



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Engaging with Sociological Institutionalism:
Addressing the Gaps and Silences**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Canada)

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialization:

**Governance and Democracy
(G&D)**

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The Hague, The Netherlands
September, 2010

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Abstract

Sociological institutionalism has gained considerable currency in political analysis, using considerations of norms, rules, identity and culture in shaping behaviour. It can be seen as an advance upon pure rational choice models, as it introduces the idea that action is shaped by more than instrumental utility calculations. However, sociological institutionalism itself is not a panacea for explaining political behaviour. As such, the central research question of this paper is: what are the gaps within the sociological institutionalism approach? This paper uses the emerging approach of constructivist institutionalism to examine these gaps in sociological institutionalism. Using this approach, it engages with sociological institutionalism to identify how its ontological assumptions prevent it from addressing relevant issues in political analysis. Due to its reliance on the logics of appropriateness as its underlying assumption, sociological institutionalism predicts equilibrium, which for constructivist institutionalists means that it is unable to account for complex post-formation change, agency, and sophisticated accounts of power.

Relevance to Development Studies

This analysis has relevance to development studies as it looks at the ways in which development-related policies are analysed, using the example of human security. The comparison of sociological institutionalism and constructivist institutionalism introduces the reader to the diversity of approaches in looking at political and policy analysis, as well as their commonalities and tensions.

Keywords

Sociological institutionalism, Constructivist institutionalism, Norms, Rules, Identities, Culture, Institutional change, Power, Human Security, Canada

Introduction

There are various approaches to political analysis, each differing in their core ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Each results in vastly different research questions and therefore different conclusions about the phenomena they attempt to study. The following analysis looks at two such approaches: sociological institutionalism and constructivist institutionalism.

Sociological institutionalism has gained considerable currency in political analysis, using considerations of norms, rules, identity and culture in shaping behaviour. It can be seen as an advance upon pure rational choice models, as it introduces the idea that action is shaped by more than instrumental utility calculations. Sociological institutionalism provides a more dynamic account of political behaviour when compared to rational choice approaches. However, sociological institutionalism itself is not a panacea for explaining political behaviour. As such, the central research question of this paper is: what are the gaps within the sociological institutionalism approach? This paper uses the emerging approach of constructivist institutionalism to examine these gaps in sociological institutionalism.

Using this approach, it engages with sociological institutionalism to identify how its ontological assumptions prevent it from addressing relevant issues in political analysis. The paper first compares the two theoretical approaches, and then utilizes this comparative framework in policy analysis, using the case study of Canadian human security policy. Through the application of these theoretical approaches to policies, the paper demonstrates how constructivist institutionalism presents an analytical advance on its sociological counterpart by theorizing the areas that sociological institutionalism does not, namely complex post-formation change and issues of power.

Methodology

The analysis is limited to two specific approaches: sociological institutionalism and constructivist institutionalism. However, these are by no means the only types of institutional approaches that exist.¹ Of the new institutionalism approaches, Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor identify three general analytical approaches: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 936). Rational choice institutionalism carries over many of the assumptions of pure rational choice models. Actors are still presumed to be rational, motivated by utility-maximization. This can be termed a “calculus approach” (p. 939). Behaviour is presumed to be instrumental and based on a calculation of cost and benefit. However, pure rational choice models were unable to account for where preferences themselves originate from, and thus the idea of institutions was introduced (Koelble 1995, p. 232).

Historical institutionalism defines institutions in a different manner, as encompassing “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the policy or political economy” (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 938). Therefore, for the historical institutionalist, institutions are primarily associated with the rules and conventions of formal organizations. In regards to how actors interact with institutions, historical institutionalists employ both a calculus approach (as described above with rational choice institutionalism) as well as a “cultural approach” (p. 940).

In contrast, sociological institutionalism emphasizes the “social and cognitive features of institutions” rather than the structural or constraining features, as in rational choice institutionalist models (Finnemore 1999, p. 326). Sociological institutionalism argues that behaviour is driven by culturally-specific practices around ideas of appropriateness, and not necessarily by the desire to enhance means-ends efficiency (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 946). As such, it provides a considerable advance on the rational choice approaches in its exploration of where preferences come from, and how they are generated.

In comparison to the two described above, sociological institutionalism is the only approach that provides for a purely endogenous account of preferences and interests, and thus motivations for action. It is due to this uniqueness, and its contradistinction to the other two new institutionalisms, that this paper focuses on sociological institutionalism. Moreover, constructivist institutionalism is utilized as it shares many commonalities with sociological institutionalism (ex. assumes endogenous, socially constructed preferences and interests), however differs from the approach in several ways, namely its account of post-formation change and its analysis of power. The commonalities and tensions between these two approaches are the focus of this paper.

In completing this comparison, the work of main sociological institutionalists James G. March, Johan P. Olsen, Martha Finnemore, Kathryn Sikkink, Paul K. DiMaggio, Walter W. Powell, Pamela S. Tolbert and Lynne G.

Zucker, are selected as key approaches within sociological institutionalism. While used to demonstrate key assumptions, they are by no means intended to represent the full range of ideas within sociological institutionalism. This is also the case for constructivist institutionalism, which is presented primarily through the work of Colin Hay, with some contributions from Vivian Schmidt.

One case study, Canadian human security policy, is included to illustrate the differences between the two approaches as well as their strengths and blind spots.

Chapter 1: Sociological Institutionalism

Life Cycle of a Norm

To explore an approach within sociological institutionalism, the analysis looks closer at what Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink term norm “life cycles” in their work *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* (1998). Norms go through a “life cycle” that is comprised of three main stages: (a) “norm emergence”; (b) “norm cascade” and; (c) “internalization” (p. 895). The authors use the example of international norms to illustrate this life cycle.

Finnemore and Sikkink define norms as “a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors within a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 891). Inherent in this concept is the assumption that human action follows what March and Olsen call the “logic of appropriateness”, whereby action is rule-based, driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour (March and Olsen 2009, p. 2). Thus people follow rules because “they are seen as natural, rightful, expected and legitimate” (p. 3), in contrast to inappropriate (“uncharacteristic, unnatural, wrong, bad”) (March and Olsen 1996, p. 252). Actors seek to fulfill obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and [its] ethos, practices and expectations” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 3).

Not only can norms be regulative (ordering and constraining behaviour), but also constitutive (creating new actors, interests, and categories of action), and/or evaluative (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 891). Evaluative norms allow an action to be assessed or judged against it, usually by a community or society. Norm-breaking behaviour generates disapproval, while behaviour that conforms to a norm is praised or, if the norm is highly internalized, it may not provoke any reaction at all (p. 892). While such rules of action may have overtones of morality, they do not by definition, connote what March and Olsen call “moral heroism”: “rules of appropriateness [can also] underlie atrocities of action, such as ethnical cleansing and blood feuds... The fact that a rule of action is defined as appropriate by an individual or a collectivity may reflect learning of some sort from history, but it does not guarantee technical efficiency or moral acceptability” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 4).

The logic of appropriateness in sociological institutionalism can be compared to the “logic of consequences”, as employed in rational choice models as mentioned in the previous section. According to rational choice models, within the logic of consequences (sometimes called ‘calculus logics’), action is understood as being based on conscious self-interested calculation of costs and benefits (March and Olsen 1996, p. 252). Actors always choose the action that best maximizes their utility, in that they always choose the course of action that makes them better off rather than worse off. In this sense, the ordering of preferences is presumed to be stable, consistent and exogenous – actors will al-

ways choose action that gives them the optimal outcome. The objective then is to make the outcomes of behaviour fulfil an actor's subjective desires and interests (March and Olsen 1989, p. 160). As such, action is seen as more preference-based than rule-based. Under such a logic of consequences, the role of norms is seen as “negotiated constraints on fundamental processes of self-serving rationality [rather] than constitutive” (p. 253). For rational choice institutionalists, norms (and the institutions within which they are embedded) are endogenous and socially constructed. It can also be argued that following norms can be rational, and therefore sociological institutionalism can be complementary to rational choice institutionalist approaches.² However, rational choice approaches will always maintain that the utility functioning of actors (and thus their ordering of preferences) will always be stable, despite the role of institutions in shaping the content of preferences.

Norm emergence

In the first stage, norms emerge due to the action of “norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 895). Norm entrepreneurs are actors who seek to propagate specific ideas about what they see as appropriate or desired behaviour for a community. They do this through “framing”: the process by which issues are named, interpreted and dramatized in order to give them importance (p. 897). Norm entrepreneurs often construct these new cognitive frames in environments of already existing norms, and thus are forced to compete with and contest these norms. In a discussion of what initially motivates norm entrepreneurs, Finnemore and Sikkink list such factors as empathy, altruism, and ideational commitment (p. 898).

In addition to norm entrepreneurs, Finnemore and Sikkink argue that “organizational platforms” are needed in order for norm emergence to proceed (p. 899). Platforms can include those that are constructed specifically for the purpose of norm promotion, such as many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (for example, Greenpeace), as well as larger transnational advocacy networks. Norm entrepreneurs can also work through other organizations whose purpose is broader than simply norm promotion, however norm promotion then competes with other substantive agendas and in turn shapes the types of norms that are disseminated. Finnemore and Sikkink use the example of the World Bank, whose organizational structure, financial donors and the professions from which it recruits may all play a role in filtering the types of norms that emerge from the organization (ibid).

Once a norm emerges, it needs to reach a threshold of ‘institutionalization’ before it can be said to escalate to the second stage, the norm cascade. According to Finnemore and Sikkink, an institution is simply an aggregate of norms, thus implying both social and cognitive features of institutions, in addition to structural and constraining aspects (p. 891). Institutionalization is thus the process of inclusion and/or recognition of these norms in several sets of international rules and organizations (p. 900). In order for a norm to be institutionalized, it should be clarified as to what exactly the norm is, what constitutes

a violation, and the procedure which “norm leaders” should follow when the norm is broken (ibid). “Norm leaders” can be considered to be those organizations or individuals responsible for enacting and/or monitoring compliance to a norm.

March and Olsen broaden the idea of institutions. For them, an institution is a “relatively stable collection of rules and practices embedded in structures of *resources* that make action possible—organizational, financial and staff capabilities, and the structures of *meaning* that explain and justify behaviour—roles, identities and belongings, common purposes, and causal and normative beliefs” (2009, p. 5, emphasis in text). Institutions as structures of ‘resources’ mean that institutions are able to “empower and constrain actors differently and make them more or less capable of acting according to prescribed rules” depending on the arrangement and allocation of these resources (ibid). Institutions as structures of ‘meaning’ translate to institutional settings providing “vocabularies” that frame both understanding and thought (ibid). It is through institutions that actors interpret the environment around them, and how they choose their actions.

