

## Norms Are What States Make of Them: The Political Psychology of Norm Violation

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I examine why states violate norms they embrace as members of international society. The rationalist answer, that norms are violated whenever they conflict with interests, is underspecified and empirically challenged. Constructivists cannot address violations well from their structural, sociological perspective. I argue from political psychology that violations stem from the motivated biases of actors who face a moral dilemma between personal desires and social constraints. These biases compel leaders to interpret norms and situations in a manner that justifies violation as socially acceptable. The ability to do so depends on the norm and the situation. The more parameters a norm possesses, and the more ambiguous those parameters are, the easier it is for actors to interpret them favorably to justify violation. Oftentimes norms are what states make of them. If the situation is plausible for states to claim exemption, they violate; otherwise they are constrained. The U.S. invasion of Panama illustrates these dynamics.

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*A breach of custom naturally presents us with a puzzle.*

—Bruce Andrews (1975:536)

Why and when do states violate the international norms they otherwise embrace as members of international society? The rationalist answer—that states violate norms whenever norms conflict with national interests—is underspecified in its ability to say *a priori* when such an occasion occurs. Rationalists also cannot explain evidence of moral restraint where utilitarian logic may have suggested another course. Constructivists, who have brought the norms debate to the fore in the 1990s, explain patterns of conformity better than instances of violation, given their sociological focus on structure and obligatory action.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than grant motivational primacy to the social-structural constraints of constructivism or selfish gratification of rationalism, I suggest a psychological argument that places human action at the crossroads of individual and social needs and constraints. Using an interactionist perspective, whereby state leaders

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<sup>1</sup> “Constructivists” in this article are those Hopf (1998:172) refers to as “conventional constructivists,” distancing themselves from the postmodern epistemology of critical theory.

pursue interests, process information, and make decisions “in an environment structured by social and organizational systems to which one belongs” (Tetlock, 1992:336), I assume that accountable leaders have political and psychological reasons for being sensitive to social expectations. Given this, norm conformity is the default option: norms provide simple organizing and decision rules for acting safely in one’s milieu, and conformity helps one maintain positive social reinforcement and self-esteem. Norm violation requires first that a conflict arises between leaders’ perceived “national interests” and a given norm, motivating them to perceive a situation in a way that would free them from a norm’s constraints. But leaders who value their standing in international society seek to avoid negative social judgments and are likely to violate the norm only if there is room for interpretation of the norm or the situation. If the norm and situation are ambiguous enough, motivated decision-makers may perceive the situation in a way that allows them to feel exempt from its moral weight. Due to the fuzzy nature of many norms and situations, and due to the imperfect interpretation of such norms by human agency, oftentimes norms are what states (meaning, state leaders) make of them. Other norms have no such wiggle room, and some situations are not credible instances that justify the abandonment of the norm. In such cases, one is likely not to violate due to the political and psychological costs of engaging in untoward behavior.

The implications of such dynamics, if substantiated, are that norms are not as powerful as the sociological school thinks, nor as weak as rationalists think. The following, though, is not a condemnation of rationalism or constructivism, but an attempt to bridge the logics of both through a dialogue from political psychology. Actors feel both obligated to conform to social expectations and compelled to pursue individual (or national) drives. The interplay of individual and social needs suggests consequences not readily identifiable by perspectives that ignore one or the other.

Neither is the following about selfishness versus altruism. Obligatory action can be reduced to utilitarian calculations of social needs, or the pursuit of “self-interest” can be defined as a norm itself, leaving such debates as unproductive as they are unnecessary (Keohane, 1984; Simon, 1995; Tetlock, 1998:884). Normative behavior can occur for both instrumental and “expressive” reasons (Tetlock, 1992; Baumeister, 1998:704). The approach I take assumes that decisions are purposive—in that they attempt to meet various needs—but are not necessarily conscious utilitarian calculations (Cialdini and Trost, 1998:151). The task is to identify personal and social motivations and the circumstances that make one or another likely to prevail. After conceptualizing norms and laying out the existing debate on violation, I develop my argument of how motivated agents try to negotiate ambiguous norms and situations, illustrating the process in the case of the U.S. invasion of Panama.

### **Norms: Conceptual Elaboration**

Norms have recently gained prominence in the international politics literature. Much of the constructivist work has explored how various norms have emerged over time (Nadelman, 1990; Price, 1995, 1998; Finnemore, 1996b) and how such norms, once formed, impact states (Klotz, 1995a, 1995b). Despite the burgeoning literature’s contribution, even constructivists concede that the work has lacked the specification of causal mechanisms and scope conditions (Ruggie, 1998:883). As I seek to contribute to this task below, it is healthy to revisit the concept of norms itself.

Norms are defined here as “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors within a given identity” (Katzenstein, 1996:5). Norms can regulate behavior as well as be constitutive of actor identity and interests (Jepperson et al.,

1996:54; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:891). There are norms that help states coordinate and collaborate so as to maximize utilities (Keohane, 1984; Goertz and Diehl, 1992:640), as well as those that are “irreducible to rationality or indeed to any other form of optimizing mechanism” (Kratochwil, 1984:700; Elster, 1989:15). There are norms at all levels of social life—domestic (Andrews, 1975), regional (Barnett, 1996/97), or global (Nadelman, 1990).

Whatever the norm, all have two components important for our discussion: prescription and parameters. The prescription (or proscription) is the part of the norm informing actors within an identity what to do (or what not to do). “Thou shalt not kill,” for example, is a proscriptive norm. The parameters of a norm indicate under what situations the norm’s prescription applies (Andrews, 1975:528; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993:10–11). Most norms stipulate conditions under which behaviors are and are not allowable,<sup>2</sup> so that the norm may now read “thou shalt not kill *except in self-defense*.” Fearon’s definition—“*good people do (or do not do) X in situations A, B, C*”—captures well the notions of prescription and parameters (in Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:892). One must consider both prescription and parameters when discussing norm violations, for an act is only a violation if it occurs outside acceptable circumstances. Prescriptions and parameters are important as well because, as I show, both are vulnerable to subjective interpretation by actors—interpretations that can allow even the most avid embracers of abstract norms to violate them in practice.

My focus is not on norms that maximize the efficiencies of states but on those “conduct-guiding” devices whose moral authority transcends “purely self-interested concerns” (Kratochwil, 1984:700; see also Elster, 1989). This focus allows us to ponder “moral dilemmas” in which self-defined interests conflict with external ideational pressures, a contrast that—while not always a problem<sup>3</sup>—nonetheless can occur and thus should be explored for practical and methodological purposes (Goertz and Diehl, 1992:644; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993:26–27). The contrast also allows us to specify the contexts within which constructivism’s “explanatory features can be expected to take effect” (Ruggie, 1998:883). Among the effects norms are purported to have is behavioral conformity. Delving into the question of why states violate norms, we should as well understand why states are expected to comply with norms in the first place. After reviewing and critiquing rationalist and constructivist perspectives, I argue for the value of a psychological approach to norm conformity *and* violation.

## Perspectives on Conformity and Violation

### *Rationalism and Constructivism*

None deny the existence of norms. Rather, the prime source of debate in the literature concerns the impact of norms on international behavior. *Rationalists* approach norms from the perspective of utilitarianism. *Constructivists*, arguing from the sociological perspective and stressing obligatory action, assert that norms exert powerful influence on the shaping of state behavior, making actors understand what is acceptable in international society. I take each in turn.

Rationalists, or “neo-utilitarians” (Ruggie, 1998), follow what March and Olsen (1989, 1998) call the “logic of expected consequences.” This logic is individualist in orientation, where rational, cost-benefit calculations drive actors to meet their desired goals. To comply with or violate a norm is a simple matter of whether

<sup>2</sup> Most, but not all. Some norms may be absolutes, meaning no conditions permit the action proscribed by the norm. Nadelman (1990:483–484) discusses and illustrates the “universal nature” of some norms. I discuss the implications for potential violation below.

