Norm Evolution Theory and World Politics

Norm change in the field of International Relations (IR) has been the subject of intensive research by constructivists for several decades. Despite many years of focus on this topic, scholars have not yet come to a complete understanding of how or why norms emerge and evolve or change over time. In many cases, constructivists have engaged with the idea of individuals and communities or various types as actors and agents that play different roles in the overall norm change process. This article engages with the topic of norms with a specific treatment of norm evolution theory in the context of world politics. The article begins with a discussion about the concept, their treatment by scholars, and the role that have and continue play in world politics.

Norms and IR

Norms operate at different societal levels. At their most basic level, norms operate at the community level whereby they influence the behavior and conduct of people in their everyday lives. Norms operating at the community level govern the behavior of people when they are in the presence of others. Either, all people within a given society could be affected by a norm, or the behavior of only particular subsets of a population will be guided by community level norms. The manner in which norms form or develop, spread, and become institutionalized and adopted by other states and institutions are all points of academic debate with different approaches and outcomes that result in an expansive literature (Kelley, 2008).

Norm Evolution

Some scholars subscribe to the view that norms change in a process whereby influence from various sources push norms as a type of global culture or something that is widely (if not universally) shared (Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez, 1997; Farrell, 2005a), while others suggest that norms occupy certain points along a range of stages (in which there is *Norm Emergence*, *Norm Cascade*, and *Norm Internalization*) (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Keck and Finnemore (1998) have written about the norm diffusion process that advocacy networks transcending state or nations influence. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999) place norms and their changes (or diffusion) within a spiral model where domestic support and opposition are the mechanisms of change. These divergent perspectives on a complex process of abstract and immensely subjective elements in international relations yield equally extensive (complimentary and opposing) accounts of what norms are and who seeks to create them, develop them, adopt them, and compete against them (Kelley, 2008). So, what exactly are norms and how do we explain them?

Turning to the field of IR in relation to norms with the view of placing the conceptualization of norms soundly within three specific IR theoretical lenses, those of: *Realism*; *Liberal Internationalism*; and *Constructivism*. This article builds on this by introducing norm evolution and the concept of the 'life cycle' of norms as a theoretical model that was originally introduced by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) in their renowned article, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', in *International Organization*. Countless norms scholars have employed Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) framework in their research on norms in a myriad of academic disciplines. What follows is an in-depth explanation of each of the three stages of the norm life cycle using norm evolution theory as a heuristic. Norm evolution theory has been liberally applied across many different social science disciplines and sub-disciplines such as political science (and IR), economics, sociology, history, military studies, demography, management, psychology, law, women, gender, and sexuality studies, and others (Merton, 1976; Zuckerman; 1988; Rae, 2003; Farrell, 2005b;

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Golde, 2006; Shephard, 2006; Sandholtz, 2008; Krook & True, 2010; Braxton, Proper & Bayer, 2011; Young, 2015).

Norm Application

Norms have been strongly applied to the study of war, conflict, and the use of force throughout history and in the modern era, including the history of the past ten years and today. They have also been used to attempt to understand the acceptability of behavior of states in the near and distant future. Norms and norm evolution theory have been widely applied to the study of state and international organizations (IOs) like the United Nations (UN) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover, the application of norm theory and norm evolution is prevalent in matters of human rights and humanitarian assistance with probably the most notable case being the principle/norm known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), alongside the UN and its role in forming global norms and how it grapples with its own internal norm formation, emergence, and contestation such as the case with the UN Charter, in which peacekeeping is not at all mentioned but which is now one of the most commonly-referenced and commonly-used tools of the UN as a world organization in its peacekeeping operations (Karlsrud, 2015). Additionally, norm evolution theory has been applied to the study of the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. They apply equally to taboo weapons, of which nuclear weapons are the most notable. However, chemical and biological weapons, and even cyber warfare studies have also been subjects of norm evolution analyses in addition to what are considered reprehensible acts, notably assassination, torture, capital punishment (also known simply as the death penalty), and aspects associated with domestic sides of societies like marriage, inter-marriage (sexual) relationship, and incest. The aim here is to show that the study of norms has taken place in a rich backdrop of social, economic, political, and legal matters and cases of many types.

