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Constructivist methods: a plea and manifesto for pluralism

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Abstract. My aim in this article is to improve the methodology of the modernist constructivist approach and to provide a more coherent, rigid, and systematic constructivist framework for research. I do this by combining the methods of process tracing, discourse analysis, and counterfactuals. In addition, I aim to provide clearer methodological criteria for the evaluation of constructivist research by modifying some of the positivist criteria and adding the criterion of contextual validity. I assert that a more coherent methodology will strengthen and improve constructivist study and may contribute to better communication between constructivist and positivist scholars.

Introduction

The constructivist approach has become more central in International Relations (IR) literature over the past decade, as an increasing number of scholars from various schools of thought refer to its findings. The constructivist school, however, gives only partial attention to methodological issues. It is true that constructivists have rejected positivist methodology and have implemented some systemised research methods, such as discourse analysis and process tracing. But an ordered and consistent methodological framework that coherently combines different methods is very rare in constructivist IR literature, as are methodological criteria to evaluate this research.

My aim in this article is to improve the methodology of the modernist constructivist approach and provide a more coherent, rigid, and systematic constructivist framework for research. I do this by combining the methods of process tracing, discourse analysis, and counterfactuals. In addition, I aim to provide clearer methodological criteria for the evaluation of constructivist research by modifying some of the positivist criteria and adding the criterion of contextual validity. I argue that in spite of the fundamental differences between constructivism and positivism, the former can use certain positivist criteria for research evaluation. However, because of these differences – which stem from the fact that the constructivist school, as part of the post-positivist turn, challenges ontological and epistemological conventions of positivism – scholars must modify positivist methodological criteria and introduce other criteria to establish clear guidelines for constructivist research.

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I assert that a more coherent methodology will strengthen and improve constructivist study and may contribute to better communication between constructivist and positivist scholars.[1] Nevertheless, I emphasise that using rigid methodological criteria does not mean that one must restrict constructivist research to the exploration of causal relationships between variables. Rather, the approach should be systematic, even when exploring more interpretative concepts such as social constructions or the analysis of discourse. I will illustrate these methodological issues through examples from the field of International Security Studies.

This study has four parts. In the first, I briefly discuss the main characteristics of constructivist research and their methodological implications. In the second and the third parts, I explain and illustrate the possibility of systemically combining the methods of process tracing, discourse analysis, and the use of counterfactuals, and I suggest a research design to this end. In the fourth part, I elaborate on general guidelines for conducting constructivist research, arguing that this approach should be evaluated not only according to its internal and external validity but to its contextual validity – its ability to study constitutive effects, social constructions, and the roles of social agents. Finally, I briefly demonstrate the methodological framework suggested in this article by providing a sketch of a research design that aims to explain the outbreak of what has been coined the Second Lebanon War.

1. Constructivism and constructivist methodology

1.1 The methodological implications of constructivist epistemology

A comprehensive discussion of the nature of constructivist approaches is far beyond the scope of this article.[2] However, since methodology can be understood as 'applied epistemology',[3] I will briefly summarise some of the basic modern constructivist assertions in order to focus on the methodological requirements and challenges of a constructivist research design.

Adler suggests that the modern constructivist approach acknowledges that the social world is made of intersubjective understandings, subjective knowledge, and material objects.[4] As such, according to Adler, modern constructivism 'results from

[1] A similar argument is presented by Hopf, who argues that 'interpretivist scholarship should make these positivistic methods more explicitly salient to make its own work more compelling, and more relevant to the mainstream', Ted Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', in Richard Ned Lebow and Mark Lichbach (eds), *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2007), p. 55.

[2] For comprehensive reviews of constructivism, see Jeffery Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory', *World Politics*, 50:2 (1998), pp. 324–48; Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 171–200; Emanuel Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), pp. 95–118. For example, the debate over whether constructivism is a method (Checkel, 'Constructivist Turn', p. 342) or a set of metatheories (David Dessler, 'Constructivism within a Positivist Social Science', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (1999), p. 125).

[3] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasising this point.

[4] Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', pp. 100–1.

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the combination of objective hermeneutics with a ''conservative'' cognitive interest in understanding and explaining social reality'.[5]

The methodological implications of these postulations are such that modern constructivist research is required to identify both causal mechanisms and constitutive relations. It is precisely for this reason that Adler, for example, gives special emphasis to the importance of social practices. For Adler, these practices bridge the material and the ideational/discursive worlds.[6] Hence, a major challenge for the modern constructivist approach lies in providing a way of understanding phenomena within a context based upon interactions between material and ideational factors.[7] Relying solely on either positivist or discursive methods does not provide the constructivist scholar with a suitable framework: positivist methods cannot account for constitutive factors, in which the independent variable is also part of the explained phenomena,[8] and the discursive approaches cannot satisfactorily explain the causal effects.

The solution offered in this article implies that constructivist scholars have 'more work to do', or as Hopf suggests, 'constructivism is no shortcut'.[9] They need to establish the causal effects ('the why questions') and the contextual and the constitutive effects ('the how questions'), and they also need to study the interactions between them.

1.2 Existing methods

During the early years of constructivist research, scholars of this new approach focused on its philosophical essence, clarifying its basic terms,[10] responding to critics, and clearing up misunderstandings. Later, constructivist scholars more straightforwardly studied phenomena in IR, demonstrating the advantages of this approach over others. This shift enabled these scholars to sharpen their notions of what constructivism is and come to a deeper understanding of the earlier philosophical debates. Surprisingly, despite this shift, scholars have tended to neglect the methodological dimension, providing little guidance on how to conduct a constructivist study.[11]

[5] Ibid., pp. 97–8.
[6] Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations. The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 7, 12.
[7] For the importance of the 'context', see for example, Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 199.
[8] See for example Nina Tannenwald, 'The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use', *International Organization*, 53:1 (1999), pp. 433–68, 439, 441.
[9] Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 198.
[10] See for example, Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 319–63; Checkel, 'Constructivist Turn'; Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism'; John G. Ruggie, *Constructing the Global Polity* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[11] Checkel, 'Constructivist Turn', pp. 338–9; Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', p. 109; Jeffery Checkel, 'Tracing Causal Mechanisms', *International Studies Review*, 8:2 (2006), p. 370.

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Thus, although in recent years some important attempts have been made to provide interpretative methods[12] and methodologies,[13] there is still a need to develop them to extend modern constructivist methodology[14] and combine it with different methods. In this respect, this article will rely on existing methods at the same time that it elaborates on ways to combine them – all towards developing a modern constructivist methodology. I will begin by outlining the similarities and differences between the arguments of current constructivist literature and those of my suggested methodology.

First, the constructivist approach is composed of a broad spectrum that includes, inter alia, radical, critical, post-modern, linguistic, and modernist sub-approaches.[15] All attempts to provide rigid methods[16] or methodologies[17] for executing the constructivist research have thus fallen into one of the constructivist sub-approaches. This article is no different, and although its aim is to provide a systematic and rigid methodology, it is limited to providing such a methodology for *modernist* constructivist research.

Second, as suggested above, the aim of this article is to develop a methodology that systematically and coherently combines existing methods. In this respect it significantly differs from the important works of Klotz and Lynch. Thus, although these scholars take a plural approach, carefully discussing many useful methods[18] and mechanisms related to methodological issues,[19] they are silent on the specific ways these methods should be combined.[20] In this manner, they are specifically encouraging scholars to extend the applications of these methods and demarcate their limitations.[21] This article can be regarded as one way of doing so.

