

# Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach

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For many years, the study of foreign policy analysis (FPA) has been a kind of free-floating enterprise, logically unconnected to the main theories of international relations (IR). Sometimes, it has been subsumed under the liberal or pluralist sections of textbooks, and at other times placed within a discussion of realism. But the logical connections to both of these paradigms were always strained. The appeal of FPA approaches has also waxed and waned over the years, in part because these approaches do not appear to “fit” anywhere within the framework of the larger debates going on in IR. This article suggests that a dialogue with social constructivism provides the most logical base from which to launch a revitalized approach to FPA, especially the cognitive psychological approach to the study of foreign policy. If the FPA agenda is to be reinvigorated and taken more seriously outside the subfield itself, this article suggests, it must hitch its wagon to some of the critical substantive debates going on in IR theory today. Indeed, there are already some signs that the cognitive approach to FPA in particular is increasingly being associated with this larger body of theory.

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## A Theory Without a Home?

For many years, the study of foreign policy analysis (FPA) has been a kind of free-floating enterprise, logically unconnected to, and disconnected from, the main theories of international relations (IR). One notices this practice immediately when one peruses a sampling of undergraduate textbooks covering the topic of IR. Sometimes, FPA has been subsumed under the “liberal” sections of textbooks; Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi, for instance, bundle it together with interdependence theory, an intellectually suspect move but one made presumably for pedagogical reasons (Viotti and Kauppi 1999:199–225). At other times, FPA is placed rather uneasily within a discussion of realism and treated as a more “realistic” form of realism, but as Brian White notes, there is “no necessary connection” between the two (White 1999:42).

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The logical connections to both the realist and liberal paradigms were always strained. The insights of the original FPA scholars were undoubtedly intended originally as a corrective to some of the assumptions of the realist paradigm, most notably the rational actor assumption, whose economic assumptions sit ill at ease with the more empirically driven, psychologically derived insights of FPA. One can treat the classic work of Robert Jervis and Graham Allison as amendments to realism—*anomalies eating away at the realist paradigm*—but if so, the anomalies have evidently mounted to the point where the original edifice is imploding; FPA arguably runs against the whole thrust of realism, both in its classical and structural versions. Morgenthau's notion of an unchanging human nature, derived from conservative political philosophy—the *animus dommandi*—sits very oddly with the more nuanced appreciation of human beings that cognitive and social psychology bring to the study of FPA. Moreover, the systemic-level focus of neorealism self-consciously rejects what Kenneth Waltz calls the kind of “unit level” analysis which the stock in trade of FPA.

As Brian Ripley (1993) has noted in articulating the “core” of the FPA research program, the assumptions of FPA counter those of neorealism at almost every turn. For neorealists, states are the primary actors, while for FPA scholars it is foreign policy elites; for neorealists, states act on the basis of the rational calculation of self-interests, while in FPA elites act on the basis of their “definition of the situation”; foreign policy for the realist is best understood as the endless search for security in an anarchical world, while for the FPA scholar it is seen as a series of problem-solving tasks; power is the currency of IR for the neorealist, while in FPA it is information; the anarchical structure of the international system determines the state's behavior in neorealism, while that system is merely an arena for action in FPA; and policy prescriptions for the neorealist involve adapting to structures rationally, while compensating for misperception and organizational pathologies is the prescription offered by FPA.

If it is odd that FPA is sometimes seen as no more than an addendum or footnote to realism, its association with liberalism is equally strange. Chris Brown notes that “a vaguely liberal account of the state as a problem solver exists in the background of a great deal of foreign policy analysis,” but beyond this he offers no strong reason for associating it with any of the “grand theories” of IR (Brown 2001:75). The unit-level focus of FPA certainly makes for a poor fit with the systemically driven arguments of scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, especially since the former emerged in his neoliberal reincarnation. As with neorealism, the thrust of interdependence theory is surely that all states behave in similar ways to the structural changes it posits; otherwise, the choice of the systemic level of analysis makes little sense. Equally, the societal-level image of “democratic peace” theory leapfrogs over much of FPA, ignoring what goes on inside states other than regime type. While there is no reason that these theories cannot be combined, the connection is far from obvious. Viotti and Kauppi, as noted above, throw decision-making approaches together with a variety of perspectives of different stripes and call the resulting approach “pluralism,” but the result is really no more than a hodgepodge of antirealisms as opposed to a coherent approach in its own right; one suspects, moreover, that the decision-making perspective has been placed in this category for want of anywhere better to put it. In this sense, FPA is a theory “without a home”; while it is in another sense “its own home,” I use the former phrase here to indicate that it is not being taken sufficiently seriously in established IR textbooks or the wider discipline. It is a theory “without a chapter” in many cases, or gets tacked on as an afterthought.<sup>1</sup>

The appeal of foreign policy approaches has also waxed and waned over the years. The 1970s, the early 1980s, and the early 1990s represented particular hey

<sup>1</sup> The author owes the observation about FPA being “its own home” to an anonymous reviewer.

days, which seem to alternate with slumps in interest. Why does this happen? Circumstances both external and internal to the discipline seem to play some role. In part, this waxing and waning must be connected to the way in which particular historical events (such as the end of the Cold War) increase or decrease the appeal of bureaucratic- or psychological-level insights. Some part of the answer must also be related to academic fashions largely internal to the discipline itself, such as the rise of both structuralism and rational choice during the 1980s and 1990s and the metatheoretical debates of recent years.

This article contends, however, that there is also a deeper reason for FPA's persistent "minority status" within IR: it has not fully engaged with the rest of the discipline, and does not appear to fit anywhere within the framework of the contemporary debates going on in IR. FPA remains a body of microtheories logically unanchored in any extant theory of IR. This lack of an anchor represents both an asset and a weakness. It is a strength in the sense that its lack of a permanent home allows it to weather the fads and fashions that sweep IR from time to time, but it is a weakness in the sense that—despite its evident potential—it has never become transformed into a recognized theory of IR *itself*, and hence has never been taken as seriously as its topic matter suggests ought to be the case. As Brian White has suggested, "these are testing times for foreign policy analysts. At issue is whether their area of study remains a major subfield of IR or whether it has become anachronistic . . . recent commentaries suggest that something of a crisis point has been reached" (White 1999:37). Similarly, Walter Carlsnaes notes that the practice "has to a considerable degree become one of eclecticism and defensiveness within a larger scholarly milieu which, on the whole, is not especially engaged with the issues at the head of the agenda of foreign policy analysis" (Carlsnaes 2002:331).<sup>2</sup>

These criticisms may go too far, and gloomy prognoses have been common in the subfield.<sup>3</sup> What some see as a "crisis" is perhaps more imagined than real, and there are several encouraging signs that foreign policy is increasingly being taken more seriously; the recent establishment of this journal, which fills a long-standing publication gap in the field, is one of these. Nevertheless, I shall argue here that the tendency of much recent theoretical and empirical work to ignore FPA derives in part from a general failure on our part to engage adequately the broader domain of IR theory. There are no doubt different ways of addressing this problem, but in what follows I will propose that social constructivism in particular—as an umbrella of perspectives that share much in common with FPA—provides a logical base from which to mount such a renewed engagement. While scholars like Alexander Wendt offer a structural form of constructivism that may seem as antithetical to FPA as Waltz's work, FPA is compatible with his and many other forms of constructivism, not least as it may be used to complement more structure-oriented versions that lack a convincing account of agency (Reus-Smit 2001:220). If the FPA agenda is to be reinvigorated and taken more seriously by scholars working in other fields, this article suggests, it must hitch its wagon to some of the critical substantive or ontological debates going on in IR theory today. Indeed, we shall suggest that there are already some signs that the cognitive approach to foreign policy analysis (CFPA) in particular is increasingly being associated with one particularly prominent approach today: social constructivism.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For other prominent surveys of the state of the subfield, see for Hudson and Vore (1995) and Hudson (2005).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that the author is himself a practitioner of FPA whose intention is not to criticize FPA, but to suggest ways in which the subfield might be taken more seriously by those who do not practice it.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "CFPA" here not to introduce another acronym for its own sake, but to distinguish it from the broader field of foreign policy analysis (FPA). The latter of course includes the former, but "FPA" as the term is used here includes a whole range of well-known organizational, bureaucratic, and group-based approaches, as well as perspectives focusing on societal-level factors such as culture and electoral politics.