Returning to the idea of “norm leaders”, Finnemore and Sikkink argue that in international relations a critical mass of states need to take on this role before the norm can be said to reach the threshold or “tipping point”, however opinions differ on what this amount may be (1998, p. 901). Finnemore and Sikkink state that given the variable “normative weights” of states, this number is difficult to calculate, however they do point out to a number of “empirical studies” which they claim “suggest that norm tipping rarely occurs before one-third of the total states in the system adopt the norm” (ibid). Furthermore, they also mention that some states are considered to be more “critical” than others to the adoption of a norm, meaning that without their participation as norm leaders, the substantive goal of the norm is compromised (ibid). Finnemore and Sikkink point out that while norm cascading requires support from these critical states, it is not necessary to have unanimity among them (ibid).

Norm cascade

Upon reaching the tipping point, stage two of the life cycle, “norm cascade”, is said to occur. For international norms, this stage is characterized by more countries beginning to adopt a norm due more to international or transnational pressures, than domestic influences (p. 902). This process can be characterized by “international socialization” where “norm breakers” are induced to become “norm followers” by way of diplomatic praise or censure, supported by material incentives or sanctions (ibid). This socialization can go beyond states and involved networks of organizations that pressure states to adopt the norms, as well as monitor compliance. However, despite inducement by way of praise or censure, Finnemore and Sikkink argue that ultimately states will comply with norms because they seek to preserve a specific identity on the international level (ibid). Akin to identity at an individual level, states seek to be

a part of a social category, and by definition that categorization is based on a commonality of norms among its members (Fearon 1997, quoted in Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 902).

The cumulative effect of states within a specific category adopting a norm can be analogous to “peer pressure” at the international level (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997, quoted in Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 903). As such, states that give in to this pressure do so for reasons of legitimation, conformity and esteem. Maintaining legitimation means maintaining reputation, trust, and credibility in international interactions, however Finnemore and Sikkink argue that it also contributes to maintaining domestic legitimacy (*ibid*). Domestic legitimacy in this sense is “the belief that existing political institutions are better than other alternatives and therefore deserve obedience” (*ibid*). In regards to conformity, states (or more accurately, their leaders) have a “psychological need to be part of a group”, and also seek to raise their esteem by having others think well of them, in turn, allowing them to think well of themselves (Axelrod 1986, quoted in Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 904).

This socialization can be seen to have the mechanics of a process called isomorphism. As defined by Amos Hawley, and expanded upon by Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, isomorphism is “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (Hawley 1968, quoted in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 149). Isomorphism can take three different forms: (a) coercive; (b) mimetic and; (c) normative. DiMaggio and Powell note that these are analytic typologies, and empirically they are not always so distinct (*ibid*).

Coercive isomorphism is characterized by formal and informal pressures exerted on one organization by other organizations upon which they are either dependent (for example, through trade relationships) (p. 150). It can also be characterized by “cultural expectations in the society within which [these] organizations function” (*ibid*). Powerful organizations in these scenarios thus impose rules and standards on other organizations, resulting in organizations that are “increasingly homogenous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions” (*ibid*).

Mimetic isomorphism occurs in uncertain environments or in scenarios where goals are ambiguous. In such cases, organizations mimic other organizations that they believe to be more legitimate or successful (p. 151).

Normative isomorphism stems from “professionalization”, which is defined as the “collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control ‘the production of producers’, and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (Larson 1997, quoted in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 152).

DiMaggio and Powell emphasize that these isomorphic processes occur without any evidence that such practices increase efficiency or effectiveness (p. 153). In regards to organizations:

To the extent that organizational effectiveness is enhanced, the reason will often be that organizations are rewarded for being similar to other organizations in their fields. This similarity can make it easier for organizations to transact with other organizations, to attract career-

minded staff, to be acknowledged as legitimate and reputable, and to fit into administrative categories that define eligibility for public and private grants and contracts. None of this, however, insures that conformist organizations do what they do more efficiently than do their more deviant peers (p. 153-4).

As such, isomorphism can be seen as more of a cultural process to enhance legitimacy than a functional or utilitarian process to enhance efficiency. Indeed, organizational legitimacy is a “status conferred by other actors” (Deephouse 1996, p. 1025). As DiMaggio and Powell observe, organizational practices become “infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” and as such, adopting such practices becomes more about legitimacy and less about improving performance (Selznick 1957, quoted in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 148).

Processes of isomorphism can be applied to the norm life cycle. Elements of isomorphism can be identified in the norm emergence stage, in that a norm is assumed to emerge within an environment of existing norms, and may emerge precisely because it is adjacent or similar to a norm that is already institutionalized. However, when following the description of the life cycle given by Finnemore and Sikkink, isomorphism is most evident in a norm cascade. A norm cascade has elements of the first two types of isomorphism: coercive and mimetic. International socialization, involving diplomatic praise and censure, is an exercise of political influence of states that are following the norm over those that are not. Indeed, those states that follow norms to preserve their identity and maintain membership of a particular social category are doing so as part of a “cultural expectation” of that group – to identify with this group, an actor must follow specific norms. Elements of mimetic isomorphism are involved when states seek to emulate other states that they recognize as successful in maintaining this identity. As Howard Aldrich remarks, “the major factors that organizations must take into account are other organizations” (Aldrich 1979, quoted in DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 150). As described, a fundamental goal or consequence of isomorphism is for an organization to be accepted by its external environment, which is made up of other organizations or actors. In the context of norms, conforming is not about utility maximization or efficiency enhancement, but fulfilling an identity and gaining legitimacy.

Interpretation plays a great role in this process. Pressure to conform to norms reflects more on the uncertainties of the “demands of identity” and less on the uncertainties of consequences and preferences, as in a pure rational choice model (March and Olsen 1996, p. 251). Therefore, according to sociological institutionalism, actors do not calculate their utilities (choosing action which makes them better off rather than worse off), but simply follow what rules, identities and roles dictate. To fulfill an identity is to follow appropriate rules, however, actors rely on their own accounts and interpretation of political history, and their role within it. These accounts help actors to define a situation, and thus which identity is relevant to it (March and Olsen 1996, p. 259). Once an identity is defined, so are its corresponding rules of action. This constitutive element of identity means that actors see obligations as part of how they see themselves, having the “commitment to fulfill an identity without re-

gard to its consequences for personal or group preferences or interests” (p. 254). However, rules and identities (and thus institutions) are themselves constructed by individuals:

Rules of action are derived from reasoning about the nature of the self. People act from understandings of the nature of things, from self-conceptions and conceptions of society, and from images of proper behaviour. Identities define the nature of things and are implemented by a cognitive process of interpretation (p. 252).

In contrast, a rational choice model sees the logic of consequentiality as treating possible interpretations and rules as “alternatives” in a rational choice problem (p. 5). In a rational actor account, actors find themselves asking: (a) *What are my alternatives?* (b) *What are my preferences?* (c) *What are the consequences of my alternatives for my preferences?* (d) *Which choice is the alternative with the best expected consequences* (ibid). This utility-maximization calculation means that the ordering of individual preferences is exogenous, consistent and stable, and the actor is responding to “exogenous distributions of resources and capabilities” (March and Olsen 1996, p. 248).

By comparison, a sociological institutionalism account finds actors trying to answer the following questions: (a) *What kind of situation is this?* (b) *What kind of person am I?* (c) *What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?* (March and Olsen 2009, p. 4). This involves the cognitive process of “recognition” which involves pairing “problem-solving action correctly to a problem situation” (ibid). Actors construct both their interpretation of a situation and the identity to match to it, based on factors such as “experience, expert knowledge, or intuition” (ibid). The norms, roles, identities, and thus institutions that guide action are socially constructed and endogenous. However, sociological institutionalism highlights that while institutions guide behaviour, they do not determine them.

Internalization

According to sociological institutionalism, a norm is internalized when it becomes “taken-for-granted”, when actors conform to a norm unquestioningly (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 904). The norm becomes so widely accepted that it is internalized, and can be “both extremely powerful (because behaviour according to the norm is not questioned) and hard to discern (because actors do not seriously consider or discuss whether to conform)” (ibid). Iterated behaviour and habit can play a role in internalizing norms, as it creates predictability, stability and trust. Internalization and sedimentation of a norm can also manifest itself in policy through legalization (March and Olsen 2009, p. 14).

In such an environment, March and Olsen argue that action is straightforward: “A socially valid rule creates an abstraction that applies to a number of concrete situations. Most actors, most of the time, then, take the rule as a

'fact'. There is no felt need to 'go behind it' and explain or justify action and discuss its likely consequences" (March and Olsen 2009, p. 7). Straightforward relations between rules and action are argued to exist within polities that have legitimate, stable, clearly defined institutions that are well integrated (ibid). "Action is then governed by a dominant institution that provides clear prescriptions and adequate resources, i.e. prescribes doable action in an unambiguous way" (p. 8).

Pamela S. Tolbert and Lynne G. Zucker look at how the degree of institutionalization affects the ways that norms and practices are diffused. When norms become institutionalized (that is, "widely understood to be appropriate and necessary"), they become legitimated (Tolbert and Zucker 1983, p. 22). Those actors that have not yet adopted the norm come under pressure. Norms that are more legitimated (as a function of being more institutionalized) will diffuse more quickly (ibid). Tolbert and Zucker's analysis looks at norms in organizational practices: "Once historical continuity has established their importance, [organizational changes] are adopted because of their societal legitimacy, regardless of their value for the internal functioning of the organization" (p. 26). As such, adoption of such practices fulfills symbolic, rather than task-related, functions. Recalling isomorphism, actors begin to look and act alike to maintain legitimacy rather than to enhance efficiency.

March and Olsen admit that there are instances where matching roles to action is more ambiguous, where it is difficult to reconcile between different concepts of the self, an account of a situation or problem, and the appropriate prescriptions of action. In other instances, actors may know what to do but find that "prescriptive rules and capabilities are incompatible" (March and Olsen 2009, p. 10). However, the range of possibilities is limited:

While rules guide behaviour and make some actions more likely than others, they ordinarily do not determine political behaviour or policy outcomes precisely. Rules, laws, identities and institutions provide parameters for action rather than dictate a specific action, and sometimes actors show considerable ability to accommodate shifting circumstances by changing behaviour without changing core rules and structures (ibid).

