Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction

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Constructivist theorists view norms as shared understandings that reflect 'legitimate social purpose'. Because the focus is on the ideational building blocks that undergird a community's shared understandings, rather than material forces, persuasive communication is considered fundamentally important to norm-building. In practice, this means that frames are crafted by norm entrepreneurs so as to resonate with audiences. However, the constructivist empirical literature illustrates the central importance of material levers in achieving normative change. Those who promote specific norms also manipulate frames strategically to achieve their ends and do not necessarily convince others to alter their preferences. The global debate over 'core labor standards' is highlighted to illustrate the various means by which frames can be distorted by communicators acting strategically, perhaps even to secure their own instrumental interests or to maintain their powerful status. Norms that do not reflect a genuinely voluntary consensus can be seen as illegitimate.

KEY WORDS ♦ communication ♦ constructivist theory ♦ frames (or framing) ♦ Habermas ♦ international norms ♦ persuasion

Introduction

Social constructivists, in stark contrast to the 'neo-utilitarian' scholars who almost exclusively highlight the causal force of material interests and power, argue that shared ideas and knowledge are very important 'building blocks of international reality' (Ruggie, 1998: 33).[1] Substantial attention, both theoretical and empirical, has appropriately been focused by constructivists on the development of international norms, structures which by definition are 'collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity'

(Jepperson et al., 1996: 54). Norms, in other words, constitute a community's shared understandings and intentions; they are 'social facts' and reflect 'legitimate social purpose' (see Ruggie, 1998).[2]

Agents, of course, translate ideas into normative structures. Constructivists are therefore especially interested in how political actors produce the intersubjective understandings that undergird norms (for example, see Risse et al., 1999; Barnett, 1999). Great attention has been directed at communication, especially at persuasive messages, which attempt, by definition, to change actor preferences and to challenge current or create new collective meaning.[3] Indeed, persuasion is considered the centrally important mechanism for constructing and reconstructing social facts. According to Finnemore (1996: 141; Lynch, 1999), 'normative claims become powerful and prevail by being persuasive'. More broadly, persuasion is 'the process by which agent action becomes social structure, ideas become norms, and the subjective becomes the intersubjective' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 914; Klotz, 1995: 29–33).

Persuasive messages, however, are not transmitted in an ideational vacuum. All advocates of normative change confront 'highly contested' contexts where their ideas 'must compete with other norms and perceptions of interest' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 897). In fact, a very wide variety and large number of normative claims are advanced in political debates worldwide. Scholars working in International Relations unfortunately lack a good theory to explain the persuasiveness of any particular normative claim over others (Legro, 1997). As Risse-Kappen (1994: 187) has argued, 'decision makers are always exposed to several and often contradictory policy concepts'. Yet, research mostly fails 'to specify the conditions under which specific ideas are selected and influence policies while others fall by the wayside'. Weber (1997: 240), who is skeptical of the constructivist approach, challenges it to explain 'why one set of knowledge claims "wins" and why others are left behind'.

Framing and Norm Resonance

A good deal of recent scholarship now addresses this concern. Constructivists commonly explain persuasion by pointing to the substantive content, or intrinsic characteristic, of particular ideas or claims. New ideas are said to 'resonate' because of some ideational affinity to other already accepted normative frameworks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998a: 204). For example, the resonance of shared ethical traditions (Lumsdaine, 1993) and widely accepted democratic processes (Payne, forthcoming) has been empirically demonstrated in studies of foreign aid and development norms. In their impressive overview of the constructivist literature on norm-

building, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 906–7) make it clear that agents intentionally try to connect new normative ideas to established ideas when they construct persuasive messages. Successful 'norm entrepreneurs' (Nadelmann, 1990: 482) are therefore those able to 'frame' normative ideas in such a way that they resonate with relevant audiences. Framing, in fact, is viewed as a central element of successful persuasion.

A frame is a persuasive device used to 'fix meanings, organize experience, alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at stake, and propose solutions to ongoing problems' (Barnett, 1999: 25, 1998). For the purpose of norm-building, frames provide a singular interpretation of a particular situation and then indicate appropriate behavior for that context. A carefully crafted interpretive frame therefore constitutes a social 'power resource with relative autonomy from material power resources' (Lynch, 1999: 265). Frames are basic building blocks for the construction of broadly resonant norms and they thereby serve to legitimate normative orders. The empirical literature provides numerous examples of frames being meticulously fashioned by norm advocates so as to appeal to particular target communities and to mobilize triumphant international change processes. Price (1998: 628), for example, emphasizes that the successful proponents of a landmine ban framed that issue in terms of the 'indiscriminate nature of their effects', thereby 'grafting' on to the debate a resonant idea from various campaigns against weapons of mass destruction. Keck and Sikkink (1998a, 1998b) likewise document effective employment of frames related to the prevention of bodily harm in their thoughtful study of human rights and other norms.