It is worth emphasizing here that the argument as it develops applies largely to the cognitive or psychological approach to FPA (CFPA), with which the links to constructivism, we shall suggest, are the strongest.<sup>5</sup> This is an unabashedly “American” approach to studying foreign policy, but it is not my intention to suggest that other branches of FPA—the bureaucratic politics approach, groupthink, domestic political explanations, Moravcsik’s liberalism, the various forms of nonstructural realism, and so on—are somehow less worthy of attention; my purpose is, rather, to suggest that approaches that emphasize the manner in which reality is *constructed* are natural bedfellows, even though as we shall see social construction and its individual counterpart clearly operate at different levels of analysis.

The argument presented here shares much in common with that of Vendulka Kubalkova, who notes that the highly artificial “FP/IP split” that occurred in the 1950s—when scholars of foreign policy and international politics went their separate ways—made (and makes) little sense. She suggests that while constructivists disagree with the way in which FPA traditionally downplays the importance of structure, they “applaud the tendency of FPA to look for the agent—the foreign-policy decision maker—wherever he or she might be found. The active mode of foreign policy expressed even in the term ‘making’ also resonates with the constructivists’ stress on processes of social construction” (Kubalkova, 2001:19; see also Hoffmann 2002; Howard 2005; Snyder 2005). The present argument seeks to intensify the linkages between the two camps, and explicitly argues that an enhanced dialogue or even synthesis between the two approaches would be of benefit to constructivism as well as FPA.

We will begin by addressing the question of what social constructivism is, arguing that while it does not form a single unified perspective—it constitutes a general social scientific framework rather than a “theory” as such—it exhibits certain common and distinctive themes that we will briefly describe. The second section goes back to early positivist-inspired work on FPA, which—while it originally attempted to create a “science” of foreign policy—nevertheless preempts some of constructivism’s later emphasis on agents, subjectivity, and the construction of meaning. This work paired a “subjectivist” ontology with a positivist epistemology (Friedman and Starr 1997). The third part will briefly examine the work of three contemporary constructivist scholars who work in the area of foreign policy—Roxanne Doty, Ted Hopf, and Jutta Weldes—arguing that there are very strong commonalities between traditional FPA and these type of arguments that justify either combining the two perspectives or at least enhancing the dialogue between them.

While the similarities between CFPA and constructivism are strong and real, there are at least two potential barriers to such a dialogue. The fourth and final section will examine these two obstacles—one epistemological, the other ontological—suggesting ways in which these might be overcome.

### Whose Constructivism?

As already noted, constructivism is a diverse collection of approaches whose members—while differing markedly over some substantive and epistemological issues—share certain core propositions in common. Various authors have ably summarized the basic assumptions that underlie constructivism in its various forms, although these are so interrelated that we can have a hard time separating them from one another.<sup>6</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying this tradition in a journal where

<sup>5</sup> Neuroscience is becoming increasingly important in the study of FPA, and I also have this approach in mind as well as cognitive approaches like schema theory and analogical reasoning when referring to CFPA. For a recent work in the subfield that uses some of the insights of neuroscience to understand foreign policy behavior, see Hymans (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Some of the most useful surveys include Adler (1997), Kubalkova, Onuf, and Kowert (1998), especially the chapters on “Constructing Constructivism” and “Constructivism: A User’s Manual” Hopf (1998), Finnemore and Sikkink (2001), Price and Reus-Smit (1998), and Ruggie (1998).

most readers will already be familiar with constructivism, it is worth briefly summarizing what I mean by the term. This will also serve the purpose of allowing the reader to observe commonalities with the CFP tradition, which I discuss in the next section.

1. The first proposition is the distinction between “brute” and “institutional” facts (Searle 1995; Brown 2001). Some aspects of our surroundings are naturally given and do not depend upon our ideational beliefs about them. If I play golf in a storm and get hit by lightning, I will be electrocuted whether I believe in the existence of electricity or not. This is a “brute fact.” Other aspects of our surroundings are “social facts,” which do depend for their existence on what we believe about them, and indeed whether we believe in them at all. Money is a classic example of such a social construction, but the key point that constructivists make is that much of the social or political world consists of such institutional facts. Applied to IR theory, notions like anarchy and sovereignty are not “brute facts” or timeless truths about reality at all, but instead constitute social inventions that human beings have fashioned themselves. This “subjectivist” notion of the political world is well captured by Alexander Wendt’s oft-quoted and highly memorable phrase, “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992).
2. Closely allied to this is a strong notion of agency; put simply, human beings matter because it is they who fashion—and have the capacity to change—social reality. This is neatly encapsulated in the title of Nicholas Onuf’s classic constructivist work, *World Of Our Making*.<sup>7</sup> Human beings or agents do not exist in isolation from the structures they create, however. All constructivism shares the assumption that agents and structures are mutually constitutive (*coconstitution*). We ought not to privilege one at the expense of the other, although different constructivists do naturally tend to emphasize one or the other as noted below.
3. A third generally accepted proposition is that, given the first and second recognitions, the “natural world” is very different from the “social world.” We are part of the reality we try to describe and explain, not external to it. This has various consequences. One of the most interesting is that human beings may change their behaviors in response to the publicization of a famous academic theory. When a theory enters the public domain, it sometimes becomes a kind of commonsense folklore; alternatively, a theorist may take a theory into the policymaking world and apply it. Like observer bias in a laboratory, both have the potential to alter the reality a theory is merely intended to describe or explain. Theories may thus become self-fulfilling prophecies.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a specific kind of idea or belief, one that provides its own confirmation; in other words, the belief creates the very behaviors it purports to explain and predict. In Andre Kukla’s term, self-fulfilling theories are *autogenetic*.<sup>8</sup> The sociologist Robert Merton is usually credited with having been the first to coin this notion. As Merton notes:

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a “false” definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come “true.” This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of

<sup>7</sup> See Onuf (1989). Onuf famously introduced the term “constructivism” to international relations.

