

Chapter a distinct school of theory in international



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Chapter 3 If this study is to use a constructivist lens as a tool for analysing the issues surrounding GERD it is important to understand what constructivism is in international relations, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and what its applications are. Constructivism sets itself out as a distinct school of theory in international politics.

It proposes that large amounts of international relations are historically and socially constructed (Jackson & Nexon, 2002). This is in contrast to international relations being inevitable consequences arising from human nature or certain aspects of international politics that exist. To say international relations is socially constructed means that core aspects of the field of study are formed by constantly ongoing processes of social interactions and practice. There have emerged two basic tenets of constructivism. Firstly, that structures of human association are created primarily through the sharing of ideas instead of by material forces. Secondly, that conscious actors' identities and interests are constructed by the shared ideas instead of arising from a certain nature (Wendt, 1999). As with any school of thought in international relations, theorists who can be described as constructivists do not agree on everything.

Though generally they share the view that international relations are not just affected by power politics. They are also affected by ideas. Constructivist theorists argue that the fundamental structures that make up international relations are social instead of being strictly material. They also assert that when the nature of social interactions between states change this can bring a move towards a greater level of security in the international arena (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2011). When constructivism developed it was as a school

of thought largely geared towards challenging realist perspectives and assumptions. This is because constructivism developed at a time when the dominant discourse in the field of international relations was realism.

Vince Neaves 2 Neorealism, the most dominant form of realism at this time, is fundamentally a structuralist theory. That is to say it holds that the majority of international politics can be explained by the structure of the international system. This way of viewing international relations first came to prominence in Kenneth Waltz's book *Man, the State, and War*. Waltz later clarified and fleshed out his ideas of neorealism in his book, *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz's neorealist view states international politics is largely determined by the anarchical nature of the international system. Instead of having some form of world government the international arena is composed of states. States are sovereign in their own territory.

Neorealist theorists, such as Waltz, argue that this anarchical system forces state actors to make certain decisions. This means state's behaviour arises from the assumption that a state can only rely on themselves for security. Neorealist theorists point to this behaviour of protecting one's own self-interests in terms of power as the explanation for most of what happens in international relations, claiming this to be born from the anarchy of the international system's structure. This has led to neorealist theorists having a tendency to downplay the importance of international politics that takes place at the state level (Brown & Ainley, 2009). Waltz labelled this focus as being reductionist (Waltz, 2010).

Early constructivists, such as the theorist Alexander Wendt, have challenged these assumptions. They have shown that the cause of international politics is not something the structure imparts on actors. Instead they point to the structure of the international system being constructed by social practices actors engage in. Wendt argues neorealism's concept of structure explains very little about how international politics functions. This is because when the presumptions neorealism makes regarding identities and interests of actors are removed it the meaning behind the social institutions, such as anarchy, loses most of its ability to explain state's behaviour. Neorealism's explanations fail to explain whether states will be allies or enemies. They fail to explain whether or not one state will recognise another state's sovereignty or if they will lean towards being more revisionist or status quo in their approach to international relations. These aspects of state actors' behaviour cannot be explained by anarchy.

Instead they require incorporating evidence of the identities and interests that are held by important actors in the international arena. This would mean that neorealist theorists' centring of the anarchical nature of the international system is misplaced (Wendt, 1992). Wendt asserts that anarchy can be seen to only constrain a state in ways that are dependant on how a state frames anarchy in their own perspective of international relations as well as how they frame their own interests and identities. This would mean anarchy does not drive states to only look out for their own self-interests in security terms, as neorealists had suggested. Instead, states need only act in such a self-interested and self-reliant way so far as they conform to a neorealist view of the international system being made up of

states all viewing security as a competitive concept and behaving accordingly. Constructivism refutes the claim made by neorealism that a states gain in security means a loss in security for another.

Constructivism allows for states to hold different concepts of security. These can be either cooperative, where states maximise their security but this does not mean another state has lessened security, or collective, where state recognise the security of other states as beneficial to their own security. Anarchy does not mean states behave in a way secures their own individual interests (Wendt, 1992). This means the conclusions neorealist theorists draw from their analysis rely on assumptions about how the meaning of social institutions, such as anarchy, are constructed. These same theorists do not address these assumptions they are making. Not addressing these assumptions leads to neorealism resting on the assumption Vince Neaves 4 that the meaning of social institutions is unchangeable. Neorealism instead excludes incorporating discussions of social construction in its analysis. The interests and identities of international actors take on the central role of theorizing international relations.

This is made possible for constructivists because they reject the role anarchy plays in determining state behaviour, as neorealist propose. Constructivists also move away from the materialist based thinking that underpins neorealism as a theory. Because constructivism does not view actors as being simply governed by a competitive drive to maximise their own individual security, the interests and identities of the actors become important when analysing the actions of those same actors.

Constructivists see these interests and identities that actors hold as not being necessarily grounded in materialism, much in the same way they view the nature of the international system as not being based in materialism. Instead, these interests and identities result from ideas and the social construction of these ideas. The meaning that comes from ideas and actors is derived from social interactions. Meanings are given and can be attached to different things and situations. It may appear that constructivists focus disproportionately on the state level of international politics, much in the same way neorealists do in regards to the structural level. However, it is the interests and identities that constructivists focus on that together make up the structure of their own that impacts the international system, in the view of constructivists. Constructivist's central point of difference from neorealists is to view the structure of the international system as arising from mostly ideas rather than material factors (Wendt, 1999). As this study will be providing a constructivist analysis of the issues surrounding GERD it is necessary to first provide an understanding of constructivism is, where it comes from, what its uses are, and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

As constructivism began to emerge as an increasingly prominent school of thought in international relations criticisms of the constructivist perspective began to mount. A common question that was raised was whether or not constructivism would remain a critical school of thought, simply pointing out problems with other theories in international politics, or would it be able to actually offer its own explanations for international political phenomena and events. Built on these questions many suggested that constructivists were

not capable of conducting empirical research (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

As empirical studies have been undertaken and published that have been based in a constructivist framework constructivism has continued to be criticised. Most of the criticism of constructivist research takes issue with empirical research. This study is not empirical and therefore will not have to consider many of these criticisms when assessing its findings.

