

# **A Norm Diffusion Approach to Studying Change in International Organizations**

Kseniya Oksamytna

Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate on Globalisation, Europe, and Multilateralism  
LUISS Guido Carli and University of Geneva  
kseniya.oksamytna@erasmusmundus-gem.eu

Paper prepared for the conference  
"Global Re-Ordering: Towards The Next Generation of Scholarship"  
Brussels, November 18-20, 2014

Draft  
Please do not cite or circulate without the author's permission

Behavior and change in international organizations (IOs) have been recently recognized as important, yet understudied, phenomena in international relations. While a number of notable works focusing on IO authority and autonomy have appeared recently, debates on whether member states or bureaucrats have the upper hand in determining IO behavior mask the complex reality in which state representatives, IO officials, independent experts, and civil society actors enter into discussions or negotiations about courses of action which are appropriate for a given IO. The norm diffusion framework holds the potential for providing a more nuanced account of this reality. In her dissertation, the author uses the norm diffusion approach to study the post-Cold War evolution of UN peacekeeping, while this paper discusses the general applicability of the norm diffusion framework to investigating change in international and supranational organizations. It alerts researchers to the difficulties which might be encountered in the process and explores the norm diffusion framework's (in)compatibility with and comparative strengths in comparison to other theoretical approaches in the IO scholarship.

To date, the norm diffusion literature has overwhelmingly focused on the state as a recipient of new ideas and practices. International organizations (IOs) have been conceptualized either as norm entrepreneurs<sup>1</sup> or platforms for the transmission of norms from one state to another.<sup>2</sup> Only during the past decade, there have been some theoretical advances towards understanding IOs as "norm consumers".<sup>3</sup> This is a welcome development: the norm diffusion framework appears to be well-suited for studying IO change. While the recent debate concerning IO behavior has concentrated on the question of whether member states, bureaucrats, or outside actors -- such as civil society, special interests, or experts -- have the most influence, the norm diffusion framework, by virtue of being agnostic about the nature of norm entrepreneurs, provides a framework for assessing efforts by any category of advocates.

The three most frequently asked questions concerning IO change are 1) who or what catalyzes formal or informal change and how is a consensus on the direction of change attained? 2) what factors shape the prospect for achieving change? and 3) how do we explain the outcome of reform initiatives, particularly when the degree or content of change is less than expected?<sup>4</sup> As concerns the first question, the norm diffusion framework offers tools for analyzing norm entrepreneurship by organization-internal and external actors and their coalition-building efforts. As for the second question, the norm diffusion framework conceptualizes mechanisms and factors which affect the probability of norm adoption and the degree of normative change (most contemporary accounts pay attention to a multitude of such mechanisms, like coercion, conditionality, social influence, persuasion, emulation, and imitation). In terms of the third question, the norm diffusion framework examines how norms proceed through consecutive stages of institutionalization, how they are contested and interpreted, and how different variants of the same norm coexist in inchoate or contradictory policies.

However, since the norm diffusion scholarship has been historically driven by a focus on norm adoption by states, its application to IOs poses certain difficulties. Many models require substantial adaptation or are of limited usefulness altogether. For example, according to Finnemore and Sikkink's "norm lifecycle" model, norms pass through several stages, such as emergence, tipping point (which usually comes after approximately a third of all states adopt it), "norm

---

1 For an overview of studies in this category, see Park 2005, 114.

2 Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 899-900.

3 The term is from Park 2006. See also essays in Park and Vetterlein 2010.

4 Tierney and Weaver n/d., 12-3.

cascade", and internalization.<sup>5</sup> This model works well in a context where the existence of a global norm is premised on its acceptance by the majority of states. Yet IOs often play unique roles in international affairs; norm sets regulating their behavior are organization-specific. Beyond general norms like transparency or accountability, it is difficult to speak of a "norm cascade" among IOs. Another model suggests that the stages of norms' institutionalization are changes in discourse, institutions, and policies.<sup>6</sup> In IOs, however, normative or policy innovations by staff in the field may subsequently become institutionalized in discourse and policies, while the creation of additional institutions may be postponed indefinitely amid fears of bureaucratization. In IOs, the stages often cannot be neatly separated and do not follow conventional sequences.