<sup>3</sup> Norms may be consistent with, and even alter conceptions of, self-defined interests.

compliance meets an actor's defined interests. Within this ontological framework there are two variants dominant in international relations: realism and neoliberalism.

Realists argue that norms are of trivial importance in explaining world politics. An epiphenomenon of the interests of the powerful (Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 1995:340–43; Schweller and Preiss, 1997:11–13), norms carry little independent causal weight. States comply with norms when it suits their interests and violate norms when they conflict with defined interests. Thompson (1980:179) argues that nations “define international morality to coincide with the demands of national survival” and that norms “are preemptory only when national interest is not endangered.” “Reasons of state” prevail over norms due to the decentralized nature of international society, the “sanctionless nature of much international law,” and the relative weight of nationalism and sovereignty (Morgenthau, 1978:248–58, 281; Thompson, 1980:8, 179). Morgenthau (1978:257) insists nationalism not only trumps international morality but has weakened moral rules “to the point of ineffectiveness”—that international society ceased “to operate within a common framework of moral precepts.” This latter claim seems overstated, given the number of norms and rules in existence. The effectiveness of such moral norms requires empirical exploration rather than casual assertion.

Realists cannot assess *a priori*, or without resort to non-falsifiable *ad hoc* interpretations, when the cost-benefit scale of interest calculations tips against norms. And if conformity were purely instrumental, this leaves unsettled situations where no material interests are served. It may be less than optimal to, say, engage in sanctions or multilateral interventions in far-off places that have no material benefit (Finnemore, 1996b; Desch, 1998). Various examples have been presented of states acting on normative concerns in the absence of material interests, or constrained by norms despite possible utilitarian value of violation,<sup>4</sup> suggesting norms play an independent role in foreign policy behavior. Morgenthau (1978:237) concedes that “certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier” that does not “permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency.” This puzzle cannot be addressed from the pure power-maximizing model of classical realism.

Neoliberal institutionalists also start with the assumption of rational, selfish actors in an anarchic world, but they argue that norms, institutions, and regimes have power in constraining actors (Keohane, 1984). Norms and institutions facilitate commitments and compliance through monitoring and sanctions as well as “non-power factors” of transparency, communication, and the shadow of the future (Axelrod, 1986:1107; Axelrod and Keohane, 1993:91–94; Mitchell, 1994:456–57). The value added here is the ability to explain norm compliance when doing so means foregoing short-term material interests. The long time horizons generated by institutionalized relationships change the payoff matrix to account for long-run absolute gains and the reputational costs of violating norms.

These costs, nonetheless, reflect considerations of material, individual gain. Neoliberals do not directly address moral norms, and they focus on norm compliance within specific regimes and institutions rather than global norms *per se*. Ultimately, neoliberal institutionalism remains a rationalist model of (long-term) self-interest: norms facilitate market efficiency, are by definition compatible with interests,<sup>5</sup> and are followed and institutionalized because the “benefits outweigh the opportunity costs of not acting on short-run interests” (Klotz, 1995a:457). Compliance decisions, as with realists, are related to calculations of self-interest,

<sup>4</sup> Desch (1998:159–66) critiques such cases, arguing they are not tests of conflicts with interests, are not clearly distinguishable from interest explanations, or do not have unambiguous findings.

<sup>5</sup> Interests as defined by neoliberals, meaning absolute economic gains. Neorealists have debated neoliberals over the primacy of absolute and relative gains (Baldwin, 1993).

and thus are subject to the same criticisms realists face. Despite their differences, then, for the following discussion I will refer to rationalist approaches as a whole—sharing the common logic of consequences—in contrast to constructivism.

Evidence from constructivism points to the influence of norms on states in the absence of material interests. Though there are variations of “constructivism,” I focus on those who work from the sociological perspective and embrace “ontological realism,” whereby reality is acknowledged to exist but whose meaning derives from collective understandings or “social facts” (Adler, 1997).<sup>6</sup> This approach grounds action in the “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen, 1989:21–26; Finnemore, 1996a:29), whereby states take cues from the social environment to determine how to behave and what interests and identity to claim (Wendt, 1995:71–73; Jepperson, et al., 1996:52–60). Norms (re)constitute interests and define “a range of legitimate policy options” (Klotz, 1995a:461–62; Finnemore, 1996b:158), limiting some means and ends while promoting others.

For constructivists, states “learn” (Adler, 1991:52; Finnemore, 1996a) about expectations of appropriate behavior from other states, international organizations, and NGOs (Kratochwil, 1984, 1989; Adler, 1991; Finnemore, 1996a). This socialization is presumed to operate through (1) the emulation of other, successful states; (2) praise by states and other actors for conformity; (3) ridicule for deviation; and (4) diplomatic and economic pressure<sup>7</sup> to “induce norm breakers to become norm followers” (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:902–4; see also Waltz, 1979; Florini, 1996). Complying with norms brings “social worth” (Ron, 1997:277) and the psychological benefits of self- and national esteem that accrue, while violation is met with disapproval, social isolation, and its impact on “esteem” (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:902). At some point norms become internalized so that conformity is not a matter of conscious choice but of second nature.

There are three problems with the sociological approach: (1) the broad claims of structural variables and subsequent inability to account for deviations; (2) the assumption that norms are clearly, commonly understood by actors; and (3) the focus on norms as decision shortcuts, to the exclusion of other possibilities. First, by focusing on the consistency produced by social structures, constructivist claims about the power of norms can seem sweeping. Barnett (1996/97:598), for one, suggests that “modern states do not . . . settle differences through war, violate basic human rights, and so on.” The problem is that states *do* sometimes settle their differences through war and *do* sometimes violate basic human rights. Though not cultural determinists (Blake and Davis, 1965:461–62; Swidler, 1986; DiMaggio, 1997) in their claims about norms (Finnemore, 1996b:158, 160; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:914), the emphasis on structure leaves them ill-equipped to address violations. Structures—political or social—are too broad and constant to capture the variation in state behavior. “To argue that the international environment determines a state’s behavior,” observes Jervis (1976:18), “is to assert that all states react similarly to the same objective external situation.” While most actors behave similarly most of the time within a structure, it is not always the case. Some have responded to structural realism by introducing perceptions and other cognitive variables to answer the “why questions” of process

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<sup>6</sup> An alternative, “critical constructivism,” operates from a constitutive epistemology that rejects the positivist assumptions of an observable reality. For them, nothing can be understood outside the context and language of participants, rendering norms to be what states and actors intersubjectively make of them under contingent power-knowledge dynamics. Norms, rather than being objective “things,” are products of discourse, sometimes the pervasive hegemonic discourse of the powerful. For an example of problematizing norms of sovereignty and nonintervention see Weber, 1995. For a discussion of similarities and differences between conventional and critical constructivism see works by Wendt (1995), Adler (1997), Hopf (1998), and Price and Reus-Smit (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, the authors do not mention coercive instruments as a means to bring about compliance, despite their use in world affairs—legitimate and otherwise—to bring about alterations in undesirable behavior (e.g., the Just War principle to roll back invaders of sovereign states).

and account for variation that structure cannot (Jervis, 1976:13; Walt, 1987; Herrmann, 1988). Similar steps are needed for norm-related behavior.

Second, it is taken as unproblematic that “shared expectations” are literally clear, common understandings of what the prescriptions and parameters of norms are. As with the rationalist assumption of perfect information, this ignores the mediating role of agents in receiving and interpreting messages from the environment (Jervis, 1976; Simon, 1985). The “message” of social structure must be received through the filter of human agency. Humans are not omniscient observers of reality; they are imperfect interpreters of it. Whether a norm’s prescriptions and parameters are understood in a given situation is up to the perceiver, with all associated cognitive limits and biases.

