4 Constructivism and foreign policy

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Chapter contents

Reader's guide

This chapter explores the relevance of constructivism for the analysis of foreign policy. It begins by examining constructivism as social theory and the various ways in which it can be applied to study the world around us, distinguishing between two types — one dominant in North America and the other more popular in Europe.

The second part of the chapter uses this dichotomous characterization of constructivism to assess its ability to shed new or different light on the actors and processes that have been at the core of foreign policy analysis for many years. These include bureaucracies and organizations (state or non-state), decision-making dynamics within and between states, and the relation between states and international institutions.

The final section then explores cutting edge issues. While constructivism has already generated significant pay-offs in the study of foreign policy, much work remains. Constructivists of all types have been lax in explaining how they go about their work (methods), and have failed to appreciate the multiple ways in which power still matters in a socially constructed world.

Introduction—what is constructivism?

For a decade now, constructivism has been a much discussed topic in international relations (IR) theory (Adler, 1997; Hopf, 1998). There have been ongoing debates (heated at times!) along with a growing consensus that constructivism is here to stay. Indeed, by now, entire books and special issues of journals have been devoted to exploring its role in contemporary global politics.

Given these facts, it is odd that so few connections have been made between constructivism and one of IR's main subfields—foreign policy analysis (FPA).[1] Of course, part of the reason is the long-standing disconnection between foreign policy analysis and core IR debates and theories (Carlsnaes, forthcoming)—a gap which the present volume is working to close.

I am less concerned in the origins of this gap than in helping to narrow it. This chapter thus explores the added value that constructivism contributes to the key concepts and dynamics of analysing foreign policy; more specifically, it also suggests how constructivist-oriented foreign policy analysis can help rectify current weaknesses in the research programme of constructivism. However, before addressing such issues, we need better to understand the nature of the beast.

What is constructivism?[2]

Constructivist approaches are trendy among students of international politics. Constructivism's core concepts—deliberation, discourses, norms, persuasion, identity, socialization, arguing—are now invoked frequently in debates over globalization, international human rights, security policy, and more. To make better sense of these terms—and the very different ways in which they are employed—I distinguish between North American and European variants of constructivism.[3]

Before discussing such differences, however, it is important first to highlight what unites all constructivists. Simply put, constructivists see the world around us as socially constructed. 'Socially' simply means that constructivists give greater weight to the social—as opposed to the material—in world politics. Consider the ultimate material capability—nuclear weapons. Constructivists would argue that it is not so much the brute fact of their existence that matters; rather, it is the social context that gives meaning to that capability. Hence, British possession of (many) nuclear weapons matters not at all to America for they are interpreted through a social context of friendship. In contrast, North Korean or Iranian possession of even one such weapon is viewed with deep alarm given the social context of enmity prevailing in these relationships (see also Wendt, 1995: 73–74).

'Constructed' means that constructivists understand the world as coming into being—constructed—through a process of interaction between agents (individuals, states, non-state actors) and the structures of their broader environment. More formally, there is a process of mutual constitution between agents and structures (Adler, 2002: 95). For example, instead of just assuming that a particular foreign policy actor has certain interests, constructivists explore how those interests are constructed through a process of interaction with broader environments. Depending on the particular constructivist, this broader context may be defined by social norms or social discourses.

Beyond this common starting point, however, constructivists begin to diverge. The North American variant, which is heavily dominated by US scholars, examines the role of social norms—shared understandings with a quality of 'oughtness'—and, in fewer cases, identity—'who we are'—in shaping international and foreign-policy outcomes. These scholars are positivists, which means they are interested in uncovering top-down/deductive mechanisms and causal relationships between actors, norms, interests, and identity. In IR literature, they are often referred to as conventional constructivists—'conventional' in the sense that they start from a standard (for the US) positivist view of how we should study IR.

For example, one could explore the ability of international organizations to promote certain understandings or norms as key reference points for behaviour. The conventional constructivist would then ask whether these norms had any influence on the interests of particular individuals, or on states more generally (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). When individuals meet repeatedly within such organizations, do they—under certain conditions—rethink their basic positions, for example on some aspect of national citizenship policy (Lewis, 2005)? More broadly, can international organizations lead states—again under certain conditions—to rethink their policy in financial or monetary affairs (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: Chapter Three)?