Analyses of geopolitical narratives and events in world history have tended to benefit from a general agreement within the IR field over the definition of norms and how they operate. In what has come to be one of the most often cited accounts of norms in world politics, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 891) provide a straightforward account of a norm as a 'standard of appropriate behavior for actors within a given identity'. 'Norms', according to Klotz (1995, 14), are 'shared (thus social) understandings of standards of behavior […] [n]or are all norms moral, since these standards can have functional and nonethical origins and purposes'. Gelpi (1997, 339) emphasis 'norms as focal points for interpreting behavior' as well as 'reputational constraints'. These definitions, however, present a palpable ubiquity to which Raymond (1997, 207) once responded to, noting that, '[t]the web of expectations created by norms guide behavior; even in the absence of centralized mechanisms to enforce compliance', suggesting that norms take on a life of their own rather than being perceived of as fixed or concretizing elements, they are standards that are constantly in flux, changing and evolving over time and in relation to other norms and other events unfolding at various points in time and places in the world. 'Over time all norms vary with regard to communal meaning, perlocutionary effect, degree of internalization, extent of conformity, patterns of deviance, and so on' (Raymond, 1997, 235).

But despite their ability to change and the level of unpredictability that following along with this characteristic of norms, they possess considerable power and potential for 'channel[ing] and regularize[ing] behavior; they often limit the range of choice and constrain actions' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 894). Norms overlap with other abstract and often elusive terms in the social sciences such as shared ideas and expectations as well as 'beliefs about appropriate behavior [that] give the world structure, order, and stability' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 894). Overlapping of these elusive, non-tangible and non-material elements are problematic not only for a single group of scholars. Finnemore & Sikkink (1998, 894) explain:

[t]he problem for constructivists thus becomes the same problem facing realists – explaining change. In an ideational international structure, idea shifts and norm shifts are the main vehicles for system transformation. Norm shifts are to the ideational theorist what changes in the balance of power are to the realist.

Quoting one of the most influential norms scholars, Friedrich Kratochwil on the nature, characteristics, and impacts of norms, Crawford (2002, 87-8) draws attention to the idea that:

norms are used to ascribe praise or blame, but he [Kratochwil] highlights the function of 'norms' in decisionmaking

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and problem solving – ordering and coordination effects – arguing that norms decrease uncertainty, allow the pursuit of shared meanings, and help actors coordinate be defining situations and the rules of the game.

It may be observed that despite the notion being projected by Kratochwil (1989), 'norms decrease uncertainty', norms have the potential for fueling uncertainty, not just because of the nature of norms and what they seek to change, but also due to the fact that norms simply do not operate independently of one another. That is, they operate in a system of shared norms, a system in which multiple norms overlap and influence each other and the actors that interact with them. Just as many different states exist and operate in the same system, so do norms. This synergistic condition places restrictions upon the idea that norms simply 'decrease uncertainty' (Kratochwil, 1989). But if this is the case then, the question should be asked: for whom does the uncertainty decrease? Surely it is not for all actors, be them states, non-states, or individuals, in the world. Therefore, we might alternatively accept that varies across a spectrum with different points along such a spectrum connection to different people and players in the world.

Community, conceptually and in practice, comes to mean common interests and norms that are shared among different peoples. As Bartle (2011, n.p.) reasons:

[n]ot only is the concept of a community a 'construct' (model), it is a 'sociological construct.' It is a set of interactions, human behaviors that have meaning and expectation between its members. Not just action, but actions based on shared expectations, values, beliefs, and meanings between individuals.

Perception and constructed communities

Members of a community see these differently. Perceptions can co-exist and mingle well or contrast and be result in hostility. Thus, the way people perceive the practices and norms matters. When people either enter into or choose to become part of a community they come to a point of having to relinquish a degree of individualism and individual behavior to become or stay part of that group or community. Communities are not fixed. They can change and acquire different characteristics, therefore being defined differently because of how they are perceived and the changes that actually take place within or around them, and the impacts those have. 'It is this notion of community', explains Agrawal (2000, 635), 'that is supposed to grow out of common location, small size, homogenous composition, and/or shared characteristics'. The existence of common danger, threat, and risk to the safety, security, and future of the community can be added to the conception of community provided above. In January 2015, following the first major Paris attacks of that year, Moroccan-born and practicing-Muslim Mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, essentialized the idea of community and the further point of threat and security by referring to Dutch society as the 'we society' (Svirsky, 2015). His statement, capturing international attention and receiving praise from London Mayor Boris Johnson centered on the idea of law extending above all people, beliefs, and (religious) practices, and argued that those unwilling to be part of the 'we community' should leave.