Research Questions

This article analyzes persuasion in norm-building and criticizes the standard constructivist account. Legitimate, authoritative norms reflect genuinely shared understandings. Persuasion should accordingly be evaluated as a social process, though too much of the constructivist literature, oddly enough, is insufficiently attentive to social concerns. My overarching thesis, informed by Habermasian critical theory, is that the constructivist explanation of norm-building, currently centered upon persuasive frames and the resonance of particular claims, is ultimately limited and flawed. Regardless of the alleged appeal of specific claims, outcomes of 'highly contested' normative struggles cannot adequately be interpreted without also examining social process. The communicative environment, in fact, almost certainly matters more than the content or framing of specific messages.

In the first section to follow I will consider a vexing empirical problem in the study of norms. Namely, apparent state acceptance of normative

standards may reflect coercion or some other mechanism, rather than persuasion, at work. Furthermore, I will examine in more detail why constructivists who study norms should be interested in genuine persuasion, and what that means in the social context of norm development. In the second section, I sketch the role of frames in the norm-building process. While it is arguably valuable to know which frames might seem persuasive across various circumstances, there are serious limits as to what may be learned about a particular frame's resonance. It turns out that framing processes themselves are highly contested. Worse, actors making misleading or otherwise inappropriate claims can significantly distort these processes. Unchallenged distortions of the communicative process may affect behavior in a way that does not reflect genuine persuasion.

Finally, to illustrate these shortcomings of frame analysis, I consider in the third major section an ongoing attempt at international norm construction. In recent years, labor and human rights activists, sometimes aligned with environmentalists and others sympathetic to their cause, have sought to address the most harmful effects of economic globalization. Specifically, these activists highlight the allegedly horrific working conditions faced by millions of people employed in export sectors of the world economy. Women and children are said to be especially vulnerable to exploitation. Activists have attempted to build a consensus around so-called 'core labor standards' in order to alter several basic terms of neoliberal trade agreements. While a wide array of states and corporations rhetorically embrace the frame, the apparent consensus masks a highly contentious and distorted debate about the many proposed normative commitments. Very little progress has been made towards restructuring the World Trade Organization (WTO) or other agreements.

Persuasion and Norms

Why do constructivists attribute an important role to persuasion in the development of international norms? The answer, according to a recent overview of the research, is that normative ideas are translated into practice and structures only after norm entrepreneurs persuade states to adopt them. Indeed, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 893; see also Nadelmann, 1990) identify a common three-stage 'life cycle' that purportedly explains the steps by which international norms 'set standards for the appropriate behavior of states'.[4] The critically important first stage, which includes this particular persuasive endeavor, ends when a 'tipping' or 'threshold' point has been achieved.[5] At that juncture, either a 'critical mass' of states embrace the norm or one or more 'critical states' enlist and thereby help assure broad international support.

Without knowing more, researchers could conceivably conclude that persuasion has occurred once significant behavioral (or even rhetorical) change is identified. Theoretically, however, observing state practices alone is a poor way of evaluating the persuasiveness of normative ideas. Consider, for example, the realist notion that powerful states can threaten weaker states to get them to adhere to behavioral standards. The result of coercive compellence (Schelling, 1966) does not reflect authentic persuasion as constructivists should understand it. Put simply, target state preferences were not likely influenced. If the state could act freely, it would not comply with the standard. A similar shortcoming of this criterion is illuminated in the neoliberal argument (Keohane, 1984: 245) that an institution can remind states of their common interest so that they can bargain or cooperate to achieve it. This advertising-like exchange merely relies upon the provision of factual information to highlight otherwise hidden, but nonetheless already shared, material interests. Again, target state preferences do not change and are not endogenous to the interaction.

Interestingly, the constructivist case study literature reveals that this criticism is not merely hypothetical. Norm entrepreneurs overtly exploit material levers all the time. The normative developments constructivists observe often do not reflect persuasion, but instead result from a coercive mechanism. The impressive study of transnational advocacy networks by Keck and Sikkink (1998a: 201), for example, quite clearly shows how norm-builders interested in preserving the environment and securing human rights readily use material levers to gain support for favored normative ideas. Advocates make 'implied or explicit threat of sanctions or leverage if the gap between norms and practices remains large. Material leverage comes from linking the issue of concern to money, trade, or prestige, as more powerful institutions or governments are pushed to apply pressure'. A substantial portion of the constructivist case studies, in fact, demonstrate that norm advocates employ material levers to 'mobilize and coerce decisionmakers to change state policy. Norms are not internalized by the elites' (Checkel, 1999a: 88, 1997: 476–7).

Of course, it has long been known that international structures like regimes or institutions can develop from coercive or informative communication, and that they can compel or invite state adherence. However, these structures do not necessarily reflect truly shared normative understandings developed because some actors' interests changed as a result of targeted persuasive appeals. As Kratochwil (1989: 228), borrowing theoretically from the work of Jürgen Habermas, argued in regard to how bribes taint conversation, mechanisms that threaten or pander to selfish interests are not 'distortion free'. Scholars wanting to understand the way persuasion helps construct legitimate norms, with an emphasis on the resonant claims (or

'better arguments') of advocates, should view coercion and advertising as fairly uninteresting communicative acts (Barry, 1990: 2). As Crawford (1993: 52) observes, 'norms established through coercion . . . lack legitimacy'.