Third, most of these methodological works do not provide comprehensive criteria for research evaluation. In this regard, I attempt to connect methods to methodology and methodology to methodological criteria, and through this to provide a more

[12] Karin Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–54; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice. Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, 'Translating Terminologies', *International Studies Review*, 8:2 (2006), pp. 356–62; Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2007).

[13] Jeffery Checkel, 'Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change', *International Organization*, 53:3 (2001), pp. 553–88; Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism'; Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics. Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow*, 1955 & 1999 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Vincent Pouliot, ' "Sobjectivism": Toward a Constructivist Methodology', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51 (2007), pp. 359–84.

[14] An important point is that methodology is a crucial requirement in the process of theory development, especially in the testing and evaluating of new theories.

[15] Ruggie, *Constructing the Global Polity*, pp. 35–6; Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', pp. 97–8; Klotz and Lynch, 'Translating Terminologies', p. 356; See also Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 10.

[16] See for example, Neta C. Crawford, 'Understanding Discourse: A Method of Ethical Argument Analysis', *Qualitative Methods*, 2:1 (2004), pp. 23–5; Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse', pp. 226–8; Hansen, *Security as Practice*; Fierke, *Critical Approaches*, p. 84.

[17] See for example, Pouliot, 'Sobjectivism'; Hopf, *Social Construction*.

[18] Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*.

[19] Klotz and Lynch, 'Translating Terminologies'.

[20] Ibid., pp. 358–62. Similarly, they argue that their aim is 'to glean strategies for designing research projects rather than to advocate any single model or set of methods . . . We demonstrate how similar research problems can be explored with various methods,' Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, pp. 4–5.

[21] Ibid., p. 6.

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solid base for modern constructivist research. This article thus extends and elaborates on some of the previously suggested criteria.

Careful attention should be given to the important works of Hopf, Pouliot, and Checkel,[22] in particular with regard to their epistemological stance of elaborating on methodology based on a combination of methods. In many respects – and although their stances differ from each other – my article is an extension of these works. Nevertheless, some important differences should be acknowledged. First, compared to these works, and especially with regard to Pouliot's article, I argue that the methodology presented in this article is closer to the epistemology suggested in Adler's middle ground. As a result, I suggest in part combining different methods than those recommended in these scholars' methodologies. For example, Pouliot emphasises the importance of interviews; however, issues that involve closed societies or the distant past cannot be studied through this method. Thus, although I do not exclude the option of interviews, I suggest broader elements for conducting a constructivist study.[23] Similarly, with regard to Hopf's work, although I follow his stance of combining positivist and interpretative approaches,[24] my aim is to set out a more general and less inductive research framework that is not, as his is, restricted to the study of identities.[25]

1.3 Toward a pluralistic methodology

As Pouliot clearly summarises, 'Constructivism does not require the development of brand new methods ... [but it] would certainly benefit from engaging more systematically and coherently with pressing methodological issues'.[26] Thus, my aim in this article is to use existing methods within the new framework of a unified, coherent, and systemised methodology.[27]

A good starting point for the presentation of a unified pluralistic methodology is Adler's review of the 'large variety' of constructivist methods. Adler argues that conventional qualitative methods – such as case studies, process tracing, counterfactuals, and comparative methods – are primary in constructivist research, although interpretative methods are also 'applied with great success'.[28] I argue that a combination of conventional qualitative and interpretative methods is crucial in both implementing and strengthening the rigidity of the research framework.

[22] Pouliot, 'Sobjectivism'; Hopf, *Social Construction*; Checkel, 'Tracing Causal Mechanisms', p. 369. The methodology suggested in this paper follows Checkel's study in many respects. However, it differs from it mainly in the necessity of elaborating further methodological issues and extending discourse analysis. See Checkel, 'Why Comply'.

[23] Regarding interviews, see also Klotz and Lynch, *Translating Terminologies*, p. 361.

[24] Hopf, *Social Construction*, p. xi.

[25] Ibid., pp. xiv, 20, 23–4. In addition, by combining different methods I aim to provide a way to study not only a shift in actor's identity, but also to explain it. For such a need, see for example, Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 79.

[26] Pouliot, 'Sobjectivism', p. 360; See also Arie M. Kacowicz, 'Case Study Methods in International Security Studies', in Detlef F. Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (eds), *Models, Numbers and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 2004), p. 113.

[27] In other words, I try to follow Checkel's as well as Klotz and Lynch's suggestion to utilise methodological pluralism, Checkel, 'Tracing Causal Mechanisms', pp. 369–70; Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 19.

[28] Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', p. 101.

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Such combination is both feasible and necessary. Although interpretative and positivist methods are not identical, and scholars tend to conflate theoretical and substantive differences with methodological differences, the aims of positivist and interpretative research may converge[29]. This means that not only can both of these approaches explain phenomena in IR,[30] they can be combined in a fixed way and provide different insights on the phenomenon under study. In this way, understandings and explanations that are achieved through interpretive methods can be enhanced by the tools of positivist methods, and vice versa.

As Wendt claims, 'there *are* significant analytical and methodological differences between causal and constitutive theorising, which reflects the different kinds of questions that they answer' ('why' questions vs. 'what'/'how possible' questions).[31] I argue that – since, as Hollis and Smith claim, 'there are two sorts of story to tell'[32] – the suggested combination of methods is essential to establish a constructivist explanation. The challenge, nevertheless, is not just to *tell* these two complementary stories, but to try to create a unified methodological framework that will combine them and examine the mutual influences of constitutive effects upon causal effects and vice versa.

The need to combine different methods is also apparent in the problems experienced by current constructivist studies, and is clearly evident, for example, in the study of norms. Some scholars suggest focusing on the behavioural reactions to the norm and not on the norm itself: more specifically, they study the reaction toward actors who do not adhere to the norm. But this approach provides only a partial solution to how norms should be studied, since the mere fact that there are actors who violate the norm does not necessarily indicate that the norm does not exist.[33] This is exactly why Kratochwil and Ruggie argue that norms cannot be falsified and hence cannot be regarded as 'variables'.[34] On the other hand, another method for the study of norms is based on examining the actors' arguments about normative behaviour.[35] Although the benefits of such an approach are clear from an interpretative point of view, it is quite difficult to differentiate between manipulation and truthful communication.[36] The basic problems in each of these two methods

[29] Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', pp. 55, 56–9; Ronald Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security', in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security*, (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 67–8; Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sydney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry – Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 34–7.

[30] It was emphasised that constitutive theories also have explanatory power. See King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, ftn.1, p. 75; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 84–7, 165–8. See also Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 15.

[31] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 85–6, italics in original; and compare with Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture', p. 67.

[32] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 1.

[33] Tannenwald, 'Nuclear Taboo', p. 464.

[34] See Frederick V. Kratochwil and Gerard Ruggie, 'International Organization: A State of Art on an Art of State', *International Organization*, 40:4 (1986), p. 767; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 87.

[35] An impressive presentation of this approach was made by Tannenwald, who uses the method of burden of proof to show the variance in the salience of the nuclear taboo over the years, Tannenwald, 'Nuclear Taboo', pp. 440–62.

[36] See Kratochwil, V. Frederick and Gerard Ruggie, *International Organization*, p. 768.

