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Office Hours: How (Critical) Norm Research Can Regain Its Voice

Abstract: Social Science research cannot be neutral. It always involves, so the argument of this article, the (re)production of social reality and thus has to be conceived as political practice. From this perspective, the present article looks into constructivist norm research. In the first part, we argue that constructivist norm research is political insofar as it tends to reproduce Western values that strengthen specific hegemonic discursive structures. However, this particular political position is hardly reflected on in norm research. Hence, it is our goal in the second part of the article to outline research strategies potentially useful in reflective and critical norm research. We propose a critical research program based upon three central methodological steps that are inspired by post-structuralism: first, the questioning of global hegemonic values; second, the reconstruction of marginalized knowledge; and third, the explicit reflection of one's own research perspective.

Keywords: auto-ethnography; constructivism; critical norm research; post-colonialism; post-structuralism.

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1 Prologue

Sofie graduated with a degree in political science [at a German university] a month ago and wants to do a doctorate. She is on her way to Prof. Sapere, professor of International Relations, who already supervised her master thesis. It is late afternoon and Sofie got the last appointment for his office hours. The door is left ajar and she knocks. Prof. Sapere looks up and invites her in. Sofie was one of his best graduate students; he would like to keep supervising her as a post-doctoral student. They sit down.

Prof. Sapere: You wrote that you are interested in post-doctoral studies. What did you think about researching so far, Sofie?

Sofie (*slightly nervous*): Well, I am interested in the current conflict in Libya, more precisely the fact that the international community intervened in Libya on the

basis of a UN mandate, the so-called *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P). (*Prof. Sapere nods interested*) The R2P norm reflects a shift in the understanding of security from security of the state towards human security, according to which individual security is valued higher than state sovereignty. Yet, R2P may have very different consequences for individual security. Therefore, I am interested which individuals are secured in which context. Using the case of Libya, I want to look into the question how Libyan refugees experience insecurity and how this perceived insecurity fits into the UN security discourse on R2P ... (*takes an inquiring look at Prof. Sapere*)

Prof. Sapere: Well, I find the case of R2P and the changing understanding of security in the case of Libya very interesting, but how do you want to realize the analysis of individual insecurity?

Sofie: I have not worked out the details yet, but I thought about participant observation and *Grounded Theory*. I read about this in a seminar on feminist approaches ...

Prof. Sapere (*interrupts her slightly impatiently*): How can the perceived insecurity of Libyan refugees provide new insights for the discipline of International Relations? I do not yet see where you are heading. Do you want to conduct an impact analysis of the intervention? Or is this about unintended consequences? What exactly is the dependent variable here?

Sofie (*hesitant*): I do not want to do any of that. I understand the experience of Libyan refugees as a specific context of discursive practices in security politics and I hope to gain a better understanding of the concept of security, or more accurately of insecurity in IR, as can be seen in the example of R2P. I am concerned with questioning the dominant concept of security in IR.

Prof. Sapere (*thinking*): You say that R2P reflects a changed understanding of security, don't you? (*Sofie nods.*) To me, this is an interesting and clear case of norm change and I would suggest that you first look into the IR literature on norms before you turn towards methodological problems. Thereby, you can embed your case in the norm literature and conceptualize it as a process of norm change in the field of international security. (*He heads for the computer and prints a paper.*) This is a bibliography of norm research, which includes the most important literature. Work through these and then we will discuss the further course of action in the next office hours.

2 Constructivist Norm Research

Norms are a central object of inquiry of constructivist International Relations (IR) research. The constructivist project began in the late 1980s as a critique of the

dominant rationalist research paradigm.[1] One of the first goals of constructivists was to empirically show that ideational factors matter in international politics and to elaborate on the causal mechanisms and processes through which norms, culture and identity influence behavior (Klotz 1995: p. 460; Katzenstein 1996: p. 5; Ulbert 1997: p. 13).