In a more promising manner, constructivists correctly focus great theoretical attention on the potential for an agent's ideas and arguments to alter the interests of other actors. Specifically, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 914) define persuasion as the effective attempt by advocates to 'change the utility functions of other players to reflect some new normative commitment'. Actor A transmits an appeal to states B, C and D to elicit revised preferences, which then agree with actor A's on a given subject. Constructivists emphasize the importance of mutual agreement around a normative idea. Indeed, because a new shared understanding results, norm development resulting from actors embracing persuasive messages can be viewed as a social interaction. Repetition and socialization then institutionalize the norm. In the ensuing diffusion process, which occurs in stages two and three of the norm life cycle, states B, C and D ultimately help convince others to embrace and act upon the normative idea.

It is worth noting, however, that despite the apparently social dimensions, this explanation of persuasion depicts a linear and reactive communicative process. The focus in stage one, for instance, is narrowly on sender A's communicative acts and the consequences for receivers B, C and D.[6] Are targeted actors B, C and D allowed to advance counter-claims and potentially recast the sought-after normative commitment? Are any or all actors' preferences subject to modification in an unpredictable fashion depending upon the progression of a dialogue? Using a strictly linear definition of persuasion, these outcomes are apparently not possible. Employing a non-linear, and more explicitly social, view of persuasive processes would help explain how actor preferences are formed and changed in discursive situations. The seminal ideas of social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1964: 269–70), for example, could be valuably applied because they reveal communication to be a recursive transaction between sender and receiver(s). When shaping messages, advocates must keep in mind the likely reception and response of any targeted audience(s). Message senders are also simultaneously receivers, and vice versa. In the next section, I demonstrate that the use of frames as rhetorical devices facilitates this social communicative function, albeit imperfectly.

In all, this section has addressed two important points regarding the role of persuasion in international norm construction. First, persuasion occurs when actor preferences change in response to communicative acts and cannot be revealed merely by examining behavior. For this reason, constructivists have sought to analyze the appeal of particular communicative

acts, such as frames. Second, since persuasion occurs as part of a social process, then all participants in a discursive exchange, including both norm advocates and the targets of their appeals, must be prepared to have their understanding of a situation challenged (Risse, 2000). Outcomes reflect intersubjective interpretations, so attention should be directed at the communicative process by which mutual meanings are agreed. Unfortunately, neither of the points raised in this section explains the success or failure of any particular persuasive claim in a given process. The focus on frames will begin to address this oversight.

Frames

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 897) view framing as the central mission of norm entrepreneurs in the first stage of the norm life cycle. Norm entrepreneurs devote significant attention to constructing a suitable cognitive frame in order to persuade targeted states — especially the domestic populations of important states — to embrace the normative idea they support. Frames are therefore seen as a key means by which advocates impute social knowledge into their communicative acts. Because they rely upon shared understandings, frames are potentially central in resolving the question of which particular appeals advanced by advocates are persuasive (Keck and Sikkink, 1998b: 223–6). Constructivists look to frames to provide causal mechanisms for the influence of ideas on policy and politics (Barnett, 1999).

Frames help name, interpret and dramatize issues, allowing advocates to create or explain broader social meanings (Brysk, 1995). As noted in the introduction, many empirical accounts of successful international norm development reveal that frames are employed by willful agents to situate issues within a broader social and historical setting (see, for example, Price, 1998). Indeed, as cognitive consistency theory in psychology explains, an actor is more likely to accept new claims if they are shown to be similar to already accepted ideas. Put in general terms, norm advocates frame issues so that target audiences can see how well newly proposed ideas coincide with already accepted ideas and practices (Klotz, 1995: 31). Actor A communicates to actors B, C and D that new normative concern z should be embraced, partly because z is similar to already agreed norms x and y. Advocates attempt to construct, in other words, frames that resonate with broader public understanding.

Thus, the idea of frame resonance potentially explains both the persuasive success of these instruments and their social function in the persuasive process. Norm-building, to reiterate, depends upon persuasive communicative acts. If particular frames resonate, they are properly viewed as key

rhetorical tools used by advocates to create support for normative ideas. Unfortunately, as the following two subsections highlight, frame analysis cannot fully explain the persuasiveness of normative claims. Consequently, the apparent causal power of frame resonance might more accurately be considered a 'quasi-causal' effect (Yee, 1996: 96–8) of communication.

Which Frames are Compelling?

Scholars across many of the social sciences have long employed frames for analytical purposes (see, for instance, Tversky and Kahneman, 1986), though constructivists studying the persuasiveness of international normative claims borrow most directly from social movement theorists (see McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1994: Ch. 7). While it is widely acknowledged across the literature that frames can help order normative content and provide boundaries for political discourse, much research also indicates that different frames often compete with one another. Frames, like broader normative claims, are disputed in highly competitive contexts. As will be illustrated below in the discussion of global labor standards, debates about the usefulness of a particular frame can be quite contentious even among the like-minded champions of new normative structures. In practice, greatly disputed, arbitrarily selected, and even contradictory frames might be employed by those trying to build a given norm. Framing agents compete with others using counterframes to provide singular interpretations of problems and appropriate solutions. Serious scholarly attention is devoted to resolving these 'frame contests' (Meyer, 1995) since those who embrace one frame over a counterframe 'see different things, make different interpretations of the way things are, and support different courses of action concerning what is to be done, by whom and how to do it' (Rein and Schön, 1993: 147).