As such, actors always pull from a "repertoire of roles and identities", and while action is not always precisely dictated, it does occur within given parameters according to the norms, roles and identities available (p. 4).

Norms and Rationality

While sociological institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism (and their attendant logics of behaviour) are often counterposed to each other, within sociological institutionalism there is some accommodation for a rational choice-like approach. However, this does not occur in a way that rational choice theorists themselves would conceive it. Indeed, sociological institutionalists can see the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences as being in some instances complementary.

Finnemore and Sikkink argue that although rational choice approaches tend to use a material ontology, there is “nothing about rational choice that requires such an ontology. The utilities of actors could be specified as social or ideational as easily as they can be material” (ibid). As such, what sociological institutionalism presumes is that while all behaviour is fundamentally driven by a logic of appropriateness, this does not dictate that the norm with which an actor seeks to comply cannot itself have to do with rational action. In other words, “the fact that most behaviour is driven by routines does not, by itself, make most behaviour routine” (March and Olsen 1989, p. 24). Thus in any given instance, an actor is compelled to act according to what is appropriate, however what is appropriate may be to perform a utility-maximizing calculation. In this way, utility-maximizing is itself considered to be constructed. It is a norm, and is one selection among many that influences action. Actors are faced with a number of norms, rules and identities, of which a variety of them can be invoked at any given moment, depending on the actor’s interpretation of the situation.

This interpretation of utility-maximization is contrary to that of rational choice institutionalists. This approach sees utility-maximization (and its associated logic of consequentiality) as itself being the primary explanatory logic of action. The inclination towards maximizing one’s utility is presumed to be inherent in actors, and thus exogenous to them. Norms themselves, endogenous and generated within institutions, do not guide action – they are only secondary. When viewed in this sense, rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism are on opposite ends of the spectrum. However, to consider ‘rational choice’ as itself a norm and constructed, as sociological institutionalism does, allows the two logics to be complementary.

As such, sociological institutionalists assume that while actors behave according to what they see is most appropriate most of the time, they *can* also act according to a utility calculus:

The criterion is appropriateness, but determining what is appropriate in a specific situation is a nontrivial exercise. One possibility is that rules are followed but choice among rules and among alternative interpretations of rules is determined by a consequential logic. That is, we could imagine political actors treating alternative rules and interpretations as alternatives in a rational choice problem. Some elements of such a calculus certainly occur, but it is not the dominant procedure. (March and Olsen 1989, p. 24-5)

In sociological institutionalism actors are capable of *choosing* between such different logics, however the logic of appropriateness is more dominant. This is in contrast to rational choice institutionalism, which, as a core assumption, presumes that utility-maximization calculus is the only logic of behaviour that humans are capable of.

March and Olsen argue that logics should be differentiated according to their “*prescriptive clarity*”, meaning that depending on the setting and situation, the logic that will dominate is that which is more clear and precise than the other (March and Olsen 2009, p. 20, emphasis in text). The example given by

March and Olsen is about bureaucrats: “Bureaucrats [...] are influenced by the rules and structural settings in which they act, yet may face ambiguous rules as well as situations where no direct personal interest is involved” (ibid, emphasis in text). March and Olsen argue that available resources dictate whether it is possible to use one logic over the other (p. 21). March and Olsen give the following examples:

[S]hifting mixes of public and private resources, budgetary allocations to institutions that traditionally have promoted different logics, and changes in recruitment from professions that are carriers of one logic to professions that promote the other logic. Tight deadlines are also likely to promote rule following rather than the more time and resources demanding calculation of expected utility (ibid).

Explaining change

Sociological institutionalists see rational choice models of change as the “adjustment of political bargains to exogenous changes in interests, rights, and resources” (March and Olsen 1996, p. 255). For example, if public resources are redistributed in a different way, then political coalitions will change as a result. Underlying this assumption is that political action adjusts “quickly and in a necessary way to exogenous changes” – that is, that history is “efficient” in the matching of political outcomes to exogenous changes (ibid). March and Olsen view historical efficiency as the “rapid and costless rule adaptation to functional and normative environments and deliberate political reform attempts, and therefore to the function or moral necessity of observed rules” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 13).

In contrast, sociological institutionalist accounts view history as less determinate, less efficient and more endogenous. “There is no guarantee that the development of identities and institutions will instantaneously or uniquely reflect functional imperatives or demands for change” (March and Olsen 1996, p. 256). Seen in this way, institutions have multiple, path-dependent equilibria, with multiple possibilities (ibid). While this makes institutional development difficult to predict far in advance, March and Olsen argue that “timely interventions” at “historical junctures” provide opportunities for change (ibid). However, such change may be “discontinuous, contested, and problematic [...] represent[ing] ‘punctuated equilibrium’ and ‘critical junctions’, and be linked to ‘performance crises’ which stimulate departures from established routines and practices” (p. 257). Such ‘critical junctions’ can include new experiences, or dramatic events such as disasters, crises and system breakdowns, that may challenge an existing order and institutions. These new experiences may be “difficult to account for in terms of existing conceptions. Entrenched accounts and narratives then do not make sense. They no longer provide adequate answers to what is true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, and what is appropriate behaviour” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 15). March and Olsen do concede that theories of institutions are “usually associated with routinization and repetition, persistence and predictability, rather than with political change and

flexibility, agency, creativity and discretion” (1996, p. 258). According to March and Olsen, change will be difficult to account for in institutional theories as change is “imperfect” and “not likely to be governed by a single coherent and dominant process” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 17).³

What makes a norm successful?

When discussing the type of norm that may be successful, Finnemore and Sikkink point to theories within sociological institutionalism that focus on the intrinsic characteristics of the norm. These theories can be placed into two camps: those focused on the “formulation of the norm (its clarity and specificity)” and those focused on the “substance of the norm and the issues it addresses (its content)” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 906). Focusing on the formulation of a norm, it is argued that those norms that are “clear and specific, rather than ambiguous and complex, and those that have been around for a while, surviving numerous challenges, are more likely to be effective” (p. 906-7). Furthermore, those norms that make universalistic claims are said to have “more expansive potential than localized and particularistic normative frameworks”, as they have a wider range of applicability (p. 907).

Sociological institutionalism also argues that norms that fit well within existing norm frameworks are less likely to receive resistance when they emerge, demonstrating a type of “path dependency” effect (p. 908). This is related to Tolbert and Zucker’s idea of historical continuity, wherein norms that are already established, institutionalized, and legitimated, will diffuse and be adopted more quickly. Lastly, in what Finnemore and Sikkink label “world time – context”, major shocks such as wars or economic depressions create a context where existing norms (particularly those associated with the losing side of a war, or contributing to economic failure, for example) are discredited, thus creating space for new norms to come to the fore (p. 909).

Focusing on the substance of the norm, Finnemore and Sikkink cite several examples within norm research that demonstrate specific types of norms that are successful. For example, norms that involve the prevention of bodily harm to vulnerable groups are particularly common, as most cultures have some basic ideas of human dignity despite differences in how the notion “bodily harm” may be interpreted (p. 907). In this case, transnational resonance is highlighted as a feature of a norm that has a greater chance at dissemination and adoption. Finnemore and Sikkink concede that such arguments (linking the content of a norm to its success) may be at risk of sounding teleological, seemingly moving sociological institutionalism out of the realm of “history-dependent institutionalism” into some form of “functional institutionalism” (p. 908). However, they cite such empirical examples as the ban on landmines, which is lauded for the speed with which it moved from norm emergence to norm cascade, as “reinforc[ing] the idea that norms prohibiting bodily harm to innocent bystanders are among those most likely to find transnational support” (ibid).

Chapter 2: Sociological Institutionalism & Constructivist Institutionalism - A Comparison

The following section introduces the constructivist institutionalism⁴ approach, as a way to engage with and critique the limitations of sociological institutionalism. This comparison is not intended to adjudicate which theoretical approach is normatively ‘better’ at explaining political phenomena than the other. Indeed, “ontologies are not contending theories that can be adjudicated empirically – since what counts as evidence in the first place is not an ontologically-neutral issue” (Hay 2006a, p. 63). As with all theories, sociological institutionalism has its inherent “biases,” areas it focuses upon and others that it misses. Constructivist institutionalism is an attempt to engage with those areas that sociological institutionalism has not/is unable to address, namely an endogenous account of institutional change. However, while its ontological assumptions mean it is unable to consider issues of disequilibrium dynamics, this does not in itself invalidate sociological institutionalism, but rather adds upon our existing understanding of institutions.

This section consists of a general overview of the core concepts in constructivist institutionalism, and its similarities with sociological institutionalism. A critique of sociological institutionalism is then conducted through the lens of constructivist institutionalism. Such a critique looks at the ontological divergence of the two approaches and how this affects the view of institutions, the relationship with rationality and, finally, implications of thinking about power.

Constructivist Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism: Similarities

Constructivist institutionalism, like other new institutionalisms, is a reaction to the behavioural approaches influential post 1950. It is an attempt to reintroduce the role of institutions in shaping social and political conduct. Similar to the sociological variant, constructivist institutionalism places a prominent role for ideas, as actors are “oriented normatively towards their environment” (Hay 2006a, p. 63). For constructivists, actors’ “desires, preferences, and motivations are not a contextually given fact – a reflection of material or even social circumstance – but are irredeemably ideational, reflecting a normative (indeed moral, ethical, and political) orientation towards the context in which they will have to be realized” (p. 63-4). This is similar to sociological institutionalism and the character of norms, identity, and institutions, all of which are considered to be constructed and endogenous.

The role of perception and interpretation are important for both approaches. For sociological institutionalism, interpretation plays a role in assess-

ing a scenario and deciding which identities or prescriptions of action apply best to it, matching a “problem-solving action correctly to a problem situation” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 4). Recall also that these identities themselves also involve a great deal of interpretation. “Rules of action are derived from reasoning about the nature of the self. People act from understandings of the nature of things, from self-conceptions and conceptions of society” (March and Olsen 1996, p. 252).

For constructivist institutionalism, actors also rely upon their perception of context, which means a normative/moral/ethical/political orientation towards one’s surroundings. However, constructivist institutionalists are less confident about the role of perception, as perceptions “are at best incomplete and [...] may very often prove to have been inaccurate after the event” (Hay 2006a, p. 63). Moreover, the role of perception in sociological institutionalism is seen as restricted to a frame or repertoire of identities, whereas constructivists do not see such a limitation. This divergence is explored further in the next section.