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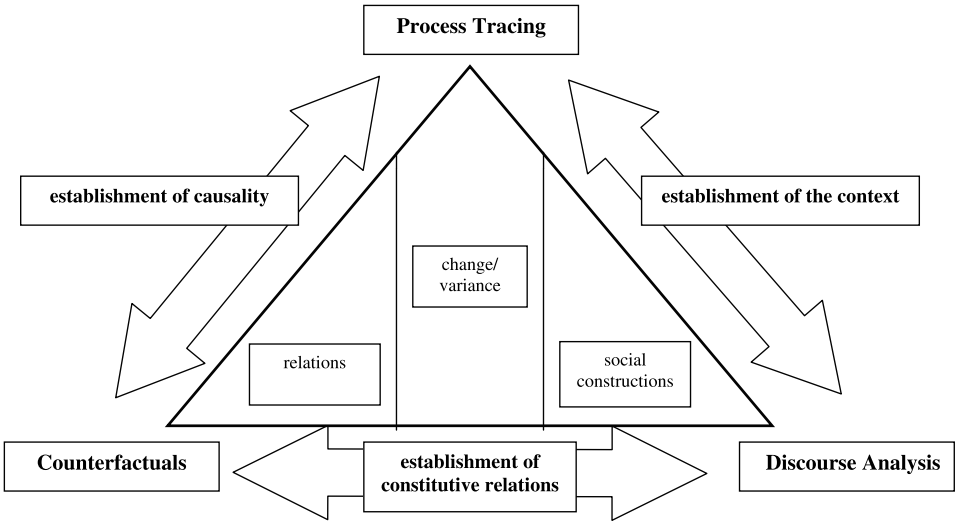


Figure 1. *Methods for constructivist studies – aims and interactions.*

demonstrate the need to study both the behavioural[37] and the discursive dimensions[38] in order to 'tell the two stories', and to actually establish the regulative as well as the constitutive effects norms have on behaviour.

2. Modifying methods

I argue that the methods of process tracing, discourse analysis, and the study of counterfactuals each emphasise different crucial characteristics of constructivist research (see Figure 1). Process tracing establishes the change over time and the variance in the 'variables';[39] discourse analysis allows us to understand the social constructions; and counterfactuals further help us to establish the relations between the 'variables'.

Moreover, following Bennett,[40] I argue that combining different research methods may have synergetic effects. This synergy can be achieved by combining not only

[37] Checkel also highlights the importance of using methods that explore the actors' behaviour in order to study norms (e.g. analysing international agreements). See Jeffery Checkel, 'Norms, Institutions and National Identity in Contemporary Europe', *International Studies Quarterly*, 43:1 (1999), p. 92.

[38] Cortell and Davis argue that discourse analysis is highly important in the study of norms, not only because it precedes other changes that indicate the norm's salience, but also because it clarifies how specific actions not compatible with the norm were ruled out. See Andrew P. Cortell and James W. Davis Jr., 'Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms: A Research Agenda', *International Studies Review*, 2:1 (2000), pp. 65–87, 71.

[39] I use here the word 'variables' although it may be problematic, since there are, as noted before, constitutive relations between elements of a study, and not only causal ones. However, this word choice may help to clarify the arguments suggested in this paper and emphasise the need for a more rigid methodology.

[40] Andrew Bennett, 'Case Studies Methods: Design, Use, and Comparative Advantages', in Detlef F. Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (eds), *Models, Numbers and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 2004), p. 19.

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qualitative and quantitative methods,[41] but different qualitative methods, particularly interpretative and positivist ones. Specifically, I argue that combining the methods of process tracing, discourse analysis, and counterfactuals further enhances the ability to conduct constructivist research, as demonstrated in the vertex of the triangle in Figure 1. Thus, combining process tracing and discourse analysis helps to establish the 'context', combining counterfactuals and discourse analysis helps to establish the constitutive relations between 'variables', and combining counterfactuals with process tracing helps to establish causality. In addition, these combinations illustrate the connections between the constitutive and the causal effects.[42]

Process tracing is the first and main method presented in this section. It allows for the study of causal processes – causal chains or causal mechanisms that connect the independent and the dependent 'variables'. Further, this method is used to identify and study complex relations between variables, as well as focal points, the influence of expectations, and agent-structure relations.[43] Process tracing thus provides a way of studying not only the proposed theoretical concepts and of testing research hypotheses, but also of studying ideational factors, the evolution of social phenomena, and the influence of these phenomena on actors' behaviour.[44] However, although this method may shed light on the evolution of social practices, it cannot alone uncover all of the constitutive dimensions: it needs to be combined with more interpretative methods, such as discourse analysis.

The importance of discourse analysis[45] derives from two characteristics of discourse – it enables the actors' understanding of the social world of which they are part, and it constitutes and defines the social parts and practices of this world. This makes it clear why it is impossible to study these relations solely through the positivist framework of X causes Y, presupposing that they exist independent of each other.[46]

However, it should be emphasised that the study of discourse should not, as some scholars suggest, be limited to a critical revelation of hegemonic relations or discovering the 'truth'. A discursive method can be used to achieve the more general and broader aims of identifying specific discourses and their emergence.[47] As such, discourse analysis may contribute to understanding a chain of events, the context of these events, as well as the constitution of actors' identities.[48]

[41] Kacowicz, 'Case Study Methods', p. 110.

[42] For example, such combinations may shed light on the question of how social constructions shape material reality and vice versa.

[43] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 12–13, 19–22, 206–7. I tend to agree with the scholars who recommend beginning agent-structure research from a given structure (top-down) and not bottom-up as some anthropologists, economists, and psychologists suggest, see in Walter Carlsnaes, 'The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36:3 (1992), pp. 245–70, 260, 264; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 372. Regarding methodological holism, see also Adler, *Communitarian International Relations*, pp. 5, 12.

[44] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, p. 206; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 82–3, 154–5.

[45] For the difference between the methods of discourse analysis and content analysis, see Fierke, *Critical Approaches*, pp. 84–5; For differences among scholars who execute the method of discourse analysis, see Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 221.

[46] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 84–5, 165–8.

[47] Compare Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', pp. 242–4 and 234.

[48] Regarding the connections between identity and discourse, see Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 1, 13; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 44.

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To this end, Milliken suggests using the method of predicate analysis to make 'relational distinctions' to define the actors' identities. Milliken argues that the fact that the aim of this method is to develop inductive generalisations through empirical study and abstraction does not mean that the researcher should not have prior conceptualisations.[49] Thus, discourse analysis combined with process tracing[50] can show that reality in other time periods not only could have a different interpretation, but could have been differently developed. Such findings establish the constructional dimension of reality.[51] In this sense, using the method of process tracing in addition to the method of discourse analysis (as well as studying counterfactuals), may improve research: as Klotz and Lynch suggest, 'Both causal and conjunctural forms of process tracing enable us to grasp specific components of structural change. Indeed they complement each other, with genealogy providing an explanation for the range of possible policies and causal process tracing focusing on the particular selection that occurs among these possibilities'.[52]

The third method is the study of counterfactuals: that is, evaluating theories through the exploration of events that did not happen[53] – and not merely, as some scholars suggest, to increase the number of cases in the study. Not only does this method significantly enhance the ability to study casual relations, it improves the analysis of mutual relations between variables and the exploration of constitutive relations.[54]

Exploring counterfactuals has three complementary, and possibly overlapping, uses. First, combining counterfactuals with the method of process tracing enhances the study of causal effects and therefore may increase the internal validity of the research. Thus, this method is commonly used, albeit with different techniques, to study and reflect on what would have happened if the variables had been different. For example, Mueller shows that a third world war would not have occurred even in the absence of nuclear weapons. For Mueller, this counterfactual is a complementary method of strengthening his argument that nuclear deterrence did not have significant impact on Cold War stability.[55] A second use of counterfactuals is to enhance our understanding of constitutive effects and therefore to establish the constitutive

[49] Ibid., pp. 232–5, ftn.7, p. 249.

[50] According to Checkel, using process tracing may help to bridge between interpretative and rational approaches. Good process tracing 'will utilize this pluralism both to reconstruct carefully causal processes and to not lose sight of the broader structural-discursive–ethical context', Checkel, 'Tracing Causal Mechanisms', pp. 363–4, 369–70, passim.