States and nations are also community types and constitute social constructs. Social scientists have devoted much attention over the several decades to the study of norms and their impact at the national level (Kocs, 1994; Botcheva, 2001; Gelpi, 2003; Cardenas, 2004; Goldsmith and Posner, 2005; Cass, 2006; Sitaraman, 2009; Smith-Cannoy, 2012; DeGarmo, 2013; Foot, 2013; Cupac, 2014). Their impact on state behavior has been the focus of studies that show states deviating from their national interests due to the prescriptive and proscriptive power of norms. States' interests are therefore not always assured. In an attempt to produce a comprehensive theory of law, Goldsmith and Posner (2005) developed a typology explaining state behavior according to four models: (i) 'coercion'; (ii) 'cooperation'; (iii) 'coordination'; and (iv) 'coincidence of interests'. The union between the state and those governed by the state within the state's borders cannot be taken for granted as there is probable separation even in the context of norms and state behavior. If a societal leader within that state sought to promote a particular norm it could take hold. That leader would then become the norm promoter. In the case of an international norm entering into the public domain of a state, even if political leadership rejects the norm, that norm 'may become embedded in domestic political discourse by reasoning with important domestic actors, which may force the leadership to acknowledge the norm and act on it' (Cass, 2006, 9). In Klotz's (1995) social constructivist examination of South Africa and Apartheid, the author shows that an exceptionally large body of states around the world worked together to confront the South African government that promoted racial inequality and used it as the basis of its domestic policy for years. The

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pressure that was built as a result of international opposition to the government, despite this running counter the economic interests of those states, leading to the eventual collapse of the Apartheid regime.

The examples above offer a lens for viewing the manner in which norms have accommodated or constrained certain performances, actions, and patterns of behaviors on different levels, ranging from domestic, to national, to the international level. When states and non-state actors begin to formulate expectations about what is either acceptable or not acceptable in the international realm, the behavior of actors can change, for better or for worse. When actors' behaviors change, due to shared expectations, what can be seen is a shift in structure within the international system. A major effect of this can be the changing of structures at the international level, affecting states everywhere. National norms have the potential of becoming international norms with the 'origins of many international norms hav[ing] been located in national understanding of what constitutes appropriate behavior in a given issue area' (Cortell & Davis, 2005, 3; see Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 1999). From the individual, 'beliefs about right and wrong', have the potential for becoming norms as 'collective expectations about proper behavior' (Jepperson, Wendt & Katzenstein, 1996, 54). Risse, Ropp & Sikkink (1999, 7) explain that, '[t]o endorse a norm not only expresses a belief, but also creates impetus for behavioral consent with the belief'. Such consent can spread far beyond the point of origin the norm endorsing.

Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) provide a valuable contribution on international norms using the label 'sociological (neo-)institutionalism'. It was partly reactionary to many behavioral influences of the 1960s and 1970s. Its core aim is to illustrate how institutions are able to determine, manage, or regulate outcomes in the international realm that are of a social and political nature (Hall and Taylor, 1996). A broad theoretical research program has contributed to bodies of work about states, individuals, and various types of organizations and organizational structures found in the modern world. Its original focus was on the impact of European culture but came to encompass consequences of world culture (see Meyer, Boli & Thomas, 1987; Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer, 2000; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Jepperson, 2001, 1), especially as it pertains to actors. Despite its applications and the 'momentum' that it has gained over previous decades, it too experiences marginalization and experiences limited recognition. Its continuing establishment movement takes place in many scholarly directions. As a basic social theory, Jepperson (2001, 31) explains:

[t]he worldwide social scientific reification of actorhood continues to give sociological institutionalism a lot of space – to defocalize actorhood – and produces far fewer near-competitors, and far less real criticism, than should be present. In this space, this institutionalism continues to 'proliferate' as what Lakatos called a 'progressive TRP', both expanding and deepening its research applications.

Norms play an intricate role in the formation of world cultures, operating cooperatively or aggressively with other norms found within a single culture and across cultures. Because norms are existing and influencing *out there*, they have the power to impact what happens *in here*. In other words, the norms found in global culture directly impact the cultures at home in a nation-state. When influence seeps into the national realm from the international realm, attitudes, thinking, and behaviorisms can change.