Confronted with the problem of frame contests, the initial inclination might well be to look at the substantive content of particular frames. Unfortunately, scholars are seriously challenged to explain the success of some frames over others (McCarthy, 1997). While certain frames utilized by advocates seem to resonate with broad understanding, many others, even potentially on quite similar issues or grounded in analogous normative ideas, may well fail or provoke controversy related to the selected frame's appropriateness for a situation (McCarthy, 1996: 149). No frame is an omnipotent persuasive tool that can be decisively wielded by norm entrepreneurs without serious political wrangling. It would be virtually impossible to know in advance if an apparently compelling frame in one situation would also prove persuasive when applied to an analogous case. Norm entrepreneurs could flounder even when relying upon 'master frames'

employed successfully by advocates facing similar circumstances (Tarrow, 1994: 131). Audiences might remain divided as to whether to embrace a recommended frame or its counterframes. Advocates might strategically abandon one frame and employ another to seek the same end result (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). In all, since there is no shortage of political actors worldwide making new demands for normative change, and since norm-building is supposed to be a social and persuasive process, most advocates who seek to design frames are presumably unable to construct one that resonates with larger audiences.

Unsurprisingly, given these problems, researchers have found that a single desired outcome can potentially be explained by multiple frames and any given frame can conceivably justify more than one possible outcome (Rein and Schön, 1993: 151). How then can scholars explain or predict frame resonance? Ironically, there is some danger that frame resonance might be ascertained by a persuasive standard already rejected. Scholars might simply identify the use of a given frame and then look for changes in actor practices or in normative structures. However, even apparently persuasive frames that achieve desired normative outcomes can be distorted, meaning that interpreters must allow for the possibility that some form of coercion has occurred. As is revealed in the constructivist case studies, and addressed further in the following subsection, factors like the resources or relative power of advocates might well influence the results of a frame contest (Marullo et al., 1996: 3). Moreover, as was noted, constructivists should be relatively uninterested in outcomes determined by such distortions and instead should seek to explain norms grounded in bona fide persuasion and shared understandings.

Scholars interested in explaining the resonance of particular ideas that might undergird shared international norms are seriously hindered by the concerns raised in this section, which highlight a perplexing communicative reality. To evaluate normative structures featuring 'competing and contra-dictory elements,' Finnemore (1996: 23–4, 136) sensibly calls for a thorough examination of political process, as well as discourse and behavior. This is because the structure of a communicative situation is likely to have significant influence on the possibility of persuasion occurring.

Are Frames Vulnerable to Distortion?

The second weakness elaborated here is that deceptive, domineering, secretive or powerful advocates might manipulate frames. This criticism is particularly significant if frames are ostensibly employed to highlight the persuasive force of a resonant 'good idea' or 'better argument'. Dryzek (1993: 227), working in a public policy field that took an 'argumentative

turn' several years ago, specifically criticized the usefulness of frames by noting that 'consensus can be reached under all kinds of conditions, through reference to many kinds of standards, and on the part of all kinds of groups, not all of which are equally defensible'. Of course, Dryzek (1990) has long worked to operationalize Habermasian notions of 'communicative rationality' in international and other contexts.[7] Unsurprisingly then, he critiques political contexts that reward powerful actors without exposing and evaluating their interests and arguments. Critical theorists generally argue, in fact, that any actor's uncontested pursuit of instrumental rationality potentially subverts communication. To achieve specific goals, an actor might forward misleading or otherwise distorted claims. In short, while all normative debates may well be 'highly contested', those that fail to meet basic standards for communicative rationality are vulnerable to numerous distortions.

Consider the possibility that any apparently resonant frame employed to build an international norm might be advocated or embraced for some hidden purpose, perhaps even for domestic political reasons (Cortell and Davis, 1996). Put differently, a subjectively persuasive frame might be used by agents acting insincerely in order to gain some ulterior aim, such as reaching elective office. Similarly, advocates might try to gain acceptance for a normative idea by lying about its implications or by linking it favorably and misleadingly in a frame to a dissimilar standard. In these instances, the deceptive abilities of advocates serve as a source of significant distortion. Any shared understanding built in this way, without exposing and evaluating these problems, would be of dubious legitimacy.

Furthermore, an apparently sound normative idea could be forwarded and framed in a plausible manner; yet, even broad compliance with the new standard may not mean that actors achieved general agreement about its underlying basis. As previously noted, employment of an apparently resonant frame could merely reflect the distorting material influence of an advocate. Obviously, this warping factor is most apt to be evident when powerful communicators advance arguments neither grounded in, nor creative of, genuinely shared social understandings. The influence of material power, however, would seem to be much more difficult to establish if the frame makes subjectively reasonable claims about the intersubjectivity of an idea and if the framer is unchallenged by real peers in some open discursive process. In any event, frames cannot be evaluated simply by looking at outcomes and practices.