[51] In this respect, the suggested method here is similar to that of deconstruction (showing that the reality could have been different) and those of juxtaposition and gerontology (showing that the reality could have been differently interpreted). See Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', pp. 242–4. It is also similar to Hansen's argument regarding the importance of providing to some extent comparison in conducting discourse analysis, Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 80.

[52] Klotz and Lynch, 'Translating Terminologies', p. 361; Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, pp. 31, 34–5.

[53] George and Bennett argue that counterfactuals can be combined with theoretical arguments on different levels. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, pp. 210–15.

[54] Thus, for example compare James D. Fearon, 'Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science', *World Politics*, 43:2 (1991), pp. 169, 171; and Steve Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 48. See also Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, 'Counterfactual Thoughts Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Psychological Perspectives', in Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (eds), *Counterfactual Thoughts Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 3–38, 4; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 88; Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', p. 237.

[55] John Mueller, 'The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons. Stability in the Postwar World', *International Security*, 13:2 (1988), pp. 55–79, 68–79.

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relations between 'variables' under study. As Wendt suggests, some social phenomena depend on other social ideas or social structures – for example, terror is dependent on national security discourse that defines 'terrorism'. As such, as Wendt argues, 'these effects satisfy the counterfactual requirement for causal explanations, but they are not causal because they violate the requirement of independent existence and temporal asymmetry'.[56] And finally, a third use for counterfactuals is to explore alternative explanations whose outcomes may challenge the suggested explanation.[57]

In more practical terms, I argue that one option for conducting a constructivist study is to start with discourse analysis, then move to process tracing (to extend understanding of both the context and the constitutive relations and to establish the causal relations), and then move to explore counterfactuals in order to strengthen the arguments. My point, however, is that scholars can move around the triangle (counter-clockwise) (Figure 1) and further strengthen their arguments by implementing these three methods over and over again, using and elaborating on the results of the preceding methods. This process will provide not only a richer explanation, but one that includes both the ideational and material dimensions and their interactions.

3. The research design

3.1 Developing the research question (determining the explained phenomenon)

As with any research method, the first important task is to determine the explained phenomenon. Even though it may change during the performance of the research *vis-à-vis* the empirical reality,[58] a clearly predetermined explained phenomenon is necessary at every stage of the research. This task implies that the research question should be explanatory. However, as discussed above, an explanatory question may be answered through the exploration of causal as well as constitutive effects.

Being familiar with the empirical reality is a good starting point, but constructivists also need to connect between soft (and general) theoretical concepts – such as identity, norm, community, and practice – and the empirical reality. They also need to think of the ways in which these concepts and the social processes they are related to – such as socialisation, learning, and social constructions – create both the material and the ideational outcomes of the phenomenon under study. In addition, constructivists should allow themselves to move back and forth from the theory to the empirical reality. Also they need to determine important focal points that create the explained social process.[59] Eventually, taking these steps may help to increase the generalisability of the research.[60]

Determining the research question should also involve the determination of case study/ies. This is somewhat contrary to the positivist criterion of determining case

[56] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 88.
[57] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, p. 219.
[58] See King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, pp. 14–20.
[59] Probe research may also be useful for this aim, see Harry Eckstein, 'Case Study and Theory in Political Science. Strategies of Inquiry', in F. I. Greenstein and N. W. Polsby (eds), *The Handbook of Political Science*, 7 (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 79–138, 108–13.
[60] For further elaboration on the connection between theoretical conceptualisation and the ability to generalise the findings of the research, see Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 29–32.

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studies only after developing the hypotheses in order to maximise internal validity.[61] This difference stems from the fact that a constructivist explanation is more sensitive to empirical cases and their context, which are a fundamental part of the explanation itself. For this reason, constructivists should ensure – at least ex post facto – that the cases in their research are not methodologically flawed. In other words, after determining the observations and the case studies,[62] scholars need to ensure variation in the study's variables, since a lack of variation – especially in the dependent variable – is the main source of bias in the case selection process and therefore may decrease the ability to establish the connections between variables.[63]

Furthermore, selection with some preliminary knowledge of the cases even has some advantages, as Bennett argues, because such selection 'allows much stronger research designs, as cases can be selected with a view toward whether they are most likely, least likely, or crucial. Selecting cases in this way can strengthen, rather than undermine, the severity of the process-tracing test of a theory'.[64]

3.2 Developing the hypotheses

Constructivists can develop hypotheses according to conventional criteria, but they need to pay close attention to this process. One aspect of hypotheses building is to provide theoretical answers to the research question, encompassing the interactions between reality and theory. The second aspect of hypotheses building is more problematic. It has been suggested that 'good hypotheses' should be falsifiable, should be operationally well defined, should explicitly refer to the expected relations between the hypotheses' variables, and should refer to as large a population as possible.[65]

Although these criteria pose challenges to constructivist research, they should not prevent constructivists from developing 'good hypotheses.' I argue that part of the solution to this problem is to develop more hypotheses for different relations and stages of the explained phenomenon. In other words – and in contrast to positivist research – scholars should not necessarily provide rival hypotheses for the same occurrence,[66] but they can develop hypotheses dealing with different stages of it. This process does not completely resolve the difficulties in determining specific relations between variables, nor does it ensure that the hypotheses are clear and general. It does, however, reduce these problems, mainly because it may provide more contingent hypotheses and because such hypotheses allow one to deal more easily with mutual constitutiveness. Thus, instead of – or in addition to – studying alternative explanations of the effectiveness of argumentative persuasion – as suggested, for

[61] David Nachmias and Chava Nachmias, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 29. For a more general discussion of the challenges interpretivists face 'selecting' case studies, see Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', pp. 64–5, 71.

[62] For a discussion on the difference between cases and observations, see King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, pp. 116–18.

[63] Kacowicz, 'Case Study Methods', pp. 112–13.

[64] Bennett, 'Case Studies Methods', ftn. 23, p. 51; Van Evera's, *Guide to Methods*, pp. 46–7.

[65] Nachmias and Nachmias, *Research Methods,* pp. 23–7; Charles C. Ragin, *Constructing Social Research. The Unity and Diversity of Methods* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994), p. 14.

[66] For the need to develop rival hypotheses, see ibid., pp. 14–16.

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example, by Checkel – different hypotheses can be proposed for the evolutionary process in which arguments become more effective.[67] Finnemore and Sikkink's life-cycle-model of norms is a fruitful source for hypotheses on the evolution of ideas (norms) and their different stages and levels of internalisation.[68]

3.3 Determining the components of research

It is very important to determine criteria to differentiate between possible occurrences of both the explained phenomenon and the explanatory mechanism. Such an effort will increase the ability to generalise research findings. Further, it will allow other scholars to reinterpret the research and recognise when explanations are not supported by the empirical evidence. Clear conceptualisation is necessary not only for the 'variables', which are presented in the hypotheses, but for the discourse analysed. Each of these conceptualisations creates challenges of its own.