<sup>8</sup> See Kukla (1994). There is also a more general literature in the field of psychology—especially in the psychology of education—which deals with how expectations affect behavior; see for example Irving Kirsch (1999). For an excellent analysis of self-negating prophecies, see Oren (2006).

error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning. Such are the perversities of social logic.<sup>9</sup>

This definition is probably unduly restrictive, for it suggests that a theory must necessarily be “incorrect” or make claims that are patently false at the outset; a theory may be logically neither correct nor incorrect *a priori*, however, and yet self-fulfilling in the sense that the actors believe in it and so render it “true.” But Merton’s definition still captures the essential nature of the self-fulfilling prophecy; perceptions can be self-creating, and even misperceptions can be proven “correct.”<sup>10</sup> One interesting example applied to the field of IR theory is suggested by the work of Thomas Risse-Kappen, whose argument about the democratic peace illustrates the ways in which academic ideas seep into the policy community and become widely accepted to the point where they effectively shape reality rather than explain it:

If actors of democratic states view each other as predisposed toward peacefulness, the significance of the security dilemma in their interactions is substantially reduced and, therefore, a major obstacle toward stable security cooperation removed. Actors who trust each other start behaving accordingly. They thereby create a peaceful and cooperative order through their interaction processes which reinforces the perception of one’s peaceful intentions. In other words, the presumption that the other is predisposed toward peacefulness leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy if both sides act on this assumption. The “democratic peace” is socially constructed.<sup>11</sup>

4. A fourth shared assumption as already suggested is that ideas in general are critically important, as they construct (*constitute*) both identities and interests—hence the constructivist slogan “ideas matter”—and within this emphasis there is a particular focus on *collective* ideas and norms. As Finnemore and Sikkink note, “the most important ideational factors are widely shared or ‘intersubjective’ beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001:393). The “national interest” is not objectively given, for example, but must be interpreted through the prism of ideas. This point is closely connected to the first one about social construction and institutional facts. Moreover, the importance of ideas is often contrasted with that of material factors. While both neorealism and neoliberalism stress the importance of material forces (such as the possession of military power), constructivists note that material factors alone do not account for outcomes. Las Vegas, for instance, can be viewed in a material sense as a collection of multibillion dollar buildings with bright lights in the middle of a desert, but it would not hold much appeal if this were all it represented to human beings. Las Vegas is fundamentally an idea, and arguably it is the social meanings and images that human beings attach to it (“Sin City,” “Lady Luck,” “Get Rich Quick”) that make it seductive, although the material structures obviously are so designed as to strongly project the desired ideas. It is often said that “Las Vegas isn’t a place, it’s a state of mind,” an observation that captures social constructivism nicely.
5. A fifth shared assumption relates to the importance of identity and can again be related to the previous point. Material forces by themselves have no intrinsic meaning, constructivists stress; their meanings are socially created by human beings and their ideas. The possession of nuclear

<sup>9</sup> Merton (1957:423). This volume reproduces much of Merton’s work, including his original article, “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy” (Merton 1948). This notion also plays a prominent role in the work of Karl Popper, who terms this the “Oedipus effect.” See for instance his *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper 1961).

<sup>10</sup> This is also sometimes known as the “Pygmalion effect” after George Bernard Shaw’s famous play, also made into the film *My Fair Lady*. Professor Higgins’s expectation that he can turn Eliza Doolittle into a “woman of breeding” proves self-fulfilling.

<sup>11</sup> Risse-Kappen (1995:504–305). The same claim had also appeared slightly earlier in Russett (1993:136).

weapons by France or Great Britain has a fundamentally different meaning for most Americans than the possession of such weapons by China, Russia, or Pakistan. Materially, the weapons may be pretty much identical, but British weapons (for instance) are not viewed as threatening due to the identity that Americans have constructed for Britain, while Chinese weapons are. Identical stockpiles of chemical weapons in Paris and Tehran, similarly, are viewed very differently in Washington, DC Identity, in this case and others, helps to construct the meanings we attach to purely material factors. This gives rise to another memorable and frequently heard constructivist slogan, “identity matters.”

So much for the shared assumptions. Beyond these, however, there is considerably less agreement on specifics. What are the key divisions amongst constructivists? As in any research program, these are many, but two are in my view especially important.

1. The first relates to the coconstitution issue raised earlier in commonality 2 above. Many constructivists do in practice tend to privilege either structure or agency over the other. The clearest example is Alexander Wendt’s structural constructivism; here, the argument about structures, agency, and mutual constitution works mostly from structure to agency rather than *vice versa*.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, there are many unit-level forms of constructivism. Peter Katzenstein’s (1996, 1999) analysis of norms in postwar Japan and Germany is generally taken as an example of this. Other versions of constructivism are “holistic” in the sense that they genuinely seem to privilege neither structure nor agency, but as one might expect this is a major fault line within the constructivist camp.
2. A second area of disagreement—equally significant, if not more so—refers to the different ways in which constructivists have reacted to the proposition that the social world is made up of intersubjective processes. Epistemologically, some have argued that studying that world requires a different epistemological approach from that commonly used to comprehend the natural one. While some display a commitment to causal or explanatory theory, others emphasize constitutive theory. This is akin to Hollis and Smith’s well-known distinction between “explanation” and “understanding” in IR.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to popular confusion, many constructivists argue that explanation is possible, although there is a general avoidance of what Price and Reus-Smit call “Big-T claims.”<sup>14</sup> As the notion that there are timeless laws or regularities waiting to be discovered “out there” is abandoned in constructivism, findings are treated as partial and contingent on time and place, and the claim that politics can be ever attain a scientific status is similarly abandoned. As one might expect, postpositivist constructivists contend that one cannot continue to study IR using a positivist epistemology. Here, however, Wendt and Katzenstein are essentially at one; each views a positivist (or scientific realist) version of constructivism as both possible and desirable. Other more radical constructivists (such as Nicholas Onuf and Friedrich Kratochwil) argue that a subjectivist view of IR is incompatible with positivism and that other approaches (such as interpretivism) must be utilized instead. Constructivism requires a special epistemology and methods, they argue, as the natural sciences cannot serve as an appropriate model for the study of politics.

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<sup>12</sup> Reus-Smit (2001:219) makes this point, as have others. There is, however, a debate on this question. Wendt himself claims that he is offering a holistic approach in which agents and structures are mutually determined (see the discussion below).

<sup>13</sup> Hollis and Smith (1990); see also Wendt (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Price and Reus-Smit (1998). This branch of constructivism is often referred to as the “modernists.”

### CFPA: A Measure of Constructivism “Before” Constructivism

Tracing the intellectual sources of a body of theorizing as wide ranging and diverse as constructivism is certainly no straightforward task. Critical theory (broadly defined) is clearly one of these sources. Another is the so-called “English School” or international society perspective, as is continental philosophy in general (Weber, Wittgenstein, and Foucault could be singled out in particular here). What is less often remarked upon are constructivism’s links to CFPA. This is perhaps understandable; the connections are not nearly so obvious, and the research tradition in which CFPA is embedded was (at least at the beginning) very different from many forms of constructivism in an epistemological sense.

Nevertheless, a focus on subjectivity, the construction of meaning and ideational factors—as opposed to supposedly “objective” material structures—was evident in the study of foreign policy decision making from the start, albeit with less emphasis on social factors than modern-day constructivists. As Kubalkova notes, “FPA began in earnest by introducing certain elements that many constructivists and postmodern scholars would later take up” (Kubalkova 2001:27). Similarly, Wendt points out that “constructivist assumptions underlie the phenomenological tradition in the study of foreign policy, starting with the work of Snyder, Bruck and Sapin, and continuing on with Robert Jervis and Ned Lebow” (Wendt 1999:3). Wendt acknowledges the role of these works and their formative influence on the development of constructivism, even though he takes them in an oddly antithetical direction in his own version.