Norms, which were commonly understood as »standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity«[2] and considered a central component of the ideational international structure, soon became the focal point of constructivist research. Early studies focused specifically on the structural character of norms. They examined their influence on actors' behavior in order to show that »norms matter« (Katzenstein 1996: p. 30; March and Olsen 1998: p. 958). Norms, it was argued, influence international politics in two ways: on the one hand, they are constitutive and shape the interests and identities of actors (in particular states) (Checkel 1998: p. 326). The international norm of sovereignty, for instance, constitutes the nation state as the central actor of international politics, thereby providing it with considerable agency (Kowert and Legro 1996: p. 466). On the other hand, however, it is also regulative and limits the range of legitimate action by prescribing that national borders and legitimate (i.e., sovereign) authority are to be respected (Barkin and Cronin 1994: p. 128).

The constructivist understanding of norms as standards of behavior focuses its research on behavior considered as appropriate, i.e., norm-based behavior. Norm-based behavior is contrasted with strategic, self-interested behavior of actors. As James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1998) argue, actors do not always act rationally in the sense that they minimize their costs and maximize their individual benefit. Rather, they also act according to a logic of appropriateness. They adopt intersubjectively shared norms that are related to particular identities and roles for actors. These identities invoke specific ideas of good and legitimate behavior that, in turn, guide and shape social action (March and Olsen 1998: p. 959; Risse 2003: p. 107).

While the effects of norms remained a central aspect of constructivist research, a growing number of researchers soon began to inquire into structural change and theorize the processes through which norms emerge and spread globally (see e.g., Sandholtz 2008; Sandholtz and Stiles 2009). Research on normative change is predominantly actor-centered (see Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: p. 393) and locates the driving force of this process in the efforts of different transnational

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1 For example Adler (1997); Finnemore and Sikkink (1998); Checkel (1999); see also Widmaier and Park (2012) for a recent review of constructivist norm research.

2 Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: p. 891); see also Katzenstein (1996: p. 5) and Kowert and Legro (1996: p. 483); Florini (1996: p. 380).

actors such as norm entrepreneurs, advocacy networks or epistemic communities (Adler and Haas 1992: p. 368; Klotz 1995: p. 463; Risse and Sikkink 1999: p. 18; Park 2005: p. 117; Risse 2006: pp. 263–265). These actors, it is argued, share a normative repertoire or a body of knowledge and act purposefully in the international system in order to spread new norms. They employ in particular discursive framing and persuasion as central strategies to advance the global proliferation of norms.[3]

Constructivist norm research has resonated broadly in IR in recent years and its contribution to and influence on the discipline is indisputable. Nevertheless, there has also been considerable critique of this research that points to analytical problems and deficits and calls attention to the inherent normative predispositions and politics of reality of constructivist norm research, which often remain unconsidered. One point of critique is, for instance, that constructivist norm research relies on a static concept of norms. Norms, it is argued, are considered as things (Krook and True 2012: p. 104) with a relatively stable content, which only need to be spread. According to critics, this leaves the general contestedness of norms out of sight as well as the permanent negotiation processes through which normative meaning is produced and modified.[4]

A second point of critique concerns the research interest of early constructivists who focused exclusively on the proliferation of international norms. Here, it is argued, normative change is at least implicitly conceptualized as a dichotomy between norm take-over and norm rejection (Wiener 2009: p. 179). Critics further argue that this research perspective neglects local contexts in adoption processes and blends out questions of power (MacKenzie and Sesay 2012: p. 161). Overall, concepts of socialization (Risse et al. 1999), diffusion (Holzinger et al. 2007) or persuasion (Deitelhoff 2006) only inadequately capture the reciprocal exchange that takes place between international norms and local ideas and practices.