Therefore, while the norm diffusion approach holds the potential for becoming an interesting perspective on IO behavior and change, a number of difficulties have to be anticipated and addressed by scholars using this approach. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section takes a brief look at the theories of IO behavior and change which can be seen as alternative or complementary to norm diffusion. The second section provides an overview of the existing literature on norm diffusion to IOs. The third section discusses difficulties which are likely to be encountered by researchers conducting empirical studies of IOs informed by the norm diffusion approach. The forth section focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the norm diffusion framework as compared to the other theoretical perspectives.

### ***1. Theories of IO Behavior and Change***

This section's ambition is not to provide a comprehensive overview of all existing accounts of IO behavior and change but, at a risk of oversimplification, highlight the differences and complementarities between a number of key theories in the positivist tradition and the norm diffusion framework. The IO scholarship has until recently been marked by a divide between the so-called rationalist and constructivist approaches.<sup>7</sup> Rationalists link IO behavior to member states' preferences:

Scholars adopting a principal-agent approach are wont to treat IOs as the mere servants of their principals -- the nation-states. At the extreme, neorealist theory sees a subset of states -- the major powers -- as the masters who dangle the strings of IOs.<sup>8</sup>

In line with this view, change in IOs occurs when (powerful) states change their preferences

---

5 Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895.

6 Cortell and Davis 2000, 70. See also Kowert and Legro (1996) who suggest that the stages are changes in official rhetoric, the creation of institutions supporting the norm, and changes in actual behaviour.

7 For a discussion, see Tierney and Weaver n/d.

8 Diehl 2007, 129.

and all (or the most important) members arrive at an agreement on the scope and direction of change through bargaining. However, since IO bureaucrats, or agents, are endowed with some autonomy necessary for fulfilling day-to-day delegated tasks, they can take action in their own interest ("slack") rather than in the interest of member states, or principals.<sup>9</sup>

Another influential account of organizational change (or rather institutions' surprising stability in the face of changing circumstances) is historical institutionalism, which focuses on the so-called "lock-ins" and path dependencies, or sustained investments in a particular course of action whose reversal is difficult and costly and therefore improbable. Institutional change may nevertheless happen as a result of exogenous shocks or incremental adjustments. The concept of a critical juncture is used to describe a moment in time when an institution sets itself on a new path.<sup>10</sup> Approaching the issue from a constructivist perspective, Barnett and Finnemore argue that international bureaucracies "cannot be conceived only as 'agents' dependent on decisions made by their 'principals'" since they are "also learning institutions, which may gain in autonomy and authority by controlling information and knowledge".<sup>11</sup>

Recently, a process of exploring complementarities between rationalist and constructivist approaches in the study of IOs has begun: "[d]istracted by meta-theoretical debates, IO scholars have inadvertently widened the gap between the study and the empirical reality of IOs over the past thirty years".<sup>12</sup> The norm diffusion approach can help if not to reconcile, then at least to put aside for empirical purposes the major disagreements between the two approaches, such as those concerning the relative importance of member states vs. bureaucrats, the prevalence of the logic of bargaining vs. the logic of arguing or appropriateness, or the role of external vs. internal IO environment.

## ***2. The Diffusion of Norms to IOs***

Despite the potential that the norm diffusion approach holds for enriching our understanding of IO behavior and change, its applications to the subject have been limited. In most of the norm diffusion literature, IOs are conceptualized either as "teachers" of norms to states,<sup>13</sup> or "organizational platforms" used by norm entrepreneurs to advance their cause.<sup>14</sup> However, a number of recent studies have looked at how various norm entrepreneurs, such as member states, civil

---

<sup>9</sup> For an overview, see Hawkins et al. 2006.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Lecours 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Nay 2010, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Tierney and Weaver n/d., 2.

<sup>13</sup> The term is from Finnemore 1993. For an overview of the literature on IOs as "teachers" of norms, see Park 2005, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 899-901.

society, academic and policy communities, and IO staff, have promoted new norms to IOs. For example, the UN Security Council's preoccupation with the needs of women and children in armed conflict has been prompted by "transnational advocacy networks and epistemic communities composed of civil society advocates, experts, member states, and other IOs in the UN system".<sup>15</sup> The integration of gender concerns into the work of the UN Peacebuilding Commission has been brought about by "the lobbying of norm entrepreneurs among member states, within the NGO community and in the UN system".<sup>16</sup> World Bank's policies on indigenous peoples, tropical forests, and dam safety have originated "from inside the Bank as a result of engagement with external advocates".<sup>17</sup> The IMF's endorsement of capital account liberalization has resulted from a combination of staff activism and pressure from the broader professional community of economists.<sup>18</sup> The above examples demonstrate that the assumption that the preferences of (all) principals invariably diverge from those of (all) bureaucrats does not always hold. The norm diffusion approach provides tools for studying coalitions which transcend organizational boundaries as well as their strategic, social, and argumentative strategies.

