# Communities of Practice and the Social Ordering of World Politics

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/05/05/communities-of-practice-and-the-social-ordering-of-world-politics/

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In a January 2024 Special Issue in *Global Studies Quarterly*, we address John G. Ruggie's (1998) famous question in IR: what makes the world hang together? We join a growing number of IR scholars – drawing historically on constructivism and the practice turn, and increasingly engaging critical theory and non-Western traditions of thought – who have sought to advance our thinking on how social structures make actors in world politics hang together rather than separately. Building on Étienne Wenger's work (1998) and John Searle's (1995) concept of background knowledge, we define international communities of practice (CoP) as domains of knowledge that constitute communities of engaging practitioners bound by an interest in learning and performing shared practices. CoPs are the social fabric of learning and contestation that makes social ordering possible in world politics.

The origins of the CoP concept lie in social anthropology, knowledge management, and theories of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and is now widely used across the social sciences (873 million entries in Google as of 26 April 2024). Adler (2005) first introduced the concept to IR, and since then, it has become one of the most fertile avenues in international practice theory research (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2014; Drieschova, Bueger, and Hopf 2022). Sustained by a repertoire of communal resources and shared background knowledge, CoPs do not refer to individual members arranged in a network, a group or a field; they are 'the social fabric of relations in action'(Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 2; see also Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024).

Sometimes cultivated in institutions but often informal or relying on informality (Tieku and Yakohene 2024; Nair 2020; Bicchi 2021; 2024), CoPs are social processes of negotiating meaning, competence, and background knowledge. They are not a function of formal organizations versus informal institutions, because shared practical know-how and practices establish CoPs' social boundaries. For example, diplomats from various states and organizations engage in climate change negotiations; military officials from different countries take part in multinational operations; a group of central bank directors set global financial regulations; refugees pass through the Mediterranean in route to Europe; or software engineers shape international standards for digital technologies – each is a community of practice. CoPs do not necessarily correspond to professional affiliations, and they can transcend organizations. Nina Græger (2016), for example, has studied cross-boundary practitioners' relationships and practical meaning sharing between the EU and NATO (see also Vitelli 2017 on regional defense CoP in South America; Banerjee and MacKay 2020 on military attachés).

Furthermore, while international CoPs point at like-mindedness and commonality, they also experience contestation and power struggles that act through social relations not despite them (Sondarjee 2024; Glas and Martel 2024). Therefore, a CoP framework potentially bridges collective ontologies between organizational sociologists and IR theories on norm contestation (Wiener 2018). The examples of the World Bank's institutionalization of inclusive practices or the OSCE's adoption of climate security demonstrate that there are no clear criteria for successful or unsuccessful contestation, and that they in fact are an integral part of the collective learning process (Sondarjee 2021; Bremberg 2023).

**What communities of practice bring to IR?**

The concept of international CoPs aims to explain social ordering processes by looking at social orders' origins and evolution (Adler 2019). The focus is on how and why specific configurations of meaningful performances organize world politics and change. This focus enables the CoP research agenda to understand power as a field of forces that create decentralized, relational, distributed, and productive epistemic and material authoritative social competence, which in turn constitutes the conditions of possibility for social reality to exist. The main benefit of focusing on international CoPs is capturing the social epistemological dimension of world politics, particularly of world ordering and global governance. By focusing attention on meaning-making and identity formation in and through practice, CoP frameworks invite scholars to think about how situated and practically derived learning shapes world politics. In sum, as a theoretically productive concept, it seeks to explain processes of international social ordering.

CoP scholars focus more on the qualitative unfolding of relationships between units rather than qualifying the structure of interactions (i.e., practices rather than ties, nodes, or vertical relationships). The degree and quality of CoP interactions result from the spaces they are embedded in and the actors through which they operate (Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024). In comparison to other concepts in IR, CoPs point at what *kind* of interaction *does* the ordering. First, the concept of regimes, which points at how social interactions produce political outcomes in world politics, resonates with the CoP concept. However, focusing on emergent dynamics within social configurations of domains of knowledge means that norms, rules, and principles do not merely 'converge' around rational actors' expectations and actions (Krasner 1983), but constitute them.

The CoP concept might seem to overlap with the concept of networks, which explains modes of social organization. However, whereas networks are often interpersonal, intergroup or interorganizational relationships through which information flows, CoPs involve social communication of knowledge through which practitioners negotiate meaning and develop their identity. Social communication refers to the co-creation of meaning rather than the mere transmission of information. While network governance refers to power as 'located' in networks' 'nodes' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009), we suggest that the CoP research program understands power as related to resources distributed within communities and across them, as well as the quality of interactions. The CoP concept can also appear similar to epistemic community, or networks of experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within a given domain (P. M. Haas 1992, 3). Such a community is a group of experts in a domain of knowledge, but most importantly, specific epistemic practicesof policy innovation. Recent work on epistemic CoPs emphasizes that knowledge is inseparable from its practice and, therefore, from CoPs (Adler et al. 2022). While epistemic communities are a specific type of CoP, not all CoPs are epistemic communities.

In contrast to Bourdieusian practice-oriented research in IR and the notion of hierarchical fields (Adler-Nissen 2012), the CoP concept focuses on interactions among like-minded individuals, and how these interactions and the struggles associated with them shape social ordering. The main difference between the concept of fields and CoP is the former's emphasis on (structurally determined) positions versus (socially emergent) processes (Jackson and Nexon 1999). While social dynamics in fields revolve around how actors understand what is at stake in a field and what it takes to control it, CoP research focuses on meaning-making and collective purpose, albeit through contestation. While both can be sites of power struggles, fields are akin to CoPs without the shared sense of joint enterprise. The emphasis on structural domination and forms of resistance in fields tends to limit the understanding of social order*ing* (instead of social orders in their static form).