A further problematic aspect of constructivist norm research is the combination of actor-centered arguments with a structuralist perspective in some explanations of normative change, which leaves out of view the processes by which norms emerge in the first place. Normative change is explained in an actor-centric way by focusing the analysis on intentional activities of norm entrepreneurs who promote and proliferate a "new" norm. This argument, however, implies a structuralist perspective insofar as this new norm must already exist as part of an ideational structure, so that norm entrepreneurs can gain an early insight into

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3 See Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: p. 898); Keck and Sikkink (1998: p. 17); Payne (2001: p. 38); Deitelhoff (2006: pp. 75–77).
4 For example Reus-Smit (2001); van Kersbergen and Verbeek (2007); Wiener (2010); Panke and Petersohn (2012).

its normative desirability (Renner 2013). This argumentation neglects the mutual constitution of agent and structure (Epstein 2008: p. 91) and blends out the process in which a new norm emerges in the first place (Wiener 2007: pp. 49–51; MacKenzie and Sesay 2012: p. 146).

3 Intermezzo

(Four weeks later, Sofie is at the office hours again and looks through her notes for the talk. Prof. Sapere sits down at the table.)

Prof. Sapere: Did you make any progress, Sofie? Please remind me once again, what was your project about?

Sofie: The application of R2P in the UN mission in Libya. (*Prof. Sapere nods.*) I read the constructivist norm literature that you suggested and thought about in how far it is applicable to the case.

Prof. Sapere: I am curious. (*leans backwards*)

Sofie: According to the literature, the case can be conceptualized as a case of norm change. It is about the recognition of individuals as objects of securitization and therewith about the change of the imperative of non-intervention into sovereign states. The norm is institutionally embedded as the *Responsibility to Protect*. From the perspective of constructivist norm research, one could ask how this change came about and what influence R2P has on political action in local contexts.

Prof. Sapere (*nods pleased*): Sounds good.

Sofie (*hesitant*): However, I find the experience of individuals in the case of the R2P norm, which is explicitly bound to the welfare and security of individual subjects, very important. In my opinion, this kind of enquiring the local context does not go far enough. I believe that an account of the insecurity of Libyan refugees can make an important contribution to security research and IR norm research.

Prof. Sapere: My problem with that is that you approach the subject of analysis from a normative perspective – namely that R2P has detrimental effects on individual security. Of course the international community cannot help each refugee individually, but for this reason the norm does not have to be called into question in principle! I think your normative approach and the analytical focus on the

individual is problematic. Why don't you try and get a more analytical grip of your topic by using the existing constructivist literature on norms we discussed earlier.

Sofie (*indignant*): But most of the texts I have read on norm literature are also quite normative!

Prof. Sapere (*frowns*): What do you mean by that?

Sofie (*takes a deep breath*): IR norm literature seems to be in large parts very affirmative towards the moral values of those norms it analyzes. Furthermore, research focuses on Western norms, which leads to the marginalization of other, non-Western norms. This research pretends to be scientifically objective, but in fact it is not only inherently normative, but also political!

4 Constructivist Norm Research as Political Practice

While the above-mentioned critiques of constructivist norm research address rather analytical problems, they also contribute importantly to what could be described as the »politics of reality« of social science research (Zehfuss 2002: Chapter 5). This concerns the normative coinage of constructivist norm research that is implicitly included in scientific writings and practices, but which remains mostly without further reflection. In consequence, research itself becomes a political practice which contributes to legitimizing and delegitimizing cultural orders and value systems.

Thereby we enter a field in which, over the last 20 years, there have been many feminist[5], post-colonial[6], or post-structural[7] researchers who criticized dominant bodies of knowledge and hegemonic practices in the production of knowledge within the discipline of IR.[8] While in the late 1980s these »dissident

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5 See Peterson (1990); Tickner (1997); Sylvester (2000); Ackerly and True (2008).