Constructivist institutionalism can also be seen to counterpose rational actor models in ways analogous to sociological institutionalism. For constructivists (and sociological institutionalists), “politics is rather less about the blind pursuit of transparent material interest and rather more about the fashioning, identification, and rendering actionable of such conceptions, and the balancing of (presumed) instrumentality and rather more affective motivations” (p. 64). Other such motivations can include legitimacy seeking and wanting to belong to a group, as assumed by sociological institutionalism, and not necessarily self-seeking or utility-maximization. However, as discussed above, sociological institutionalism accommodates some accounts of utility driven action, although it argues that logics of appropriateness is the dominant mode of action. This is in contrast to constructivist institutionalism, which challenges the idea that any action can be driven by a calculus logic, and that this logic itself is constructed. This incompatibility of constructivist institutionalism and theories of rationality is discussed in detail in the next section.

Constructivist Institutionalism vs. Sociological Institutionalism: Key Differences

Constructivist and sociological institutionalisms share some commonalities, primarily in their contradistinction with pure rational choice approaches and their consideration of institutions. Nonetheless, they diverge on other levels. Such divergences, while in some ways nuanced and minor, have considerable implications for thinking about behaviour and the effects of institutions on political life.

The nature of institutions, and change

A central contention of constructivist institutionalism is that it seeks to examine complex post-formation institutional change. That is, after an institution is created (especially when, in the words of Finnemore and Sikkink, it becomes “taken-for-granted”), how does it then change? In other words, “If everyone follows rules, once established, how do we explain change? And how do we explain agency?” (Schmidt 2008, p. 314). By asking such questions, constructivist institutionalism is attempting to understand and analyze institutional *disequilibria*.

In looking at the concept of disequilibria, and how it is unique to constructivist institutionalism, we can first look at how other approaches treat institutional equilibrium. For rational choice approaches, which employ a logic of consequences, it can be argued that it *presumes* equilibrium as an initial condition (Hay 2006a, p. 61, emphasis in text). Equilibrium is initially presumed as actors enter into a scenario whereby they are going to conduct a utility calculus, and in order to do this, they must have a fixed and immutable preference set, extensive information and stability (Hay 2006b, p. 4). Similarly, sociological institutionalism *predicts* equilibrium, “for the ‘logics of appropriateness’ that constitute its principle analytical focus and that it discerns and associated with successful institutionalization are themselves seen as equilibrating” (Hay 2006a, p. 60, emphasis in text). In other words, by definition the logics of appropriateness are the driving force behind why an actor follows rules or acts appropriately, and thus cannot logically be applied to instances when an actor does not. Since both logics (calculus- and norm-driven) are context-dependent and evident to the analyst, “the actor’s behaviour is rendered predictable to the analyst by virtue of the context in which it occurs” (Hay 2006b, p. 3). In the case of sociological institutionalism, it is rendered predictable by the *institutional* context, which has embedded within it norms, rules, identities and patterns of behaviour.

As such, both rational choice and sociological approaches are “theoretical non-starters” on questions of institutional disequilibrium and change (Hay 2006a, p. 60). To the extent that they address dynamics of change, these approaches are better at accounting for “the *path-dependent* institutional change they tend to assume” rather than the “periodic, if infrequent, bouts of *path-shaping* institutional change they concede” (p. 61, emphasis in text). To specify the important distinction between ‘path-dependent’ and ‘path-shaping’, recall sociological institutionalism’s account of change, discussed in the previous section. Sociological institutionalism claims that it takes an endogenous interpretation of institutional change that does not assume the historical efficiency of rational choice approaches. Political history is seen as less determinate, less efficient, and institutions have multiple equilibria with multiple possibilities (March and Olsen 1996, p. 256). As such, sociological institutionalism assumes that some type of equilibria will be reached, and thus that institutional change occurs within some range of possibilities, despite the recognition that the number of possibilities may be large. In this way, this approach’s view of change can be said to be ‘path-dependent’.

Moreover, sociological institutionalists posit that the source of such change can sometimes occur at “critical” or “historical junctures”, during crises such as wars, disasters or economic breakdowns where existing institutions and rules of behaviour will be challenged or discredited (p. 257). However, since such moments of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ are still exogenous, these explanations are no different than those of rational choice approaches, despite the consideration of historical inefficiency. There is no endogenous account for these ‘critical junctures’, and why certain events (and not others) cause actors to re-evaluate their embedded norms, rules, and actions.

Constructivist institutionalism, on the other hand, considers the possibility of ‘path-shaping’ institutional change. ‘Path-shaping’ can be understood as the “recast[ing] and redesign[ing]” of not only institutions, but also the attendant logics that they impose (p. 61). Therefore not only can an institution be changed, but all the parameters within which change can occur, and even the way terms such as “institution” or “change” are understood can be manipulated and altered (Schmidt 2008, p. 309). To a degree, path-dependent change still occurs: “the order in which things happen affects how they happen; the trajectory of change up to a certain point itself constrains the trajectory after that point” (Hay 2006b, p. 7). However, such path-dependence does not preclude path-shaping, although it does reject that institutional change is simply a functional response to exogenous shocks. Instead, constructivist institutionalists propose that it is through the “intended and unintended consequences of *political agency*” that political change occurs (Hay 2006a, p. 61, emphasis added). To explore this, one must look more closely at the ontology of constructivist institutionalism.

Ontology of constructivist institutionalism

Constructivist institutionalism’s approach to institutional analysis involves a dynamic interplay of structure and agent, of material and ideational factors, of “institutional context and institutional architect” (p. 62). In this way, constructivist institutionalism:

...allows us to examine the relationship between political actors as objects and as *agents of history*. The institutions that are at the centre of historical institutionalist analysis [...] can shape and constrain political strategies in important ways, but they are *themselves also the outcome (conscious or unintended) of deliberate political strategies of political conflict and of choice* (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, quoted in Hay 2006a, p. 62, emphasis in text).

Such an account means that constructivist institutionalism, while recognizing the significant role of institutions in shaping and constraining political agency, also recognizes that such institutions are the *result* of political agency. As structure shapes actors, actors also shape structure as institutional architects through the “intended and unintended consequences of *political agency*” (Hay

2006a, p. 61, emphasis added). This is a unique addition to the body of work on new institutionalism, which tends to focus on path-dependent logic rather than path-shaping, perhaps reflecting a “latent structuralism of the attempt to bring institutions back into contemporary political analysis” (ibid).

What is the implication of this for thinking about action? Action is not straightforward, as preferences or logics of conduct cannot be derived from their institutional settings, context, or even material or social circumstance (p. 63-4). By extension, change is simply not a functional reaction to exogenous shocks. This is because action is largely dependent on the perception of the actor, which as mentioned above, is “at best incomplete and which may very often prove to have been inaccurate after the event” (ibid). As such, an actor’s goals are changing constantly, they are complex, and are contingent upon their perception and how they orient themselves towards their environment. All preferences, interests, desires and motivations are constructed, “irredeemably ideational, reflecting a normative (indeed moral, ethical, and political) orientation toward the context in which they will have to be realized” (ibid). However, such motivations are not only ideational. Our perception is what gives meaning to material reality, with the recognition that material reality exists for actors to perceive. This dialectical relationship is ideational-material, as it is the *perception* of such material reality (rather than the material reality itself) that informs and guides action (Hay 2006b, p. 14). Ideas are accorded a causal power of their own rather than simply being considered to be a reflection of materiality (ibid).

This approach has implications for thinking about structure as well. While a more agential account considers institutional dynamism, action does not take place in an arena that is neutral:

[Action] occurs in a context which is structured (not least by institutions and ideas about institutions) in complex and constantly changing ways which facilitate certain forms of intervention whilst militating against others [...] [A]ccess to strategic resources, and indeed to knowledge of the institutional environment, is unevenly distributed. This in turn affects the ability of actors to transform the contexts (institutional and otherwise) in which they find themselves (Hay 2006b, p. 8).

Thus strategic action takes place in an environment that is neither materially nor ideationally neutral. Actors make decisions with the backdrop of cognitive filters, filters that define “what is feasible, legitimate, possible and desirable” (ibid). In other words, “it is not just institutions, but the very ideas on which they are predicated and which inform their design and development, that exerts constraints on political autonomy” (Hay 2006a, p. 65). As such, constructivist institutionalism “seeks to identify, detail, and interrogate the extent to which – through processes of normalization and institutional-embedding – established ideas become codified [and also] the conditions under which such established cognitive filters [...] are contested, challenged, and replaced” (ibid).

Agents are both the “architects” of institutions (and of the ideas on which institutions are designed and developed) as well as institutionalized subjects (p. 64). Therefore change is both conduct- and context-shaping. Context

can be understood as the environment within which agents act, as the institutions within which action is shaped and given meaning. This dynamic interaction between structure and agency means that constructivist institutionalism “simultaneously treats institutions as given (as the context within which agents think, speak, and act) and as contingent (as the results of agents’ thoughts, words, and actions)” (p. 314). This allows agents to “think, speak, and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, to deliberate about institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them” (ibid). It is in this area, of informing an endogenous account of “complex institutional evolution, adaptation and innovation” that constructivist institutionalism approach has its value-added (Hay 2006b, p.6).

Ontology of sociological institutionalism

Sociological institutionalism is ontologically distinct from constructivist institutionalism. The sociological approach “falls on the structural or holist side of the structure-agent debate. Analytically, social structure is ontologically prior to and generative of agents. It creates actors; it is not created by them” (Finnemore 1999, p. 333). In sociological institutionalism, social structure consists of the norms, rules, identities and logics that prescribe action. Seen as constitutive, these structures give existence to the actors themselves.

As a consequence, a constructivist would interpret sociological institutionalism as less able to account for political dynamism and as static. Recall Finnemore and Sikkink’s description of the norm life cycle. In the first stage, norms are said to emerge due to the action of “norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 895). Actors ‘frame’ issues in way that expresses how an issue is important to them, however, such action is still constrained within specific frameworks. Norms do not emerge in a vacuum. Finnemore and Sikkink list factors, such as empathy and altruism, as motivators for these entrepreneurs (p. 898), however these are norms themselves. Where did they originate? Through what process did they come to motivate norm entrepreneurs? Why is it these particular norms are the inspiration, and not others, such as greed, or fear? For a constructivist institutionalist, such specifications of motivations seem arbitrary.⁵ Finnemore and Sikkink also describe “organizational platforms”, such as organizations or networks, which are needed in order for a norm to emerge (p. 899). Again, there is no recognition of where these platforms came from, and upon which norms they are built. Institutions, once created, are treated as given, becoming the context within which agents act and thus become *external* to the actors themselves (Schmidt 2008, p. 314).