Although a number of studies have used the norm diffusion terminology to describe changes in IOs' principles and policies, perhaps the only existing theoretical model is Susan Park's concept of direct vs. indirect socialization of IOs by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Direct socialization occurs when an NGO successfully promotes a norm to an IO, while in the case of indirect socialization, "member states are first socialized by [an NGOs], in order to then socialize the IO".<sup>19</sup> For example, the consideration of human rights during the negotiations on the UN Charter "was prompted by NGOs consulting with the US delegation".<sup>20</sup> The World Bank instituted environmental assessments only after the US Congress, under the pressure from environmental groups, passed a bill on environmental practices in multilateral development banks and the US Treasury put pressure on the American executive director.<sup>21</sup> The Jubilee 2000 campaign convinced powerful IMF members to expand the scope of multilateral debt relief, which led to a revision of the Fund's policy towards heavily indebted poor countries.<sup>22</sup> Direct and indirect socialization often "occur simultaneously and may therefore be difficult to disentangle".<sup>23</sup> Many NGOs deliberately combine the two strategies: for example, the adoption of the norm prescribing the protection of women in armed conflict has been "strongly influenced by powerful NGO lobbying both within

---

15 True-Frost 2007, 145.

16 Tryggstad 2010, 169.

17 Park 2010, 192.

18 Leiteritz and Moschella 2010, 167.

19 Park 2006, 357. See also Park 2005, 118.

20 Clark 2001, 24.

21 Park 2010, 187.

22 Busby 2007; as cited in Momani 2010, 47.

23 Park 2006, 357.

states and at the transnational level".<sup>24</sup>

### ***3. Limitations of the Norm Diffusion Approach***

Researchers who choose to study IOs with the help of the norm diffusion framework are likely to encounter a number of problems. A major difficulty inherent in applying the norm diffusion approach to IOs arises from the fact that IOs are not monolithic entities with which advocates engage in a uniform manner but complex and multifaceted institutions.<sup>25</sup> The existing empirical studies of norm diffusion to IOs either treat them as unitary actors<sup>26</sup> or focus on their specific organs.<sup>27</sup> While some approaches, like the principal-agent analysis, have already acknowledged the analytical challenges posed by the collective nature of principals<sup>28</sup> and, since recently, agents,<sup>29</sup> the norm diffusion approach still needs to address this issue. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that IO organs can be conceptualized simultaneously as recipients of norms and venues for their diffusion from one state to another. A situation in which a member state persuades or entices another state into supporting a course of action in the Security Council, which results in the Council's adopting or upholding a particular norm, can be seen as an instance of "norm consumption" by the Council as a whole but also diffusion from one state to another in the given institutional environment. In this regard, readers might question whether indirect socialization, that is, socialization of a state by an NGO with the intention that the state will support the promoted norm in an IO, should be at all considered norm diffusion to an IO rather than simply state socialization.

This touches upon some of the difficult questions concerning IO actorness. Some scholars, especially constructivists, have looked exclusively at IO bureaucracies which produce observable outputs, have clear management structures, and are characterized by a relatively homogenous organizational culture. Looking at intergovernmental organs complicates the picture. On the one hand, the support (or at least acquiesce) of key members is a precondition for any action by that organ. On the other hand, even the UN Security Council is driven by "more than the sum of its individual members' desires and may frequently be beyond the control of any single state, even

---

24 MacFarlane and Khong 2006, 218.

25 Park and Vetterlein 2010, 12.

26 A notable exception is Park's (2010) account of the World Bank's introduction of environmental safeguards as a result of a bureaucratic contest and exchange of opinions among its units and departments.

27 See, for instance, Kamradt-Scott (2010) on the Secretariat of the World Health Organization or True-Frost (2007) on the UN Security Council.