First, as previously discussed, researchers defining the 'variables' of the hypotheses in constructivist studies face the problem that they cannot be defined independently. This is because of the studied phenomena's constitutive elements as well as because of the mutual influences of the components in the research.[69] A possible solution to this problem is to acknowledge that the variables – the independent and the dependent – overlap to some extent.[70] This means that they have both common and idiosyncratic characteristics. Hence, defining or conceptualising the variables entails identifying the characteristics they share as well as the ways in which they differ. As suggested by Kacowicz, conceptualisations, along with detailed exploration of the case studies, resolve the problem of mutual influence and provide a more solid basis for process tracing by offering clear definitions of the evolutionary stages.[71]

Determining the criteria for the study of discourse is also a challenging task, since in this case. Definitions that are too rigid are not helpful.[72] But avoiding this task may undermine the efforts to systemise the constructivist methodology suggested in this article. I argue therefore that the discourse should be determined on two levels. First, we need to determine the sources required for research. This decision is concerned with determining the historical period and the genre of the discourse to be studied.[73]

[67] Checkel, 'Why Comply', pp. 562–3.
[68] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norms and Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organizations*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–909.
[69] This problem was mainly discussed with regard to the study of norms. See Checkel, 'Norms, Institutions and National Identity', p. 92; Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International Norms', p. 892; Cortell and Davis, 'Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms', pp. 69–70.
[70] A similar kind of argument is suggested by Klotz and Lynch with regard to the relations between identities and interests, Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 83.
[71] Kacowicz, 'Case Study Methods', p. 113.
[72] For example, Fierke warns that there are not really objective definitions: 'the world of analysis is limited from the start by the choices, and thus arguably the interpretation of the analyst', Fierke, *Critical Approaches*, p. 84.
[73] Crawford, 'Understanding Discourse', pp. 23–4; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, pp. 59–64, 82. Hansen argues that scholars need to determine whether they want to study official discourse, wider political debates, cultural representations, or marginal political discourses. In addition, Hopf suggests that texts to be analysed may be found in archives, interviews, popular culture, and even secondary sources. See Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 23–4. For more general suggestions of analysing varied sources, see Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 50.

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In addition, as some scholars have pointed out, there is the need for a variety of texts of the main actors, texts that demonstrate different opinions on the issue under study as well as those that refer not only to policy formulation but also to policy implementation.[74] At the second level, it should be clear what we are looking for – the utterances we want to explore and the interpretations and main categories we expect to find. Such clarifications may help us to explore, as Milliken suggests, how categories of discourse became operative categories in policy.[75] Similarly, Crawford suggests exploring how certain arguments succeeded over others, and whether and how they change the terms of the debate. Later on, 'informal analysis' of the arguments should explore the evidence and words that were used (and not used), the challenges actors pose to dominant beliefs, and the claims that were raised about legitimacy.[76]

3.4 Alternative explanations

Since one of the aims of research designs is to justify the research, dealing with alternative explanations is very important,[77] despite the fact that constructivist explanations cannot 'refute' competing ones. Key factors of constructivist research – such as context, constitutive effects, and mutual influences – are not necessarily opposed to positivist explanations, but in many respects they provide for a much more complex understanding of the phenomenon under study. Providing and exploring rich and detailed explanations demonstrates the inadequacy of competing explanations that ignore the context when establishing causal relations between the explored variables, and in this way highlights the advantages of the constructivist approach.[78] Given these advantages, the constructivist tendency to neglect the study of alternative explanations, particularly self-interest explanations,[79] is very surprising.

More specifically, one can discern anomalies in alternative explanations in two complementary ways. The first is to locate empirical, logical, methodological, and theoretical problems in these explanations that would emphasise the relative advantages of the constructivist explanations. The second is to develop counterfactuals to strengthen the argument that these alternative explanations cannot stand on their own but need the extension of an ideational, constructional, or contextual dimension in order 'to work'.

The advantages of alternative explanations can be demonstrated through a study of the superpowers' continuous avoidance of using nuclear weapons during the Cold War. A possible constructivist explanation is the institutionalisation (and

[74] Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', 233, 240–1; Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 33, 52–3, 59–64. For further operational suggestions for planning discourse analysis, see Hansen, *Security as Practice*, pp. 73–82.
[75] Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', pp. 240–1.
[76] Crawford, 'Understanding Discourse', pp. 23–4.
[77] This is to some extent different from Hopf's presentation of alternative explanations near the end of his book, Hopf, *Social Construction*.
[78] In more methodological terms, studying alternative explanations contributes to the enhancement of the internal validity of the research, see Hopf, *Social Construction*, p. 32.
[79] See Jeffrey W. Legro, 'Which Norms Matter? Revisiting the "Failure" of Internationalism', *International Organization*, 51:1 (1997), pp. 33–4.

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construction) of the idea of deterrence by punishment through learning and socialisation. However, several competing explanations could be suggested: for example, a constructivist alternative explanation of the nuclear taboo,[80] or even the theory of deterrence itself. Thus, for example the methodological and theoretical flaws[81] in deterrence literature highlight the need to explore the ideational and constructional dimensions of this theory's basic postulations,[82] and through this to demonstrate why deterrence strategy is not, as some realist scholars argue, self-evident.

The study of counterfactuals also strengthens the suggested explanation: for example, it is possible to show that the idea and practices of deterrence could not have developed as they did without the processes of learning and social constructions. Thus, during the 1950s the US did not have a consistent view of deterrence strategy because there were several obstacles – mainly the tradition of war-fighting and bureaucratic constraints – slowing down its implementation.[83] These obstacles demonstrate that deterrence strategy is not self-evident: it was not the result of deterministic forces, but rather was advanced through social agents.[84]

4. General guidelines for modern constructivist research

I suggest that the pluralist methodology presented in this article can adhere to the methodological criteria I will outline in this section. However, because some of these criteria lead in contradictory directions, satisfying all of them is problematic. In spite of this, scholars should at least be aware of the implications of the specific methodological decisions they make.

4.1 Internal validity

Positivist methodological literature accepts that the presentation of an internally valid explanation should be based upon the following criteria: establishing covariance and time order, eliminating spurious relationships, and providing a theoretical explanation for the relations between the independent and dependent variables.[85] These criteria allow scholars to establish the (causal) connections between the variables in their studies.[86] Nevertheless, the implementation of these criteria with

[80] Tannenwald, 'Nuclear Taboo'.
[81] See for example, Timothy W. Luke, 'What's Wrong with Deterrence? A Semiotic Interpretation of National Security Policy', in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 213–14.
[82] Ibid., p. 214.
[83] Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, 'Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Taboos', in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 135, 139.
[84] For another example of how a constructivist explanation (of identity) provides a better explanation than that suggested by an alternative neo-realist explanation, see Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 271–8.
[85] Nachmias and Nachmias, *Research Methods*, pp. 29–36.
[86] The method of process tracing enhances the internal validity since it moves us away from correlational arguments toward theories that capture and explain the world as it really works, Checkel, 'Tracing Causal Mechanisms', p. 366.

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X1 (the norm of sovereignty)→ Y1 (state system) → X2 (a stronger norm of sovereignty) → Y2 (a stronger state system, more political entities adhering to the rule of territorial integrity) → X3 (an even stronger norm)

Figure 2. *The norm of sovereignty.*

regard to constructivist research may be challenging. Although it can be argued that the sensitivity of constructivist studies to context[87] contributes to increased internal validity, mainly with regard to the elimination of spurious relationships, the independent and dependent 'variables' can overlap and mutually affect each other, which would not meet the positivist criteria of establishing time order and covariance.