As a consequence, such formulation of the life cycle of a norm appears to be tautological – a norm emerges, cascades, and is internalized, becoming part of the logics of appropriateness. It thus serves to frame and shape the context wherein a norm emerges, cascades, is internalized and becomes part of the logics (and so on and so forth). This is because ontologically, sociological institutionalism is ideational. Political action begins and ends with ideas, how-

ever there is no explanation of what the genesis point is, or where it came from. The same setback follows for the cascade and internalization phases of the life cycle. Existing norms and institutions are described as simply the backdrop or arena within which a norm cascade and internalization can proceed. If all action originates within norms and identity, which norms and identity inform states to adopt ‘new’ norms and identities in the lead up to the ‘tipping point’? Take the stage of norm internalization, and processes of isomorphism, for example. Isomorphism is seen as a cultural process, where actors seek to enhance legitimacy as opposed to efficiency (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 153-4). Norms that are legitimated (as a function of being more institutionalized) will diffuse faster (Tolbert and Zuckert 1983, p. 22). However, is not the idea of ‘legitimacy’ itself a norm? What dictates that ‘legitimacy’ and acceptance by others is a worthy goal, or a preference?

Actors assess a scenario and decide which identities or prescriptions of action apply best to it, matching a “problem-solving action correctly to a problem situation (March and Olsen 2009, p. 4). While actors play a role in interpreting the situation and matching the adequate identity to that situation, it is assumed that this identity is pulled from an existing (and limited) repertoire of identities. This interpretation leaves no room for innovation or dynamic change, no explanation for the genesis of this repertoire, of how identities become a part of it and how the actor interacts with it. Such formulations of political action and behaviour become formulaic – a description merely of the processes of norm dissemination. Sociological institutionalism, as a rule-following model, subordinates agency (action) to structure (rules). As such, constructivist institutionalism argues that this “effectively leaves us with ‘unthinking’ actors who are in an important sense not agents at all” (Schmidt 2008, p. 314).

Behaviour and rationality

Constructivist institutionalism is at odds with any approach that incorporates the rational choice model to any degree, despite the latter’s recent attempts to account for endogenous factors in its new institutionalist variants. According to constructivist institutionalist, behaviour in rational choice models is assumed to be in reflection of an actor’s self-interest, and such interests are assumed to be “both given by, and hence a logical derivative of, their material context” (Hay 2006b, p. 12). As such, it assumes an actor’s behaviour can become predictable simply by looking at the context within which he or she is located, given that this context/system is in a constant state of equilibrium (ibid). Moreover, actors are presumed to have perfect information, to ensure that they can “[discern] the contours and nuances of the strategic terrain they inhabit” and will not “misperceive their materially-given interests nor misidentify or fail to discern the strategies [needed to fulfill these] interests through ignorance or lack of information” (p.13).

Given these assumptions, the role of ideas and their effect on behaviour is “entirely epiphenomenal – reflections of material necessity without any

causal power of their own” (ibid). What is the implication of excluding the role of ideas in accounts of behaviour? For constructivist institutionalism, this isolates action from the role of interpretation. Recall constructivist institutionalism’s characterization of the role of interpretation: “[Actors’] desires, preferences, and motivations are not a contextually given fact – a reflection of material or even social circumstance – but are irredeemably ideational, reflecting a normative (indeed moral, ethical, and political) orientation” (Hay 2006a, p. 63/4). As such, all action is based on the perception of the actor, is endogenous and socially constructed. By contrast, as mentioned above, rational actor theories assume that behaviour can be predictable based on the context, which is seen by these models as only exogenous (Hay 2006b, p. 11).

This means that there are some behaviours that can be seen as ‘given’, ‘inevitable’, ‘natural’, ‘objective’ and thus ‘necessary’ due to exogenous incentives or constraints. However, upon closer inspection, sociological institutionalism commits the same pattern, even when it does not include rational choice elements. Recall the logics of appropriateness. In sociological institutionalism, action is driven by adherence to norms that are embedded within institutions, stable collections of rules and practices. Presumably then, a constructivist institutionalist would conclude that if the institutional context is known, then so is the anticipated action: “In so far as an actor’s behaviour is norm-driven, and in so far as that norm is both context-dependent and accessible to us, the actor’s behaviour is rendered predictable to the analyst by virtue of the context in which it occurs” (Hay 2006b, p. 3). Moreover, norms that become institutionalized, normalized and internalized become so ingrained that they are no longer questioned and taken as ‘facts’ or ‘axioms’. In this way, norms too become ‘given’, ‘inevitable’, ‘natural’, ‘objective’ and thus ‘necessary’, and while analytically they are presumed to be constructions through institutional-embedding and normalizations, they are no longer recognized to be so. In effect, norms, initially recognized as constructed and endogenous, once embedded and normalized, become merely the context, exogenous and outside of the actors themselves. Consider the sociological institutionalist characterization of this process: “Most actors, most of the time, then, take the rule as a ‘fact’. There is no felt need to ‘go behind it’ and explain or justify action and discuss its likely consequences” (March and Olsen 2009, p. 7).

In essence, constructivist institutionalism disputes that *any* theory of behaviour can have predictive power. In both cases, rational choice (and its new institutional variants) and sociological institutionalism both accord predictive capacity to the context. However, constructivist institutionalism challenges that any behaviour can simply be reduced to actors reacting to inevitable contextual features. Instead, this theory assumes that due to the role of interpretation and perception, all interests are endogenous and therefore ‘constructed’, ‘normative’, ‘contingent’, ‘subjective’ and thus inherently political. Constructivist institutionalism considers that this process, in framing what is ‘constructed’ as ‘natural’, turning what is ‘endogenous’, ‘exogenous’ and thus making the ‘contingent’ into something ‘necessary’, involves an exercise of power. This is explored in the next section.

Implications for thinking about power

As mentioned above, sociological institutionalism accounts for the process of internalization, where a norm becomes so embedded that it is no longer questioned, is taken for granted, and is considered fact. These norms as institutions serve as unchallenged cognitive filters “though which actors come to interpret environmental signals and, in so doing, to conceive of their own interests” (Hay 2006b, p. 8). This process of defining how actors conceive of their own interests through (institutional) context shaping can be looked at as an exercise of power.

Robert A. Dahl offered his classical pluralist definition of power: “A has power over B to the extent that he or she can get B to do something that B would not do otherwise” and where there is a conflict of interest between A and B (Dahl 1957, quoted in Hay 1997, p. 46). However, such an approach was criticized for its over-reliance on the decision making process (ibid). As such, Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz built upon Dahl’s explanation to include the power in non-decision making arenas, such as the power to shape the agenda: “A devotes his (*sic*) energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A” (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, quoted in Hay 1997, p. 46).

Despite the advance that Bachrach and Baratz made on the definition of power, it was still criticized for only addressing those instances in which a conflict could be observed between those exercising power and those whom it is being exercised on (p. 47). In essence, it still excludes when “power is being exercised in situation in which the subordinated do not identify themselves as the subjects of subordination – in which they do not perceive themselves as possessing an interest which they are prevented from realizing” (ibid). Steven Lukes addresses this deficiency in adding a third dimension of power, wherein A influences and shapes the very preferences of B:

...is it not the most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural or unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes 1974, quoted in Hay 1997, p. 47).

In general, constructivist institutionalists would consider sociological institutionalism as generally skirting analysis of power at the level. In fact, when sociological institutionalism does address the issue of power, it is limited to behavioural forms (ex. conduct shaping, agenda-setting). Take for example DiMaggio and Powell’s description of isomorphic processes. Such processes can be coercive (formal and informal pressures exerted on one organization by others), mimetic (mimicry in situations of uncertainty) or normative (associated with professionalization)(DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 149). However, such conceptions of isomorphism still rely largely on the Dahl and Bachrach/Baratz

conceptions of power – that is, where a conflict can be observed between those exercising power and those whom it is being exercised on (Hay 1997, p. 47). Isomorphism is the process by which previously divergent organizations are brought in alignment with other organizations – either by coercive, mimetic or normative means. In this instance, dominant organizations are assumed to be more powerful because of greater resources, or greater legitimacy. However, sociological institutionalism is silent on how such measurements (ex. resources, legitimacy) translated to greater strength – meaning, what ideas led to such preferences for ‘resources’ or ‘legitimacy’.

As discussed above, sociological institutionalism rests upon an ideational account of political history. As such, preference sets are taken to be a given and actors behave according to them. The emergence of these dominant identities, how they became dominant over other norms is generally not questioned. Behaviour begins and ends with ideas. Institutions become the arena within which power exercises occur, rather than a source of power struggle itself. Consequently, a power analysis under sociological institutionalism becomes simply procedural: what is the norm, who adopted it, who is a ‘norm leader’ and a ‘norm breaker’ and to what extent did it spread and become institutionalized? Analysis of power is resigned to those areas in which it is an actor’s *conduct* that is shaped.

In contrast, constructivist institutionalism sees institutions themselves as “the subject and focus of political struggle; and on the contingent nature of such struggles whose outcomes can in no sense be derived from the extant institutional context itself” (Hay 2006a, p. 64). Recall that while structure shapes actors, actors also shape structure as ‘institutional architects’ – through the “intended and unintended consequences of political agency” (Hay 2006a, p. 61). However, such structures (made up of rules, preferences and motivations) are not simply a reflection of material or social circumstance, but rather are “irredeemably ideational”, based largely on *perception* (p. 63). The perception of preferences is shaped within cognitive frames – that is, the framework through which actors see “what is feasible, legitimate, possible and desirable” (Hay 2006b, p. 8). When seen in this sense, shaping these cognitive frames, the *preferences* themselves, falls within the third dimension of power, according to Lukes, the most ‘insidious’. As such, this exercise of power is about “context-shaping, about the capacity of actors to redefine the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others” (Hay 1997, p. 51). Therefore, constructivist institutionalism has an advance on sociological institutionalism, as it is able to consider instances where power is both conduct- and context-shaping.