Finally, constructivists (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998) and others (Keohane, 1984:110–32; Florini, 1996:367; Vertzberger, 1998:60–65), have suggested norm conformity rests on cognitive foundations as shortcuts to successful action. This may be true at times, but other cognitive shortcuts can also impact decision-making processes, including whether norms are even invoked. The lack of a more carefully specified microfoundation on which norm structures are based contributes to the inability to discern when agents comply with or violate those norms.

#### *The Case for Political Psychology*

Despite the theoretical lines drawn, there is nothing inherently mutually exclusive between the logics of consequences and of appropriateness—decisions may be influenced by both self-centered calculations and an awareness of social constraints (Chayes and Chayes, 1993:177; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:914; March and Olsen, 1998:952).<sup>8</sup> The puzzle is to explain the role of each in the decision process, something neither rationalism nor constructivism does very well. I suggest an interactionist perspective that, akin to DiMaggio’s (1997:277) call, “embeds the logics in the interaction between mental structures instantiated in practical reason on the one hand and institutional requirements on the other.” In this framework, choice results from the interaction of agent and structure, whereby motivated yet accountable agents pursue goals with an eye toward what is acceptable according to the prevailing social structure. Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1962) refer to this as *statecraft*: “the art of combining the desirable and the justifiable” (in Tetlock, 1992:342).

Research on decision-making shortcuts and self-presentation offers insights into how agents deal with the psychological needs underlying constructivist logic: (1) organize and simplify reality for the purpose of effective action; (2) build and maintain social approval from one’s peers; and (3) maintain and enhance one’s self-image and esteem (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). The interplay of these needs with one’s perceptions and situation has an impact on the decision to conform with or violate norms.

First, the need to organize and understand the complex milieu within which one maneuvers is fundamental to the ability to act effectively. White (1959) suggests that this “effectance” motivation is an adaptive strategy allowing people to understand and interact with others (Cialdini and Trost, 1998:155). In response to this need, actors behave as “naive scientists” trying to deduce how the world works and why agents do what they do. The “boundedly rational” actor (Simon, 1985) often relies on cognitive shortcuts to organize their world and reach decisions, especially in situations of limited time and incomplete or ambiguous information (Larson, 1985:36–37). Reliance on decision rules, such as heuristics

<sup>8</sup> Ruggie (1998:867) also does not see them as incompatible, suggesting constructivism shows from where interests come, which is “what happens before the neo-utilitarian model kicks in.”

and schema, simplifies reality to allow quick actions. Though norms can serve as conduct-guiding decision shortcuts, other cognitive shortcuts may direct both one's behavior and one's situational understanding of norms. Thus, whether norms or something else is guiding behavior needs to be ascertained in order to understand when norm conformity is likely.

A second line of research clarifying the psychological stakes of norm compliance has to do with social approval needs. As a member of an identity group, one desires to enhance one's social image, seeking the approval and respect from peer members (Blake and Davis, 1965:479; Tetlock, 1992:338). Self-presentation—"behaving so as to prevent changing others' impressions of one" (Goffman, 1967; see also 1959)—is deemed a universal concern stemming from the accountability actors face within the social structure to which they belong (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Tetlock, 1992:336–37; Baumeister, 1998). The need for positive evaluations by others causes people to be socially aware of their actions, developing and maintaining social networks to further these psychological (Cialdini and Trost, 1998:151, 160) as well as instrumental needs (Bull, 1977; Tetlock, 1992). Conversely, people try to avoid provoking negative social judgments. The "threat of attribution of negatively valued identity characteristics" (Backman, 1985:264) inhibits one's consideration of norm violation. But at times a motivated actor can define a situation in a way that absolves them of normative constraints, thinking that others will understand the violation to be a legitimate exemption.

Finally, people have a need to maintain positive self-images. The desire to evaluate oneself positively and enhance one's self-esteem leads people to behave in accordance with their own values, including internalized norms (Snyder, 1985; Abrams and Hogg, 1988:43; Brewer and Miller, 1996:14; Baumeister, 1998). Once norms are "integrated into one's self-concept," Cialdini and Trost (1998:160) report, "future normative behavior represents conforming to one's own expectations of self, leading to feelings of self-esteem" (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Thus self-presentation serves both external and "internal" audiences (Snyder, 1985:237). While this often promotes norm conformity, a positive self-concept can be maintained by other means. The motivation to bolster self-esteem can lead to ego-defensive strategies or self-deception tactics that absolve oneself for counternormative behavior in advance (Backman, 1985; Herrmann, 1988; Baumeister, 1998:690). I suggest how different mental strategies influence conforming and violating behavior.

These three needs—to organize one's environment and maintain social and self esteem—can be complementary. Garnering wide societal approval can further effective action, and such social worth can enhance one's self-image. But other decision shortcuts can sometimes fulfill these needs. Belief-driven and motivated perceptions can affect the definition of a situation, including norms. I show how actors resolve moral dilemmas, based on the dynamics by which they organize and understand reality, struggle to avoid negative social judgments, and maintain a positive self-image.

### **A Framework for Resolving Moral Dilemmas**

The realm of possible norm violation is not infinite. We can locate likely violations by considering a spectrum of situations where, at one end, norm conformity results for lack of any conflicts of interest and, at the other end, normative constraints do not exist amidst the compulsion of interests (see Figure 1). At each end of this spectrum there is an absence of conflict between norms and other values, and action is either utter norm-driven obligatory action or unfettered, utilitarian action. Between these two extremes, when leaders' perceived "national interests" challenge expectations of appropriate behavior, policy will reflect the

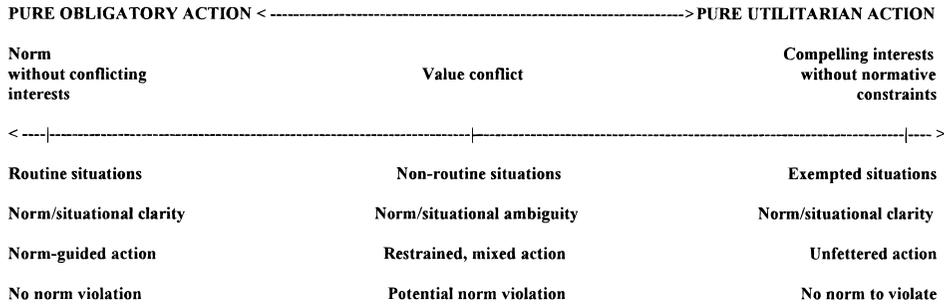


FIG. 1. The spectrum of choice.

tension of normative constraint and the desire to act—what Backman (1985) calls a “moral dilemma.” Policy will seek to please all audiences, and action will be mixed and constrained as leaders wrestle with competing personal and social needs. It is in this gray area where norm violations may occur.

Whether norm violation occurs depends on the interplay of the individual will and social ability to violate. Actors must feel justified to violate a norm to satisfy themselves and the need for a positive self-image, by interpreting the norm and the situation in a way that makes them feel exempt. As political creatures needing social approval, they must also sell this violation to their domestic and international audiences, or be able to deny the violation (for instance, through covert operations). The ability to deny, justify, or excuse untoward behavior to oneself and others depends on two things: the norm itself and the situation at hand. First, does the norm have parameters, or is it a universal? If it has parameters, are they interpretable, malleable, or elastic in the minds of decision-makers? Second, does the situation at hand provide actors with a plausible outlet based on the norm’s parameters? If the answer to each of these latter questions is no, can the actor violate the norm in secret, offering deniability to external audiences? If the situation is not amenable to denial, an actor is unlikely to violate (see Figure 2).

In short, violation is motivated by self-interest, but is permitted by the nature of the norm and the situation, which conditions one’s ability to define a situation in a way that allows socially accepted violation. I now turn briefly to the variable “willingness to violate norms,” based on psychological needs and the manner in which actors organize and simplify reality in order to act. I then discuss the variable ability of them to legitimate the action, a function of perceptions constrained by structural considerations (the norm itself) and the contextual situation.