One way to establish covariance in a constructivist study is by executing a longitudinal survey, which means showing that the 'variables' change together over time. In this respect, although the constructivist study of mutual relations between dependent and independent 'variables' implies that the variables mix, thus precluding the establishment of time order,[88] this is not a completely accurate picture. Following Heraclitus's image that 'you cannot step twice into the same river' – because either the water or you may change – the conclusion that the variables overlap and have mutual influences is not to say that X affects Y and Y affects X, but that they all change over time. Therefore, a more accurate presentation of these relations is X1 → Y1 → X2 → Y2 and so on. This is also why finding focal or threshold points is highly important in tracing these kinds of relations. Furthermore, such research is especially relevant in constructivist studies, which are very often based on tracing a chain of events.[89]

For example, a norm may become more salient over time, and therefore the practices suggested by the norm become more likely. But the fact that practicing a norm may contribute to its salience should not prevent scholars from establishing covariance if we bear in mind that a more flexible scheme of relations between variables may exist. Thus, for example, although the norm of sovereignty has constitutive effects and has contributed to establishing the states world order (and has likewise been strengthened by it), this norm also affects state behaviour (see Figure 2). In this respect, although the recurrent practices suggested by this norm can themselves strengthen it, they can also be traced separately. It is possible to show that in accordance with the enhancement of the sovereignty norm, states increasingly tended to follow the principles the norm suggests. Political entities were more and more influenced by the ideas of territorial integrity and the principles of monopoly on violence.[90] These practices are especially prominent in the case of quasi-states: although they enjoy external sovereignty, their internal sovereignty is doubtful.[91]

[87] See for example Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 197; see also Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 32–3.
[88] Nachmias and Nachmias, *Research Methods*, p. 29.
[89] Tannenwald, 'Nuclear Taboo', p. 441.
[90] John G. Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1993), pp. 139–74; Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 50–81.
[91] Ibid., pp. 21–31.

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A second way to establish the covariance is through cross-sectional study, where the phenomenon under study is compared with another.[92] For example, a norm can become stronger because another norm is becoming weaker. This is exactly the argument Silverstone makes about the contestation between the preventive war taboo and the anti-proliferation imperative.[93] Cross-sectional studies on the relative strength of norms may be extremely helpful in further elaborating longitudinal surveys and, through this, increasing the internal validity of the research.[94]

Following this, constructivist scholars should also carefully select the cases and consider the possible focal points during research planning to increase internal validity. This will improve the examination of process tracing, which has the basic function of demonstrating the specific ways the 'variables' under study affect each other and interact with ideational factors to create these chains of events. Here, as discussed above, the exploration of counterfactuals may also be beneficial: it increases the internal validity by providing a more solid understanding of the phenomenon under study.

4.2 External validity

The argument in methodological literature is often that one cannot achieve a high level of both internal and external validity.[95] Internal validity forces scholars to be very sensitive to the specific context. This stance opposes the demand of external validity, which is based on identifying covering laws to address the largest population possible.[96] This is exactly why Price and Reus-Smith argue that constructivist scholars have, as part of the post-positivist turn, rejected the possibility and desirability of formulating covering laws. According to them, 'systematic conclusions at the level of abstraction and in the form of causal determinism demanded by the most insistent proponents of the positivist legacy are not forthcoming from constructivism.' They emphasise, therefore, the importance of contingent generalisations, which can be differentiated from law-like generalisations by their limited cultural and temporal scope and their specific context relevance.[97]

However, constructivist scholars themselves, following their epistemological stands, differ in their views regarding generalisations. As Adler argues, some scholars do develop (albeit in different ways) social mechanisms for causal and/or constitutive

[92] Regarding cross-sectional study of norms see for example Legro, 'Which Norms Matter?', pp. 38–45.

[93] Scott A. Silverstone, 'The Preventive War Taboo vs. the Anti-Proliferation Imperative: Contested Norms and Strategic Responses to Nuclear Proliferation', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, California, 22–26 March 2006.

[94] This follows the great importance of studying chains of events in a constructivist research, Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 196; Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations', p. 95, it may be useful to use cross-sectional studies as complementary to the study of longitudinal surveys. See, for example, Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 29.

[95] Bennett, 'Case Studies Methods', p. 34; Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, pp. 20–1.

[96] Ruggie, *Constructing the Global Polity*, p. 9; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, p. 22.

[97] Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:3 (1998), pp. 259–94, 273–5. See also Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', p. 66.

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explanations that are based on successive reformulations of the explanation and the explained phenomenon, while others take constructivism to be consistent with the positivist view of generalisation.[98]

I argue that the tendency to reject any option of generalisation stems in part from insufficient distinction between determinist factors and abstractions. Although constructivist explanations cannot be determinist ('the more X, the more Y') and although they do differ from the positivist ones, constructivist studies provide general conclusions on different levels of rigidity/contingency and may have some degree of abstraction. Such general conclusions may be compatible with some of the constructivist aims addressed by Adler, such as the revelation of social mechanisms and empirical regularities.[99] Therefore, constructivist research can reach some general conclusions about the importance of context, norms, and identities, as well as the importance of social processes such as learning and socialisation.[100] This ability to generalise and sketch out expected patterns of behaviour in research is quite similar to that of historians.[101] However, because constructivists can more easily use theoretical conceptualisations, they have a greater facility (and will) than historians to generalise.

It is possible to study the evolution and influence of specific practices in order to develop broader conclusions about practices of other actors in a similar context. For example, in her study of the effects of the nuclear taboo on the US, Tannenwald concludes that her findings are applicable to other Western democracies that were not part of her actual study. She expects that 'if the taboo operates in the United States, it probably operates in other democracies less committed to, and reliant on, nuclear weapons historically'.[102]

Furthermore, the difficulty of establishing high external validity is not a problem idiosyncratic to constructivist research itself, but rather a problem of small case studies – single case and comparative studies. Therefore, the solutions proposed to this problem in positivist small-number case studies[103] can also be implemented in the suggested modern constructivist research. By selecting deviant and crucial case studies, and/or conducting parallel studies that explore similar phenomena in different periods of time (longitudinal) or in different countries/regions (cross-sectional), researchers can provide more general and theoretical conclusions.[104] One such example of a constructivist cross-study is the comprehensive exploration of the evolution of security communities in different regions and at different stages of their progress.[105] In addition, according to Checkel, cross-national or longitudinal designs would help to reduce the problem of over determination evident in many

[98] Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', p. 71; Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations,' p. 101.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 197; See for example Checkel, 'Why Comply'.
[101] Kim Solomon, 'What Is the Use of International History?', *Journal of Peace Research*, 30:4 (1993), pp. 375–89, 383–4.
[102] Tannenwald, 'Nuclear Taboo', p. 464.
[103] Eckstein, 'Case Study and Theory in Political Science', pp. 44–6.
[104] But see Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', p. 64.
[105] Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'A Framework for the Study of Security Communities', in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 29–66, 413–41.

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constructivist analyses.[106] Finally, the external validity of research can be increased through a method complementary to the study of processes – that of scenario building.[107]

Because external validity is crucial even in a constructivist research, constructivist scholars should neither reject the possibility of generalisation out of hand nor overemphasise it. As Hopf argues, the richness of constructivist study allows the researcher to elaborate on causal/constitutive mechanisms within a social context: 'The cost here, however, is that the more conventional constructivism moves to furnish such a causal theory, the more it loses the possibility of maintaining the ontological openness that its interpretivist methods afford. However, the dilemma is a continuum, not a binary opposition'.[108]

I argue the suggested methodology (and the suggested guidelines for developing research design) help maximise adherence to the criterion of external validity in two ways. First, it urges scholars to select cases carefully in order to be able to reach conclusions with regard to different periods or different actors. Second, it urges theoretical articulation of the scholarly arguments. The point is not only that theoretical conceptualisation in general helps to increase external validity, but that the specific kinds of theoretical arguments constructivist scholars develop provide better understanding of how social processes may increase (or decrease) over time, and how these processes may be implemented by (and affect) other actors.