For constructivist institutionalism, no preference (and the action that it informs) can be a contextually given fact. Desires, preferences, and motivations are irredeemably constructed and ideational, thus reflecting a normative and political orientation. Power resides in the process of normalization, institutional embedding, and, as described by sociological institutionalists, internalization of norms. That is, the process through which specific preferences (or more specifically, the perception of preferences) becomes dominant, normalized and no longer questioned. Through the constructivist institutionalism lens, an example:

Businesses [...] value profits not because it is innately good for them to do so, nor because it is structurally-determined by virtue of their position in the relations of production to do so, but because those responsible for corporate decisions are socialized in such a way as to evaluate business interests in such terms. In other words, it is conventional to conceive of corporate interests in this way (Hay 2006b, p. 19).

Therefore, constructivist institutionalism seeks to interrogate the processes by which actors come to conceive of their preferences and interests. These processes are explored in the next section.

Chapter 3: Case Study - Canadian Human Security Policy

The following section applies sociological and constructivist institutionalism to policy analysis. The intent is to demonstrate how different theoretical approaches to policy analysis shape research questions, and their conclusions. First, we provide a background to the concept of human security, its origins, uses, and definition. Next, we look specifically at Canadian human security policy and the ways in which it is an example of a sociological institutionalism approach. Then we will engage with this approach using constructivist institutionalism, to illuminate both the merits of sociological institutionalism, and the dimensions in which it is silent.

Background

Human security is a concept with a variety of different meanings and interpretations. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was the first to coin the term “human security” in its 1993 Human Development Report, later expanded in 1994. In general, to have human security is to have both “freedom from fear and freedom from want” (UNDP 1994, p. 24). Threats to human security can be grouped in the following categories: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, political security.

The concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust. It has been related more to nation-states than to people [...] Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives. For many of them, security symbolized protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression and environmental hazards. (UNDP 1994, p. 22).

As such, human security as theorized has four defining features: (a) it is a *universal* concern; (b) components of human security are *interdependent* and its effects are not confined to geographic borders; (c) it is easier to ensure human security through *early prevention* rather than later intervention and; (d) it is *people-centred* (ibid, emphasis in text).

Economic security speaks to an assured basic income, generated from remunerative work but also from a government-funded safety net of last resort. For the UNDP, this type of economic security can thus extend to both the developing and developed world, and can be measured in rates of unem-

ployment, underemployment and percentages below country-specific poverty lines (ibid). Food security is defined as the physical and economic access to basic food at all times. "Access" in this sense is not just adequate amounts of food available, but a person's "entitlement" to food through private farming, purchasing it in a store or receiving it as part of a public food distribution program (p. 27). In this sense, access to food is intertwined with access to assets and an assured income (economic security). Health security encompasses exposure to health risks such as polluted water or industrial waste, lack of nutrition as well as inadequate access to health care. As seen, health security is also intertwined with economic and food security. This can be measured in terms of maternal mortality, which is 18 times higher in developing countries than developed (p. 28). Environmental security is related to both threats to local ecosystems and to the global system. This can include threats to supplies of water, usable land and clean air. Environmental threats can be sudden and violent (for example, Bhopal, Chernobyl) or chronic and long lasting, such as deforestation leading to droughts and floods. Personal security involves security from physical violence. Threats can take many forms, such as threats from the state, other states, other groups of people, individuals or gangs (p. 30). Threats can also be directed specifically against women, children (based on their vulnerability and dependence, i.e. child abuse) and also directed against the self (suicide, drug use) (ibid).

Community security involves the recognition of the community as a vital social unit – whether it is a family, an organization, or a racial or ethnic group. Communities are described to provide "a cultural identity and a reassuring set of values" as well as practical support such as shared household responsibilities and resources (p. 31). The UNDP notes that threats to community security include discrimination based on race or ethnicity, which can result in "limited access to opportunities", as well as the degradation of traditional customs and ways of life, as experienced by some indigenous peoples (ibid). However, the report also recognizes that communities can perpetuate "oppressive practices" (for example, employing bonded labour or genital mutilation) (ibid). Furthermore, communities can be a source of division within society as a whole, particularly in cases of ethnic conflict, when competing groups fight between each other on the basis of race or ethnicity (p. 32). Political security involves protection against state repression and the preservation of basic human rights, including freedom of expression and information (ibid).

Canadian Human Security Policy: A Sociological Institutionalism Approach

Canada's approach to human security can be seen as employing a sociological institutionalist approach to international relations. This analysis will focus on policy documents released by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), as well as press releases, official speeches and journal articles written by Lloyd Axworthy in his capacity as For-

ign Affairs Minister from January 1996 to October 2000, under the Liberal Party government of Jean Chrétien.

Reconceptualizing security

While it can be said that elements of human security appear in Canadian policy before the 1990s¹, the term “human security” was first utilized in Canadian foreign policy language by Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy in 1997. Axworthy published an article in the spring edition of *International Journal* entitled “Canada and human security: the need for leadership” (1997). He begins by discussing the inadequacy of traditional security approaches of ensuring peace and stability in a post-Cold War world:

The Cold War concept of security emphasized the prevention of interstate conflict in order to avoid the perennial danger of escalation...It is now clear that this approach to security was inadequate to foster stability and peace. Canada and a small number of like-minded countries...began to reassess the traditional concept of security in order to identify those variables beyond arms control/disarmament which affect peace and stability. From this reconsideration emerged the concept of ‘human security’ (Axworthy 1997, p. 184, emphasis in text).

Axworthy goes on to describe human security similarly to the 1994 UNDP definition, with a focus on securing minimum basic needs, “sustained economic development, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, good governance, sustainable development and social equity” (ibid). Axworthy notes that while instances of armed conflict between states has dropped since 1972, intra-state conflict has increased (p. 183). Moreover, many states experienced deeper economic deprivation and political repression despite the relative peace between states after the Cold War (ibid). While traditional security (with its referent as the state) demonstrated a decline in military threat, this did not correspond to a decline in other threats to human life and wellbeing.

As such, a new paradigm of security needed to be constructed, with the referent object as the individual. This re-assessment emphasized the idea that security, and the tools to achieve it, could be re-conceptualized and thus was subjective. This subjectivity, and the centrality of socially constructed ideas, is the main premise upon which sociological institutionalism is based. Indeed, traditional security, with a focus on inter-state conflict and hard military power was but one way to interpret what it means to be secure. This attempt to change the security paradigm occurred due to the old traditional security paradigm reaching a “critical juncture”, where existing institutions and rules of be-

¹ For examples, see Jennifer Ross, 2001, Is Canada’s Human Security Policy Really the ‘Axworthy’ Doctrine? *Canadian Foreign Policy* 8 (2), pp. 75-93.

behaviour were challenged or discredited (March and Olsen 1996, p. 256). In this climate, human security emerged as an alternative to traditional security and its tools, which were less relevant. According to DFAIT, “human security is best understood as a shift in perspective or orientation. It is an alternative way of seeing the world, taking people as its point of reference, rather than focusing exclusively on the security of territory or governments” (DFAIT 1999).

According to DFAIT, human security does not supplant national security but challenges the idea that national security is an end in itself (ibid). State security and human security are mutually supportive: “Building an effective, democratic state that values its own people and protects minorities is a central strategy for promoting human security. At the same time, improving the human security of its people strengthens the legitimacy, stability, and security of a state” (ibid). Therefore, states are assumed to want to promote human security (as conceptualized by Canada) in order to be viewed as “effective” and “legitimate”. As such, the underlying assumption is that state action follows a type of “logic of appropriateness” as espoused by sociological institutionalism, whereby action is primarily rule-based, driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour (March and Olsen 2009, p. 2). States are assumed to follow norms of human security because “they are seen as natural, rightful, expected and legitimate” (p. 3). Canada frames this legitimacy as being conferred by other states in the international system, which, in an interdependent world, rely on each other for stability: “The Charter of the United Nations embodies the view that security cannot be achieved by a single state in isolation [...] A human security perspective builds on this logic by noting that the security of people in one part of the world depends on the security of people elsewhere” (DFAIT 1999). Thus, when framed in this way, legitimacy of the state is “contingent upon the accepted responsibilities to international order and justice” (Franceschet and Knight 2001, p. 52), which cannot be ignored.

Moreover, Canada argues that legitimacy is bestowed upon the state from its own citizens, which can only be achieved through democratic governance. When states ensure the security of their citizens, it is assumed that citizens will grant the state legitimacy, which is key to stability as the citizens are less likely to rebel, cause conflict or try to oust the government from power. This can be seen as based on the Hobbesian model of the state and the social contract, whereby states are obliged to provide security for those living within their borders in exchange for the legitimate means of the use of force (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, p. 18). In highlighting that human security strengthens stability and security of a state, Canada is also framing this norm as something that is in its national interest. Like sociological institutionalism, this approach does not preclude that states still exercise a calculus logic. Human security policies both maximize utility for a state, as it helps to ensure stability within its borders, and follow norms of what is appropriate in the international arena. However, first and foremost, states are driven to abide by human security norms because it is what is expected of them in fulfilling their duties as states. This assumption, that state action is primarily driven by standards of appropriateness, is demonstrated most clearly in cases of norm diffusion and internalization, such as for the ban on landmines, discussed in a later section.

Policy implications, and Canada's "human security agenda"

What does the promotion of human security look like? In the 1999 DFAIT document entitled "Human Security: Safety for People in a Changing World", promotion of human security translates to six main foreign policy implications. First, when conditions warrant, DFAIT argued that ensuring human security could involve coercive measures such as sanctions and military force (DFAIT 1999). Military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were given as examples. Second, Canadian policies that promote state and international security must be assessed, and should "take into account the impact on innocent people" (ibid). The example given was the use of economic sanctions, and that Canada needed to also take into account that civilian populations may be adversely affected. Third, security policies should be integrated more closely with human rights, democracy and development promotion strategies: "Human rights, humanitarian and refugee law provide the normative framework on which a human security approach is based. Development strategies offer broadly based means of addressing many long-term human security challenges" (ibid).

Fourth, DFAIT focused on the importance of multilateralism, including cooperation with other states, as well as multilateral organizations and civil society groups. The ministry stated that such cooperation is required, due to the transnational and complex nature of human security threats: "These threats link the interest of citizens in countries which enjoy a high level of human security with the interests of people in much poorer nations, who face a wider range of threats to their safety" (ibid). Fifth, greater operational coordination would be required, for example, between development agencies and security organizations, and between a variety of actors such as peacekeepers, human rights monitors and humanitarian aid personnel, who are now considered to be working towards the same goal of ensuring 'human security' (ibid). Lastly, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the business sector should be more actively engaged in the promotion of human security, as they are also seeking greater opportunities and responsibilities in promoting human security: "In many cases, non-governmental organizations have proven to be extremely effective partners in advocating the security of people. They are also important providers of assistance and protection to those in need of greater security" (ibid).

