

Workshop: Studying Micro-Practices in (International) Institutions: Chances and Limitations of Theory-Building

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Place: Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research (University of Duisburg-Essen) in Duisburg (Germany)

The Centre will cover travel expenses and arrange accommodation.

Concept Note

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What constitutes international institutions? What is their fabric, how do they operate, and how are they socially constructed? While different disciplines have grappled with these questions and offer theories of different range to account for the social characteristics and operations of international institutions, organisations and their actors, many of these theories are fraught with conceptual premises and prior assumptions that may or may not correspond to empirical observations. Particularly International Relations have made sense of international institutions by relying on large-scale theories that translate assumptions about global order to the institutional settings of international organisations.

But what if we attempt to reconceive of world order and international institutions from the perspective of micro-analysis? Can we theorise this macro-order as both a product of and being endogenous to micro-situations? Vice versa, what is the reach of micro-analytic observations and ethnographic approaches vis-à-vis phenomena we consider to be situated on the macro-level? These questions can – and should – be posed from an interdisciplinary vantage point. This workshop brings together a multi-disciplinary set of tools, ideas and research-practices in order to inquire into institutional micro-practices and to reflect on the potentials and limits of abstraction from ethnographic or linguistic observations.

This endeavor entails asking for the methods, heuristics and tools to pursue such a project of theory-building, building on the experiences of researchers from different traditions in the social sciences and the humanities. The workshop brings into conversation sociologists and cultural anthropologists with a tradition in examining micro-situations (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Kalthoff, Hirschauer, and Lindemann 2008) and scholars from International Relations who have become interested in researching international institutions from a micro-perspective (Holzscheiter 2010; Neumann 2013; Bueger and Gadinger 2014).

International Institutions in International Relations

The world seen from the perspective of International Relations scholars is a world of states which can be understood by turning to theories with a decided focus on macro phenomena.

Anarchy, hegemony and the balance-of-power structure the way states act, including their strategies and practices in fora of international institutions and organisations. Based on assumptions that see international organisations as derivatives of states' interests, IR scholars have mostly dealt with the (lacking) output of international organisations, but much less with their social role in international society. Since the diagnosis by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986) that IR dealt too little with the epistemological challenges of studying regimes in their informal, social practices while focusing only on the formalised structures of international organisations, IR has indeed taken a turn to what are commonly called 'sociological approaches'. Yet, it overall remains wedded to macro-theories.

With the introduction to the neo-institutionalist idea of organisations as world cultural models (Meyer et al. 1997) and the normative institutionalist idea of 'logics of appropriateness' and 'logic of arguing' (March and Olsen 1989, Risse 2000), IR allowed for engaging with organisations and institutions in their internal operations, but often, though, turning to sociological accounts of international institutions also comes with different conceptual baggage that pre-structures analyses in a way that seems similar to relying on the grand theories of IR.

More recently, work on international organisations has produced such perspectives as principal-agent approaches (Siebenhüner 2008), notions of an empowered bureaucracy (Barnett/Finnemore 2004) or the identification of hypocrisy traps (Weaver 2006) – which reflect different theoretical premises, ranging from methodological individualism to Weberian forms of authority. However, most of the afore-mentioned analyses are still more concerned with the consequences of these processes for the performance of international organisations than their social reproduction. Or to put it differently, even in their scrupulous empirical analyses of intra-organisational practices many scholars adhere to the powerful paradigms of IR, e.g. the dominant role of states or motive-based action, and do not challenge prevalent ontological assumptions nor opt for inductive reasoning.

By putting theoretical concepts of discourse, practice, and narrative into empirical research scholars of international organisations have developed more sophisticated understandings of intra-organisational processes. We observe an emerging and indeed exciting body of literature that follows actors into their field of expertise witnessing United Nations conferences (Campbell et al 2014), the trajectory of conventions (Holzscheiter 2010), diplomats at various sites (Neumann 2013), knowledge production in inter- and transnational organizations (Esguerra 2014, Bueger 2015) or engages with the various linguistic representations of international institutionalised arenas (Groth 2012; Freistein 2013, 2015). One of the main challenges remains in the lack of methodological instruments suited to bridge the gap between observing micro-practices and accounting for them in generalisations beyond established theories.

Beyond IR: Traditions in the Social Sciences and Humanities

Quite the opposite seems to be true for other disciplinary traditions in the social sciences and the humanities. From early on, publications such as sociologist Peter Blau's *"Dynamics of Bureaucracy"* (1955) or Laura Nader's *"Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up"* (1965) have argued for qualitative methods to approach institutions in modern societies. Concentrating on the micro and meso aspects in institutionalised settings, a significant body of research engages with everyday life in institutions, focusing on how actors make sense of the workings of organisations, how habitualised practices feature in processes and how meaning is negotiated. Increasingly, in a turn towards the role that international organisations and

institutions play in global processes, the “Anthropology of Policy” has produced detailed ethnographic studies on modi of negotiation, the construction of global frameworks or the interplay between texts and programmes as products of international organisations and their interpretation and use in contextualized settings. Sociologists, anthropologists and others have in the process made convincing arguments about the advantages of “thick descriptions” (Geertz), ethnographic and grounded theory approaches as well as in-depth analyses of mundane processes (Shore/Wright 1997, 2011), slowly influencing IR scholars in their dealings with international institutions.

Yet, while IR may be committed to identify large and generalisable patterns of behaviour, striving to compare cases and test heuristics, studies from anthropology, sociology as well as other disciplines have demonstrated that a sense for the intricacies of seemingly insignificant smaller practices in organisations has the potential to produce deeper insights into their workings. Communicative conventions and strategies, “worklore”, professional attire, the structuring of time, professional background of actors, modes of employment, the handling of documents and architectural factors – a range of ethnographies has demonstrated that these aspects are vital for an understanding of international institutions and their implications for broader sociocultural processes. Moreover, they can shape process and outcome of international institutions significantly (Gupta 2012, Hull 2012).

The Workshop: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue

What this body of research from different disciplines has in common is, we argue, an interest in the social reproduction of institutions and, methodologically, a commitment to a *theoretical empiricism* (Kalthoff, Hirschauer, and Lindemann 2008): It gives primacy to contextualised micro-situations as they unfold in their empirical complexity without imputing grand theories. At the same time, however, in order to link up to previous research and to stay relevant in their respective disciplines, they aim at constructing patterns, regularities, and forms of generalisation – in short, they produce theories of world order at different scale. What we can identify as a research-practical challenge is the question how to arrive at generalisations, how to abstract and how to generate theories or theoretical assumptions from the observation of micro-practices.

Against this backdrop, we will try to bring together scholars from the social sciences and humanities who have studied (international) institutions from an interpretive perspective to engender an interdisciplinary dialogue. Our common aim is to reflect on the chances and challenges of building theories based on micro-analysis. Participants are invited to introduce their assumptions and theoretical heuristics when practicing empirical research and theorising their work.

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