Practice Theory and the Opening Up of International Organizations

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Scholars researching international organizations’ (IO) inclusion of transnational and local civil society organizations (CSOs) have provided compelling insights; however, according to their self-evaluation, many of these insights remain at a general level. Against this backdrop, I propose two complementary claims. First, I identify a bias in the literature that has focused on large, Western IOs. What non-Western or small IOs do and how their practices interact with CSO inclusion in different localities is often missed. Second, based on burgeoning practice theoretical literature on IOs and CSOs, I claim that practice theory can add to research on IO-CSO. In spite of internal pluralism, practice theory refines constructivist methodologies for zooming in on IOs’ internal dynamics, daily practices, and performances of the practice of CSO inclusion, including in IO country offices. On the basis of my own field research, I also suggest that the practice of CSO inclusion interacts with power, gender, and race dynamics. In sum, practice theory can inform research on marginalized and often power-ridden specificities among and within IOs in relation to IO-CSO interaction.

Introduction

International relations (IR) scholars have provided compelling insights on the opening up of international organizations (IOs), meaning the inclusion of transnational and local civil society organizations (CSOs) in policy making and implementation. Scholars have shown that CSO access has grown since the 1950s, to varying degrees. IOs composed of democracies and engaged in human rights governance tend to be more open than IOs that are autocratic or IOs engaged in security governance (Tallberg et al. 2013). Rational institutionalists have argued that IOs open up when they are interested in epistemic resources that CSO provide (Steffek 2013; Tallberg et al. 2013, 22). Constructivists assume an emergent participatory governance norm that commits IOs to the granting of access to CSOs (Dingwerth et al. 2020) and have asked whether IOs’ organizational culture incentivize CSO inclusion. If cultures are oriented toward member states’ concerns with sovereignty, it is unlikely that IOs will include CSOs in the absence of strong demands for external epistemic expertise (Liese 2010). However, according to the respective scholars’ self-evaluation, many rationalist and constructivist insights have remained general (Jönsson and Tallberg 2010, 246).

Building on this evaluation, I identify a research gap and propose practice theoretical means to address. With a focus on large, Western IOs (Tallberg et al. 2013, 27; Tallberg et al. 2018), I examine the omission of differences within or among IOs with regard to CSO inclusion. Only in recent practice theoretical literature are there efforts to tease out the often power-ridden specificities of CSO inclusion (Po liot and Thérien 2018, 166). Hence, I propose that practice theory, or rather practice theorizing, can add to empirical research on IO-CSO interactions. I developed my claims through a secondary literature analysis and insights from exploratory research on IO practices. I conducted expert interviews with staff working for the European Union (EU), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and other IOs; visited IO country offices in Tunisia (2017–2019); and initiated conversations with “practitioner colleagues” to learn more about the plausibility of scholarly assumptions about IOs (2017–). Through my claims and observations, I speak to practice theorists and IO scholars.

Then, I argue that practice theory can help account for underresearched small and non-Western IOs and IO country offices and their interactions with CSOs. In the conclusion, I relate my claims to practice theoretical state of the art.

Practice Theory

Many scholars have acknowledged constructivism as a precursor to practice theory and the connections between the two theories (McCourt 2016; Kratochwil 2018, 18). Constructivists have demonstrated the value of social theory by demonstrating that socially constructed identities impact state and nonstate actors’ interests and practices. Practice theorists, in turn, avoid grand theorizing to advance constructivist methodologies and empirical research within IR. Practice theorists emphasize methodologies that allow access to practice by blending document analysis with participant observation when possible (Corнут and de Zamaróczyi 2020). Furthermore, many practice theorists emphasize Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology, which shows social constructions of reality are constrained by power structures. Practice theorists ask how ideas, identities, norms, interests, and practices are displayed in power-constrained settings (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014).

In their investigations, practice theorists see both change-impeding power structures and change-stimulating agency and reflection (Hopf 2018). When change is observable, practice theorists often demonstrate originality in models (Andersen and Neumann 2012), conceptualizations (Drieschova, Hopf, and Bueger 2021), or midrange theories of changing practices (Pouliot 2020). Some practice theorists consider this reorientation from grand to midrange theory as a means to theoretical dialogue (Pouliot 2020). Others even zoom in on theorizing practice and change (Ekengren and Hollis 2020).

There is considerable pluralism within practice theory. Pouliot’s contributions are often termed mainstream practice theory. Pouliot originally conceived of practices broadly speaking, as time bound, competent, and socially meaningful performances that unfold in between structure and agency (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4). Bourdieusian practice theorists have argued that Pouliot’s translations of Bourdieu have tamed the critical edge of this sociology (Martín-Mazé 2017; Holthaus 2019), even if Pouliot and
Adler-Nissen revealed how power structures enable efficient competence claims in practice (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Furthermore, feminist and poststructuralist practice theorists have distinguished themselves and put forward distinct definitions of practices (Hansen 2011). Other practice theorists have rejected the ontological claim of Pouliot’s definition (Ringmar 2014, 7) or any prima facie definition of “practice” (Bourbeau 2017). However, practice theorists, including Pouliot, have dealt with definitions of practice and options for scholarly (re)description anew in each project (Pouliot 2020).