We think that the concept of CoP is especially useful to advance our understanding of social ordering in five areas: (i) capturing the political and economic effects of the social dimension of shared knowledge creation and diffusion through practices and collective learning; (ii) identifying the sources of knowledge production and learning and their diffusion, as well as the normative and political contestation within and between CoPs; (iii) studying the social processes that originate at the boundaries between CoPs; (iv) examining how people and processes generate, transform, and communicate knowledge; and (v) exploring CoPs as instruments for cultivating global governance's norms, values, and practices from the bottom up.

The first theme concerns the CoP concept's capacity to capture the political and economic effects of shared knowledge, the development and diffusion of practices, and collective learning. If collective learning dynamically constitutes world order in practice, it is a political process *par excellence.* The negotiation of knowledge within and

across CoPs can lead to either the inclusion or exclusion of people from decision-making spaces. Take, for example, Maïka Sondarjee's (2024) analysis of the gradual inclusion of aid-receiving populations at the World Bank, Christian Bueger, Maren Hofius, and Scott Edwards' (2024) analysis of the addition of the United Nations in the maritime security community, or Guangyo Qiao-Franco's (2024) analysis of the dissemination of Chinese practices of cyber sovereignty among Global South countries, all included in the Special Issue.

The Special Issue's second theme identifies the sources of knowledge production and learning and the normative and political contestation processes within and between CoPs. A CoP framework sheds light on the dynamics of relational power within domains of knowledge. Thus, even if the social fabric of a CoP involves much more than struggles for resources, a CoP is not defined by only amicable social interactions. Thus, meaning negotiation in CoPs often happens when taken-for-granted notions about identity ('who are we' and 'what do we do') become unsettled. The domain of knowledge that demarcates a CoP is a space where knowledge is produced, negotiated, and contested. Focusing analytically on CoP serves, therefore, to identify the locus of social and political change through collective learning. Ingvild Bode's (2024) analysis of how a particular constellation of a CoP of diplomats, weapon manufacturers, and journalists shapes public debate on the use of lethal autonomous weapon systems, and Nina Græger's (2024) analysis of how practitioners in Norway and Russia engage in formal and informal boundary-crossing practices at borders in times of international conflict, highlight these dynamics.

The third theme deals with studying the social processes that originate at the boundaries between CoPs. After all, studying what happens *between* entities rather than within them is something specific to IR. Boundaries are not finite borders, they are non-geographical conceptual spaces, largely ignored by mainstream IR, where members of at least two communities negotiate knowledge and identities (Sondarjee 2021, 311; Hofius 2023). In these liminal spaces, learning is accelerated: 'they are where the unexpected can be expected, where innovative or unorthodox solutions are found, where serendipity is likely, and where old ideas find new life and new ideas propagate' (Wenger 1998, 254). Stéphanie Martel and Aarie Glas' (2024) analysis of diplomats in the ASEAN shows how boundary encounters become important sites of social interaction, and Thomas Tieku and Afua Boatemaa Yakohene's (2024) analysis of conflict resolution in the AU, ECOWAS, and UN, shows how the practice of informality helped resolve political crises in several Western African countries.

Our fourth theme considers how practitioners communicate knowledge in CoPs. Communication of knowledge among practitioners is also necessary for collective learning and negotiation of meanings, which Niklas Bremberg and Elsa Hedling (2024) point out in their analysis of semi-formal learning practices in the EU Common and Security Defence Policy (CSDP) during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, theorizing about social communication in and between CoPs relates to how we conceive background knowledge as intersubjective. If background knowledge can be both tacit and reflexive (Pouliot 2008)— subjectively existing as dispositions and expectations in practitioners' minds—it is also in the practices themselves, namely bound up by shared practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 15; Adler 2019, 72). A theory of communication in CoPs distinguishes between background knowledge and information.

The fifth theme is exploring CoPs as instruments for cultivating global governance's norms and values from the bottom up. As Federica Bicchi (2024) argues, from the 1990s onwards, international organizations have started to intentionally cultivate CoPs. Our framework extends her argument to the intentional cultivation of informal CoPs to help reduce the influence of more formal CoPs, whose technological, business, political, and military practices pose a danger to global governance. Cultivating CoPs from below also requires a normative approach that explicitly promotes values and practices that underline common humanity challenging dehumanization processes at stake in world politics (Adler 2019, 265; Chessé and Sondarjee 2024).

**Avenues for Future Research**

Going forward, five themes will be productive for advancing the international CoP research agenda. First, studying liminality and boundaries is crucial for studying shared practices and background knowledge. Boundaries are often where transformative social dynamics occur –they are spaces where members of communities negotiate meaning. This could be done by drawing on feminist and postcolonial research on boundary spaces. Second, CoP scholars should continue to study how practicing and knowing together in CoPs helps constitute shared identity and

practitioners' reciprocity. Because practicing reciprocity rests on trust, we must inquire further about the relationship between identity/ontological security and trust. Third, scholars engaging with the CoP concept need to delve further into power and contestation. Power is critical for understanding interactions within and between CoPs, or the ability to select and help diffuse certain practices over others. Fourth, CoP research needs to address questions of normativity and ethics. There is a need to understand better what shapes practical judgment, normative evaluation, and reflexive agency in meaning-negotiation processes in CoPs. Finally, most CoP studies so far either refer to Western practitioners or are related to subgroups within or between Western institutions, with only a few exceptions.

If research on CoPs is to help us understand fundamental aspects of social ordering in world politics, it must seek to cover the entire world. Our Special Issue, with contributions on Western African countries, Chinese companies, and South-East Asia, will hopefully pave the way to include more scholars with research interests outside the Western world.

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