The European variant of constructivism—often labelled post-positivist or interpretive—explores the role of language in mediating and constructing social reality. This role is not explanatory in the sense that A causes B. Rather, interpretive constructivism asks 'how possible' questions. In other words, instead of examining what factors caused aspects of a state's identity to change—as would the conventional mainstream—interpretative constructivists would explore the background conditions and linguistic constructions (social discourses) that made any such change possible in the first place. In an interpretative study of German identity, Banchoff argues precisely that his analytic task is not to 'establish the effects of identity on state action' (as would conventional constructivists). Rather, it is to 'demonstrate the content of state identity in a particular case—a necessary first step in the constructivist analysis of action' (Banchoff, 1999: 271).

Put differently, European/interpretative constructivists are committed to a deeply inductive (bottom up) research strategy that seeks to reconstruct state identity, with the methods encompassing a variety of linguistic techniques. Consider Hopf's study of the relation between identity and Soviet/Russian foreign policy.[4] He begins not with some hypothesis or theory about what causes that policy to change, as would conventional constructivists (Checkel, 1997). Rather, Hopf seeks to uncover Soviet/Russian identity as it emerges from a variety of texts, ranging from novels to the minutes of Politburo meetings; as such, his methods are textual and narrative. These identities then set broad limits on Soviet/Russian foreign-policy choices (Hopf, 2002). For Hopf, then, foreign policy behaviour is made possible through these linguistic constructions; it does not result from one or more causal factors. (See Box 4.1.)

BOX 4.1 Constructivism

Constructivists see the world as socially constructed. 'Socially' means they give greater weight to the social—as opposed to the material—in world politics. 'Constructed' means that constructivists see the world as coming into being—constructed—through a process of interaction between agents (individuals, states) and their broader environment.

Constructivism comes in two main varieties: North American and European. These differ in the questions they ask about foreign policy and the methods employed. Both varieties give us a new set of lenses for thinking about actors (bureaucracies) and dynamics (decision-making) long central to FPA.

Constructivism and foreign policy analysis—bureaucracies, decision-making, and international society

Constructivism can contribute to the analysis of foreign policy in many ways; I consider three. Two will be well-known—bureaucracies and decision-making. A third has received less attention, but is increasingly important in our globalized world—the impact of international society on the foreign policy practice of states.

Before undertaking this assessment, it is important to address the relation of constructivism to the subfield of FPA more generally. After all, if constructivism is simply warmed over FPA—highlighting only the dynamics the subfield discovered many years ago—there would be no point to this chapter! The good news here is that constructivism is both similar to key tenets of FPA *and* quite different.

From the perspective of similarities, parts of constructivism—especially the North-American variant—share a common focus with the cognitive branch of foreign policy analysis. Both sets of scholars consider how foreign policy makers essentially construct their situations through various cognitive processes and shortcuts (Carlsnaes, 2002: 338; Houghton, 2007: 31–33). In addition, some of the North-American/conventional constructivists share with FPA a strong focus on agency. If a student of foreign policy talks of state-based foreign policy *elites* (Houghton, 2007: 25), conventional constructivists often explore the role of non-state norm *entrepreneurs* (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). While such actors are clearly not the same, it is wilful agents that drive the story forward in both cases.

The differences however are equally if not more important. For all constructivists, social construction is given pride of place in their analyses. Thus, while cognitive aspects of FPA may examine the role of individual-level learning and psychological biases in affecting foreign policy (Levy, 1994), the conventional constructivist will—in contrast—add broader social structural context, exploring the role of social learning instead (Checkel, 2001). Moreover, the European variant of constructivism would strongly object to the micro-level focus of cognitive aspects of FPA, arguing that it is impossible and indeed unnecessary 'to get between the earlobes', as it were (Guzzini, 2000).