*The Will to Violate*

While conformity in the absence of value conflict is no puzzle, it is instructive to examine the logic behind it as the baseline from which violations deviate. Conformity serves instrumental and psychological functions of social approval, self-esteem, and the organization of reality for effective action. As discussed, the cognitively limited actor relies on mental shortcuts to organize their world and reach decisions. Norms can serve as such shortcuts. Representing what is “appropriate” in the prevailing social structure, norms indicate pathways likely to bring positive feedback to actors, and provide a reasonable heuristic for successful action (Florini, 1996; Cialdini and Trost, 1998:154–55).

Norm conformity also meets the need of social approval. By definition, norms reflect society’s consensus about appropriate behavior. Conforming to such behav-

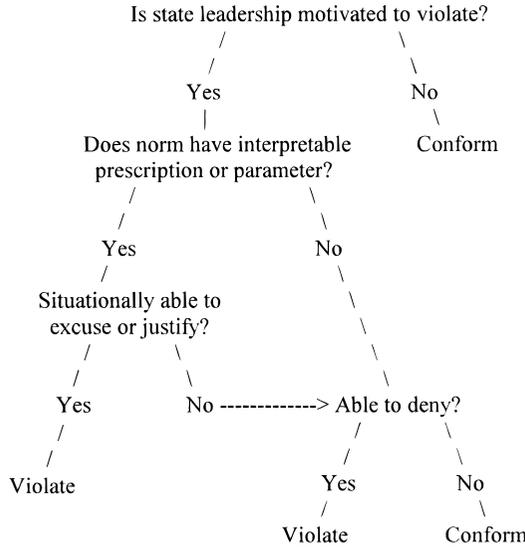


FIG. 2. Framework for decision: conform or violate?

ior thus enhances one’s image in the eyes of peers, whereas violation of such standards risks generating social disapproval. One’s actions become predicated on the notion of normative legitimacy, not merely through the lens of utility (Vertzberger, 1998:130–31). The *acceptability heuristic* biases action toward conformity, suggesting the easiest way to meet psychological needs is to “make decisions that one is confident others will accept . . . based on what is justifiable to those to whom you are accountable” (Tetlock, 1992:340–42). Following group norms enhances one’s social image within an identity group.

Along with this social need to save face socially is the ego-defensive need to retain a positive self-image (Snyder, 1985). Social approval and disapproval is a major component of one’s ability to maintain a positive self-image. Once internalized, norms become “integrated into one’s self-concept, and future normative behavior represents conforming to one’s own expectations of self, leading to feelings of self-esteem” (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Cialdini and Trost, 1998:160). People have a basic need to evaluate themselves positively and feel good about who they are (Steele, 1988; Leary, 1995). Motivated to retain a positive self-image, it is easier to feel good about yourself when your peers embrace you than when they shun you. But decision-makers are also accountable to themselves, so one’s values and conscience must be considered. It is difficult to consider policies that conflict with one’s values (Backman, 1985; Tetlock, 1992). Thus, a precondition to norm violation is a process of self-diagnosticsity (Vertzberger, 1998:55) and the emergence of a prevailing view among decision-makers that such an action is defensible personally.

There are other reasons to expect norm conformity beyond the psychological benefits. There are strategic and instrumental reasons, such as when compliance brings foreign aid or avoids sanctions. There is also a natural tendency toward not rocking the boat. This *omission bias* suggests people prefer the status quo, all things equal, rather than to initiate new, deviant courses that may lead to problems (Spranca, 1991; Baron, 1994; Vertzberger, 1998:55). These multiple reasons to conform make norm conformity, not surprisingly, the standard in international behavior. Norm conformity helps organize reality and direct action in favorable directions for cognitively limited actors, enhances social relationships

and positive evaluations from peers, and helps maintain and bolster self-esteem. It is psychologically fulfilling, efficient, and carries the rewards of compliance and avoids the punishments of deviance. To violate, then, requires overcoming many obstacles.

Yet actors are not *only* concerned with social expectations of appropriate behavior. They are motivated by many values, including the pursuit of interests whose means and ends may not jibe with expected appropriate behavior. This tension between the self and the social compels one to attempt to construct a definition of a situation that “facilitates the achievement of desirable outcomes” and at the same time “allows for the maintenance of a favorable situated identity” (Backman, 1985:264; Tetlock, 1992). As mentioned earlier, norms are not objectively understood and applied; they are subject to mediating agent processes. Before a norm can be a conduct-guiding device, it must be situationally perceived and enacted. Actors being generally “theory-driven” more than data-driven (Jervis, 1986:496; Koopman, Snyder, and Jervis, 1990), prior beliefs and cognitive-affective biases influence state leaders’ interpretations of situations and other actors (Jervis, 1986:496–98; Herrmann, 1988:183) and thus impact upon decisions, including whether to violate norms.

But to violate a norm one needs to resolve the moral dilemma posed by the imbalanced state of the motivation to violate, on the one hand, and the social constraints of acceptable behavior on the other (Heider, 1958; Herrmann, 1988). To engage in norm violation without pangs of guilt, the mind must justify the act, to balance the desire to violate with social pressures not to violate. *Images* are a common type of organizing cognitive device that serves this ego-defensive function. They are cognitive schemata reflecting a subject’s mental representation of another actor in the political world (Herrmann and Fischerkeller, 1995:415). Held individually or shared among decision elites, images simplify and organize one’s surroundings, and influence the interpretation of events and the applicability of norms in particular situations. If one sees another as a threatening enemy, the actor may conclude that the use of force is not a violation of a norm but an exercise in “self-defense.”

Images result from the dissonance created by the value conflict of moral restraint on other desires,<sup>9</sup> and serve to balance decision-makers’ affective sentiments toward an actor with a cognitive picture of that actor (Heider, 1958; Herrmann, 1988:182–83). “Sentiment” is derived from the relationship between a state’s instrumental goals and the perceived target. That target can be a threat to one’s perceived goals, an opportunity to be exploited to meet those goals, or one who jointly benefits from the goals. Though there are many images (Herrmann and Fischerkeller, 1995), I refer to those indicating joint gains as positive images and those reflecting threats and opportunities as negative images, suggesting the valence of one’s sentiments. It is these latter, negative images, that are associated with norm violation. Herrmann (1988:183) suggests that

perceived threats and perceived opportunities both incline a subject to act, and put pressure on the cognitive processes related to defining a situation. The result is a tendency to construct an image of the situation for personal and public consumption that releases the subject from moral inhibitions and allows the subject to deal with the threat or opportunity without restraint.

In other words, norms that state leaders accept in principle become filtered situationally by those leaders’ motivated perceptions of the other actor in the situation.

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<sup>9</sup> Note that this differs from purely cognitive treatments of images (Rosati, 1987; Cottam, 1994), though cognitive and affective models are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Images linked to threats or opportunities can render the abstract norm inapplicable in the concrete context, “releasing the subject from moral inhibitions” and allowing norm violation. Targets are “exempt” from moral consideration because they are perceived to have directly threatened or injured the subject (self-defense) or because they lie outside normative parameters by virtue of their status as a socially unacceptable group (e.g., “terrorists”) subject to ethnocentric double-standards (Scott and Lyman, 1968:51; Brewer and Miller, 1996). Intense negative affect toward another group can lead to “self-deceiving value delusions” regarding parameters or prescriptions, reducing “values to personal tastes” (Martin, 1986:35). Dehumanization, viewing others en bloc as “subhuman” or “non-human,” allows the perceiver to carry out violence against people “free from the restraints of conscience” (Bernard et al., 1971:102–3). “Human rights,” predicated on a definition of “human” that in principle includes all humanity (Finnemore, 1996b), in practice depends on one’s view of a given group. To the Nazis, Jews were dehumanized and thus not subject to civilized rules of conduct. Contemporary examples tragically persist from Rwanda to Kosovo.