6 See Inayatullah and Blaney (2004); Agathangelou and Ling (2009); Grovogui (2010).

7 See Der Derian and Shapiro (1989); Ashley and Walker (1990b); Campbell (1992); Walker (1993); Doty (1996).

8 In a German context, this discussion has precursors: In the positivism dispute in sociology as well as in the interventions of critical theory in the 1970s, important aspects on reflexivity in social sciences have been discussed, see the contributions in Gantzel (1975). Further, one could name ZIB (German Journal for IR) – contributions by Mathias Albert (1994), Thomas Diez (1998), Maja Zehfuss (1998), Klaus Schlichte and Boris Wilke (2000) as exemplary evidence by German IR researchers.

voices« (Ashley and Walker 1990a) explicitly refused to furnish a clearly defined, reflexive research program, which was claimed by Robert O. Keohane (1988: p. 392), more »moderate« or »conventional« constructivists conducted this kind of project since the 1990s (for these labels, see Doty 2004: p. 379). In their programmatic article on the state of IR norm research, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: pp. 894–909) presented the corner stones of such a constructivist research program (see Engelkamp and Glaab 2011). Norm research is certainly not the only branch in constructivist IR approaches in which initially post-modern critiques were gradually modernized. Yet, it concerns research that explicitly raises the claim of working reflexively and of producing scientific insights about normative change.[9]

Thus, not only arises the question of where analytical problems in theoretical models and explanations of norm-research are located, but also of how the respective theoretical and methodological decisions and practices strengthen or modify certain bodies of knowledge and values and of how these contribute to a specific reading of reality and legitimate order, while other orders and value systems are marginalized and delegitimized.

Empirical political consequences of such discursive normalization practices can be observed when different cultural bodies of knowledge and values clash. For instance, one could name different understandings and assessments of *good governance* in development cooperation (Gallagher forthcoming) or of peacekeeping operations and military interventions in countries in the global south (see Platenkamp 2007). In these cases, the selection of mostly liberal, Western and affirmative norms dominates not only research practices, but simultaneously contributes to political discourses and agendas which partially lead to unintended and »destructive policy consequences«, as one can see in the case of the US invasion in Iraq, which was legitimized through ideas promoted by democratic peace studies (Smith 2011: p. 153).

In the following, we argue that constructivist norm research takes an implicitly Eurocentric perspective and is thereby conducive for the naturalization and the strengthening of those norms which are accepted in the West, while non-Western stocks of values show a tendency to remain marginalized and delegitimized

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9 Lately, the publication of articles and fora in international journals has grown in which post-structural and post-colonial inspired authors critically engaged with constructivist norm research, see the contributions of Krook and True (2012); Adler-Nissen (2014). The articles of Epstein (2012), Inayatullah and Blaney (2012a), MacKenzie and Sesay (2012) and Widmaier and Park (2012) are part of a forum in *International Studies Perspectives*, organized by Charlotte Epstein, which goes back to the working group *Interrogating the Use of Norms in IR* that took place in context of the ISA-conference 2011 in Montréal.

(Epstein 2012: pp. 140–141; MacKenzie and Sesay 2012: pp. 157–159).[10] This does not mean that we want to initiate a discussion on the universality of human rights and thereby take a culture-relativistic position. We rather argue that the representation of liberal values as global norms implicates an idealization that enables to hide the dark side of these norms (but see Geis 2011 and lately Heller et al. 2012), or, as Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney put it: liberal norms promise »progress without tragedy« (Inayatullah and Blaney 2012b: p. 293).

The Eurocentric predisposition of constructivist norm research shows in the selection of empirical research objects: norms that are perceived to be good and widely accepted in the West are analyzed as global norms and therewith acknowledged as such, for instance, Western concepts of democracy, human rights and justice (Finnemore 1996; Risse et al. 1999; Deitelhoff 2006). Neither the process of their historic emergence such as colonial rule or slavery, which could challenge the normative authority of Western value systems, are examined (Inayatullah and Blaney 2012a: p. 168; see also Bhambra and Shilliam 2009), nor are non-Western norms identified as (good) norms and researched as such (Towns 2010: pp. 24–27). Those Western norms under research are barely questioned in their existence as (good) norms; the history of their emergence and change as well as their contestation remain hidden. To the extent that the contingency and historicity of these norms are left out of the analysis, their embeddedness in hegemonic Western value systems remains unreflected, thus preventing their potential questioning as good norms. That way, normative meanings and their truth and validity claims are naturalized and therewith those value systems and bodies of knowledge are strengthened, in which these norms are embedded.