Underlying this latter difference is a deeper—epistemological—distinction that further separates FPA and constructivism. If much of the FPA literature is unified around 'a loosely positivist epistemology' (that is, how we come to know) (Houghton, 2007: 35–36; see also Carlsnaes, 2002: 336–41), then the same is certainly not true of constructivism. As already seen, constructivism is deeply split between positivist and interpretive branches.[5]

Bureaucracies and their interests

National bureaucracies have been at the heart of foreign-policy analysis—and rightly so. Foreign ministries, state departments, departments of international trade, ministries of defence—all such units play central roles. This is true for large states as well as small, and holds for policy formulation as well as implementation. These ministries and departments are typically large, complex bureaucracies. Their mission, of course, is to defend the national interest. Much of the FPA literature takes this line of argumentation a step further. National bureaucracies/actors know what they want—typically to protect their mission or to maximize some material benefit. They thus seek to mould that national interest in ways consistent with their *own* organisational interest (Allison, 1971). However, the origin of these desires and interests is typically not explored in FPA; they are taken as unproblematic and given. As Rhodes has argued more generally about Graham Allison's widely cited governmental politics model (Allison, 1971), much of its attraction is that 'like the classical rational actor model it challenges, it continues to explain behaviour in terms of *interest* . . . [for Allison] the rational, self-interested actors whose interaction must be modelled are not states but the individual members of government' (Rhodes, 1994: 2, emphasis in original).

It is precisely such interests that a constructivist-oriented analysis of foreign policy would problematize. These scholars—especially those in North America—would instead ask: from where do such interests come? To paraphrase one prominent conventional constructivist, 'much of foreign policy is about *defining* rather than *defending* national interests' (Finnemore, 1996: ix, emphasis added). To put this more formally, if traditional FPA is understood to exogenize interests—to take them as given—then a constructivist FPA would endogenize them: exploring how interests are constructed through a process of social interaction.

Consider a hypothetical example. The defence ministry of middle-size Country X comes to oppose the use of anti-personnel land mines in the tactics and battle plans of its own armed forces. FP literature would likely explain such a change as simply not being in the objective interests of Country X. That is, as technology and tactics developed, the armed forces of X came to realize that the deployment of such mines would advance no clear military objective; their deployment was ultimately not in X's material interests. This is a plausible story—but it is not the only one possible.

The conventional constructivist student of foreign policy would consider another explanation for X's change of heart. This scholar might instead argue that the defence ministry of X came to learn new interests—in this case, in relation to the desirability of deploying anti-personnel mines. This learning occurred as ministry employees interacted with their broader environment, including officials from other defence ministries, as well as international activists and networks campaigning against the use of such mines on principled grounds—and especially the terrible human cost they exact on civilian populations (Price, 1998). This constructivist argument would not simply be asserted; rather, it would be competitively tested against likely alternative explanations for the same change in policy. (See Box 4.2.)

To this point, I have argued that a constructivist-orientated analysis of foreign policy analysis could look in new ways at old actors—that is, units and national organizations that have always been accorded an important place in FPA. However, constructivism would likely go a step beyond traditional FPA, with its emphasis on unit-level factors (Carlsnaes, 2002: 332), to explore a role for bureaucracies and units *beyond* the nation state. Here, I have in mind international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. The number of such organizations (or transnational actors) has increased dramatically over the past fifteen years. More important for my purposes is the argument by North-American/conventional constructivists that such actors are exerting a growing influence on state-level foreign policy.

> **BOX 4.2 National interests and a constructivist foreign policy analysis**
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> Constructivists endogenize the process of interest formation. Instead of just assuming that a bureaucracy or state has given interests, they explore how these are constructed in the first place. Thus, if the rallying cry for the realist is 'defending the national interest', for the constructivist it is *defining* the national interest.
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> In this process of interest formation, constructivism emphasizes the social—how norms or discourses can lead states to adopt new interests. Material facts—resource endowments or military capabilities, say—still matter, but it is the social context that gives meaning to them. Hence, British possession of nuclear weapons matters not at all to America for they are interpreted through a social context of friendship.