The will to violate, then, depends on convincing the decision-maker or decision group that such a course is acceptable. Legitimate policy, Vertzberger (1998:63) explains, requires the perceptions and preferences of the decision-making group to be “broadly shared. . . . [T]ransformation from individual perceptions and preferences to shared cognitions requires a stimulus that triggers a convergence of cognitive and affective responses among the members.”<sup>10</sup> Three stimuli facilitate the crystallization of a prevailing view amenable to norm violation: (1) dramatic events, especially as (2) a culmination of events (Rosati, 1987); and (3) changes in personnel (Spiegel, 1991:274–78). Motivated biases emerging from events invoking fear, anger, or desire and can push actors to “interpret . . . obligations in terms of their . . . own interests” (Blake and Davis, 1965:470; Kier and Mercer, 1996:89). The images or biases precede consideration of the abstract norm so that the norm may never be invoked, or, if it is, the actor believes itself not to be violating social expectations at all. Rather than a structural ideational force imposing itself on states, norms interact with agents and are contextually activated based in part on one’s image of the other in a situation. Norms become what decision leaders make of them.

The above argument shows people’s potential for creative, subconscious interpretations of one’s normative environment, in the effort to free oneself from a moral dilemma. What it does not specify is the conditions under which these interpretations are more or less likely to occur. The needs for cognitive organization and a positive self-image can be resolved by cognitive balancing and similar self-deception tactics (Heider, 1958; Herrmann, 1988), but positive self- and social approval requires that both the norm and situation be amenable to what would be seen not as violation but norm exemption. Without parameters to misperceive, norms cannot be creatively reinterpreted. Without a credible situation that allows the potential violator to justify its action, norms cannot be violated without risk of social disapproval.

#### *The Ability to Violate*

For a motivated, accountable actor to violate a norm, there must be a credible opportunity to claim exemption from the norm. Given social needs, actors vio-

<sup>10</sup> Note the similarity in language of psychological and constructivist readings. Adler (1991:59) similarly states that “the world is hence made sensible by interpreting agents who create collective understandings that acquire a life of their own as ‘objective’ products, thus generating policy responses.” Prevailing views among state elites bring personal beliefs together to produce intersubjective understandings of the world. Images are the result.

late norms only with an invocation of an *account* (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Backman, 1985:263; Sykes and Matza, 1990) that resolves the moral dilemma in the minds of actors as well as (actors hope) the audiences to whom they feel accountable. Accounts “explain unanticipated or untoward behavior” (Scott and Lyman, 1968:46) that can bring personal discomfort and disrupt the social order of an identity group by making conduct unpredictable and offenders untrustworthy. They attempt to retain or restore social trust, explaining deviant behavior while upholding the norm from which the actor has deviated.

There are four types of accounts—apologies, denials, excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman, 1968). An *apology* recognizes fault for an inappropriate act, leading to a plea for forgiveness. These situations mostly reflect accidents and idiosyncratic events not amenable to systematic analysis. A *denial* acknowledges neither the untoward act nor responsibility for it, and is limited to actions about which nobody (decision-makers hope) finds out. Covert operations are an example of denial. *Excuses* attempt to mitigate or relieve responsibility for the conduct in question. If a state can claim the decision was forced or “out of their hands,” a resort to excuses may result. This is a tall order when sovereign leaders set policy for nations, but at times actions are taken without permission or under the pressure of a stronger (patron) state. More common are *justifications*, whereby actors accept responsibility for an act but deny the pejorative quality associated with it. Justifications appeal to the nature of the norm’s prescriptions and parameters for their effect. Common among them is the *denial of victim*, which argues that the target deserved what happened according to an interpretation of a norm’s prescriptions or parameters—for example, claiming self-defense for a resort to arms (Scott and Lyman, 1968:46–51).

Most who study accounts treat them as strategic explanations after the act has been committed, but I join others (Backman, 1985:280–81; Herrmann, 1988; Sykes and Matza, 1990:207) who suggest the process of justifying violations occurs in the actors’ minds prior to committing the act. Accounts resolve moral dilemmas by constructing a definition of the situation that “facilitates the achievement of desirable outcomes or the avoidance of undesirable ones [while] allowing the maintenance of a favorable situated identity” (Backman, 1985:262–64; see also Kratochwil, 1989:133; Sykes and Matza, 1990:207). While value conflicts spark an incentive to find accounts that allow people to sidestep the norm in socially acceptable ways, what allows accounts to become available are (1) the structure of the norm and (2) the situation at hand.

The ability to exempt oneself from norm compliance is partly a function of the norm itself. Norms exist in the abstract, often formalized in international law, treaties and codes, and are instantiated (and their meaning negotiated) in social practice and through communicative action (Kratochwil, 1984, 1989). To take effect in a concrete sense, though, norms must be interpreted and applied by humans. A subjective interpretation of what a norm’s prescriptions and parameters “really mean,” or of whether a situation reflects a norm’s definition of parameters, is unavoidable (Kier and Mercer, 1996:87–89). State leaders define the norm and situation *as they see them* in any particular instance. To the degree that such prescriptions and parameters are situationally limited, undefined, or ambiguous, accounts come more easily to the motivated actor. Specificity (Legro, 1997:34–35) has an obvious role in allowing for different interpretations to arise. The less specific the norm, the easier it is for actors to justify violations in the fuzzy language of a norm’s prescriptions and parameters. A clearly articulated, codified norm offers fewer accounts by which an actor within an identity can violate and maintain social integrity. A universal norm with no acceptable parameters—such as the norm against colonialism—offers no room for justifications, and thus enjoys greater compliance by those within international society (Kratochwil, 1989:73; Florini, 1996:376; Legro, 1997). In Kier and Mercer’s (1996:94)

words, “‘never’ is better than ‘sometimes’” in terms of normative parameters and their effect on compliance.

The ability for creative interpretation is also conditioned by the credibility of a given situation as a source for the generation of a normative account. For example, though the parameter exists in the nuclear taboo that allows nuclear weapons to be used in retaliation against a nuclear strike, a situation must approach such conditions for decision-makers to consider exemption seriously. One cannot credibly use nuclear weapons and claim it to be retaliation against another’s first strike if such a first strike did not actually occur. In these cases, then, norms are less what states make of them.

Consider an alternative example: the norm of nonintervention. Even when states understand a norm in the abstract—that states are not allowed to use force against other states (proscription) except in self-defense or as part of a repelling force against an aggressor (parameters)—the concrete realization of this norm is fraught with the imprecision. The malleable nature of defining (1) the prescription (what is “use force?”); (2) the parameters (what is “self-defense”? what is an “aggressor?”); or (3) the particular situation in which one finds oneself (is this an example of “self-defense”? is that an “aggressor?”) facilitates the generation of accounts where one willfully or otherwise violates the norm out of a motivated, biased interpretation of any or all of these three facets. With an account available, violation can occur because the violator believes to be acting under acceptable exemption, thus not in danger of social disapproval and not threatening to one’s positive self-image. This does not mean that disapproval is not forthcoming, only that a motivated actor in some situations can *believe* they are acting in a socially acceptable way. With all three needs met, and moral dilemmas resolved, violation occurs as easily as conformity did before.

Norm violation, for an actor willfully part of international society, requires that the norm allow for interpretations of its application, that the situation allow for an account based on such interpretations, and that an actor be motivated to generate such an account. The motivated biases of actors, in interaction with the structural constraints of normative parameters and prescriptions, create expectations for how moral dilemmas are resolved and when they are resolved by norm violations. I illustrate these processes with an examination of the U.S. invasion of Panama.

### **The Case of the U.S. Invasion of Panama**

To exemplify how leaders can be constrained by norms as well as how they creatively interpret them under some circumstances, consider the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989. Despite the international consensus that the invasion violated international law and the norm against forceful intervention into a sovereign state, the U.S. defended Operation Just Cause as a justified response of self-defense against a thug whose underlings threatened and abused U.S. citizens in Panama. Yet, despite Bush’s stated interest in removing Noriega from power, it was not until December 1989 that the administration felt justified to intervene militarily. Since a plan for intervention already was on the books, and the military was prepared and able to move on relatively short notice, the puzzle becomes why Bush did not act on espoused U.S. interests earlier than he did.

