopting new international norms. Acharya (2004) adds dynamism to the process, replacing a static “cultural match” with “congruence building,” and highlighting the process of “localization” to the efforts of spreading new norms in new places. Saunders (2006) argues that powerful states act as “norm entrepreneurs” and also set “membership criteria” for international society, despite the “bounded intersubjectivity” of limited agreement over norms and the “criteria.” Muller and Wunderlich suggest an array of international actors, from “Great Powers” to “good citizen” states to “revolutionary.” Thies (2013, pp. 21–22) uses role theory to distinguish states along dimensions of their degree of structural conditioning and degree of conformity within the system, arguing that some states are successfully socialized into the “club of nations,” while others—“rogue states” and “quasi-states”—are not. Notions of “good citizen” states, “rogue” states, and the like, can be helpful if carefully done so as not to essentialize and politicize the labeling of states.

Some critical constructivists point to a Western bias in theory and practice of socialization. Zarakol (2014, p. 312) argues that modern international society was built on a dynamic of stigmatization of non-Westerners, and Steinhilper (2015) argues that the “mainstream diffusion literature has mostly focused on the proliferation of liberal Western norms, radiating from “the West” to “the Rest.” Skeptics of the presumed goodness of norms and international society is Epstein (2012), who argues that socialization has “the effect of ‘infantilizing’ the socializee,” leading to silencing, she argues, which stretches into the scholarly research realm itself. Some see marginalized groups adapting and succeeding in the system nonetheless. Steinhilper (2015) finds that Indigenous peoples, in alliance with transnational advocacy networks and sympathetic states, have succeeded in constructing a new HR norm manifested in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (RIP). Another skeptic of the virtuous power of international norms, Xuetong (2011) doubts that “international interactions can only advance international norms towards a Kantian culture of friendly mutual help” as opposed to “regression to a Hobbesian culture of hostile confrontation”—citing the six party talks and normative pressure leading not to norm acceptance but accelerated nuclear testing. Some studies point to the political benefits of outright defiance of international norms. Prakash and Ilgit (2017) show that international criticism can be a catalyst for states’ leaders to “consolidate state identity” against negative representations.

Of course, resistance is easier said than done, and for some countries easier than others. Adler-Nissen (2014), analyzing the stigmatization of “transgressive” states, and how actors within stigmatized states cope, finds that “low-ranking agents are ... negatively affected by their stigmatization, but not so socialized that they lack the agency to strive for change” and resistance. Some see actors as having less ability to resist socialization to their position, such as non-Western states seeking to “move up rank” as defeated ex-colonial power fighting stigmatization in a largely Western order (Mattern & Zarakol, 2016, pp. 17–18).

The dichotomous notion of norm compliance or violation has been supplanted by studies of social and strategic adaptation to normative environments. Much research explores strategies for social resistance and evasion of contested norms. Those under pressure to conform to norms have creative choices beyond compliance and violation. One option is to give rhetorical “lip service” to norms while trying to avoid the obligations. Thomas (2002) notes that such lip service can trap states through a “boomerang effect” by which networks of non-state actors influence states when they identify with international norms that the states have formally accepted—“even if that formal acceptance did not initially reflect any serious intention to implement or monitor the norm in question.” Dixon (2017) proposes a taxonomy of rhetorical resistance to norms in the face of social pressure, including norm interpretation, norm avoidance, and norm signaling. Buzas (2015) explores evasion and the exploitation of legal loopholes, arguing by example that France evaded the norm of racial equality to expel the Roma with impunity by technically complying with the international legislation on racial equality as it pertains to the freedom of movement.”

Conclusion

In summary, norms have clearly entered decision-maker thinking, but whether they are decisive seems to vary widely on power, interests, personality, and other variables. Further studies can start to turn these lists of conditions into testable theories to advance a generalizable understanding of how norms can matter.

One of the problems with norms research is the epistemological divides that, while promoting pluralism of theory and method, also inhibit cumulative research premised on hypothesis testing. There are countless “case studies” of the role of specific norms in specific instances, but rarely do they invoke case study methodology that maximizes virtues of control and variation of the values of variables of interest. Bjorkdahl (2002, p. 11) laments the difficulties in tracking the causal effect of ideas and norms, noting that postmodernists and post-structuralists “have abandoned the search for causes and objective truths.” This article shows the diversity of a pluralistic field in terms of theory and method. Cumulative findings are difficult to come by if the bulk of the research is idiosyncratic cases or self-consciously eschewing research design that can facilitate

generalizable theory building. But ultimately, nothing is stopping neo-positivist attempts to do so. Goertz and Diehl (1992) laid out guidelines for doing norms research in a positivist vein of testable, measurable dynamics.

Head-to-head theory testing is not vital, of course, and many advocate theory building and synthesis across paradigms. Many meta-debates in the field of IR call for moving toward synthesis, cross-pollination, and integrative theory building. Examples in the norms field include “realist constructivism” (Barkin, 2003; Sterling-Folker, 2002) to “psychological constructivism” (Hymans, 2010; Shannon & Kowert, 2012). General theories are also not essential, and “middle range” theories of country-specific behavior or clusters of “state types” has been potentially illuminating. But the effort to generalize and clarify patterns of normative behavior must continue to keep norms at the center of academic and policy debates.

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