A different kind of distortion transpires when frames resonate because they remind audiences of already agreed, but potentially harmful normative commitments. For example, advocates who employ frames for potentially xenophobic or even violent purposes (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 916)

can recall shared norms of nationalism (or even racism, in some communities). Advocates of interstate cooperation on various global issues can be frustrated by opponents employing counterframes invoking the norm of sovereignty. In these instances, frames might resonate because the shared understandings exhibit dubious legitimacy. The undergirding ideas themselves may not survive meaningful discursive challenges — especially if discussed openly in an inclusive forum.

Again, these hypothetical shortcomings are quite evident in the constructivist empirical work. As already noted, framers frequently attempt to unleash material levers. Constructivists also point out that norm entrepreneurs commonly employ very sophisticated means–ends calculations and engage in 'strategic social construction'.[8] This inherently manipulative practice, which might also be called 'strategic framing' (Barnett, 1999: 15), stands in stark contrast to something like communicative rationality which imagines actors' reciprocally challenging one another's validity claims in order to find shared truth. In any case, the constructivist empirical research highlights all sorts of 'deliberately inappropriate' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 897–8) behavior by norm advocates that fairly clearly distorts communicative processes and is more accurately viewed as a form of coercion rather than persuasion.

By definition, persuasion occurs when target preferences change in response to a sender's appeal. However, when powerful advocates construct frames, or if any supporter uses misleading or repugnant messages, then those assertions are arguably not compelling in the way that constructivists should understand persuasive processes. Scholars should be reluctant to attribute changes in preferences to the innate persuasiveness of a normative idea or cognitive frame that suffers these distortions. In contrast, genuine persuasion would transpire in social and discursive situations that minimize the influence of a warping factor like participant rank and reveal deceptive or deleterious messages. Normative structures should, in short, develop out of communicative processes that test the veracity of claims and claimants.[9] In the next section, I examine ongoing debates about the globalization of 'core labor standards' to illustrate the problems of constructing and interpreting cognitive frames and norms in a highly contested and politically distorted context.

Framing Labor Norms

This section focuses on the efforts by norm entrepreneurs to identify an appropriate frame to 'sell' new global labor standards for the WTO and other international trade agreements. The discussion to follow uses the transnational debate about 'core labor standards' (see SOLIDAR, 1999) as

an example to illustrate the problems with frame analysis rather than as a scientifically selected empirical case suitable for testing the prevailing models of norm-building. Moreover, I have also intentionally selected an instance of nascent norm construction that has not been successfully resolved. Upon initial consideration, these might seem to be dubious methodological choices. Even the apparent failure of any given frame would not prove that frames are never compelling. Additionally, in this issue area, meaningful labor standards could conceivably be constructed quickly once entrepreneurs produce an appropriately resonant appeal. However, to date, the norm-building literature has primarily studied successful instances and this creates an important source of bias (Checkel, 1999a: 86). Though the authors of these studies typically note the contentious debate that preceded victory, their analysis tends to center upon the alleged resonance of the 'winning' ideas. This approach too often minimizes the myriad of problems faced by real-world advocates seeking normative change. Which arguments shall they employ? Are proven master frames available that might secure victory? How might ideational appeals be coupled with material leverage? Put most simply, which strategies should norm entrepreneurs select?

My purpose in offering the following illustrative example is not to answer these questions, but rather it is to highlight the great vulnerability of frame analysis to the various distortions already outlined above. Constructivists should devote much more attention to communicative processes of persuasion and perhaps less to the potential resonance of particular ideas.

The Impetus for Labor Standards

To justify normative change, advocates of new international labor standards typically highlight a variety of alleged deficiencies in the global economy that harm workers all over the world (see Lee, 1997). First, ever-increasing global economic competition, which narrows corporate profit margins, virtually encourages transnational businesses to move production facilities to low-wage countries. Furthermore, developing states vying against one another for foreign investment are said to be in a (de-)regulatory 'race to the bottom', all too willing to abide sweatshops, overt discrimination, exploitative use of child labor, and other repressive labor practices (Smith, 1999). Finally, wealthy nations too are responsible for designing the neoliberal economic structures that allow for the relatively unconstrained mobility of capital and encourage an unprecedented volume of international trade.

Opponents of this status quo call upon states and corporations to develop new global norms to end and/or prevent 'repression, discrimination and the gross exploitation of workers' (Jordan, 1998). From a constructivist perspective, of course, labor advocates face the always-difficult task of

challenging widely adopted and increasingly accepted practices. Wealthy and poor states, as well as transnational corporations, will likely continue to create, promote and sustain the apparently exploitative working conditions unless they develop a common understanding that such labor practices are wrong, or illegitimate. Moreover, even if they recognize the often-dubious outcomes resulting from their behavior, these actors must also come to some meaningful agreement about the parameters and content of new international norms.