In tracing this influence, Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin’s work is a good place to begin as it set the whole tone of what was to come. Their *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*—originally published in 1954 but sadly little read nowadays—was, and remains, the formative work on this subject (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962). As Valerie Hudson notes in a recently reissued edition of the book, the agent–structure debate and the cultural dimension of foreign policy are but two constructivist-style concerns that emerge in the book, albeit of course using different language (Hudson 2002). Even more significantly from a constructivist perspective, the work of Snyder and his colleagues seems to mark the first recognition within postwar IR of the proposition that interests are constituted by ideas, not somehow objectively “given.”

The central idea in the book is the now well-known concept of the “definition of the situation.” As Richard Snyder notes in his introduction to the 1962 edition, “it is difficult to see how we can account for specific actions and for continuities of policies without trying to discover how their operating environments are perceived by those responsible for choices, how particular situations are structured, what values and norms are applied to certain kinds of problems, what matters are selected for attention, and how their past experience conditions present responses” (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962:5). Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin attempt “the re-creation of the ‘world’ of the decision makers as *they* view it. The manner in which they define situations becomes another way of saying how the state oriented to action and why.” The task is to reconstruct the constructions of foreign policy elites, showing how “of all the phenomena which *might* have been relevant, the actors (the decision makers) finally endow only some with *significance*.”<sup>15</sup> In Steve Smith’s words, “foreign policy is what states make of it” (Smith 2001).

A clear awareness of what we now call the structure/agency problem is also present, although again it is couched in rather different language as one might expect. “We are still confronted by the empirical puzzle of the extent to which an individual policy-maker . . . influences policy outcomes and the extent to which impersonal forces (such as historical movements, ideologies, and governmental systems) also determine actions,” Snyder noted back in 1962. “One suspects that it is not one or the other but both” (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962:7–8). Put in the

<sup>15</sup> Snyder et al. (2002:70). Also quoted in Hudson (2002:4).



terminology of modern-day constructivism, agents and structures are mutually constituted, making it perilous to privilege one over the other. As Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr have noted, this awareness is even clearer in the work of Harold and Margaret Sprout, which first appeared in the late 1950s and also addresses what we now term agent–structure questions (Friedman and Starr 1997:4–5).

As for the cultural dimension of foreign policy and the importance of social identity, Snyder and his colleagues were among the first in modern IR to argue for the necessity of studying these phenomena, although in truth this recognition goes as far back as Harold Lasswell's *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, first published in 1935, and to Max Weber's arguments in the *Methodenstreit* (methodological controversy) of the late nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> In a section headed "socially defined norms and values external to the total decision-making structure and internalized in the decision-maker," Snyder and his colleagues note that the decision maker "enters the government from the larger social system in which he also retains membership. He (*sic*) comes to decision making as a 'culture bearer'. Any conceptual scheme for analyzing state behavior must attempt to account for the impact of cultural patterns on decisions" (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962:156). This dovetails nicely with the conviction of many constructivists that collectively shared or intersubjective norms ought to be the focus of study. Sadly, this dimension of FPA lay largely dormant until the 1990s, since which scholars such as Valerie Hudson have picked this tradition up, partly in reaction perhaps to its prominent role within constructivist theorizing and research (Hudson 1997).

An emphasis on the social construction of meaning is continued in another candidate for the title of "foundational text" in CFPA—Joseph de Rivera's *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*—which first appeared in the late 1960s (de Rivera 1968).<sup>17</sup> De Rivera explicitly discusses the construction of reality in his book. "It is difficult even to intellectually grasp the fact that we construct the reality in which we operate. We take our perception of the world for granted," de Rivera notes. "We know what is real. We live in this reality and act accordingly" (de Rivera 1968:21). Moreover, unlike some later work in the subfield, de Rivera does not neglect the *social* construction of reality in his work:

We have been treating a person's perception of reality as though the person were an isolated individual. It is time that we considered some of the effects engendered by his relations with other persons. . . . A person almost always belongs to at least one group of persons whose opinions he values. He cares what these particular persons think of him, and he tends to see things from their perspective. . . . Since changing his view of reality means losing emotional contact with the group, his beliefs are anchored in what the group perceives as real. (de Rivera 1968:27)

Later on in the book, de Rivera examines how groups can construct realities in different ways and the "clashes of worlds" that result (de Rivera 1968:247–257). This analysis preempts the direction Irving Janis would take with his celebrated work *Groupthink*, which is really a book about how agents collectively construct social reality (Janis 1982). Steve Smith makes a similar point about both Janis and Graham Allison's bureaucratic politics approach, calling each "almost a paradigmatic example of social constructivism" (Smith 2001:53).

Snyder et al.'s work (as well as James Rosenau's later "pre-theory") reflected the earnest hope that—studied carefully and rigorously, and with the appropriate methodological techniques—FPA would one day become a "normal science." As

<sup>16</sup> The author is grateful to Ned Lebow for this point.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Ripley notes that along with Snyder et al., De Rivera and Jervis can also credibly claim the status of "seminal text" in FPDM; see Ripley (1993:405).

Neack, Hey, and Haney put it, this first generation “had as one of its primary goals to move away from noncumulative descriptive case studies and to construct a parsimonious explanation of what drives the foreign policy behavior of states”. Consequently, “many first-generation scholars adopted quantitative, positivist (scientific) models of theory building and methodologies” (Neack, Hey, and Haney 1995:3). There was always a tension here, however. Much of mainstream (behavioralist) political science suggested that behavior should be the focus of study, not the ways in which actors described themselves or their beliefs, and yet actors’ self-descriptions became a major focus of study in the new CFPA approach. Perhaps problematically, if one treats IR as an “objective” science of explanation while simultaneously stressing the ways in which decision makers have access only to subjective and often flawed beliefs, one places oneself on a “higher plane” than the decision makers themselves; in this original positivist form, the approach seemed to suggest simultaneously that decision makers lived in a subjective reality while political science scholars dwelt in an objective one.

Ultimately, of course, the first-generation attempt to turn the study of foreign policy into a science failed. Second-generation analysis has not abandoned the search for a single, unified theory of foreign policy altogether and has certainly not abandoned the search for explanation, but its contemporary methods are a mixture of the neopositivist and the postpositivist. Methodologically, the second generation is far more eclectic than the first, with some scholars continuing to use advanced statistical procedures while others have returned to the more traditional qualitative case study approach. The field today consists of a continuing proliferation of old-fashioned, context- or area-specific case studies and often sophisticated but context- or area-specific statistical analyses (with little or no expectation held out of fashioning a “grand theory” thereby).

The linkages between early CFPA and latter-day constructivism should not be overstated or exaggerated, of course. No sensible analyst would assert that the project in which Snyder et al. were engaged had either the same purpose as, or a similar epistemological inspiration to, most forms of constructivism. Snyder et al. were essentially working within the realist paradigm, and rather than questioning the notion of IR as a “science” as many constructivists do, the authors hopefully embraced it; they treated ideas as “causal” rather than “constitutive,” and they paid more attention to the construction of individual realities than they did to social ones. Moreover, an approach does not become “constructivist” merely because it emphasizes the role of ideas. Goldstein and Keohane’s edited volume, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, provides a case in point. Working within a rationalist perspective, they offer us the weakened claim that idea-based perspectives provide a useful supplement to interest-based ones.<sup>18</sup> But in early CFPA, we see at least the beginning of the idea that states—and the policymakers within states—in a sense “construct” their own realities. My purpose is not to claim that CFPA is a more significant source of modern-day constructivism than, say, critical theory—that would be stretching the argument too far—but to suggest that by the 1950s the work of CFPA scholars, whether they realized it or not, had popularized subjectivism and begun to address the issue of how agents construct reality; my purpose in suggesting this is also to lay the groundwork for the argument that follows.