Norms and taboo weapons

When the interaction of global and domestic cultures takes place environments within the state can change. Many different environments can be found in the domestic environment or realm of a state. For example, one can turn to economic, energy, and political environments, and those of education, mobility, urban structuring, social development, and justice, equality, and rights. National security is also part of this mixture. Each one of these environments shapes our perceptions of world issues in and on which we act daily. To illustrate this point further, our perceptions, attitudes, and views centering on such issues as economic trade, sovereignty, environmental protection, and human rights. For example, anti-personnel (AP) landmines have been used as a military weapon and yet despite their perceived usefulness in some military establishments and military or even political leaders, AP landmine consequences have generated a level of abhorrence so as to create a powerful basis of support for their complete ban. Canada and other states sharing similar views spearheaded the charge for the creation of an international agreement, which came to be known as the Ottawa Treaty that facilitated the banning of the use of all AP landmines.

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Building support for, developing, and implementing the ban was well suited for a constructivist IR explanatory lens in world politics.

Other weapons like Sarin, Tabun, and Soman (different types of nerve agents) can essentially short-circuit a person's nervous system and cause death through respiratory system failure while painful blistering and internal body hemorrhaging occur. Use of such agents is prohibited under the Geneva Protocol but their lack of use is also the result of an unusual self-imposed proscription. Initially 32 states agreed to 'abstain from the use of projectiles the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases' in the Hague Declaration of 1899 (Laub, 2014). An increasingly number of states joined the ranks of those already willing to be part of a practice of self-imposing proscription, deepening the institutionalization of the proscription through the Geneva Protocol of 1925 (Laub, 2014; United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, UNODA, 2016). This powerful norm gained strength over many decades and throughout the 20th century with 137 states eventually consented to the protocol. Calling this a great success story. Price (1997) notes that even armed rebel groups and nefarious regimes fighting for their survival against insurrections have shunned the idea of using nerve agents to keep from losing their power and control in a given state.

Norms prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons have been well covered in the academic literature and offer a tremendous amount of influence over states and their behavior in the context of tactical and strategic atomic weapons testing and usage. Just five years after the first use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities seen not as targets of military necessity but rather test opportunities against large collections of civilians in urban centers, the US militarily engaged the North Koreans on the Korean peninsula, demonstrating a savagery in the use of napalm and bombing resonant of the type of destruction orchestrated against the Japanese cities during 1944 and 1945. In some parts of the world there was a hesitance to look at atomic weapons as a viable tactical and strategic option. In the US, many voiced their support for reserving atomic weapons as a last resort, particularly if China were to become involved in the war. Average Americans and Congressional members vehemently opposed President Truman's position on the use of atomic weapons – what is known as the Truman administration's 'appeasement' of China. Tannenwald (1999) describes the opposition in her exemplary book *The Nuclear Taboo*, naming Bernard Baruch, Senator Owen Brewster and Senator Stuart Symington, and Congressman Mendel Rivers, who called on Truman to drop atomic bombs on North Korea to 'spread World War III' (Intondi, 2015, 31). The Stockholm Peace Appeal grew out of the anxiety over Truman's decision in 1950 to develop a hydrogen bomb (Intondi, 2015). UN delegates from a number of states including Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Liberia – even a handful of states in Latin America – supported the position of Truman who often repeated his threats of nuclear warfare against the Koreans (Intondi, 2015). In 1950, Democrat and Republican Senators alike called for the use of nuclear weapons, not only in Korea but also against the Soviet Union. Intondi (2015, 30) highlights the brashness of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. (R-MA), who advocated an '"atomic artillery barrage" against the Koreans' and defended their use by rebuking the idea of '"moral disapproval of using atomic weapons in Korea"'. Former Senator Lodge Jr. went on to say that, '"[a]s a matter of fact, a strong argument could actually be made for using the atomic bomb strategically so as to permit a defensive line of craters to be made at some point across the Korean peninsula"'. As Intondi (2015, 30) includes in his analysis, 'Senator Lyndon Johnson (D-TX) suggested that the United States unleash a "full-scale atomic attack" on Russia if it perpetuated "one more act of aggression". As late as 1953, Defense officials conceded that the Eisenhower administration was considering using nuclear weapons in Korea'.