28 See, for instance, Nielson and Tierney 2003.

29 See, for instance, Graham 2014.

powerful veto-wielding states".<sup>30</sup>

Assessing whether an IO is actually in compliance with a norm is another challenge. For example, at the UN, different actors mandate, direct, finance, and carry out peacekeeping tasks. While the Security Council authorizes missions, the Secretariat manages them; missions' budgets are approved by the General Assembly; membership-provided contingents carry out military and police duties on the ground. Very often, ambitious mandates handed down by the Council are not implemented due to the lack of financial resources apportioned by the General Assembly or human and material resources volunteered by states, a situation which is referred to in the norm diffusion literature as "involuntary non-compliance".<sup>31</sup>

The final set of difficulties is methodological. Most empirical studies using the norm diffusion approach rely on interview material. In this regard, norm recipients are more reliable sources of information than norm entrepreneurs but they are usually also more reluctant to reveal reasons behind their adoption of norms (advocates, on the other hand, are more willing to share success stories). In IOs, additional complications are associated with access to interviewees and their responsiveness:

Not only is the pool of potential respondents with enough 'inside' knowledge (IO staff) much smaller, these people also tend to be less inclined than the general public to contribute to the generation of new data about themselves. IO staff can cite various professional reasons for refusing researchers access to their organisation, ranging from a lack of time to an obligation – contractual or otherwise – to protect organisational 'secrets'.<sup>32</sup>

In light of these difficulties, the following section assesses the added value of the norm diffusion framework with a view to estimating whether investments of time and resources which a norm diffusion-informed study requires – considering that indeed such studies involve "a considerable start-up cost" and take "patience and persistence"<sup>33</sup> – is indeed justified.

#### ***4. The Added Value of the Norm Diffusion Framework***

This section argues that the norm diffusion framework has a number of strengths as compared with other accounts of IO behavior and change. Furthermore, many accounts which are often characterized as "competing" with the norm diffusion approach can in fact be seen as complementary. For example, neorealism expects normative change in IOs only if it is desired by major powers. However, there are multiple examples of change initiated by less powerful states, such as non-permanent members of the Security Council, or even non-state actors like NGOs,

---

<sup>30</sup> True-Frost 2007, 188.

<sup>31</sup> Checkel 2001, 576.

<sup>32</sup> Kranke 2014, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Weaver 2008, 14.

which "have only discursive resources: expertise, arguments, and publicity".<sup>34</sup> At the same time, important states can also act as norm entrepreneurs and employ those resources which they have at their disposal, such as voting or economic power. Similarly, neoliberalism, which sees organizational behavior as driven by bargaining, does not capture the entire picture: states, IO officials, civil society actors, and independent experts use a variety of strategies not limited to (but including) bargaining, like shaming, persuasion, and example-setting.

As for the principal-agent analysis, its underlying assumption is the divergence of interests between principals and agent. However, in many situations, some IO officials and some states act in coalition or in support of each other's norm entrepreneurship efforts. For example, "the Secretary-General is likely to be most effective when he uses the United Nations to crystallize emerging understandings among states and non-state actors, rather than striking out in entirely new normative directions".<sup>35</sup> Constructivist accounts of IO behavior, on the other hand, often downplay the role of states and IO-external actors as well as the mechanisms of bargaining and coercion.

Finally, as concerns historical institutionalism, the concept of normative change is close to the one of a critical juncture. Yet while historical institutionalism offers a useful perspective on organizational development following such juncture, the puzzle of most norm diffusion-informed studies is to see how norm adoption comes about: who or what catalyzes change, how is a consensus on the direction of change attained, what factors shape the prospect for achieving change, and what causes reform initiatives to stall or remain incomplete,<sup>36</sup> as discussed in this paper's introduction.

## **5. Conclusion**

Despite a number of limitations, the norm diffusion framework offers a perspective on IO behavior and change which allows explaining developments which other theories do not pay attention to or struggle to account for. Studies applying this framework require a sophisticated understanding of an IO and extensive fieldwork. At the same time, payoffs can be high since such studies can help build a richer picture of decision-making in institutions which are constantly exposed to a variety of influences from different sources. By virtue of being agnostic about the nature of norm entrepreneurs, the norm diffusion framework offer tools for assessing efforts by member states, IO staff, civil society actors, and experts at influencing IOs through various strategies, such as coercion, shaming, persuasion, and example-setting.

---

<sup>34</sup> Deitelhoff 2009, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Johnstone 2007, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Tierney and Weaver n/d., 12-3.