### **The Basis for a CFPA–Constructivist Collaboration?**

One oft-mentioned criticism of CFPA is that it is supposedly “all agency and no structure”; certainly, as a body of literature it has had relatively little to say about

<sup>18</sup> They reject the utility of psychological approaches to FPA in helping them examine ideas on the grounds that such approaches deal mainly with the roles of ideas in groups and not with ideas “shared by large numbers of people.” See Goldstein and Keohane (1993:6–7).

international or domestic structures, treating them for the most part as empty vessels. Conversely, much of the mainstream constructivist literature seems weighted toward structure.<sup>19</sup> In the work of Alexander Wendt—to take the most prominent example—the argument about agents and structures arguably and privileges the latter. Wendt claims to adopt a holistic approach based on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory in which agents and structures are mutually constituted, but structures still get a good deal more attention than agents, and Wendt rules out of consideration theories of foreign policy that might assist in understanding agent behavior. Even if we treat Wendt's work as atypical of most constructivists—as we might justifiably do—other work in this tradition that also claims to adopt a holistic approach has been similarly criticized for leaving agents out of the picture. Kowert and Legro, for instance, note that most constructivists do not examine the origin of the norms they see as constituting behavior, but agent-based theories such as those offered by CFPA can certainly assist in filling in this missing piece of the puzzle (Kowert and Legro 1996:477–483). On the foreign policy side of the equation, it may be that understanding or explaining foreign policy decisions is particularly unsuited to structural explanations and should correspondingly be weighted toward agency. Nevertheless, actors do not operate in a vacuum, and the cognitive approach to foreign policy is somewhat undertheorized when it comes to structural issues.<sup>20</sup>

The central appeal of a synthesis or increased collaboration between CFPA and constructivism, then, lies in the fact that each is strong where the other is weak. This point extends beyond questions of structure and agency, moreover. Finnemore and Sikkink note that while rational choice and constructivism differ in many obvious ways, they share something important in common: each constitutes “a framework for thinking about the nature of social life and social interaction, but makes no claim about their specific content . . . neither constructivism nor rational choice provides substantive explanations or predictions of political behavior until coupled with a more specific understanding of who the relevant actors are, what they want, and what the content of social structures might be” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001:393). CFPA, and indeed FPA generally, offers various ways of filling in the gaps that constructivism leaves, however.

Interestingly, for all his attention to what he calls “international politics” as opposed to “foreign policy,” even Wendt allows that “a potentially fruitful dialogue between cognitive theories of foreign policy and cultural theories of structure” is possible, given that the former has always maintained that interests are constituted by ideas, not somehow “objectively given” (Wendt 1999:134). Similarly, James Goldgeier and Philip Tetlock note that cognitive science potentially has much to contribute to the constructivist program. “At a foundational level, a cognitive psychological analysis of world politics is compatible with the constructivist program,” they argue. “From a cognitivist point of view, all causal inferences and policy lessons are the product of mental constructions of what could, would or might have happened had a different set of antecedent conditions held or policies been tried” (Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001:83). Like Kowert and Legro, Finnemore and Sikkink also suggest that cognitive psychology could be used to examine the origin of norms and the thinking of what they term “norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:896–899).

There are signs that at least some FPA scholars already see themselves as part of the constructivist camp. One observer, for example, notes that Alexander Wendt “now counts . . . many prominent foreign policy authors among the list of IR con-

<sup>19</sup> See Khong (2002); Reus-Smit (2001) also makes this point forcefully when discussing Wendt's work.

<sup>20</sup> When I refer to “structure” here I am talking about forces operating at the level of the international system. As already noted, FPDM has not neglected other aspects of the structures in which agents work. Apart from the bureaucratic politics and groupthink literatures cited above, see in particular Hudson (1997) and Ripley (1995).

constructivists” (Palan 2000:576). Some avowed constructivists, moreover, already see the two approaches as almost synonymous. Gavan Duffy, for instance, treats one of the leading statements of the CFP approach in recent years—Yuen Khong’s *Analogies At War*—as a constructivist work, describing it as “close to a paradigmatic constructivist account of political agency. I know that others who consider themselves constructivist share this assessment” (Duffy 2001:265). This is rather illogical, as Duffy seems to label *Analogies At War* “constructivist” solely on the basis that it sides with the agency portion of the structure–agency divide. This is rather like accusing Kenneth Waltz of being a Wendtian constructivist on the basis of his all too evident preference for “structure,” and even rational choice theorists might qualify as agent-level constructivists using this definition.<sup>21</sup> Still, while Khong argues convincingly in his reply to Duffy that the latter misunderstood his purpose in writing *Analogies At War* and mischaracterizes his argument, Khong does not actually dispute the label “constructivist” as a description of his work (Khong 2002).

What *does* a constructivist account of foreign policy look like? In common with the nature of constructivism itself, there is no single constructivist account of this topic, but there are a growing number of scholars who study foreign policy from within the constructivist tent. Discussing the foreign policy decision-making perspective, Wendt remarks that “it would be interesting to explore what, if anything, a more self-consciously constructivist approach would add to this approach,” and in fact this project has already begun in the literature (Wendt 1999:371). For reasons of space, we will briefly examine the work of just three such scholars whose work addresses this issue: Roxanne Doty, Ted Hopf, and Jutta Weldes.

Roxanne Doty’s work on the social construction of U.S. foreign policy toward the Philippines is both innovative and interesting (Doty 1993). She notes that most mainstream FPA asks “why-questions” (i.e., they ask why a particular decision was made, for instance). She shifts the focus to what she calls “how-possible questions,” which are constitutive in nature:

Explanations for why-questions are incomplete in an important sense. They generally take as unproblematic the *possibility* that a particular decision or course of action could happen. They presuppose a particular subjectivity (i.e., a mode of being), a background of social/discursive practices and meanings which make possible the practices as well as the social actors themselves. . . . I examine how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others. What is explained is not *why* a particular outcome obtained, but rather *how* the subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible. (Doty 1993:298)

One can note here an interesting overlap with Snyder and his colleagues. Recall that they viewed their objective as being to show how “of all the phenomena which *might* have been relevant, the actors (the decision makers) finally endow only some with *significance*” (Snyder et al. 2002:70). This is essentially a “how-possible” kind of question and it puts us in mind of (for instance) Richard Price’s constructivist account of how the norm or taboo against chemical weapons came to be, contrasted with the way in which other deadly weapons are not subject to the same widespread approbation within the international community (Price 1995).

Doty goes on to critique the cognitive approach to FPA for assuming that an “objective” reality exists, and would probably dispute my contention that her own analysis can be made in some way compatible with mainstream scholarship. Many

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<sup>21</sup> In Duffy’s defense, it might be argued that Khong’s focus on words and language in *Analogies At War* gives it a constructivist flavor in some sense, but he does not use this justification, noting simply that “I chose to consider the work constructivist because it examined seriously the effects of agents on outcomes” (see Duffy 2003:103).