Labor activists, who are the norm entrepreneurs in this issue area, now consistently refer to a set of 'core labor standards' that they believe should be embraced to mitigate the worst effects of globalization. Many scholars and policy-makers, in fact, claim to 'see a consensus emerging' (Hughes and Wilkinson, 1998; Lee, 1997) around a particular set of standards. Arguably, the 'core labor standards' phrase serves as a powerful master frame, invoking common understandings of fundamental rights shared by working people everywhere. The frame is designed to resonate with various target audiences. As Strang and Chang (1993: 243) point out, this is not a new approach. Organized labor traditionally 'frames its goals in terms of internationally recognized human rights'. In this instance, the core labor standards are characterized as 'basic human rights', meaning that they 'are universal and not governed by national context or level of economic development' (Haworth and Hughes, 1997: 195).[10]

In practice the 'core labor standards' phrase is employed by a wide variety of participants in the debate to support a plethora of wildly divergent policy actions. While labor activists want to secure core labor standards in the WTO and other institutional contexts, numerous other sympathetic participants in the debate reject that plan and seek alternative solutions, such as increased use of private codes of conduct (Bhagwati, 1999). Still others favor non-coercive action by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (see Niles, 2000; Irwin, 1999). Additionally, it should be noted that while many participants in the labor standards debate favor action, some are not especially interested in working conditions in the developing world. Consider the millions of unemployed (or underemployed) workers in affluent states who believe that their jobs were exported to the Global South. These workers and their elected representatives often simply support trade sanctions that would protect domestic production at the expense of foreign workers.

Framing labor standards as basic human rights is a subjectively appealing notion and activists have employed it successfully in the past to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, the persuasive task advocates now face is truly daunting. Numerous corporations and governments would have to make significant and potentially costly changes in their behavior. Indeed, the entire neoliberal

international economic structure would have to be significantly altered. Obviously then, norm entrepreneurs in this issue area will be engaged in a ferocious battle for the foreseeable future.

Contentious Context

Given the political and economic stakes, it is not surprising that a contentious debate has raged over the appropriateness of establishing 'core labor standards' in the WTO or in other trade agreements. Indeed, Hughes and Wilkinson (1998) find a 'strong and often acrimonious division' between the various participants in this debate. For example, the norm entrepreneurs are challenged by many observers who view labor standards as something 'the North wants to impose on an unwilling South' (Basu, 1999: 91). Pakistan's trade negotiator, Munir Akram, is one of many representatives of the South who argues that labor standards constitute 'a new protectionism' that will 'bedevil all future trade negotiations' (quoted in Olson, 2000). Indeed, on a very broad level, the Group of 77 (Ministers of the Group of 77, 1999) recently affirmed strong opposition to 'any linkage between trade and labour standards'. Lee (1997) takes the point even further, noting that 'there is a perception among developing countries that the industrialized countries are seeking to impose conditions in international economic relations which violate the sovereignty and block the development prospects of poor countries'.

It is not merely the governments of states in the Global South who tend to believe that labor standards are designed primarily to help workers and industries in the North. Many economists in affluent states also view labor standards as 'a Trojan horse' that serves as 'a convenient hiding place for those with a much more selfish, protectionist agenda' (Basu, 1999: 82). These economists contend that 'there's no guarantee that such agreements would improve the well-being of workers in developing countries' (Irwin, 1999). Many conclude, in fact, that workers are better off under the current market system (Basu, 1999) and note that the 'race to the bottom' hypothesis is 'disputed vigorously' by both economic theory and scholarly empirical research (Bhagwati, 1996: 34). In short, economists directly challenge the resonance of the core labor standards frame, arguing that 'international consensus on the treatment of unions, child labor, and discrimination based on gender may be impossible' (Golub, 1997: 23).

Of course, even as the analysts reject the idea of core labor standards for the WTO, they note that 'everyone agrees that improving living standards in the South is desirable. The question is how to achieve' the laudable goals sought by the norm entrepreneurs (Golub, 1997: 22). Basu (1999: 92), for example, fears that prohibiting child labor in export sectors could end up

forcing children into prostitution. In that instance, imposition of standards could 'hurt the very people they were supposed to help'. Bhagwati (1999) offers a similar criticism, noting that if one addresses 'consequential ethics, not . . . rights', then 'from a utilitarian point of view, the social well-being of a whole lot of even poorer people is compromised' if labor unions organize and achieve higher wages for poor people in places like India. Clearly, then, much of the controversy surrounding core labor standards concerns the appropriateness of the various policy responses. This means that the potential resonance of a contested frame can be virtually impossible to calculate in advance of norm emergence.