These general foreign policy implications translated to specific policy programs for Canadian foreign policy. In the same document, DFAIT began to define what it called a "human security agenda" (ibid). This entailed both short-term humanitarian action in highly insecure situations (such as violent conflict and natural disasters), as well as long-term strategies that help to "[pre-vent] the conditions which make [people] vulnerable in the first place" (ibid). To do this, DFAIT proposed two fundamental strategies: (a) strengthening legal norms and (b) building the capacity to enforce them. One such example was Canada's initiative to ban antipersonnel land mines.

The Ottawa Treaty: a ban on anti-personnel land mines

The ‘Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Productions and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction’, otherwise known as the ‘Ottawa Treaty’/‘Ottawa Convention’, is one of Canada’s hallmark human security policies. Land mines were seen by Canada to pose its greatest danger to individual civilians, as they are indiscriminate and do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants (DFAIT 2000). They are explosives that are buried in the ground and are detonated when pressure is applied directly on or near the mine. Approximately 76 countries and territories have had or currently have land mines within their territory (ICBL 2009). Land mines that remain undetonated create obstacles for the return of refugees after a conflict, and prevent the use of productive land, creating further threats to human security (DFAIT 2000). As talks to strengthen the existing Convention on certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) began to stall in the early 1990s, Canada offered to host a strategy conference in its capital Ottawa in October 1996 to negotiate a separate treaty banning anti-personnel land mines (Howard and Neufeldt 2000, p. 18). This conference initiated what became to be known as the ‘Ottawa Process’, and included related United Nations (UN) agencies, NGOs and other pro-ban states such as Austria and Belgium. Discussed at the conference was the drafting of a treaty that would ban the use, stockpile, production and transfer of anti-personnel land mines (p. 17).

In between the formal meetings, Canada and the core group of pro-ban states actively lobbied governments worldwide by sharing information about the treaty through embassies, delivering joint *démarches* and coordinating state efforts with NGOs as part of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) (p. 20). Moreover, Canada supported the ICBL in mobilizing public opinion, in order for populations across the globe to lobby their own governments from the grass-roots up (*ibid*). On September 18, 1997, a draft treaty was completed in Oslo, Norway, and on December 3, 1997, the convention was signed in Ottawa by 122 states. Notably, the United States, China and Russia did not sign the treaty. While the United States, a close ally of Canada, issued statements in support of the land mine ban, it is reported that the Clinton Administration at the time requested specific exceptions if it were to sign on – namely, that the Korean peninsula would be exempt (*ibid*). Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien presumably offered a compromise that the US could phase out its mines in Korea over a nine-year transition period, however in the end the US withdrew and did not sign the treaty (*ibid*).

The Ottawa Treaty came into force on March 1, 1999, and to date 156 states are party to the agreement (ICBL 2010). The treaty commits participating states to:

- Never use, “develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer” antipersonnel landmines;
- Destroy mines in national stockpiles within four years of the treaty becoming binding;
- Clear mines in their territory, or support efforts to clear mines in mined countries, within 10 years;

- Offer assistance to other States Parties, for example in providing for survivors or contributing to clearance programmes;
- Adopt national implementation measures (such as national legislation) in order to ensure that the terms of the treaty are upheld in their territory (UN 1997, quoted in ICBL 2010)

Articles 8 and 9 outline provisions for compliance to the treaty. In Article 8, suspected violations can be investigated through a multi-stage process of verification procedures that can include fact-finding missions, albeit with the express permission of the state under investigation (ICBL 2010). The fact-finding mission then reports to the “Meeting of the States Parties or the Special Meeting of the States Parties”, through the Secretary-General of the United Nations, which may suggest “ways and means to further clarify or resolve the matter under consideration, including the initiation of appropriate procedures in conformity with international law” (UN 1997). However, Article 9 has been stressed by State Parties as being the primary compliance provision, as it places the onus on individual states to ensure compliance within their own territories: “Each State Party shall take all appropriate legal, administrative and other measures, including the imposition of penal sanctions, to prevent and suppress any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention undertaken by persons or on territory under its jurisdiction or control” (ibid).

A ban on the use, production and distribution of land mines can be seen as a norm that followed the stages of a norm “life cycle”, as described by Finnemore and Sikkink. In the first stage, “norm emergence”, “norm entrepreneurs” seek to propagate specific ideas about what they see as appropriate or desired behaviour through “framing” – naming, interpreting and dramatizing issues in order to give importance to them (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 897). Canada cannot be said to be a norm entrepreneur, as its involvement came after the time when the norm of a ban on land mines emerged. Indeed, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was formally launched in 1992 and involved a group of six NGOs that sought to persuade states to end the production and sale of land mines (ICBL 2010). The ICBL was the “organizational platform” that Finnemore and Sikkink described as needed for norm emergence to proceed. Such platforms allow the norm to be promoted, and ICBL’s extensive NGO network generated international awareness and advocacy regarding land mines (Howard and Neufeldt 2000, p. 17).

According to Finnemore and Sikkink, a norm has to reach a threshold of ‘institutionalization’ before it can be said to escalate to the second stage, norm cascade (1998, p. 891). This requires the active support and promotion by “norm leaders” (p. 900). While provisions on land mines were already included in the Convention on certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), the convention did not serve as a legal basis for a complete ban (Howard and Neufeldt 2000, p. 18). The ICBL pushed for the norm to be institutionalized in a more far-reaching international treaty. Canada can be seen as a “norm leader” in this respect, with its leadership in the Ottawa Process, supporting NGO advocacy, petitioning states to sign the treaty and pushing the issue at the UN (ibid). As such, Canada can be said to have played a part in the “norm cascade” where an increasing number of states began to support the treaty (Finnemore and Sik-

kink 1998, p. 902). Canada took part in “international socialization” through the Ottawa Process, where “norm breakers” were induced to become “norm followers”(ibid). Isomorphic processes are involved in this international socialization. In particular, coercive isomorphism, characterized by formal and informal pressures to have one state resemble other states, can be seen through the exercise of diplomatic praise and censure by Canada in promoting the land mine ban to other states.

According to sociological institutionalism, a norm is internalized when it becomes “taken-for-granted”, in that actors conform to a norm unquestioningly (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 904). This cannot be said for the norm on land mines. To date, 39 states are still not party to the treaty (ICBL 2010). Moreover, some skepticism has been expressed by developing countries, which see the land mine ban as a “western” backed norm (Howard and Neufeldt 2000, p. 19). This implies that at the present time the norm is far from being taken-for-granted, normalized, or taken as ‘fact’.

“Soft power” and national identity

For Canada, promotion of human security contributed to a particular identity that it wanted to foster. According to Axworthy, such policies constituted an “internationalist vocation...provid[ing] Canadians with something enormously valuable: it contributed to a uniquely Canadian identity and a sense of Canada’s place in the world” (Axworthy 1997, p. 185). In addition to this internationalist orientation, Axworthy listed other characteristics that Canada had to live up to: democratic values, openness, a reputation as an “honest broker” or “helpful fixer”, skills at networking, and a willingness to work with civil society groups (p. 193). As such, not only did the *content* of Canada’s human security policy align with its perceived identity, but also the *way in which it promoted* human security.

Axworthy further elaborated on this idea in his 1998 *International Journal* article entitled “A ban for all seasons: The landmines convention and its implications for Canadian diplomacy”. In the article, Axworthy described how the promotion of the land mine ban, through the Ottawa Process, was a clear exercise of what international relations scholar, Joseph Nye, terms “soft power”:

Soft power [...] refer[s] to the power to co-opt, rather than to coerce, others to your agenda and goals. In this context, traditional military and economic might, while still important, do not have the overwhelming pre-eminence they once did. Skills in communication, negotiating, mobilizing opinion within multilateral bodies, and promoting international initiatives are increasingly effective ways to achieve international outcomes (Axworthy and Taylor 1998, p. 192).

As such, smaller states as well as non-state actors can play a greater role internationally, while lacking in measures of conventional hard power, such as military or economic might. However, Axworthy clarifies that soft power is

only useful in addressing certain international problems “that do not pit one state against another, but rather a group of states against various transnational challenges” (ibid). In these instances, where there is “mutual benefit in finding a solution”, soft power and its proclivity towards coalition-building will be most useful (ibid).

Soft power, which involves coercive isomorphism mentioned previously, is described not simply as a process “that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 149) due to cultural expectations or legitimacy, but also as a *tool* to achieve certain outcomes. Axworthy describes coalition-building and multilateralism also in terms of its functional usage – it is necessary for states to work together, and to be able to work together effectively, they must become ‘like-minded’ and advance the same goals in the same ways. Again, we see an illustration of how sociological institutionalism, while espousing that states primarily act according to logics of appropriateness, also find that some of these appropriate rules themselves are also the most efficient.

A Critical Engagement with Policy: Constructivist Institutionalism

In contrast to sociological institutionalism, constructivist institutionalism does not assume that the institutional context alone can explain an actor’s behaviour, but rather argues that the context itself is contingent, “the subject and focus of political struggle” (p. 64). As such, the institutions that result do not prevail simply because they are the most functional, or appropriate, but because they represent the triumph of a particular social force in a political struggle. The following analysis will engage with the sociological institutionalism approach to Canadian human security, in an attempt to address possible loopholes, silences or weakness in sociological institutionalism, and to demonstrate the added value of constructivist institutionalism.

A critical look at “human security” as a concept

As described by the UNDP and Canada, human security is a paradigm change in thinking about security, moving from the state as the referent of security to the individual. Canada describes that a decline in inter-state military threats with the end of the Cold War did not translate to a decline in other threats to individual life and well-being, and as such, new tools and a new conceptualization of security was needed (Axworthy 1997, p. 183). In the sociological institutionalist framework, this paradigm change is due possibly to the old traditional security paradigm reaching a “critical juncture”, where existing institutions and rules of behaviour are challenged or discredited (March and

Olsen 1996, p. 256). In its place, new institutions and rules emerge that are presumed to be more adequate for the change in circumstance.