4.3 Contextual validity

I argue that while external validity concerns the ability of scholars to generalise their findings and internal validity concerns their ability to actually establish the connections between the variables under study, contextual validity concerns their ability to study the contextual influence on the connections between the variables. As Searle articulates in his seminal work, X is Y in context C.[109] Thus, we need to find a way to show that the specific meaning of Y is attached to X in context C, which implies that in other contexts, in context B for example, it is not likely, or at least not necessary, that X will be interpreted in the same way.

Thus, contextual validity is about being able to determine whether a study explores the implied assertion that the reality is, in part, the outcome of social constructions and that without these constructions the reality could be different. In other words, to satisfy the criterion of contextual validity, the research design as well as the implemented research methods should demonstrate the influences of the constitutive factors that create the 'context'. This use of the term contrasts with that of previous studies that use 'contextual validity' to determine the completeness and thoroughness of research – a view that overlaps with internal validity. I aim to

[106] Checkel, 'Constructivist Turn', p. 339. This is also why discussing alternative explanations is a crucial step in conducting the research.
[107] Steven Bernstein et al., 'God Gave Physics the Easy Problems: Adapting Social Science to an Unpredictable World', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:1 (2000), pp. 50–9.
[108] Hopf, 'Promise of Constructivism', p. 197.
[109] John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society* (New York: Basic, 1998), p. 28.

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differentiate this term from this criteria, since techniques that enhance internal validity will thus have minor impact on the study of the 'context'.[110]

It follows that two dimensions need to be explored to establish the contextual validity. First, we need to be able to trace the evolution of X and show that it is differently understood over time.[111] Significant in this process is the ability to identify focal points and threshold or tipping points.[112] These may indicate the boundaries between different stages or levels of the phenomenon under study, as well as its different meanings over time. Second, we need to be able to make sense of C (the context). In order to acknowledge context in research, we need to reveal the process in which it was constituted – how agents, ideational structures as well as social practices, influenced its creation – and to further establish that it is not an inevitable outcome.

Adhering to this criterion is dependent first on careful selection of the cases (and the texts), which will allow the researcher to trace the changes and the constructions of meanings that occurred over time. Discourse analysis is the main method of satisfying this criterion, since it aims to explore social constructions and the constitutiveness. But it is precisely here that the pluralistic spirit of this article comes into effect: in order to further demonstrate the influence of the context we must show that the discourse can change and that it interacts with the material world. These aims can be achieved through counterfactuals and, especially, process tracing.

4.4 Falsifiability and reliability

Constructivists can also adhere to, and even satisfy, the criteria of falsifiability and reliability[113] – criteria emphasised by positivist researchers. According to the criterion of falsifiability, scholars should provide some indication of how their explanation can be refuted. The criterion of reliability refers to the ability of scholars to return to and reinterpret research with the same results as the original study.

I argue that in order to adhere to these criteria in constructivist research, scholars need to articulate the theoretical and methodological arguments with regard to the hypotheses, definitions, and discourse analysis.[114] The research design suggested above is a tool for such articulation and thus a means of developing a more systematically conducted and better evaluated study. In addition it may help scholars sharpen their arguments and their presentation of them, which will help other scholars reinterpret the study's components. For example, providing clear criteria regarding the 'we-feeling' created in developed security communities[115] is necessary –

[110] Compare for example with Matthew B. Miles and Michael A. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), p. 36; Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), p. 21–2.

[111] In this respect see Milliken, 'Study of Discourse', pp. 242–4.

[112] See for example Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norms and Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organizations*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917, 901.

[113] Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 27, 29; Pouliot, 'Sobjectivism', pp. 378. See also regarding the interpretivist treatment of anomalies, Hopf, 'The Limits of Interpreting Evidence', pp. 68–9.

[114] For further elaboration of the criterion of reliability with regard to discourse analysis, see Hopf, *Social Construction*, p. 29; Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse', pp. 232–5, ftn.7, p. 249.

[115] See Adler and Barnett, 'Framework for the Study', pp. 38–45, and compare with pp. 7–9.

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not merely to encompass this complicated phenomenon in such a way that scholars can reinterpret different studies concerning this concept, but to evaluate how empirical evidence accords with the arguments made about the enhancement of the 'we-feeling' over time. Thus, for example, these criteria are necessary in considering questions such as: Does the enlargement of the EU toward Eastern Europe result from the decline of collective identity within the Western states or from the broadening of Western identity toward the east? Or is collective identity irrelevant in this process and are the changes simply the outcome of geo-strategic calculations?

5. A brief illustration: Israeli deterrence and the 2006 war on Lebanon

A discussion of the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon demonstrates the usefulness of the combined methodology I suggest in this article.[116] The over-usage of the term 'deterrence' regarding the war in Israeli discourse – in the Israeli media as well as in published documents – is striking. This could lead scholars to wonder whether there is a connection between such discourse and the decision to enter the war. One possible (and more theoretical) answer is that strategies can become constitutive of states' identities, and as a result they not only demand domestic costs when they are not pursued, but they internally constrain policy makers' alternatives. More specifically, it can be suggested that Hizballah's actions – the kidnapping of two soldiers on Israel's northern border and a massive launching of rockets – were understood by Israel to represent a deterrence failure, one that Israel had to address by enhancing its deterrent posture. In this respect, the actions taken by Hizballah were seen not only as a physical threat but also (and mainly) as a threat to Israel's identity (role) of deterrer.

In order to satisfy the methodological criteria laid out above, two kinds of empirical dimensions should be taken into account. The first involves studying the Israeli identity, which will help to establish the constitutive relations as well as the context of the research. This can be done by tracing the emergence of Israel's identity as deterrer (the roots of which can be found in the 1950s and later in the development of ambiguity over nuclear deterrence).[117] The second dimension is concerned with broadening the explained phenomenon (the implementation of strategy), an extension that can be achieved, for example, by using the theoretical framework to explain similar events, such as Israeli attempts to deter Palestinian terrorism, or the massive Israeli armament after the 2006 war. In this way, scholars can further develop hypotheses about connections between the Israeli deterrent identity (and its emergence) and its influences on Israel's strategic decisions (and strategic alternatives). Such hypotheses should suggest a connection between a specific stage of the internalisation of deterrence identity and the strategic decision. For example, states that have adopted deterrence identity will tend to use force in case of minor clashes. The reasoning of this hypotheses is that in such cases a defending state will use force in order to retaliate and to punish the challenger following the understanding that it

[116] It should be noted that an explanation of this war exceeds the illustrative aims of this section.
[117] Uri Bar-Joseph, *Israel's National Security Towards the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2; Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press).

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needs to enhance its deterrent posture.[118] As such, this hypothesis could help to extend the explanation for the 'cult of reputation' forcing states to demonstrate resolve.[119]

5.1 Discourse analysis

As suggested above, it is useful to begin the research process by exploring the discourse. Israel's dominant discourse of 'deterrence' with regard to the situation with Hizballah can be categorised according to two of its interrelated characteristics: deterrence as an aim in itself ('this is a red line we cannot cross/allow', 'the erosion in the Israeli deterrence'), and deterrence as an ability that can be achieved regardless of the actions of an enemy ('we should keep the deterrence shape', 'we should enhance the Israeli deterrence posture'). Thus, utterances in the first category demonstrate that deterrence itself (and not the avoidance of violence) is an aim of Israeli officials, and those in the second make no reference to a 'deterred' enemy when considering this strategy (in these cases, deterrence is an aim that does not take into account the Other). To further establish the existence and influences of a discourse of 'deterrence', it is also very useful to analyse Israeli Arab Knesset Members (the Israeli parliament) who do not take part in this discourse: the fact that they presented a more critical view of this strategy during the war helps to further validate the findings regarding the Israeli deterrence identity.[120]

We also need to determine the kinds of sources to use in our discourse analysis. Clearly, official discourse is important here. Specifically, the report of the Winograd Commission, appointed to investigate the war, is not only a good secondary source, but the report itself is an important demonstration of Israeli discourse. In this respect, the report and the testimonies of officials interrogated by the commission provide a close look at the strategic discourse of 'deterrence', including citations from closed forums.[121] Moreover, the commission itself demonstrates this discourse when it accepts the notion that Israel should deter Hizballah and refers to the 'erosion of the Israeli deterrent posture'.[122] Looking back on the discourse since the eve of the Israeli withdrawal of South Lebanon may also be necessary, since earlier references to deterrence will help to establish the existence of the Israeli deterrer identity. And finally, the study of popular culture may also be useful. The Israeli movie *Beaufort* for example, although it focuses on a different narrative, also demonstrates to some extent a wish to rely on deterrence *vis-à-vis* the Hizballah.[123]

[118] Emanuel Adler, 'Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't, ''Performative Power'' and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing' in T.V Paul, Patrick M. Morgan and James J. Wirtz (eds) *Complex Deterrence: Theory and Practice in a New Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2009).