These scholars ask: what motivates NGOS to act? And they offer a clear answer—moral principle or commonly held values and norms. According to this logic, Amnesty International acts not out of any material concern—say, gaining money for its operations. Rather, it seeks to promote the spread of basic human rights values throughout the world.[6] A number of studies have now documented how NGOs in various policy areas—human rights, the environment, security policy—have exerted influence on state actors and policy (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999; Evangelista, 1999).

Most recently, constructivists have applied such reasoning to another, seemingly very different non-state actor: multinational corporations (MNCs). MNCs would seem a tough nut to crack for constructivists as they are surely driven by profit motives and material interests. If this is indeed the case, why—ask these scholars—have we seen a 'greening' of multinationals in recent years, where increasing amounts of time and resources are devoted to questions of the environment, human rights, and sustainable development? More generally, why are more and more MNCs adopting codes of corporate social responsibility? Constructivists argue that more than

mere profit-maximising is at work; MNCs are learning from their social environment about the ethically correct way to act in a changing global and national setting (Risse, 2004). Given their often influential role in national politics, we would then expect this learning by multinationals to affect state policies as well.

The constructivist viewpoints advanced here are not necessarily always correct. But a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis supplements the traditional FPA approaches by broadening both the array of actors considered and the assumptions made about what leads them to act.

Decision-making: bargaining and arguing

To this point, I have considered the actors of foreign policy. Yet, foreign policy is driven not so much by these various actors taken separately, but by the decision-making processes in which they collectively participate. Do constructivists have anything to offer on this score? To answer this question, we must first establish a baseline—how FPA has typically explained decision making. The traditional view, much in keeping with trends in the broader IR literature, has been to assume that decision dynamics are—broadly speaking—rational. Actors know what they want and bargain to get it. To bargain means that individuals and bureaucratic units cut deals at the level of strategy and specific tactics, while protecting their core policies and interests. More formally, the actors involved are **instrumentally rational**, carefully calculating, and seeking to maximize given interests.

To be sure, FPA and IR scholars have long realized that few, if any, decision processes can be perfectly rational. Indeed, cognitive approaches to FPA start from the premise that agents are boundedly rational (see Chapter Six). It is not possible for them to attend to everything simultaneously or to calculate carefully the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action; attention is a scarce resource. Organizational environments provide simplifying shortcuts, cues, and buffers that help policy makers decide (March and Simon, 1981).

While these two approaches to foreign policy decision-making are quite different, they are united by a common view of the actors involved as asocial. They decide alone, as it were. If they are instrumentally rational, individuals simply calculate in their heads; if they are boundedly rational, they look to organizations and routines for cues. In neither case is there any meaningful interaction with the broader social environment—interaction that in some basic sense might affect how individuals decide (see also Houghton, 2007: 38).

Constructivist approaches to FPA decision-making have a different starting point. Drawing upon insights from social psychology as well as the work of Juergen Habermas, a German social theorist, they advance a third—**communicative**—understanding of rationality to explain decision-making (Johnston, 2001; Risse, 2000). These researchers claim that communicatively rational agents do not so much calculate costs and benefits, or seek cues from their environment; rather, they present arguments and try to persuade and convince each other. As such, their interests and preferences are open for redefinition.

With this understanding of rationality, individuals are seen as deeply social. They decide by deliberating with others. Arguing in fact becomes a key decision-making dynamic, supplementing bargaining. Individuals do not come to the table knowing what they want; the whole point of arguing is to discover what they want or, more formally, to define their (national) interests.

Does any of this really matter for the student of foreign policy? After all, if policy makers enter national or international decision-making arenas with fixed preferences, then the value of constructivism would seem vanishingly small. However, from memoirs, interviews, and journalistic accounts, we know that decision-making is not just about hard-headed bargaining, but also about puzzling and learning. Indeed, two practitioner-scholars with considerable experience in the world of diplomacy describe arguing and persuasion as a 'fundamental instrument' and 'principal engine' of the interaction within institutions (Chayes and Chayes, 1995: 25–26).