A rationalist explanation would expect the U.S. to act on its wishes, eschewing social concerns about intervention. After exhausting other options, and given the military superiority of the U.S., invasion should have occurred. Yet it did not. The frustrated Bush administration restrained from such action after other options were deemed failures. The sociological perspective would point to such restraint as evidence of prevailing norms against the use of force. This would explain the months without invasion, but of course cannot explain the subsequent interven-

tion. In my framework, the U.S. would have to demonstrate the desire to oust Noriega as well as the ability to generate a credible account for exemption from the norm's parameters in a given situation.

The following shows that, though Bush sought Noriega's ouster through 1989, he was restrained from resorting to military intervention. Part of the reason was the belief that lesser means would work, but restraint continued after hopes of other means being effective vanished in October. A prevailing view of Noriega's Panama as an illegitimate rogue was enough for the decision-making circle, after a change in personnel consolidated the negative image of Panama. Still, without justification for force available for external audiences, military intervention lay in waiting until a dramatic event gave them the justification they needed.

#### *A Note on Method*

In this case study I trace the evolving perceptions and subjective interests of U.S. decision-makers to explore policies considered and chosen over the course of 1989. This allows us to look at internal processes to see what motivations, normative and otherwise, are behind policy choices. The Panama case allows us to control for self-interest, which is constant throughout 1989, while providing variation in compliance behavior, to see if it is due to normative or other considerations, and to see what changes when the decision to violate is made.<sup>11</sup> Many studies treat compliance as a constant or as a longer-term historical dynamic based on the rise and fall of norm strength. The examination of a case over a brief period of time provides the benefits of longitudinal rhythms in perceptions and action related to norm compliance, while controlling for long-term changes in norm-robustness.

To distinguish empirical expectations of our alternative frameworks, we need to ascertain: (1) whether the U.S. understands and embraces the abstract norm in question; (2) whether U.S. policymakers perceive a conflict between goals and the norm; and (3) whether and when the U.S. violates the norm as opposed to resolving the conflict in a socially acceptable fashion. Without the U.S. as a norm adherent in the first place, violation is no surprise. Once adherence and a value conflict are established, though, the timing of norm violation matters. Rationalists would expect intervention after the conflict arises, at least after lesser measures had failed, not bound by normative constraints. Constructivists either expect compliance throughout or remain indeterminate as to when and why violation would occur. Under my framework not only does the decision group need to agree that intervention is acceptable, but a situation needs to arise whereby open intervention is deemed justifiable according to the norm's prescriptions or parameters.

#### *Establishing the U.S. as a Norm Advocate*

If U.S. decision-makers did not subscribe to the norm of nonintervention in the first place, there is no puzzle in the decision to invade Panama. The proscriptive norm forbids "any use of force by one state against the political sovereignty or territorial integrity of another" (Walzer, 1992:51–63). A relatively robust norm by Legro's (1997) standards, nonintervention predates 1945 (durability) and has certainly been widely held and accepted since then (concordance), as codified in the UN Charter and subsequent documents.<sup>12</sup> In its various forms, language is

<sup>11</sup> Goertz and Diehl (1992:641–45) suggest these methodological issues be addressed.

<sup>12</sup> UN Charter Articles 2(1), 2(4), 33, and 124; OAS Charter Articles 18–21; Helsinki Accord of 1975; Rio Treaty on hemispheric security; OAU Charter; Pact of the League of Arab States; UN General Assembly 1965 Declaration on Intervention; 1970 Friendly Relations Declaration (Maechling, 1990:114–16).

consistent in specifying against direct or indirect military intervention in another state (specificity).

The proscription is but half the story; parameters inform actors as to when nonintervention applies. The use of force into the internal affairs of others is acceptable in some situations. Self-defense and the retaliatory “just war” in response to another’s aggression are classic exemptions to nonintervention (Walzer, 1992:62; Welch, 1993). More recently, responses to massive humanitarian abuses, especially if multilateral, have likewise become acceptable (Finnemore, 1996b). Any such response in the above conditions, however, is expected to be proportional, sincere, and necessary (Nanda, et al., 1990:506); in other words, the punishment should fit the crime.

The United States has signed and promoted several documents endorsing the norm of nonintervention both globally and in the hemisphere. It is a signatory and long-time supporter of the UN and OAS Charters, the UN Declaration on Intervention, the Rio Treaty on Hemispheric Security, and the Helsinki Accord (Maechling, 1990:115). It can thus be understood to be aware and acceptant of the expectations of appropriate behavior the norm entails. The question becomes whether and when the U.S. is an adherent to the norm in the case of Panama.

*Perceived Value Conflict: “Noriega Must Go”*

The desire for Noriega’s ouster dates back to the Reagan administration in the latter 1980s. The increased salience of the drug war and a Florida court’s 1988 indictment of Noriega for racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering led to sanctions, frozen assets, and plans to oust the dictator of Panama. Despite the new disdain for the Panamanian leader within the Reagan/Bush circle, there was dissensus over the perception of the situation there, the threat posed by Noriega, and the acceptability of the use of force to settle U.S. demands (Woodward, 1991:83–93; Baker, 1995:177). The debate tilted against the use of force to oust Noriega, with Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci and Joint Chiefs Chair Admiral William Crowe arguing that force could not be justified (Gilboa, 1995/96:548; Powell, 1995:416). Important to understand is that the Reagan, and later Bush, administrations defined the self-defense parameters of the norm, ruling out military intervention as unacceptable except to protect the Canal or U.S. lives (Scranton, 1991:147).

The Bush administration continued to be guided by these understandings of parameters and proportionality. Agreeing that “Noriega must go” (Gilboa, 1995/96:552), Bush nonetheless ruled out overt, massive military intervention in favor of lesser means. The diplomacy, multilateral appeals to the OAU, and economic sanctions reflect an attempt to achieve desired goals in socially acceptable ways, both for efficiency purposes and for lack of a justification to do otherwise. The resort to covert operations on several occasions—ranging from helping opposition candidates to helping Noriega rivals to mount coups (Scheffer, 1992:115; Gilboa, 1995/96:551)—is not surprising, as it reflects the desire to perform unjustifiable acts in the shroud of *denial*—eschewing problems of accountability to external audiences. Part of the reason for hesitancy about the overt use of force was that the decision circle remained divided in their perceptions about the nature of Panama’s government and the threat it posed. Until a common understanding of an actor emerges, policy reflects divisions and compromise. The “colony image” (Herrmann and Fischerkeller, 1995)<sup>13</sup> some had of Panama, viewed as an illegitimate backward state whose people are in need of help, had yet to crystallize fully in the decision elite. As a whole, the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and other political actors were seen in somewhat complex terms as

<sup>13</sup> Cottam (1994:13, chap. 6) uses “dependent” or “client” images for similar phenomena.

autonomous agents. Panama itself was not seen as a lost cause; though Noriega's inner circle was seen as "patently illegitimate," the PDF was still seen as an avenue for dialogue and change (Baker, 1995:185). This division in perspectives inhibited a prevailing view that would allow consideration of military intervention. Invasion against one man, Noriega, was not justifiable as a proportional response.