CFPA scholars have certainly adopted (and continue to adopt) a loosely positivist epistemology, albeit with little overt or self-conscious recognition of the fact. Moreover, the notion of an objective reality of some sort is embedded in at least some CFPA theories. It is inherent in Robert Jervis' notion of misperception, for example, for in order to misperceive reality, there must logically be some reality against which the misperception or cognitive error deviates and may be checked (Jervis 1976). However, the assumption that an objective reality exists that we can apprehend in some way is *not* logically necessary to the core of CFPA; at its root, it posits a subjectivist ontology that is compatible with different theories about how we gain knowledge about the world. As already noted, this is also a central division within constructivism, as its advocates cannot agree on a single epistemology with which to pair their substantive views. But the fact that CFPA began with an objectivist epistemology does not, in my view, tie it indefinitely to such an approach, a point I shall return to in the final section.

Ted Hopf is another constructivist whose work touches directly on the concerns of FPA, and his research has gone further than anyone else's in forging links across the two traditions. Hopf's best-known work, *Social Construction of International Politics*, is perhaps the leading constructivist account of identity. Although he berates social psychology for failing to develop useful theories of social identity, Hopf's account is significantly informed by cognitive psychology: "Society is assumed to consist of a social cognitive structure within which operate many discursive formations. Identities constitute these formations. Individuals have many identities; they participate in a variety of discursive formations, and their daily social practices constitute both themselves and Others, and the identities and discursive formations that constitute the cognitive structure in which they live" (Hopf 2002:3-4). For our purposes, one of the most important claims Hopf makes is that identities are like cognitive short cuts or heuristics; they impose some sort of order upon the world. Mainstream CFPA makes much the same assumption about human beings, suggesting that they behave like "cognitive misers" or "naïve scientists."<sup>22</sup> Identities allow us to assign meaning, both to ourselves and others, making the world a more intelligible place; they also provide the basis of interests as in Wendt's theory, but Hopf derives these identities from the domestic level.

Hopf uses this theory of identity to explain Soviet and Russian foreign policy at two different points in time. Beginning with newspapers and books (including novels), he attempts to reconstruct the domestic identities operative in the Soviet Union in 1955 and Russia in 1999. As "every foreign policy decision maker is as much a member of the social cognitive structure that characterizes her society as any average citizen" (Hopf 2002:7), this then gives Hopf a basis from which to reconstruct or infer the foreign policies of the time. Although his work utilizes an interpretivist epistemology and avoids making truth claims that are supposed to represent an objective reality, he nevertheless anchors what he is doing in the language of hypothesis testing, evidence, and variables in a way that speaks to mainstream, positivist scholars, while restricting the extent and generalizability of the claims he is prepared to make for his findings.

A third noted constructivist who examines foreign policy, Jutta Weldes, argues for a revival of the much-criticized concept of the "national interest," although not from the familiar realist standpoint. Like Hopf, she eschews Wendt's structuralism, arguing that identities are constructed by more than systemic or interstate relations:

In contrast to the realist conception of "national interest" as objects that have merely to be discovered, then, my argument is that national interests are social constructions created as meaningful objects out of the intersubjective and culturally established meanings with which the world, particularly the international

<sup>22</sup> See, in particular, Larson (1985) on this point.

system and the place of the state in it, is understood. More specifically, national interest emerges out of the representations—or, to use more customary terminology, out of situation descriptions and problem definitions—through which state officials and others make sense of the world around them.<sup>23</sup>

They do this by identifying objects (including the self and others), posit relations between these objects, and hence shape national interests and identities by defining the world surrounding them. Weldes applies her framework to the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, but unlike many previous analyses of the missile crisis (of which there are of course many in mainstream research), she is mostly interested in answering a “how-possible question”: how the discovery of the missiles in Cuba came to be seen as a threat to the U.S. national interest in the first place. This issue is glossed over by at least some conventional analysts—“surely the reasons are obvious?”, they might reply—but the issue is akin to that posed by Wendt about how material factors have no “objective” meaning independent of the meanings that decision makers attach to them.

Although she arrives at this position via a different route and uses postmodernist language (such as the “security imaginary”), which more conventional foreign policy analysts would probably avoid, Weldes is working on the same page as many scholars of CFP. In their reanalysis of the Cuban missile crisis in *We All Lost The Cold War*, for example, Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein seek to understand how the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba came to be regarded as a crisis.<sup>24</sup> “Kennedy opposed the Soviet missiles for domestic and foreign-policy reasons,” they conclude, and they show that it is really only the traditional account—associated with administration insiders like Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger—which treats the crisis as something “natural” or nonconstructed. A mixture of emotional–psychological and domestic political reasons explain the genesis of the crisis, they argue:

The traditional and revisionist interpretations address only the domestic and foreign-policy costs of accepting Soviet missiles in Cuba. Both interpretations fail to consider the possible costs of doing something to get the missiles out. These costs were very much on the president’s mind.<sup>25</sup>

The similarity between Weldes’ notion of a “constructed national interest” and Snyder et al.’s notion of the “definition of a situation” is readily apparent. Another intriguing similarity is presented when Weldes describes the manner in which policymakers posit relations between defined objects. She notes that these often take the form of “quasi-causal arguments” like the Munich analogy or the domino theory. This closely mirrors the established literature within CFP on analogical reasoning. In the aforementioned *Analogies at War*, for instance, Khong argues that analogies provide decision makers with a variety of diagnostic functions, which provide answers to questions such as “what is happening?” and “how should we respond?” (Khong 1992). The author’s own *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* makes a similar argument about Jimmy Carter and his advisers during the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, while also trying to show that those who seized the embassy operated according to logics similar to those of the U.S. decision makers (Houghton 2001). In constructivist terms, the radical students who occupied the embassy building constructed an identity of the United States as an enemy hell bent upon subordinating Iranian sovereignty to its own will, imagining that the United States must wish to replace the Ayatollah Khomeini and return the Shah to power (the 1953 analogy, a quasi-causal representation in Weldes’ terms).

<sup>23</sup> Weldes (1996:280). See also Weldes (1999).

<sup>24</sup> Lebow and Stein (1994). See in particular chapter 5, pp. 94–109.

<sup>25</sup> Lebow and Stein (1994:109).

Are constructivist foreign policy analysts merely reinventing the wheel, saying the same things that CFPA scholars have said already but in a different language? This may be true in places—hence the need for more dialogue between literatures that sometimes do not speak to one another—but it is also true that significant innovations have been made. Constructivist accounts of foreign policy have established their own identity, albeit in ways that I would argue are largely complementary to mainstream CFPA. Constructivist scholars are examining foreign policy as an exercise in understanding as well as explanation; by and large, their efforts are intended to be explanatory as well as constitutive in nature. Their focus on “how-possible” questions in particular leads to a deeper understanding of phenomena and of the ways in which things come to be the way they are than at least some mainstream research has provided. These approaches are not, moreover, incompatible with traditional “why-questions”; they supplement, or round out, explanations to provide a fuller account, rather than attempting to supplant what CFPA scholars currently do. After all, why *not* ask why?

Where constructivism can most fundamentally add to the understanding of cognitive FPA, perhaps, is in stressing the role of *intersubjective* identities and representations, something that CFPA, with its emphasis on individual decision making, has not traditionally been well-equipped to do. Collective (as opposed to idiosyncratic) beliefs are not generally well-dealt with in most of the CFPA literature.<sup>26</sup> Again, however, this is where constructivism is correspondingly well-equipped to step into the breach. Much constructivism assumes, as we have already noted, that intersubjective ideas are more important than individual or idiosyncratic ones. This is Hopf’s focus in particular, and it arguably adds something valid and useful to our understanding of foreign policy.