Constructivists have given empirical backing to the latter claim. In particular, they have documented that arguing and persuasion are an important part of both national and international decision-making, in Europe (Checkel, 2003), Asia (Johnston, 2007), and elsewhere (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999; Deitelhoff, 2006). Also, they have not theorized in either/or terms—either arguing or bargaining. Instead, they see both at play, with the challenge being to ascertain under what conditions one or the other dominates.

Consider an example from my own conventional constructivist work on citizenship and immigration policies in Europe. I have been concerned with tracking the development of these policies within committees—composed of national bureaucrats—of several European regional organizations. My hunch was that arguing played a role in such settings, shifting the preferences of bureaucrats and thus leading to changes in national policy.

To theorize such processes, I turned to a laboratory-experimental literature on persuasion taken from social psychology, from which I developed hypotheses on the roles of agent properties (for example, their degree of authoritativeness) and of privacy in promoting persuasion (Checkel, 2001; see also Johnston, 2001). My main finding was that persuasion and arguing did play a role in the decision-making process and did affect national policy making, but only under certain conditions—for example, where the proceedings occurred in private and out of the public eye (Checkel, 2003).[7]

My European constructivist colleagues saw a gap in the analysis, however. For them, it is highly likely that particular national agents are not only persuasive because they are authoritative or because they argue in private. Rather, arguments are persuasive because they are enabled and legitimated by a broader social discourse in which they are embedded. Did a particular agent's arguments in a particular committee resonate with this discourse? In my case, I thus also needed to ask: did an individual policy maker's arguments on citizenship and immigration resonate with broader European understandings?

Put differently, I had lost sight of the (social) structural context, failing to theorize the broader forces

> **BOX 4.3 Constructivism and language**
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> All constructivists see language as playing a central role in foreign policy analysis. For some, language simply causes things to happen. Thus, the North American or conventional constructivist conceives of language as acts of arguing or persuasion that may cause a foreign policy decision maker to change his/her mind on an issue.
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> For others, language is the medium and background through which we interpret the world around us. The European or interpretive constructivist thus talks of language as structures of meaning—discourses—that make possible certain foreign policy actions.

that enable and make possible human agency. To provide a more complete account of persuasion-arguing's role in decision-making, I will therefore need to supplement my North-American variant of constructivism with the European-interpretive sort, where the study of social discourses is given pride of place (Milliken, 1999). (See Box 4.3.)

International society and states

In an increasingly globalized world, it is a truism that the boundaries separating the international and domestic have grown ever fuzzier. Entire literatures have developed to theorize and empirically document these facts, especially for globalization (Zuern, 2002) and Europeanization (Olsen, 2002). This work does not document a withering away of the state, but an increasingly complex set of interactions between the international and domestic. Students of foreign policy must capture this increasingly tight global-local nexus in their work as well. Constructivism can help illuminate these ties—conceptually, by overcoming the level-of-analysis problem, and, theoretically, by exploring the multiple mechanisms connecting the international to the domestic.

Regarding levels of analysis, which refer simply to where we look to explain foreign policy, we need first to establish a baseline for how this concept has been

dealt with by IR and FPA. Do we consider factors at the national or state level of analysis? Factors at the international or systemic level of analysis? Or some combination of the two? For many decades, the latter—mixing levels—was considered a taboo (Singer, 1961). Over the past fifteen years, however, scholars have moved to modify and partly reject this advice (Mueller and Risse-Kappen, 1993).

Indeed, today, an IR–FPA consensus seems to be emerging that we need synthetic, cross-level approaches. As one prominent IR theorist has argued: 'We have developed strong research traditions that hold either [the international—JTC] system or country constant. We do not have very good theories to handle what happens when both are in play, when each influences the other' (Gourevitch, 2002: 321). Likewise, a leading scholar of foreign policy analysis has recently noted that 'the divide between domestic and international politics . . . is highly questionable as a feasible foundational baseline for a sub-discipline that needs to problematize this boundary' (Carlsnaes, 2002: 342).