While acknowledging the internal pluralism in practice theory, it is possible to recognize nascent practical approaches to IOs that can complement research on the opening up of IOs. The approaches refine constructivist and functionalist insights. Functionalism has coevolved with modern IOs, and its vocabulary reflects practical languages, as evident in distinctions between technical and political problems and assumptions about IOs’ orientations toward a (global) common good. For functionalists, IOs’ purpose is the resolution of globalization problems and provisions of social services. The phrase “form follows function” reflects continuously changing IO practices and the idea that practices define IOs, rather than the treaties creating them (Holthaus and Steffek 2020). Similarly, some constructivists and precursors to practice theory have assumed different forms of IOs and have acknowledged a need to shift attention to what IOs do (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 756). By implication, any IO is “a beast” (Risse-Kappen 1996), possessing specificities that demand distinct consideration. Hence, practice theorists have continued constructivist arguments for researching internal structures of IOs, while searching for new methodologies and theories to capture perhaps changing IO specificities.

Practice theoretical orientations are reflected in stances on IOs’ organizational culture. Constructivists have established—vis-à-vis rationalists—the claim that IOs’ organizational cultures, composed of scripts, languages, and routines, matter. Some constructivists (Chwieroth 2008; Vetterlein and Moschella 2013) have paid close attention to IOs’ organizational cultures, and how they bring about authoritative interpretations of an IO’s purpose and best practices. Practice theorists, however, have placed further emphasis on the fluid character of organizational cultures, including those of non-Western IOs, also in explanations of different practices (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017). Practice theorists have often employed inductive and abductive methodologies, or new methodologies such as “working together” to provide original evidence (Sending and Neumann 2011; Anderl 2016, 234). Practitioner-turned-practice-theorists have also affirmed the importance of fluid and competing organizational cultures (Campbell 2018).

To understand the development of the bias, we need to consider the wide usage of analytical eclecticism within the literature of the opening up of IOs. Analytical eclecticism suggests drawing on multiple theories to explain puzzling observations, but this orientation often excludes insights from interpretative theories, such as practice or postcolonial theory (Smith 2003). Furthermore, the theoretical insights tested in case studies on IO-CSO interactions have often been developed for Western IOs (Chwieroth 2008). Theoretical engagements with few IOs, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), turn (the headquarters of) these exceptionally powerful Western IOs into prototypical examples of IOs, to which others may be compared. Generalizations come from uncommon Western examples and do not capture all differences between IOs that that arise in practice.

Practice theory can correct maldevelopments in the research on the opening up of IOs. Although practice theorists have paid attention to Western IOs, commitments toward abductive and inductive theorizing and reminders of postcolonial practice theory work against further generalizations of Western examples (Standfield 2020, 159). Practice theorists mind variances in practices of Western IOs and in nongovernmental organizations’ (NGOs) accreditation (Pouliot and Thérien 2018, 168). The IMF is an abnormal example, as it lacks a formal CSO inclusion guide. Furthermore, the IMF, similar to the WB (Sondarjee 2020, 354), favors Western-(like), urban, liberal CSO, or likeminded local actors at the expense of trade unions or religious CSOs and does not bring about progressive practices (Scholte 2012).

In addition, practice theory makes methodological suggestions for how to avoid generalization of peculiar examples, while maintaining a distance to narrative or anthropological approaches to IOs. Practice theory suggests beginning with the question of what IO practices are performed daily. If answers to the question bring about that IOs gain information on ongoing policies from transnational and local NGOs before negotiating tasks with them, there is a good reason to speak of “orchestration” (Bueger 2016). The practice appears to exist even in realms such as security policy, though policy makers have disagreed about the added value of CSO inclusion (Shapovalova 2016). Furthermore, answers to the question of what IOs do daily may bring about that IOs working on development gather information through research institutes or think tanks to establish authoritative interpretations of “development” and to prepare and legitimize future policies (Biersteker 2017; Sending 2019). These daily performances suggest that IO “research” is a practice. Through my explorations, I also learned that IO research can influence academic research. IO staff frequently visits conferences and gatherings of practitioners and academics, to lobby for practically relevant research themes and to prepare and legitimize future policies (Biersteker 2017; Sending 2019).

The insights suggest adding consideration of practice to consideration of IOs’ policy fields, etc. in research on the opening up of IOs and new research questions. For example, with awareness of increasing multi-bi-aid, perhaps IOs that specialize in epistemic services involve fewer CSOs because they conceive of them as competitors in struggles for scarce funding (Seabrooke and Sending 2015)? Perhaps they include CSOs with symbolic and scientific capital (Eagleton-Pierce 2018), rather than CSOs that are openly critical of IO policies (Anderl, Daphi, and Deitelhoff 2021)? What differences can be observed on the microlevel (Solomon and Steele 2017)? Bourdieuian concepts, such as material, social, symbolic, or scientific capital,
may help answer these questions through the analysis of diverse power struggles, as methodological experimentation. Practice theorists have experimented with combinations of surveys (Bode and Karlstrud 2019, 470), document analyses (Cornut and de Zamaróczy 2020), and participant observation.