The only open advocate of force in early 1989 seems to be (SecState) Baker; cautiously undecided were Bush and (SecDef) Cheney; opposed were Joint Chiefs Chair Crowe and Commander-in-chief of U.S. Southern Command (CINC-SOUTH) General Frederick Woerner (Baker, 1995:184). All agreed Noriega was bad, but not all agreed that Panama was a monolithic apparatus, subservient to Noriega's whims—a key aspect of the colony image. After the botched Panamanian elections nullified by Noriega in May 1989, Bush spoke of the problem in terms of a "conflict between Noriega and the people of Panama" (Gilboa, 1995/96:553). Cheney "saw no role for U.S. troops . . . their purpose is not to be involved with deciding who governs Panama" (Scranton, 1991:166). He indicated a willingness to use force, depending on normative considerations of just cause—if Noriega did something provocative to warrant U.S. retaliation (Woodward, 1991:100). Crowe opposed intervention and recognized the implications of going into a sovereign country to seize its leader (Woodward, 1991:91). Woerner, whose complex understanding of Latin America (Woodward, 1991:83–93; Baker, 1995:194) precluded stereotypical images, opposed the use of force vocally. The removal of Woerner and Crowe helped consolidate the colony image within U.S. decision-making, allowing leaders to think more seriously about intervention as justified behavior.

#### *Will but Not Ability*

Personnel change and a dramatic series of events facilitated a new consensus among the U.S. decision-makers. The shift in administration views of acceptable behavior resolved the moral dilemma between the desire to remove Noriega and the constraints against forcible intervention. A major factor in resolving the dilemma internally was the replacement of CINCSOUTH Woerner with General Maxwell Thurman (30 September) and, the next day, of JCS Chief Crowe with Colin Powell. Flanagan (1993:23–24), calls these replacements "singularly propitious" to the shift. Woerner opposed intervention efforts; Thurman thought the military should be exploited more aggressively in the war against drugs, including Noriega (Woodward, 1991:95). Contrary to Crowe's ambivalence, Powell saw the need to "take the PDF down" to solve the problem (Donnelly, 1991:65–66). He initially had reservations about using force in the scenario but believed that, if force were necessary, "it all had to go" (Dinges, 1991).

A dramatic series of events also tilted the balance of perceptions of the situation. A failed coup against Noriega on October 3rd led to two factors relevant to our understanding of norm violation. First, it caused U.S. élites to doubt Panama could take care of the problem itself. The piecemeal approach characteristic of the desire to have it both ways was not working, forcing the moral dilemma further to the fore. Second, the failed coup and Bush's lack of support for it generated domestic criticism, hinting that the domestic audience was thinking less about norms of nonintervention and more about national interests and pride against a druglord that continued to thwart the U.S. Two of the three audiences were thus psychologically prepared for intervention by around this time. Crowe surmised the mood, observing "the only way the situation is going to get resolved in Panama is with military force" (Donnelly, 1991:64–65). With consensus among the internal audience about the nature of the threat, and with the domestic audience suggesting that more aggressiveness would be acceptable

if not desirable, the administration had, in effect, a “decision in search of an excuse” (Dinges, 1991:305–6). The justification was still needed to provide external legitimacy to the mission and credibly suggest to others that military intervention was a legitimate response rather than a violation of international norms. In short, Bush was still constrained.

After October 3rd, plans for intervention were drafted in short order, building on existing contingency plans dating to the Reagan administration. The new plan reflected the new consensus as to Panama’s monolithic, corrupt nature—it called for massive force aimed not just at Noriega but at ridding the country of the entire PDF (Powell, 1995:420). The failed coup, started by PDF insiders, was not supported by the U.S., not “because of conflicting perceptions and internal debate” but because of the lack of time and “lack of enthusiasm” for the coup leaders, seen as unsavory as their affiliates (Cottam, 1994:160). Bush defended (in)action against those who called for military efforts to “get Noriega” by saying “that’s not the way I plan to conduct the military or foreign affairs of this country” (*Public Papers of the President*, 1990:1315). Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater added that Bush “did not want to interfere in the affairs of a Latin American nation” and that the U.S. “traditionally stopped short of . . . military involvement”—referencing implicitly U.S. adherence to the norm of nonintervention (Flanagan, 1993:29). Bush argued that the Panamanian people, not the U.S., “ought to do everything they can to overthrow Mr. Noriega out of there” (Woodward, 1991:92). This outward display of normative concerns reiterated the U.S. commitment to nonintervention to its external audience, while internally preparations were made for another covert operation (Gilboa, 1995/96:557), consistent with a conflicted actor lacking justification for overt norm violation.

Plans for military intervention developed in “an unimpeded effort to try to topple Noriega” (Cottam, 1994:160). Still missing though, as Powell (1995:425) recalls, was “whether we had sufficient provocation to act.” The will was there, but a justification for the constrained superpower to “go in” had yet to materialize. That perceived justification would come in December.

#### *A “Just Cause” for Action*

Within two hours of each other, two events on December 16, 1989, provided dramatic culmination of a pattern of harassment that justified intervention in the eyes of U.S. decision-makers. The shooting of an off-duty Marine by PDF guards at a checkpoint followed by the abusive interrogation of an American couple (Dinges, 1991:307; Donnelly, 1991:94–95) were perceived as confirmatory evidence of a Panama ruled by a monolithic, corrupt, and wicked force. In subsequent meetings of Bush’s inner circle few references were made to the individual guards that committed the heinous acts; instead, the acts were attributed to the “PDF” or “forces” under Noriega’s command, or “Noriega’s reckless threats and attacks” (Powell, 1995:422; *Historic Documents*, 1989:706). Asking whether the incidents were “the work of errant PDF soldiers,” General Larry Welch was told by Powell and Kelly that “they were as sure as they could be” (Woodward, 1991:165). Others asserted that Noriega “was personally covering up for his organization,” implying that these isolated, unusually violent incidents were part of a “pattern of aggression” (Dinges, 1991:307–8). This simplification and attribution of complex events to one man and his monolithic reach confirms the colony image, suggesting a motivated bias to read events favorably toward justifying the use of force. The rapidly achieved consensus that these incidents were worthy of military invasion is impressive: there was little critical reflection as to details of the events; the decision to invade came “without sharp dissent or debate”; and the president “offered no high-flown reflections and did no last-minute agonizing” (Scranton, 1991:201; Cottam, 1994:161). Powell called the

events “unignorable provocation” and representative of “an increasing pattern of hostility toward U.S. troops” (Kempe, 1990:11–12; Powell, 1995:422). They were convinced that the entire PDF was corrupted, controlled by Noriega and thus beyond negotiation and assistance (Woodward, 1991:168).

Reflecting a colony image, a distinction was made between bad and good interventions in the justification process. The U.S. invasion would help the good citizens against the bad rulers, turning invasion into a humanitarian effort to “defend democracy” in Panama (Maechling, 1990:122; Vertzberger, 1998). The U.S. invoked UN Charter Article 51 and OAS Article 21 for the right to self-defense as another part of their explanation for action (Scheffer, 1992:122). Pointing to the moral dilemma as he saw it, Bush invoked obligatory action in his public justification, claiming to have “no higher obligation than to safeguard the lives of American citizens” (*Historic Documents*, 1989:706).

This, of course, is the rhetoric of accounts offered to themselves and others to ameliorate the fallout before and after conducting socially untoward behavior. Believing they were justified, American policymakers explained away the significance and sincerity of international reaction in advance. The Soviets, OAS, and Third World states, Baker argued, would “feel an obligation to denounce the interference,” but he insisted that most would privately be “neutral or even pleased” (Woodward, 1991:170). This is important because the subjective interpretation norms empower actors not only to violate norms but also to believe that others will recognize the U.S. action as a benign, legitimate exemption to social convention, not a violation (Jervis, 1976).

The U.S. view of the incident was not shared, however, implicating the intervention as a norm violation, defined as defying collective understandings of appropriate behavior. Arguments about safeguarding Americans’ lives were not the issue so much as the proportionality of the American response in its name. Avoiding a veto in the Security Council, the UN General Assembly voted 75–20 to condemn the U.S. and demand withdrawal from Panama. The OAS voted 20–1 to condemn U.S. actions, with the United States the lone dissenter (*UN Documents*, 1989; Scheffer, 1992:123).