However, constructivist institutionalism argues that this account of change is not sufficient in explaining why the change occurred. This ideational paradigm change is attributed to an exogenous shock (the end of the Cold War), rendering current ideas and institutions less useful. However, it does not by itself explain why this particular shock (and not others) prompted a reconceptualization of security. Moreover, constructivist institutionalism challenges the ideas that new institutions and rules emerge simply because they are more functional or adequate for the circumstance. As such, the approach refutes that context can predict behaviour, and instead proposes that it is through “the intended and unintended consequences of political agency” that change occurs (Hay 2006a, p. 61).

What is the implication for thinking about change in this way? While a shift of focus from traditional security to human security may be framed as the *inevitable* consequence of a changed international setting, it is actually *contingent* upon a particular actor’s perception of the changes happening in the international realm, and the tools needed to address it. As such, it was not the end of the Cold War itself, nor the increase of inter-state conflict that prompted a change from traditional to human security, but rather the *perception* and *interpretation* of these events as necessitating a change in thinking about security. Change occurs through political struggle, and it is this particular interpretation that has reigned.

Constructivist institutionalism contests the assumption that ideas, preferences or interests are necessary, natural, universal or exogenous (Hay 2006b, p. 11). In what ways is the concept of human security framed as necessary, natural and universal? Take for example the unit of analysis in human security. Security is conceptualized as residing most importantly with the individual, and often this is juxtaposed with security for the state. In this sense security is only conceived in two ways – of the state or the individual. However, it is not inevitable that security can only be constructed with these two units in mind, and this interpretation may be representative of a *particularistic* cultural view: “local constructions of security [can] differ from what is commonly assumed in Western-centric [international security studies]... it cannot, for instance, be assumed that the objective of security is to ensure the survival of either the individual or the state” (Buzan and Hansen 2009, p. 202). Indeed, units such as families, clans or ethnic groups would challenge the idea that survival of the individual (or the state) is always paramount (*ibid*). Using this example, human security is far from universal but rather one that may be more reflective of a Western orientation.

Moreover, the conceptualization of what constitutes a “threat” is treated as universal. The UNDP accounts for several areas of human security, including economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security (*ibid*). Do these criteria cover all the multitude of ways that an individual can feel insecure? Indeed, critics highlight the ways in which this conceptualization does not cover all the threats it purports to, with some notable absences:

UNDP's founding formulation articulates a much less conflictual relationship between the West and the South, and between regimes and citizens, and hence offers less of a systematic critique of the global economic structure [...] These absences – criticism of the state and the Neoliberal economic order – are perhaps not too surprising considering the document's status as a UNDP text which by its very nature and institutional location has to be acceptable to states (Buzan and Hansen 2009, p. 203-4)

A critical look at "human security" as a policy

Canada's adoption of human security into policy committed many of the same assumptions mentioned above, with the Canadian government often framing its actions as functional, necessary, and natural. To demonstrate, recall how the UNDP defined human security. In general, to have human security is to have both "freedom from fear and freedom from want" (UNDP 1994, p. 24). However, the Canadian approach to human security was a distinctive focus on issues of "freedom from fear":

For Canada, human security means freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, safety or lives [...] Through its foreign policy, Canada has chosen to focus its human security agenda on promoting safety for people by protecting them from threats of violence. We have chosen this focus because we believe this is where the concept of human security has the greatest value added – where it complements existing international agendas already focused on promoting national security, human rights and human development (DFAIT 2000, p. 3).

Canada had explicitly left out human development elements ("freedom from want") from the human security concept. Why did Canada narrow the conception of human security? DFAIT defended its narrowed policy on grounds of applicability and feasibility – it is in the area of "freedom from fear" that Canada believed it had the most value to add (ibid). As explored above, constructivist institutionalism, action or behaviour that is justified for 'feasibility' or functionalist reasons is not taken at face value. This is because constructivist institutionalists do not presume that behaviour, "desires, preferences, and motivations are not a contextually given fact – a reflection of material or even social circumstance – but are irredeemably ideational, reflecting a normative (indeed moral, ethical, and political) orientation" (Hay 2006a, p. 63/4). As described above, no action is simply *necessary*, but rather is *contingent* and therefore always political. Canada defended its narrowed human security agenda to "freedom from fear" using necessitarian logic for an inherently political decision. Such necessitarian logic, which framed this narrowed agenda as the only alternative, served to silence opposition or alternative ways of operationalizing human security policy. It limited the scope of policy alternatives to only those that were deemed "feasible" or "possible", but did not question who or what decides what is feasible or possible.

Indeed, critics say that such approaches can be used to obscure other, more effective motivations. What are some examples of these non-functional motivations? Similar to the UNDPs “silences” regarding human security described above, Canada’s silence on “freedom from want” in its own policies may serve to skirt the issue of an unequal global economic system from which it, as a wealthy industrialized country, benefits. A “freedom from fear” agenda only addresses “the worst manifestations of human insecurity, while neglecting a deeper analysis of both their links to structures of inequality, and Canadians’ own complicity (as a government and as a society) in those structures – notably through neo-liberal trade and development policies [Canadians] propagate” (Black 2006, p. 62). As such, a focus on “high-level, reformist processes of normative and institutional politics” perhaps only creates an *illusion* of change while not altering underlying power structures, “thereby deflecting and demobilizing sources of potent and justified dissent” (ibid).

Moreover, Elizabeth Blackwood argues “Canada’s almost exclusive emphasis on protection from physical violence serves to preclude consideration of the political economy of the violence” (Blackwood 2006, p. 87). Blackwood argues that in doing so, the protection of civilians from violence is treated as if it is isolated from issues of “poverty, economic marginalization, distribution of wealth and resources, and equality” (ibid). In her analysis, she cites examples such as the operations of Canadian energy firm Talisman Energy Inc. in Sudan, and the Canadian government’s reluctance to regulate overseas operations of its private companies, despite their involvement with governments that were named for violence against civilians.

Implications for thinking about power

Framing ideas and preferences as natural, inevitable, necessary and universal is, for constructivist institutionalists, an exercise of power. For this approach, power is considered to be about “context-shaping, about the capacity of actors to redefine the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others” (Hay 1997, p. 51). All the examples given above are examples where power is exercised. Indeed, when considering the logics of appropriateness, great power lies in defining *what* is appropriate, and identifying legitimacy as a desired goal for states. These are cognitive filters, through which actors define “what is feasible, legitimate, possible and desirable” (Hay 2006b, p. 8).

For constructivist institutionalists, the short-coming of sociological institutionalism lies in its inability to engage with how standards of “feasibility”, “legitimacy”, “possibility” and “desirability” are constructed. As such, sociological institutionalist approaches appear technocratic, as they are primarily concerned with the processes of norm creation and diffusion, and less so on norm emergence or post-formation change. By comparison, constructivist institutionalism offers a more power-sensitive approach, in its attempts to explore “path-shaping” dynamics, whereby institutions, and even the attendant logics they employ, are recast and redesigned (Hay 2006a, p. 61).

However, not all exercises of power explored here are necessarily “bad” in a normative sense. A point of clarification needs to be made to differentiate between analytical and normative approaches regarding the analysis of power. Analytical approaches are concerned with the “identification of power within social and political contexts”, while normative approaches offer a “critique of the distribution and exercise of power thus identified” (Hay 1997, p. 45). As such, the approach of this analysis is intended to be an analytical one, and not normative as described above. The ability to shape, influence and design preferences (and thus, the ways individuals see the world) is an exercise of power, but is not in and of itself a negative thing. Indeed, it is not always negative for an actor to have an effect on another actor in this way.

What is important, according to constructivist institutionalists, is the recognition that what is socially, politically and economically possible may be circumscribed, not by material restrictions, but ideational limitations imposed and created by actors. These limitations are seen in: making political decisions appear technical; rendering the contingent, necessary; the subjective, objective; the contested, natural. Such recognition can add a deeper understanding of the context of policy-making, and enhance policy analysis.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, sociological institutionalism addresses significant gaps within rational choice approaches, in its account of how norms, rules, identity and culture affect political behaviour. However, it is not a panacea for political analysis. Due to its reliance on the logics of appropriateness as its underlying assumption, it predicts equilibrium, which for constructivist institutionalists means that it is unable to account for complex post-formation change caused by the “intended and unintended consequences of political agency” (Hay 2006a, p. 61).

By not considering political agency, constructivist institutionalists argue that one cannot account for institutional change, to ask questions of why institutions look the way that they do, who created them and for what purpose. As such, institutions are taken as given, seen as exogenous templates that guide behaviour.

The implication of this is significant. By not recognizing the dialectical role of agents as institutional subjects and architects, of shaping institutions and being shaped by them, sociological institutionalism is unable to account for power. In particular, power as expressed in the ability to shape institutional context and the cognitive frames through which actors are able to define what is possible, feasible and desirable. In not addressing how these frames themselves are constructed, and thus can be altered, the implication is that all social, political and economic behaviour remains ideationally constrained when it is not necessary for it to be so.

Thus, sociological institutionalism can limit the way that we conduct political and policy analysis thereby limiting how we are able to conceive of the world around us and the possibilities for both micro- and macro-level change.

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Endnotes

¹ See Appendix: Origins of Institutional Analysis for further elaboration.

² For an example of the rationality of norm following, see Elinor Ostrom (1991, 1992) and her studies on self-governance.

³ Michael D. Cohen, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1972) further explore such “imperfect” processes of institutional change in their work “A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice”. Providing an overview of what they term “organizational anarchies”, Cohen, March and Olsen argue that “to understand processes within organizations, one can view a choice opportunity as a garbage can into which various kinds of problems and solutions are dumped by participants as they are generated” (1972, p. 2). Within this view, one can interpret how change is seemingly random, however policy options still remain within a defined parameter or repertoire of choices “inside” the garbage can.

⁴ It should be noted that Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and Finnemore (1999) use the term “constructivism” synonymously with “sociological institutionalism” to emphasize the role of social construction of preferences, norms and identities in their approach. However, for the purposes of this study, the term “constructivist” will be used only in reference to “constructivist institutionalism”, which is divergent from sociological institutionalism in its approach to social construction and other tenets. It should also be highlighted that in other works, the terms “ideational” and “discursive” have also been used interchangeably with “constructivist institutionalism” (Hay 2006b, p. 1).

⁵ This assessment can also be made of Finnemore and Sikkink’s attempt to categorize what types of norms become successful. For example, norms that make universalistic claims and have transnational resonance (such as reducing bodily harm) are claimed to be inherently more successful at diffusion (p. 906-8). However, there is no discussion of how ‘universalism’ and ‘transnational applicability’ are themselves norms, where they came from, and why they are seen as successful.