Constructivism has begun to address this divide, advancing cross-level models that emphasize the simultaneity of international and domestic developments. One example comes from work on an aspect of state foreign policy practice of growing importance in the contemporary world—human rights. Several constructivists have argued that the source and inspiration for national human rights policy may lie in the international system—with transnational networks of activists and global or regional human rights institutions (such as the United Nations or—in Europe—the Council of Europe). Yet, neither the domestic nor international is prioritized in such arguments.

Instead, change in human rights policy comes about through an interplay of actors at various levels of analysis—domestic human rights activists, international NGOs, state policy makers, and regional organizations (Brysk, 1993; Keck and Sikkink,

1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999). The analysis is constructivist because much of the raw material connecting the international and domestic is social—shared understandings of what counts as appropriate human rights policy.

As a result of this concern for developing cross-level models, constructivists have also devoted significant time to theorizing and documenting empirically a variety of mechanisms connecting the international system to national actors, institutions, and policies. Consider Europe. If there is any place in the world where the gap separating the international and domestic would seem to be vanishingly small, it is here (see also Olsen, 2002). This is largely due to the creation and functioning of the European Union (EU). How then might the EU be affecting the foreign policies of its member states? Through what kinds of mechanisms? Some are obvious and require no specifically constructivist tool kit: the Union's treaties simply dictate certain foreign-policy functions that it performs on behalf of member states (Cross, 2007: Chapters Six and Seven). In addition, the currently suspended Constitutional Treaty would—if enacted—create an EU diplomatic service that would partly supplement national diplomatic structures (Treaty, 2004).

The added constructivist value has come in documenting the mechanisms via which the EU may be affecting the very identities and interests of its member states. For North American constructivists, these include the diffusion of policy paradigms and values (Sedelmeier, 2005b), acts of persuasion (Checkel, 2007b: Chapters 1, 5, 6), and the strategic use of arguments (Schimmelfennig, 2003). European constructivists—in keeping with their interpretive starting point—emphasize more holistic mechanisms, including discourses (Waever, 1998, 2004) and public spheres (Fossum and Trenz, 2005). Moreover, in making these EU–national connections, constructivists of all types still see a central role for the nation state (Zuern and Checkel, 2005: 1065–72).

Conclusion: the cutting edge

This chapter has argued that constructivism—in both its North American and European variants—has much to offer analysts of foreign policy. Be it the study of bureaucracies and organizations, decision-making dynamics, or the relation between international institutions and state policy—constructivist scholarship can bring new light to bear on actors and processes that have been at the core of foreign policy analysis for many years.

This street should be two ways, however. As the analysis of foreign policy draws upon constructivism, it should not simply pull its theories and insights off the shelf, but also push this research in new directions. In particular, students of foreign policy can help constructivists deal better with two vexing problems—methods and power.

Methodological gaffes

Methods are the real-world, down-to-earth counterpart to epistemology. If epistemology asks 'how we come to know' at a broad, conceptual level (do we seek to uncover law-governed causal processes, or do we instead ask what makes such processes possible in the first place?), methods give the researcher the practical tools for answering such questions. For constructivists, these tools include case studies and process tracing (for the North American variant), and discourse or other forms of textual analysis (for the European type).

Questions about method are critically important. One can have insightful and new theoretical ideas, but the pay-off for the student of IR or FPA is in applying them. Consider the method of process tracing. Constructivists from the US invoke this technique all the time, but with little clear sense of what it entails except 'to trace a process'! In fact, it involves much more. Specifically, process tracing means to trace the operation of the causal mechanism(s) at work in a given situation. One carefully maps a given process, exploring the extent to which it coincides with prior, theoretically derived expectations about the workings of the mechanism (Bennett and George, 2005: Chapter 10).

The devil here is in the details. When does the process tracer know that he or she has collected enough data? What counts as good data (Checkel, 2007c)? For example, what makes for good data in a constructivist process-tracing analysis of foreign-policy decision-making? Interviews would obviously be key. Surely, though, one would need more—for interviewees may just say what you want to hear. The very best constructivist work suggests an answer to this methodological challenge—triangulation. This means one triangulates across various data sources, where interview findings are cross-checked against meeting minutes and press accounts (Gheciu, 2005).