The preceding shows how an objective, abstract norm differs from the subjective perceptions thereof, and how the latter drive action. U.S. leaders saw events in Panama increasingly through the lens of the colony image—whereby activities in Panama were taken to reflect the monolithic acts of a brutal regime. As tragic as the December events were, U.S. elites saw them not as the acts of a few individual guards but as a directed, intentional brutality ordered from above. The resort to self-defense accounts and the blame on Panama’s regime for forcing invasion served to protect U.S. self and social images “by justifying and giving righteous value to coercive interventionist behavior” (Cottam, 1994:181). The image reflects the motivation to intervene that consolidated after personnel changes and dramatic events played out. The ability to intervene arose from the ambiguity of the nonintervention norm, coupled with the belief that a situation had arisen that gave the U.S. legitimate exemption under “self-defense.” Importantly, intervention came only after such a justifying incident, not earlier, despite the desire and plans to do so. This suggests that both agent interest and social conditions matter: self-interest gave the U.S. the will to violate, but the norm’s parameters required a plausible situation for decision-makers to interpret favorably to allow absolved intervention.

### Conclusion

State leaders are not *either* selfish or social but both at the same time. The social state must balance internally conceived notions of interests with each other and

the pressures induced by the needs for social approval and a positive self-image. Whether the selfish or social prevails is a contextual question, despite efforts to favor one or the other ontologically prior to theory-building and testing. In search of answers to this question, I engaged several dialogues: the relative primacy of obligatory versus utilitarian logic, the interplay of agent and structure, and the role of morality relative to other interests. I argued the world is not “either/or” with regard to these dichotomies, but reflects the tension of acting selfishly under the constraints of a social world. My approach embraces the challenge of the agent-structure problem—to “conceptualize interstate behavior in terms of both human choice and social determinism” (Carlsnaes, 1992:256). It brings sociality to rationalist approaches, and agency to sociological approaches, in a fashion that may prove fruitful.

I offer a framework that proposes when norms are violated. When norms and interests coincide, conformity results—not surprisingly. When there is a value conflict, violation is unlikely if the norm lacks parameters or is very specific, or if a situation cannot credibly lend itself to those parameters. This limits the realm of the possible—states cannot do whatever they want. Violations, then, are not as easy as rationalists suspect, since sheer utilitarian considerations do not suffice. But to the extent that (1) norms are ambiguously defined, (2) a situation lends itself to a favorable interpretation of an ambiguous norm, and (3) an actor is motivated, there is great breadth in the range of norm interpretations and behavior within a social structure. With the violation of many norms still easy, if not frequent, attention to norm specificity and the dynamics of norm violation is a must.

This analysis has theoretical and practical implications regarding the power of norms. First, there should be caution in treating norms solely as a structural feature of the system to explain agent behavior. It seems ironic that (conventional) constructivists, whose philosophical heritage and current proponents warn against giving primacy to agent or structure (Wendt, 1987), in practice remove agency and focus on reified social structures as objective determinants of agent choice. While norms may exist as “social facts,” I have pointed to the limits of assuming a norm’s existence translates into uniform influence on states. Anthropomorphizing the state homogenizes agents, missing the varying understandings of norms and situations that leaders within (not to mention across) states may have. These differences precede and influence whether a norm is even enacted. Just as norms shape the perceptions actors have of their surroundings (Adler, 1991), so too do perceptions shape the interpretation of norms and the situations to which they apply (Vertzberger, 1998:61). Theorizing needs to “bring agency back in” to the agent-structure dynamic so central to constructivism’s philosophical foundations (Wendt, 1987; Dessler, 1989; Carlsnaes, 1992).

Yet it would be a mistake to revert to discard social structure altogether. Norms do provide objective referents—however malleable—from which much social interaction occurs. If norms were always purely whatever each individual made of them, it would be pointless to talk of them at all. Yet we know norms exist and that disparate agents conform to recognizable patterns of predictable behavior, whatever the motivation. So long as people are concerned about social judgment, theories must attend to the constraint that norms and situations place on choice and preferences.

My argument leaves many aspects of violation unexplored, such as power, punishment, and personality. I mentioned nothing of material power, but it is logical to expect power to impact the physical ability to violate norms. One might expect small powers to be more compliant than large ones, all things equal, owing to the sheer ability to violate or withstand punishment. Even if a smaller country overcomes the social obstacles to violation, they may resist due to insufficient resources or fear of the consequences. More powerful countries in

the same situation would be less constrained. The U.S. ability to invade Panama without serious social repercussions reflects its dominance not just in the hemisphere but globally. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait violated the same norm but was "punished" by the system of peers much differently. Power is a major reason for the difference.

Many point to the essential aspect of an effective, consistent punishment mechanisms to enhance compliance (Andrews, 1975:528; Axelrod, 1986; Nadelman, 1990:481; Goertz and Diehl, 1992:636–40). If conformity is a function of socialization, which is partly a function of punishing violators, then erratic punishment undermines norm growth and compliance. There is room for pessimism on this matter, given the variable power of potential violators and the anarchic environment that precludes automatic punishment mechanisms from operating. Moreover, the psychological variables discussed above should apply to issues of punishment. The same preconceived beliefs that filter whether a situation is norm-exempt can filter whether a violation is seen by observers as justified self-defense or a norm violation. Those with negative images of a violator may augment the view of the violation and the punishment owed for it, while those with a positive image of the violator may forgive such actions—believing the violator to be justified (Herrmann and Shannon, 1999). Such double standards handicap the ability to punish with consistency. Those who wish norms to have more power over state action must address the many paths to violation and many loopholes in punishment. Neoliberal institutionalism offers some insights in this regard, and future research should explore the different levels of conformity within institutional regimes—characterized by monitoring, transparency, and enforcement mechanisms—as opposed to outside such regimes.

Personality differences can make a difference in assessing the power of norms versus interests. Leaders' sensitivity to audiences varies to some degree, and such differences in leaders would correlate with different attentiveness to social expectations. The literature distinguishes between leaders who are "context sensitive" versus "context-insensitive" (Hermann and Kegley, 1995), or who are more or less "conformity oriented" or "self-monitoring" (Backman, 1985:281–83; Cialdini and Trost, 1998:167). Such distinctions may yield useful insights into normative behavior.

Some may question the usefulness of the use of psychological theory to explain international relations. Critics suggest that psychology is about people, and world politics is about governments and states. But neither "states" nor "governments" act; people act on behalf of states. As I clarify above, norms are not what *states* make of them but what *leaders* of states make of them. So long as humans are making foreign policy decisions, psychological theory is not only defensible, it is oftentimes essential to explaining a process that is not utility-maximizing but boundedly rational. As for the transportability of experimental findings—the basis of much psychological wisdom—into the "real world," the external validity of robust experimental findings is by no means guaranteed. But neither should it be dismissed out of hand. This and myriad other studies (Jervis, 1976; Herrmann, 1985, 1988; Larson, 1985; Vertzberger, 1998) offer real-world applications to be judged on their merits.

An acknowledged limitation to this study is the single illustrative case. Though I defend the case as one showing both conformity and violation in the context of my framework, future research should accumulate cases addressing the interplay of obligation and interest related to the specificity of norm prescriptions and parameters. Some have produced evidence of the power of robust norms (Paul, 1995; Legro, 1997; Tannenwald, 1999), and research must be carefully done to determine how much instances of conformity are driven by norms rather than other concerns.

A final comment: if norm violation is as easy as the preceding pages intimate, this does not diminish the value of norms and of defining the content of social

expectations in international society. Norms, even if violated often, are important for directing the normal currents of international relations. When conformity to norms represents at least most social behavior, for obligatory and utilitarian reasons, it is vital to consider what those norms will be. Would we rather have a world where most states eschew slavery and the subjugation of other lands, or one where slavery, colonialism, and the systematic abuse and discrimination of peoples are commonplace and expected? Studying, defining and fighting for the *content* of international politics are among the valuable contributions constructivists have made to the discipline.

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