Constructivism is a different kind of theory from realism, liberalism, or marxism and operates at a different level of abstraction.

Constructivism is not a substantive theory of politics. It is a social theory that makes claims about the nature of social life and social change.

Constructivism does not, however, make any particular claims about the content of social structures or the nature of agents at work in social life.

Consequently, it does not, by itself, produce specific predictions about political outcomes that one could test in social science research (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

Constructivism in this sense is similar to rational choice. Like rational choice, it offers a framework for thinking about the nature of social life and social interaction, but makes no claims about their specific content. In a rational choice analysis, agents act rationally to maximize utilities, but the substantive specification of actors and utilities lies outside the analysis; it must be provided before analysis can begin. In a constructivist analysis, agents and structures are mutually constituted in ways that explain why the political world is so and not otherwise, but the substantive specification of agents and structures must come from some other source.

Neither constructivism nor rational choice provides substantive explanations

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or predictions of political behavior until coupled with a more specific understanding of who the relevant actors are, what they want, and what the content of social structures might be. Some do not consider constructivism to be a theory as such. This is because constructivism does not set out to offer explanations for the behaviors of actors or explain why actors differ from one another in their actions. It does not attempt to explain how the world changes.

What it does do is make theorising about seemingly unrelated issues possible. This is because outside of constructivism the concepts that are used and assertions that are made are also unrelated. Constructivism offers a way to explain the international system holistically as well as cohesively (Onuf, 2013). One of the purposes of this chapter is to gauge what constructivism's usefulness is in analysing the issues surrounding GERD. The problem of how to evaluate a theory derives from the first interrogation. In order to assess constructivism, it is imperative to closely examine its ontological and epistemological foundations and its research capabilities and methodology. However, it is also necessary to situate the theory in relation to other approaches.

Constructivism can be understood well by carefully distinguishing between its position on the level of observation, on the level of action, and the relationship between the two. With regard to the first, it argues that a coherent position of constructivism implies a constructivist epistemology. Constructivism is epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the social construction of the social world. On the level of action, it assumes an intersubjective unit of analysis. And

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since constructivism relies on a problematisation of how reality is constructed, it must theorise the link between these two Vince Neaves 7 levels. The basic underlying thrust of constructivist research has been to increase reflexivity in both theoretical and empirical studies in international relations on the basis that analysis of the social world is not only a very part of the real world but might also affect it. This intrinsic link from social science to power and politics might be rejected by some scholars for it seems to imply that all social science is ideological.

But this seems to be an unnecessary deduction. It is a fact that social sciences interact with the social world. That is was the study of social sciences is of. But saying that social science has political implications does not imply that social science is nothing but politics. Inversely, it does not mean that although the social world is constructed, it is simply a matter of will to reconstruct it in order to get it changed. Although some scientists might have preferred access to political power, this is by no means a general position, nor one with necessary effect (Guzzini, 2000). Constructivism has some weaknesses that can compromise its evaluation as an approach to international relations theory.

Indeed, the first of them concerns the divisions within the school of thought, which could well be strength or a burden. As early as in the 1990s, constructivism was already divided. Different scholars have used a constructivist lens to analyse different features of the issues they are looking at in international relations. For example, Finnemore (1996) focused on developing a systemic approach to understanding the interests and behaviors of states.

She did this by analysing international structure. But instead of focusing on the international structure of power, as a realist would, she focused on the international structure of social values. Taking such a specific method of analysis will produce similarly specific set of results. Another weakness of constructivism, although in the right context it can be a benefit, is when it becomes reductionist (Moik, 2015). Constructivism is not capable of placing political phenomena in a complex structural framework the same realism can. Being able to place phenomena in a structural framework can make analysis clearer and deliver, at times, a more coherent set of findings. However, as long as constructivist analysis is conducted with its weaknesses being taken into consideration it is possible to deliver findings that are valuable.

Conversely, constructivism also has many strengths that make it a worthwhile framework to base an academic study in. One of the great strengths of constructivism is its integrative and bridge-building ability to pay attention to both structure and agency and thus avoid the pitfalls of an exclusive embrace of either an overly detailed and complete holism or a carelessly individualistic approach (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998). Onuf (2013) points out that the language used when conducting a constructivist analysis can be a strength. He notes that this is particularly true when compared with realist works. Realists, he poses, use rhetoric such as struggle, fear, and violence. This can affect what the findings from a research project can be. Conducting a constructivist analysis can therefore draw new findings from the same case by its different use of language. The importance of

question driven research and scholarly dialogue should also be noted as a strength of constructivism.

An infinite array of interesting questions can be asked about world politics, both of a historical and contemporary nature. Sometimes constructivists and rationalists will seek to answer the same questions, and here the value of divergent epistemological and methodological standpoints can be argued in relation to the question at hand. At other times, scholars will ask different types of questions, as evident in the preference of some postmodern constructivists for addressing ‘ how’ questions over conventional ‘ why’ questions (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998).

Vince Neaves 9 Constructivism is also far more capable than realism of offering explanations for why more specifically when events occur. Realists often point to history as evidence of their theory’s legitimacy, noting that it has been capable of explaining major political events in the international arena. However, realism is not often capable of explaining, in a more detailed fashion, the ways in which the political outcomes it predicts come about. Constructivism can answer these missing details (Onuf, 2013).