Another dilemma for the process tracer is not to lose sight of the big picture. Say a foreign policy scholar is using constructivism to trace the decision-making process on a bilateral trade agreement between two countries, focusing on the role of arguments. It might be all too easy to explain the outcome by considering only the quality of the arguments advanced by the negotiators, thus losing sight of a different and bigger picture where power disparities between the two countries might be what really count. Here, the constructivist student of foreign policy would need to ask a counterfactual, which is a kind of thought experiment. That is, absent the causal factor he/she thinks was important (arguments made by negotiators), would the outcome of the bilateral trade deal nonetheless have been the same? If the answer could plausibly be 'yes', then the analyst must also test for the importance of other factors (such as power differences).

More recently, both North American and European constructivists have begun to pay greater attention to methods. A constructivist-oriented analysis of foreign policy can only benefit by systematically incorporating the insights of this latest work, be it the nitty-gritty details of how to do good discourse analysis (Hansen, 2006) or a practical primer on applying constructivism to real-world problems (Klotz and Lynch, 2007).

Where's the power?[8]

Power is central to the study of international relations and foreign policy. However, constructivists have been curiously silent on its role. A constructivist take on foreign policy can and must improve on this state of affairs by adopting an understanding of power that is both more hard-edged and multi-faceted. By hard-edged, I mean the compulsive face of power (the ability of A to get B to do what B otherwise would not do); multi-faceted refers to broader conceptions of power that go beyond basic coercive-compulsive principles to capture institutional and productive dimensions as well. Specifically, institutional power is actors' control of others in indirect ways, where formal and informal institutions mediate between A and B; working through the rules of these institutions, A constrains the actions of B. Productive power is generated through discourse and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced and transformed (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 51, 55, *passim*).

European constructivists who draw upon the insights of Juergen Habermas have been especially remiss in neglecting power's role. These scholars study the role of arguing and deliberation in bilateral and multilateral settings, where one gets the sense that compulsory power is present but nonetheless ignored (Sjursen, 2006b). As Hyde-Price argues of such work, there often seems to be an 'almost total neglect of power' (Hyde-Price, 2006: 218, citing E.H. Carr).

For constructivist-informed analyses of foreign policy that study arguing, reality is—or should be—more complex. One need not be a hard-nosed bargaining theorist to recognize the plain truth that arguments are often used to shame, twist arms, and compel, as a growing literature confirms (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999; Schimmelfennig, 2003). The challenge, then, is to integrate this compulsive face of power into constructivist studies of foreign policy.

In a different but equally important way, North-American/conventional constructivists also underspecify power's role—especially its institutional and productive dimensions. The earlier critique of my own work on citizenship and immigration policies in Europe was precisely about a neglect of productive power. Yes, acts of persuasion occurred in the institutional settings studied and affected national policy (Checkel, 2003), but productive power—the background, discursive construction of meaning (see also Doty, 1993: 299)—likely played a role as well. It did this by enabling and legitimating the arguments of individual persuaders.

In addition, institutional power would seem to play a central, albeit unspecified, role in conventional constructivist studies of the relation between international organizations and national policy (Checkel, 2007b). All too often, this work reifies such organizations, imbuing them with fixed values and meaning, but not asking from where these came or why certain ones are simply absent. Why does the EU, for example, promote one minority-rights policy for candidate countries wishing to join, but refuse to apply this same policy to its own member states (Schwellnus, 2006)? Perhaps this discrepancy (and hypocrisy) is explained by the exercise of institutional power, in this case, the ability to keep certain issues off the EU agenda.

The bottom line is that constructivists of all sorts need to accord power a more central place in their work. This will not only help consolidate constructivism as a research programme in its own right. More important, such a move will make its insights more relevant for a subfield like foreign policy analysis, where power is inextricably bound up with the study of national policy and practice.