One illustration of this is the different ways in which scholars of CFPA and constructivism study the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies. As already noted, this is an important corollary of the notion that theories constitute reality, and as Wendt suggests, “the self-fulfilling prophecy idea can explain a great deal about the production and reproduction of social life” (Wendt 1999:108). From the CFPA perspective, Robert Jervis repeatedly emphasizes the role of the self-fulfilling prophecy as a cognitive pathology in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Jervis 1976). Similarly, Lebow and Stein find that the Cuban missile crisis resulted in large part from self-fulfilling prophecies on both sides:

Soviet officials testified that the American strategic buildup, missile deployment in Turkey and assertions of strategic superiority exacerbated their insecurity. President Kennedy considered all these actions as prudent, defensive measures against Soviet threats, especially in Berlin. Instead of restraining Khrushchev, they convinced him of the need to do more to protect the Soviet Union and Cuba from American military and political challenges. Through their avowedly defensive actions, the leaders of both superpowers made their fears of an acute confrontation self-fulfilling (Lebow and Stein 1994:92).

Constructivists go a step further than most cognitive analysts of foreign policy, however, in turning this perspective inward. When Jervis talks of self-fulfilling prophecies, he mainly has in mind the errors and misperceptions to which decision makers in government are inevitably prey at the individual level. Constructivists and other constitutive theorists, on the other hand, are equally concerned with the manner in which theories originally developed in the academy, once they become widely disseminated through various mechanisms, may become self-fulfilling or autogenetic at the social level through their status as intersubjectively held beliefs;

<sup>26</sup> There are of course some notable exceptions. Apart from Hudson’s work already cited, see for instance the various contribution in Sylvan and Voss (1998), as well as Sylvan, Grove, and Martinson (2005).

again, Risse-Kappen's (1995) account of the democratic peace provides a good example. Constructivists, in other words, spin out the fabric of CFPA to its logical conclusions at the collective level.

### Nothing in Common? Potential Obstacles to Collaboration

While one can make a good *prima facie* case that constructivism and CFPA have much in common, it does not necessarily follow that they are ultimately commensurable with one another or that they can enter into a mutually fruitful dialogue; indeed, attempts to somehow associate the two may be quite misguided. In the spirit of working against my own argument, two main obstacles seem relevant here: one epistemological and the other ontological. I shall try to show that while these *might* stand in the way of meaningful interchange, there is less than meets the eye to each.

First of all, it could be argued that constructivism and CFPA simply do not fit together in an epistemological sense. As Hollis and Smith note, "understanding" and "explanation" stem from such fundamentally different epistemological positions that it is probably impossible to combine them in a single narrative, and to the extent that constructivism is seen as occupying the understanding side of the equation and FPA the explanatory side, integration of the two is certainly a practical impossibility. In his useful characterization of the subfield of foreign policy, for instance, Walter Carlsnaes (2002:336–339) characterizes cognitive psychological approaches as an objectivist position (explanation) and constructivism as interpretivist (understanding).

While this is certainly true as a general categorization and Carlsnaes is certainly correct about general tendencies, neither constructivism nor CFPA (nor FPA as a whole) is an epistemologically unified approach. Constructivists, as we have seen, are deeply split on this issue. While Wendt can be seen as *sui generis*, there are plenty of other "modernist" constructivists who can be seen as "doing explanation" too, even if they do not go as far as Wendt in claiming to be "positivists."<sup>27</sup> So too, to a less visible extent perhaps, is FPA. Characterizing the subfield epistemologically is admittedly a difficult exercise, for with only a few exceptions (Steve Smith, Walter Carlsnaes, and Harvey Starr in particular spring to mind here) most FPA scholars have not traditionally attached much priority to epistemological issues. As a result, its adherents share no clear epistemological identity, and epistemological debates have not featured prominently in the subfield (there is no counterpart in FPA to the voluminous debate about epistemology that has been going on inside constructivism and IR theory generally).<sup>28</sup> It would certainly be useful to have a good survey of the views of members of the subfield along this dimension. As noted already, however, it seems likely that the vast majority of today's FPA scholars have abandoned the strict behavioralism and scientism of the 1950s and 1960s, for the simple reason that there is widespread recognition that this project failed. Although admittedly an impressionistic observation, the subfield today seems to reflect a genuine eclecticism about epistemological issues. Certainly, there are many who still seem to believe that the enterprise will ultimately uncover hidden regularities, and who remain wed to naturalism and objectivism; but as Hollis and Smith note, there are also those for whom FPA was always about understanding rather than explanation. "Understanding proceeds by reconstruction at an individual level," they note, and in FPA "the concern is to understand decisions from the standpoint of the decision makers by reconstructing their reasons."<sup>29</sup> Put simply, many within the CFPA tradition are actually on the same side of the metatheoretical fence as constructivism.

<sup>27</sup> I would categorize Peter Katzenstein, for instance, as falling under this category.

<sup>28</sup> See, however, the work of Walter Carlsnaes, especially Carlsnaes (1992).

<sup>29</sup> Hollis and Smith (1990:74). Similarly, Walter Carlsnaes notes that some approaches to foreign policy analysis fit under this interpretive category. See Carlsnaes (2002:341).



Clearly, the potential for collaboration is the greatest between (a) FPA practitioners who have become increasingly uneasy with positivism (e.g., Steve Smith, Ned Lebow) and interpretivist constructivists, and (b) between neopositivist FPA practitioners and those constructivists who remain committed to explanation. Correspondingly, the potential for collaboration is the least when one is asked to cross the epistemological breach. Like Wendt, Friedman and Starr suggest that a subjectivist ontology is compatible with an objectivist epistemology (Friedman and Starr 1997). Postpositivist constructivists such as Onuf and Kubalkova are unlikely to find such claims persuasive, of course, just as those wedded to positivist-style explanation in the field of FPA may well see no necessity to limit themselves to the interpretive understanding of events, as opposed to the continued search for law-like regularities in an external world.

A second (more ontological) concern probably has more to it, for it has to do with the notion of coconstitution that we have noted is common to all forms of constructivism. Much empirical research within the CFPA tradition finds that agent-centered approaches simply work better than structure-driven ones in accounting for the details of foreign policy decisions (“why-questions,” in Doty’s parlance). The exchange between Yuen Khong and Gavan Duffy brings this out well. Khong convincingly argues that the evidence shows that agency mattered more than structure in shaping the Vietnam escalation decisions of 1965, but Duffy insists that structure and agency matter equally, even on this kind of question. As Kubalkova (2001:19) notes, most constructivists disapprove of the privileging of agency over structure (or *vice versa*), and Duffy takes a similar line. Given the strong bias toward agency in the CFPA literature, however, constructivists need to do a better job of showing *empirically* how coconstitution operates in a foreign policy context. They also need to address the question of whether coconstitution operates with regard to “why-questions” in the same way that it operates on “how-possible” ones. Equally, cognitive scholars of FPA need to pay more attention than they have so far to the ways in which social rules and norms affect decision making. One very preliminary example of how both might be done is suggested in the concluding section.

What most constructivists and FPA scholars already share, among other things, is the conviction that a theory of foreign policy is or can be a theory of IR. FPA can never be a theory of IR, goes the now familiar Waltzian critique, because theories at one level of abstraction can tell us little about phenomena at other levels; one cannot use apples to make orange juice. As Waltz puts it:

True, the theory does not tell us why state X made a certain move last Tuesday. To expect it to do so would be like expecting the theory of universal gravitation to explain the wayward path of a falling leaf. A theory at one level of generality cannot answer questions about matters at a different level of generality. (Waltz 1979:121)

This is a somewhat odd comparison to make, as Sir Isaac Newton is famously reputed to have developed the general theory of gravity from a particular event that occurred at a particular moment in time and space (i.e., at another level of generality) and—to change the scenario slightly as Waltz does with his wayward leaf—we do in fact expect that theory to explain why a particular brand of Golden Delicious fell to the ground when I dropped it last Tuesday.