Close analysis of IO specifies may prompt reconsideration of assumed distinctions between IOs and CSOs (Eagleton-Pierce 2018, 235). In particular, small IOs share commonalities with CSOs, and some IOs have been designed as foundations and only become IOs during founding negotiation practices (Säve-Soderbergh 2015). The headquarters staff of, for example, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), invokes IO language by speaking of “member states’ interests” but narratives about the daily practices pivot around the creation of epistemic services, as in CSOs (for a “practice all the way down” position, see Hopgood 2009).

**Practice Theory and Differences Within IO**

Research on the opening up of IOs may benefit from consideration of variances within IOs. The rationalist and constructivist theories that guide this research focus on headquarters without considering or explaining varying relationships between headquarters and country offices. Practice theorists have been conducting field research on country offices and their varying relationships with CSOs (Sending and Neumann 2011; Beerli 2018; Campbell 2018, 242), shifting attention to marginalized parts of the WB and other IOs, such as the UNDP, that have country offices in several states.

Practice theoretical research on IOs’ varying relationships with CSO shows that headquarters are concerned with member state interests and are open to Western NGO advocacy (Eagleton-Pierce 2018). They turn to country offices, which often employ Westerners and multilingual people of color with elite educations, when they ask how donor interests can be reconciled with practical options (Autesserre 2014, 174). Against this backdrop, my own exploration underlines the need for further, detailed practice theoretical perspectives on the various negotiation practices that enable the formulation and implementation of, for instance, development and democracy promotion policies (Rutazibwa 2010; Poppe, Leininger, and Wolff 2019). Such practices take place in different localities and are embedded in varying relationships that constrain practical rooms for maneuver.

One locality in which such negotiation practices unfold are small Western IOs’ country offices. Through conversations with S., a practitioner colleague who became the head of a small IOs’ country office after studying IR at an elite Western university, I learned that “IOs’ guidelines are drawn from a global point of view and then “given” to the field. Sometimes, this might not be the most pressing issue on the field (in the target country), and sometimes the field can’t respond to more relevant and pressing needs by stakeholders.” In brief, and to remain within the scope of this research note, negotiation practices were not only shaped formal but also by informal hierarchies, personal conflicts, and affects, and comparable to the ones unfolding between embassies and Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

Another locality in which negotiation practices unfold are the offices of local CSO in non-Western states. Apart from exceptions (Scholte 2012), the importance of these local practices has been overlooked within research on the opening up of IOs. However, lasting CSO inclusion depends on local negotiation, and IOs’ estimation of local rooms for maneuver. For instance, the partner of the WB country office in Tunisia, a highly regarded Tunisian NGO, ended its policy implementation duties around 2016. The NGO not only disagreed with the WB terms, the partnership also turned it into “a liberal NGO” in the local context. By ending the partnership, the NGO regained considerable local prestige. Hence, the practice of CSO inclusion appears to interact with other practices, which all interact with power, gender, race, and postcolonial legacies.

**Practice Theory**

Practice theory includes recognition of country offices’ establishments in the era of decolonization and varying continuities between Western colonialism and contemporary practices (Sabaratnam 2017); however, there was and remains non-Western domination. By implication, Westerners are not the only ones who need to mind neocolonial appearances when dealing with CSO. For example, Egyptian IO staff working with CSOs in Sudan would need to be aware of the current and historical context of the relationship between the countries.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have presented two related arguments. First, I have observed bias in the literature on IO inclusion of CSOs. Scholars have generalized insights from the study of the headquarters of large, Western IOs, sometimes indirectly. Indirect generalizations occur, for example, in case studies that test theories that have been developed in view of these Western examples. An alternative is the exploration of non-Western or small IOs, including their country offices, in their own right. Hence, I have claimed, secondly, that practice theory can aid in correcting these pitfalls, as it provides novel methodologies for the scholarly opening up of IOs and an analytical focus on how diverse IO practices interact with CSO inclusion in contexts that are constrained by power, race, and gender dynamics.

While practice theory can help accounting for marginalized specificities among and within IOs in relation to IO-CSO interaction, it is critical to mind practice theory’s internal pluralism. Mainstream practice theory is interested in the identification of how commonalities among IOs arise in practice. Its interest in IO commonalities conflicts with more interpretative interest in commonalities among IOs and CSO. Still, in its different manifestations, practice theory can now add to research on IOs’ inclusion of CSO. After debates about definitions of practice, methodology, change, etc., practice theory may now benefit from further dialogue with other scientific communities. That other IR scholars have equally turned to IO country offices implies a good point in time for doing so.

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