These criticisms notwithstanding, constructivism offers a valuable and rich tool kit to the student of foreign policy. It can shed new or different light on the actors and processes that have been at the heart of FPA for many years, including bureaucracies, decision-making, and the relation between states and international organizations. Constructivism alerts us to the social and linguistic context—norms, discourses, social learning, arguing—that play key roles in shaping state policy and practice. Constructivism is not only a rich tool kit, but also a diverse one—as my discussion of its North American and European variants makes clear. Neither variant is intrinsically

superior to the other, and each asks characteristically different questions. Used *in combination*, they offer a robust entrée into the social dynamics of foreign policy analysis.

Key points

☐ Constructivism comes in two main varieties—North American and European—and these differ in key ways in the questions they ask about foreign policy and the methods employed.

☐ Both varieties of constructivism give us a new set of lenses for thinking about actors (foreign policy bureaucracies) and dynamics (foreign policy decision-making) long central to FPA.

☐ Constructivists explore how the interests of key foreign policy actors are socially constructed.

☐ Constructivists are concerned with the nexus between language and foreign policy, be it the study of arguing or of how social discourses make possible certain foreign policy actions.

☐ In an increasingly globalized world, constructivists argue that the best way to study FPA is to transgress levels of analysis, thus combining factors from both the national and international–transnational setting.

☐ Students of FPA should not simply pull existing constructivist theory off the shelf. Rather, in developing their arguments, they should address central challenges for constructivism—including the use of methods and the (near) absence of power.

Questions

1. What is constructivism?
2. What does the phrase 'socially constructed' mean to a constructivist?
3. What are the key differences between the North American and European varieties of constructivism?
4. What is the added constructivist value when it comes to the study of foreign policy bureaucracies and non-state actors such as NGOs?
5. What is the difference between bargaining and arguing, and how can constructivism contribute to a better understanding of the latter?
6. How do constructivists view the relation between international organizations and state foreign policy?
7. Are there methods that are particularly important for a constructivist FPA?
8. What forms can power take and why is this important for constructivist FPA?

Further reading

Adler, E. (2002), 'Constructivism and International Relations', in W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, and B. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage Publications), 95–118.
In this essay, Adler provides a masterful overview and introduction to constructivism—both as social theory and substantive IR theory.

Barnett, M., and Duvall R. (2005), 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization*, 59/1: 39–76.
This article thinks systematically about a concept—power—central to foreign policy behaviour and practice, with the authors developing a three-fold understanding of it that speaks to the concerns of both conventional and interpretive constructivists.

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Checkel, J. T. (2007), 'Constructivism and EU Politics', in K. E. Joergensen, M. Pollack, and B. Rosamond (eds), *Handbook of European Union Politics* (London: Sage Publications), 57–76.
Written by a sympathetic observer, this chapter provides a detailed net assessment of constructivism, cataloguing both its achievements to date and continuing challenges.

Gheciu, A. (2005), 'Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization? NATO and Post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe', *International Organization*, 59/4: 973–1012.
From a North-American/conventional constructivist perspective, Gheciu documents how international actors can influence the policies and institutions of national militaries. Her study is also an excellent example of a technique—process tracing—central to this variety of constructivism.

Hansen, L. (2006), *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge Publishers).
Hansen's book is a must-read for those wishing to apply the European form of constructivism to FPA. At a very applied and practical level, she demonstrates how to conduct discourse analysis and its importance for the study of foreign policy.

Hopf, T. (2002), *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Hopf's book is a rare—and successful—attempt to combine the best of the North American and European variants of constructivism.

Houghton, D. P. (2007), 'Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3/1: 24–45.
Houghton offers a thoughtful and balanced assessment of the advantages to be had by a more sustained constructivist—FPA collaboration.

Johnston, A. I. (2007) *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
In this empirically rich and methodologically rigorous study, Johnston demonstrates how conventional constructivism can shed new light on the behaviour of great powers. In particular, he explores how China's growing involvement with an array of international organizations has affected its foreign policy.

Klotz, A. and C. Lynch (2007), *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations* (NY: M.E. Sharpe).
Designed as a 'how to' primer, this book is essential reading for all those wishing to apply constructivist insights to FPA. Using many examples and a refreshingly accessible writing style, Klotz and Lynch explain the nuts and bolts of constructivist research.

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book for more information:
www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/smith_foreign/