Nonetheless, the norm entrepreneurs who employ a core labor standards frame have arguably engaged in a savvy strategic practice. They face a difficult situation, human rights frames have proved their effectiveness in a wide range of political contexts, and there are some sensible reasons for joining labor and human rights issues. Lee (1997) argues that 'other terms sometimes used, such as "internationally recognized workers' rights", are less precise and could be subject to a broader interpretation going beyond the basic human and labour rights'. More than a decade ago Charnovitz (1987: 580) traced the long history of 'international fair labour standards', and concluded that the story is primarily 'just one long string of false starts, hollow promises, and forgotten laws'. On the other hand, many alternative frames could perhaps be utilized to even better effect and other advocates with like-minded goals have used them. The idea of social justice, for example, has great potential rhetorical appeal and could well lead to desired normative change. In December 1999, labor activists and their many allies derailed ongoing WTO negotiations at Seattle, Washington. This achievement could be partly credited to the success of protesters linked across a variety of issue areas using various social justice frames. Irwin (1999), an economist who opposes core labor standards in the WTO, declares that 'the more respectable critics' claim that 'the WTO destroys democracy, puts profits above people and abets global poverty. Unless countered', he argues, these 'claims could undermine public support for trade liberalization'. Given the great diversity of arguments made by activists protesting at the Seattle meeting, scholars should of course view skeptically any claim about the resonance of a particular frame.

Counterframes suggesting completely different policy responses in this issue area also pose a problem for scholars attempting to interpret the contentious policy milieu. As noted, leaders from the Global South sometimes claim that labor activists from rich countries are most appropriately viewed as protectionists. Developing states recognize their great comparative advantage from cheap labor; thus, labor standards that would require them to increase wages significantly could effectively lock them into

poverty and unjustly delay their development. In the North, the protection-
ist counterframe for characterizing the labor standard norm would resonate
with free traders that oppose amending the WTO.[11] However, many social
activists who are ordinarily unmoved by arguments about free markets and
trade may well be quite sympathetic to the South's viewpoint because of
their concern with eliminating poverty in the developing world.

In all, the fractious debate about the appropriateness of various labor
standard frames illustrates one of the chief weaknesses of frame analysis.
Political contexts are often highly contested and it can be essentially
impossible either for norm entrepreneurs to know in advance which frames
might work or for scholars in retrospect to ascertain the resonance of any
particular frame or counterframe. In short, frame analysis alone does not
adequately explain which appeals are persuasive and thus does not reveal
causality in norm-building processes.

Distortions in the Labor Standards Debate

In the debates about trade and worker rights, core labor standard frames
have additionally been distorted by very strong states or by other claimants
making misleading and even troublesome claims. For example, even though
labor activists or small states might try to contest some points, the stated
positions of an actor as powerful as the United States are difficult to
overcome in contemporary world politics. In any case, scholars studying
norm-building in this issue area should attempt to evaluate how a potentially
persuasive frame is affected by various distortions.

To begin, it is fairly clear that the US has for several years employed the
'core labor standards' frame when discussing workers' rights in an inter-
national context. As early as 1996, in fact, former Secretary of Labor Robert
Reich lauded the international consensus that he claimed had been reached
'on what labor standards are "core" standards' and noted that these 'are the
essential principles of human rights at work'. More concretely, US President
Bill Clinton (1999) now says that the WTO must assure that open trade
'respects core labor standards that are essential not only to worker rights, but
to human rights'. In her discussion of American trade goals and strategies,
US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky (1999) similarly declared that
'the WTO can also help to strengthen respect for internationally recognized
core labor standards'.

Despite the use of this potentially appealing frame, it seems apparent that
when US government officials discuss labor standards, they represent a
powerful actor pursuing at least some instrumental interests. While it is
simple to note American strength, it can be more difficult to identify the use
of misleading positions advanced in hopes of shaping normative commit-

ments according to America's instrumental interests. Advocates, after all, tend to strategically frame points to make them seem reasonable and agreeable. Consider, for example, the acknowledgement by US officials that core labor standards should not be used to serve protectionist purposes. While this is a commendable admission from the point of view of the norm entrepreneurs, the US officials more questionably also focus their attention almost exclusively on substandard working conditions in the developing world. US shortcomings, including urban sweatshops, inequitable pay for women, poor working conditions faced by migrant agricultural workers, and various other labor concerns are mostly ignored. While it may literally be true that millions of workers in developing states are exploited, this narrow focusing of the problem overlooks the likely complicity of American corporations. Moreover, by ignoring problematic working conditions inside the US, American leaders head off a discussion of anti-US sanctions. In fact, the US has not even ratified most of the ILO agreements that serve as the basis of the core labor standards (Haworth and Hughes, 1997: 185). This is why Bhagwati (1999) argues that when considering the core labor standards frame, the question of 'political economy has to come in, of who is power[ful], who is not, who is pushing it, and why and so on'. In his view, the proponents of labor standards are clearly self-interested. Bhagwati expresses a desire not 'to be cynical in relation to human rights, but' as an analyst, he can 'see why it is that certain things happen to get pushed and in which particular context. . . . the very fact that it was trade-oriented meant that the selection bias was in terms of fear about competition'.

The affluent and powerful US has arguably suggested a one-sided normative solution. It is not at all clear that impoverished states can embrace core labor standards without seriously threatening basic economic and social development needs. US power to unilaterally reject international normative agreements assures that real or imagined distortions cannot be easily minimized. Worse, scholars looking for evidence of frame resonance will not be able to distinguish between the effect of America's seemingly 'good' argument from the influence of its material power. The US position is on its face plausible even as it is also arguably distorted. American power certainly affects the frame contest pitting 'core labor standards' versus 'protectionism'.