## Bibliography

- Checkel, Jeffrey T. 2001. Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change. *International Organization* 55 (3):553–88.
- Clark, Ann Marie. 2001. *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cortell, Andrew P., and James W. Davis, Jr. 2000. Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms: A Research Agenda. *International Studies Review* 2 (1):65–87.
- Deitelhoff, Nicole. 2009. The Discursive Process of Legalization: Charting Islands of Persuasion in the ICC Case. *International Organization* 63 (1):33–65.
- Diehl, Paul F. 2007. Review of 'Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics'. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9 (4):129–30.
- Finnemore, Martha. 1993. International Organizations as Teachers of Norms: UNESCO and Science Policy. *International Organization* 47 (4):565–97.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization* 52 (4):887–917.
- Graham, Erin R. 2014. International Organizations as Collective Agents: Fragmentation and the Limits of Principal Control at the World Health Organization. *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (2):366–90.
- Hawkins, Darren G., David A. Lake, Daniel L. Nielson, and Michael J. Tierney. 2006. Delegation under Anarchy: States, International Organizations, and Principal-agent Theory. In *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*, edited by Darren G. Hawkins, David A. Lake, Daniel L. Nielson, and Michael J. Tierney, 3–38. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnstone, Ian. 2007. The Secretary-General as Norm Entrepreneur. In *Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics*, edited by Simon Chesterman, 123–38. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamradt-Scott, Adam. 2010. The WHO Secretariat, Norm Entrepreneurship, and Global Disease Outbreak Control. *Journal of International Organization Studies* 1(1):72–89.
- Kowert, Paul, and Jeffrey Legro. 1996. Norms, Identity and Their Limits: A Theoretical Reprise. In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, edited by Peter J. Katzenstein, 451–97. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kranke, Matthias. 2013. Currents of Bureaucratisation at the IMF: Policy Coordination with Other Organisations. Paper presented at the 1st European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS), June, Tartu, Estonia.
- Lecours, André. 2005. Structuring Nationalism. In *New Institutionalism: Theory and Analysis*, edited by André Lecours, 176–99. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Leiteritz, Ralf J., and Manuela Moschella. 2010. The International Monetary Fund and Capital Account Liberalization: A Case of Failed Norm Institutionalization. In *Owning Development: Creating Global Development Policy*

- Norms in the World Bank and the IMF*, edited by Susan Park and Antje Vetterlein, 105–17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacFarlane, Neil S., and Yuen Foong Khong. 2006. *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Momani, Bessma. 2010. Internal or External Norm Champions: The IMF and Multilateral Debt Relief. In *Owning Development: Creating Global Development Policy Norms in the World Bank and the IMF*, edited by Susan Park and Antje Vetterlein, 29–47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nay, Olivier. 2010. Policy Transfer and Bureaucratic Influence in the United Nations: The case of AIDS. Sciences Po Centre d'études et de recherches internationales working papers series "Questions de Recherche" no 33. Available from <<http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/qdr33.pdf>>. Accessed 15 May 2013.
- Nielson, Daniel L., and Michael J. Tierney. 2003. Delegation to International Organizations: Agency Theory and World Bank Environmental Reform. *International Organization* 57 (2):241–76.
- Park, Susan. 2005. Norm Diffusion within International Organizations: A Case Study of the World Bank. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 8 (2):111–41.
- . 2006. Theorizing Norm Diffusion within International Organizations. *International Politics* 43 (3):342–61.
- . 2010. The World Bank's Global Safeguard Policy Norm? In *Owning Development: Creating Global Development Policy Norms in the World Bank and the IMF*, edited by Susan Park and Antje Vetterlein, 181–203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Park, Susan, and Antje Vetterlein. 2010. Owning Development: Creating Policy Norms in the IMF and the World Bank. In *Owning Development: Creating Global Development Policy Norms in the World Bank and the IMF*, edited by Susan Park and Antje Vetterlein, 3–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . eds. 2010. *Owning Development: Creating Global Development Policy Norms in the World Bank and the IMF*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tierney, Michael J., and Catherine Weaver. N/d. *Principles and Principals? The Possibilities for Theoretical Synthesis and Scientific Progress in the Study of International Organizations*. Available from <<http://wmpeople.wm.edu/asset/index/mjtier/principlesandprincipals>>. Accessed 10 November 2014.
- True-Frost, Cora. 2007. The Security Council and Norm Consumption. *New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy* 40:115–217.
- Tryggestad, Torunn L. 2010. The UN Peacebuilding Commission and Gender: A Case of Norm Reinforcement. *International Peacekeeping* 17 (2):159–71.
- Weaver, Catherine. 2008. *Hypocrisy Trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.