Today, there are strong indications supported by the empirical record of a lack of nuclear weapons use since 1945 that there is a resilient nuclear weapons taboo. About seven decades of history across the entire Cold War period, the uncertain post-Cold War era, and the 9/11 and post-9/11 periods that feature a nuclear-armed North Korea, presented numerous wars and conflicts. In this entire range of history there were what seems to have been countless opportunities to use tactical and strategic nuclear weapons without running the risk of a nuclear counterattack or retaliatory action. In spite of many different variables indicating the likelihood of nuclear use. Abbasi (2016) notes a variety of variables that supported the use of nuclear weapons in different tactical and strategic contexts. Those variables are worth mentioning: widespread nuclear weapons in states' possession internationally; states' technical efficiency in regard to operationalization of such weapons; transfer of nuclear weapons from old to new proliferators with asymmetric power balance; the centrality of nuclear weapons in states' national security policies and their strategic doctrines; states' distinct strategic cultures/traditions and unique political systems and; more significantly,

absence of legal prohibition towards possession and use of nuclear weapons.

Over the previous 20 years there has been clear decline in the number of US and Russian warheads, states vehemently opposing nuclear weapons development and testing, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty extension for which now 190 states provide the supporting foundation. President Obama's New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) was a major step forward leading to the eventual reorientation of US national security policy.

French President François Hollande in early 2015 stated there was 'no question' about France's loosening of its nuclear commitment in a speech outlining the country's nuclear doctrine and policy. Hollande, in that speech declared his position in favor of completely eliminating nuclear weapons: 'I therefore share the long-term goal of a total elimination of nuclear weapons, but, I would add, only when the strategic context allows. France will continue to work ceaselessly in that direction' (Presidency of the French Republic, 2015). President Obama's Prague speech in 2009 delivered his sentiments about the need to 'put an end to Cold War thinking' (The White House, 2009). Whereas the past administrations and political leaders placed a great deal of promise in nuclear weapons to keep the nation and its allies safe while keeping their adversaries down, today the language provides a palpable re-characterization of the role of nuclear weapons, depicting them as the essence of what can make the US and its allies unsafe.

Such initiatives and efforts are powerful moves forward that entrench the nuclear weapons taboo but it is a taboo that reveals some signs of fragility. Whether there is real legitimacy behind the taboo attracts negative attention. Moreover, North Korea and Iran challenge the nature of the taboo along with the US that has also contributed to taboo weakening via agreements with India in 2008 and the US-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). Abbasi (2016) points to the 'essence and spirit of the taboo' as the victims of US shared interests with other states like India. Uneven positioning about nuclear weapons and their defensive and offensive roles across the member state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presents a portrait of ambiguous doctrines and strategies alongside competition observed amongst states in South East Asia that could potentially enter into a nuclear arms race. Some of those states also share a norms-based relationship within the Association of South East Asian National (ASEAN) group. These are just a few instances pointing to the 'fragility and vulnerability of [the nuclear] taboo' (Abbasi, 2016) even though we ought to still recognize continuity of non-use in so many fragile situations involving numerous vulnerable states and their positions.

Conclusion

This article began by asking why great power states sometimes violate long-standing norms, which in some cases they helped to create or maintain. To address this question, the article examined realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches toward the development, shifting, and breaching of norms, especially in relation to the targeted killings by the US, including the challenges and limitations encountered by these three core branches of IR theory apropos these issues. With the world today arguable facing the prospect of or already experiencing a major shift from a unipolar system dominated by the US to a multipolar one, understanding the interactions between strong powers such as the US and norms, norm violations, and norm shifts is becoming increasingly salient. In light of the previous discussion, norms can be extremely resilient. They can strengthen over time and diffuse across increasingly more states, gaining support over long periods of time. As illustrated, the adoption of norms by other states and NSAs can legitimize behavior and define what individuals, organizations, states, and supranational bodies, among other entities in the international system and international society can expect as patterns or standards of behavior. A state, for example, can challenge the existence of a norm and rewrite the premise of it. Norms can also display continuity in spite of occasions of fragility and embedded or latent vulnerability that can come about through tense or turbulent political situations. Such instances can test the strength of norms, either strengthening them further or challenging their foundations. Somewhat unheeded in practice and by a surprising number of academics is the possibility of norms diminishing or even vanishing entirely without other norms assuming their place.

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