In all, I have argued in this section that various norm entrepreneurs, including labor activists and US government officials, have utilized the core labor standards frame to build norms. To date, these efforts have mostly been unsuccessful, though similar frames have proven very effective in other policy contexts. Moreover, because the US has great material power, I also note that it is able to preclude virtually any undesired normative development, drown out competing frames, and attempt to shape potential

outcomes according to its instrumental interests. Nonetheless, the purpose of this section is neither to demonstrate the futility of building a resonant frame around labor standards nor to critique US policy. I would certainly not argue that the example serves as a scientifically selected case testing the prevailing model(s) of norm construction for this issue area. Instead, the example highlights the fact that framing is almost always a contentious process, inherently vulnerable to various kinds of communicative distortions. In the early stages of the norm-building process, on an issue that might well be inhospitable to normative change for the foreseeable future, norm entrepreneurs face tremendously difficult communicative tasks. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that they might act strategically to manipulate material levers. While ideas clearly undergird these actions, constructivists simply cannot view persuasion as the primary mechanism for causal change.

Conclusion

The growing literature on norm-building accurately identifies the importance of persuasion for actors attempting to fashion genuinely shared understandings in a social process. Yet, as has been demonstrated, constructivist observations about the resonance of particular ideas and frames are challenged by their own empirical research, which highlights how norm entrepreneurs commonly use material levers and act strategically to achieve desired ends. The notion of 'strategic framing', for instance, is flawed because it invites various distortions into the communicative process. As illuminated in the labor standards example, the actions of powerful or deceptive advocates can be particularly difficult to overcome, or even to reveal, since rhetoric can be manipulated to seem reasonable for audiences. Interestingly, the social movement scholars (Tarrow, 1994: 123) who have already plowed much of this ground know very well that frames must be understood in terms of prevailing power structures.[12] The constructivists conducting case studies in International Relations have borrowed somewhat selectively from social movement theorists. They undoubtedly document norm-building, but the mechanisms of change seem more coercive than persuasive. The process, as described in this body of research, is not especially social. The resulting norms could even be said to lack legitimacy according to constructivist standards.

Indeed, frame analysis is perhaps most usefully employed simply to develop hypotheses and theories about the 'quasi-causal' effects of normative ideas and persuasive discourse. Ideas may in fact resonate in some circumstances and the study of frames and framing could help explain this possibility. However, if offered confidently as a causal explanation of real change across contexts, the weaknesses of frames should be very carefully

considered. As seems to be occurring, more scholarly attention should be directed at communicative processes.

Notes

1. In fact, constructivists emphasize that even material resources acquire meaning only within the social context in which they are embedded. North Korean and British nuclear weapons would have similar destructive capabilities, but the latter do not generate equivalent fears in other actors (Wendt, 1992: 397).
2. Both Hurd (1999) and Barnett (1997) argue that legitimate order is based on social consensus, a condition clearly distinct from coercive power (see Linklater, 1998).
3. Additionally, Chayes and Chayes (1995: 26) argue that persuasion 'is expressly recognized as a principal method of inducing compliance' with international treaties and regimes.
4. Scholars in law and sociology are said to have independently found this common pattern of normative influence. Price and Tannenwald (1996: 145), however, argue that 'the path of normative development can be highly varied' and Checkel (1999a: 85) points out that constructivists misguidedly direct most attention at 'norm-makers' and not 'norm-takers'.
5. In stages two and three, norms cascade through the population of states who are socialized into compliance. Norms can be formally reflected as well in international institutional designs. Ultimately, norms are fully internalized, habitually followed in practice, and rarely the subject of public debate.
6. Similarly, in later stages, these persuaded actors become advocates and elicit further agreement around the already agreed norm.
7. German International Relations scholars conducted an extensive debate about Habermasian notions of argumentative rationality and its compatibility with rational-choice theory. Some of this literature is cited in Risse (1999; see Haacke, 1996).
8. The 'empirical studies reveal . . . that instrumental rationality and strategic interaction play a significant role in highly politicized social construction of norms, preferences, identities, and common knowledge by norm entrepreneurs in world politics' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 910–11).
9. Some constructivists are looking at learning and other processes which view persuasion in a more socialized manner (see Checkel, 1999b; Johnston, 1999). Other International Relations scholars are beginning to consider Habermasian

notions, but this mostly abstract and theoretical literature cannot be examined here (see Crawford, 1998; Bohman, 1999; Samhat, 1997; Payne, 1996).

10. Anner (2000: 20) argues that 'movement activists have framed the sweatshop issue in terms of human and labor rights norms that have resonated with the US public'. He finds norms against child labor particularly salient and effective.

11. Zald (1996: 261, 269) refers to these different kinds of disputes as external and internal frame competitions.

12. McAdam (1996: 341), in fact, goes so far as to criticize research on frames for focusing almost exclusively on ideational concerns while overlooking far more important matters, such as the 'degree of threat' posed by social movements to the prevailing order. Empirically, sociologists also frequently lament the lack of comparative studies of frames, especially in cross-national contexts (McAdam et al., 1996: 6, 19).

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