Consequently, this article shares Vendulka Kubalkova’s (2001) conviction that the highly artificial division between theories of foreign policy and theories of international politics misrepresents the relationship between structures and agents. The neorealist separation of the two makes sense only if one overwhelmingly privileges structure at the expense of agency, arbitrarily deciding that a theory of IR should not explain what states do.<sup>30</sup> Waltz himself violates this “separation” in his

<sup>30</sup> “Like Waltz, I am interested in international politics, not foreign policy,” Wendt insists. See Wendt (1999:11).

own work, however—a telling illustration of how difficult it is to make this distinction—and even some of his own followers dispute Waltz’s position that a theory of IR cannot be used to account for foreign policy outcomes (see Elman 1996). If the latter is true, cannot a “theory of foreign policy” equally well serve as a “theory of international politics”?

For Richard Snyder and his colleagues, Waltz’s separation of the two worlds would have made little sense. Indeed, in *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, Snyder and colleagues called what they were doing a “perspective on international relations” (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962:9) and the subtitle of their book was originally “Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Relations.” In reality, the notion that a theory of IR must be kept separate from a theory of foreign policy is a neorealist myth that makes no sense if structures and agents are assumed to be mutually constituted.

### Benefits of a Dialogue with Constructivism

There is, as a number of observers have already noted, a risk that constructivism is in the process of becoming mere fad or what Chris Brown calls a “bumper sticker,” morphing into a big tent approach of such size and diversity that it loses its distinctiveness. Can everything and anything fit under the description of “constructivism”? Clearly not. According to some critics, many supposedly “constructivist” arguments are merely old or existing theories dressed up in the superficial trappings of the approach. Stefano Guzzini, for instance, suggests that much scholarship calling itself “constructivist” is “often either eclectic or redundant. Eclecticism shows up when constructivism has become a general category out of which many researchers pick and choose their particular version without necessarily looking at the theoretical coherence of the final product. Redundancy applies when a constructivist touch adds some face lift to already existing approaches” (Guzzini 2000:148).

While one can have some sympathy with these critiques, they often betray a “more constructivist than thou” mentality and a desire to close down debate, reserving the term “constructivism” exclusively for what the critic happens to do. Why should constructivism have a single epistemology, methodology, or ontology? Guzzini is surely correct that one is hardly a constructivist simply because one studies ideas, as we noted earlier, and it is difficult indeed to make constructivism compatible with rationalism, as some have sought to do.<sup>31</sup> Some scholars have also adopted the label while not noticeably changing the way they go about studying the world or their substantive conclusions about it,<sup>32</sup> but this is sometimes because the tradition and subfield to which they belong dovetails nicely with constructivism’s overall message (as CFPA does). Many are joining the constructivist fold, but this is surely because its message draws upon a large and disparate variety of traditions—some dissident, some mainstream—whose relevance had not been acknowledged during the years in which realism, neorealism, and then the “neo–neo” synthesis predominated. There is surely room for different tendencies within the constructivist movement, as there is within FPA.

What are the specific benefits, though, of an increased dialogue between constructivism and cognitive FPA? The first, as suggested above, is that (rightly or wrongly) CFPA is often perceived as having no theory of structure and constructivism no theory of agency; while this is surely a caricature, there is an element of truth to it.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this argument could be used to justify a dialogue with (say)

<sup>31</sup> For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Price and Reus-Smit (1998:278).

<sup>32</sup> See Brown (2001:52) on this point. He probably has in mind so-called “middle way” or “modernist” constructivists such as Emanuel Adler and Peter Katzenstein here.

<sup>33</sup> Again, this is far less true of groupthink or the bureaucratic politics approach than it is of the cognitive psychological approach to foreign policy, as the remarks by Steve Smith quoted earlier suggest.

neorealism, so what are the benefits to CFPA of an alliance with constructivism in particular? This leads us to the second, and arguably most significant, benefit. A full appreciation of foreign policy decision making surely requires that we understand both individual construction (cognitive psychological approaches) and collective construction (social construction). Sadly, what we commonly refer to as constructivism most often rules the first out of the equation, while cognitive perspectives very often neglect socially shared norms, ideas, and beliefs. In their approach to constructivist foreign policy, for instance, Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner decide not to integrate the cognitive approach to foreign policy within their constructivist theory of foreign policy, arguing that the former perspectives are “unsatisfactory in that they always raise the question of the social roots of individual beliefs without themselves being able to answer it.”<sup>34</sup> Ruling this out from a theory of foreign policy *a priori* makes little sense, however; whether one focuses on one or the other seems a matter of appropriateness to be judged according to the research issue at hand, rather than something to be adopted or discarded *in toto*. On the other hand, Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner are surely correct to note that “although the proponents of cognitive theories do not dispute the social origins of *individual* beliefs and values, they regard the individual beliefs held by decision makers as exerting an independent influence on foreign policy behavior. More or less explicitly, therefore, individual beliefs of decision makers are ascribed a great deal of autonomy vis-à-vis their social environment.”<sup>35</sup>

Considering a case most of us know intimately—the Cuban missile crisis of 1962—makes it plain how important both forms of constructivism are, as well as the manner in which the choice of one or the other depends on the thing we are trying to explain. If we are interested in why Kennedy and his advisers gave little or no consideration to the option of doing nothing in response to the discovery of missiles in Cuba, for example, beliefs about Cold War Communism and appropriate presidential behavior in response to security threats shared by practically all Americans (social constructivism’s forte) seem so critical that it is difficult to understand how any useful explanation could conceivably leave them out. On the other hand, if we are interested in why Kennedy chose the naval blockade over the “surgical” air strike, society-wide beliefs tell us relatively little and individual constructions a great deal.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, international and domestic norms about hostage taking which most Americans had internalized meant that doing nothing about the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 was never considered an option; simply leaving the hostages to whatever fate befell them was literally “unthinkable.”<sup>37</sup> Social norms pushed and pulled the decision-making process, ruling some options out and others in.

Here lies the beginning of an answer as to how the two approaches might be integrated in particular cases. Social norms are at their strongest in accounting for policy positions that are simply taken for granted across the board, while individual beliefs clearly allow us to differentiate further as we trace the details of the decision-making process. When Lyndon Johnson was advised to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, he reportedly rejected such advice out of hand. We take his reasons for doing so as obvious, but it is worth stating that he was probably responding to both international and domestic norms about the use of nuclear weapons and the anticipated costs of violating these (as we would expect most if not all U.S. presidents to do). The justification for collaboration or “marriage” between individual and social

<sup>34</sup> Boekle, Rittberger, and Wagner (2001:108).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Robert Kennedy’s argument that a surprise air strike was “not in our traditions” could be viewed as a social norm, although it is properly viewed as at least partially idiosyncratic as it was not shared by several members of the ExComm.

<sup>37</sup> For a cognitive explanation of the Iran hostage decision making, see Houghton (2001).

construction is simply that each benefits from restoring the missing piece of the puzzle each leaves out; neither is complete without the other, and neither can fully claim to represent the process of making foreign policy in isolation.

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