[119] Shiping Tang, 'Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict', *Security Studies*, 14:1 (2005), pp. 34–61.

[120] See for example the speech of Jamal Zahalka, cited in Knesset Minutes, 14 August 2006 [in Hebrew].

[121] Winograd Commission Interim Report, (May 2007) [in Hebrew]. See also the commission website, ⟨http://www.vaadatwino.org.il/⟩ [in Hebrew].

[122] See Winograd Commission Interim Report, p. 135.

[123] The movie (named after a fortress in South Lebanon) was a blockbuster in Israeli terms.

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. . . X1 (deterrence identity [leads to interpret kidnapping as threat to identity]) → Y1 2006 War (and its consequences) → X2 (deterrence identity enhanced) → Y2 (plans to massive armament). . .

Figure 3. *Process tracing – connections between deterrence identity (Xs) and strategic decisions (Ys).*

5.2 Process tracing

Process tracing is an important method to further establish the connections between Xs (the deterrence identity) and Ys (security strategies). One must first look for the focal points on a chain of events. In this case, we can investigate the connections between the kidnapping and the decision to enter the war. The withdrawal from South Lebanon (May 2000) could also be considered an important focal point – one that would demonstrate the deterrence discourse of both the supporters and the opponents of the withdrawal.[124] Continuing this process tracing will reveal how the war and its consequences aggravated Israel's need to enhance its deterrent posture, which is now leading the Israeli army to insist on massive armament. On the other hand, the 2000 withdrawal had an actual impact on the strategic situation in Lebanon, generating another kind of influence on Israeli political discourse and rhetoric over how to address the Hizballah threat (see Figure 3).

As part of this process tracing, one can look for how domestic costs – those stemming from public as well as leaders' internalisation of deterrence ideas – compel decision makers. This process demonstrates the mutual effects between the role identity of a strategy (for example, deterrence) and the strategy implementation. In such cases, the implementation of the strategy may strengthen the identity, and the identity may further strengthen the need to implement it.

The suggested overlap between the independent and dependent variables is due to the fact that although both variables address 'deterrence', they differ in the way they refer to it. The Israeli deterrent identity was initially formed in the context of nuclear ambiguity, and therefore the term has a much more generalised usage than 'deterrence' in the context of the situation *vis-à-vis* Hizballah or the Palestinians. In other words, although deterrer identity and deterrence practices have common components (that is, the idea of deterrence is part of both), they do differ.

5.3 Counterfactuals

The context of deterrence identity led Israel to interpret the actions taken by Hizballah as a deterrence failure. In the absence of this context, there would have been no need for Israel to go to war – especially if we consider the main trigger, the kidnapping of soldiers, to be a 'minor clash'. In other words, elaborating on what would have happened if there was no Israeli deterrent identity clarifies and solidifies the research results, revealing that in such a scenario it would have been less likely

[124] See in Dalia Dassa Kaye, 'The Israeli Decision to Withdraw from Southern Lebanon: Political Leadership and Security Policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, 117:4 (2002–3), pp. 579–81.

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that Israel would have retaliated. The war and its aims were thus partially justified in terms of restoring the Israeli deterrent posture.[125]

5.4 Research evaluation according the suggested criteria

The 'applied epistemology' outlined in this section has the advantage of studying both ideational and material factors, as well as the connections between them. For example, the actual kidnapping of the soldiers and the war itself have influences not only on the material world, but on the ideational level as well. Thus, the Israeli deterrent identity (and its 'context') is an outcome of these two dimensions. I further argue that the suggested research framework can adhere to the three criteria of internal, contextual, and external validity.

More specifically, combining process tracing with discourse analysis reveals that the reality could be interpreted differently over time – in other words, that the context of deterrence and deterrence identity do matter. Combining counterfactuals with process tracing demonstrates causal effects stemming from the practices of deterrence. Further, it demonstrates the importance of the context that the identity of deterrence creates through the implementation of this strategy and through the acquisition of compatible force structures. It also helps to explain how actual events interacted with these social practices. In this way, the research satisfies the criteria of contextual and internal validity.

Contextual validity is further established by combining counterfactuals with discourse analysis, enhancing our understanding of the constitutive relations between the variables. As such, these methods unravel how deterrence identity and deterrence discourse interact and enhance the identity and the discourse, which exacerbates the context in which deterrence ideas are likely to have an impact.

With respect to external validity, the study of the 2006 war in Lebanon may have important implications for other case studies: for example, other cases in which strategy implementation influences discourse and state identity, which in turn influence the use (or misuse) of this strategy. Furthermore, conclusions with regard to this case study can lead to other general conclusions about Israel. For example, this study suggests that as long as Israel is unable to acknowledge the constitutive elements of deterrence strategy, its deterrer identity will be strengthened and will continue to constrain the implementation of strategic alternatives.

6. Conclusion

The pluralistic methodology suggested in this article thus has significant advantages for conducting modern constructivist research. However, it is important to address some of its possible drawbacks. The first challenge of this methodology is that its implementation is an extremely demanding task. A solution might be to view this methodology as an *ideal type*. Recognising its advantages and implementing it as

[125] For example see in Winograd Commission Interim Report, p. 58.

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much as far as possible may improve research. But more importantly, if we acknowledge that the world is dependent on both material and ideational factors, then epistemologically we need a methodology to study the causal effects, the constitutive effects, and the connections between these two. Shortcuts may obscure the complete picture.

However, the possible pitfalls of this epistemological stance should be noted. As suggested above, one main problem is that the research framework may be too strict. Although rigidity may enhance the ability to conduct such research, flexibility is also important. For example, in executing this methodology, scholars may find that they need to add or omit components of the definitions, extend the time period, or refer to other utterances of the discourse. Although flexibility is not idiosyncratic to modern constructivist research, the need to avoid too much rigidity (while having some rigidity) stems from the fact that constructivism should be very attentive to nuances. The framework and the definitions are thus guidelines to improve the research and are not aims in themselves. In other words, we should work with them rather than be coerced by them.

And finally, following from the epistemology and pluralistic methodology of this article, scholars may suggest other combinations of methods for performing a modern constructivist study with the aim of providing systematic ways to 'tell the two stories'.[126] Furthermore, the findings of such research can be extended by using other methodologies: for example, as Hopf suggests, large-n surveys or ethnographic participant-fieldwork.[127]

[126] In other words, and following Klotz and Lynch, there is no one correct way to pursue research, Klotz and Lynch, *Strategies for Research*, p. 23.
[127] Hopf, *Social Construction*, pp. 270–1.

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