The affirmative stance of constructivist norm research towards a hegemonic value system that is accompanied by a marginalization of non-Western norms is also reflected in an analytical focus of norm research which mostly concentrates on the diffusion of international norms and conceptualizes normative change

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10 When we write here and in the following of the West or the non-West, when we differentiate between local and global contexts or when we criticize the narrowness of Eurocentric bodies of knowledge, we do not want to implicate that these simply can be localized in terms of geographic entities. Without doubt, such dichotomies are reified through texts such as the present one. However, we hold on to these terms, in order to address the – from our perspective – problematic focus of norm research as a branch of a »narrowly Western social science« (Acharya 2011: p. 620). As such, post-colonial authors such as Chakrabarty (1992; 2002) and Randeria (2002) have criticized the proclamation of mostly specific European development paths as universal, a perspective that ignores the historicity of norms at the same time. Yet, this does not mean that doing critical research is not possible from a Western perspective (see for this point the work of Said and Chowdhry on the mutual entanglement of Western and non-Western histories, as discussed in Section 6.3).

at least implicitly as dichotomous norm take-over or rejection (Zimmermann 2012: pp. 20–24). This shows, for instance, in the neglect of conflict and power in processes of normative change, which is often modeled in concepts of learning or persuasion (Neumann and Sending 2010: p. 7). Local values and forms of articulation, which are directed against hegemonic (Western) norms, are not considered and marginalized. As Amitav Acharya (2004: p. 242) convincingly argued, the presentation of Western liberal norms as cosmopolitan or universal leads to the perception that any local resistance against these norms is illegitimate or immoral. From a post-colonial critical perspective though, value systems are always based on the discrepant experiences of colonizers and colonized (Grovogui 2010: p. 239). Accepting these different historical experiences of colonialism and resistance draws attention on the exercise of power and dominance in non-Western societies (Chakrabarty 2002: p. 303) and therewith makes it possible to question the validity of hegemonic norms.

The implicit depreciation and delegitimation of local agency is further strengthened by conceptualizing the diffusion of seemingly global norms into local context as processes of socialization of new states and societies into global norms (Epstein 2012: pp. 140–143). The concept of socialization tends to be understood as a teleological process of progress, which leads to an improvement of the socialisee. Furthermore, socialization is conceptualized to work unidirectional, from the global to the local; therewith local actors automatically appear to be passive, *re*acting recipients of global norms. This model infantilizes local actors by constructing them as morally empty subjects, whose own values and identities are suppressed and therewith revoked (Epstein 2012: pp. 140–143). Thus, normative change is understood here in line with the socialization concept as normative improvement. Thereby local identities and values are neglected and local forms of articulating contingent experiences are interpreted as resistance against (moral) progress (Epstein 2012: p. 143).

Whereas norm research tends to devalue local agency which is not in the name of global norms, it implicitly strengthens the agency of norm entrepreneurs (Engelkamp and Glaab 2011). These are viewed as central actors in the diffusion of Western norms. Norm entrepreneurs are presented as moral subjects, who either act strategically, but bound by empathy, altruism and an ideational sense of duty (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: p. 898; Keck and Sikkink 1998: p. 14), or engage for the global diffusion of norms in the mode of communicative action (Deitelhoff 2006: pp. 90–97). The spread of Western norms is based on persuasion through the better argument, communicated in rational discourses without exploiting different potentials of power (Deitelhoff 2009). The diffusion of Western norms is presented rather positively, as elements such as cooperation, mutual understanding and progress are emphasized in the process of norm diffusion, while coercion

and the exercise of financial pressure as driving forces of normative change are not analyzed enough (MacKenzie and Sesay 2012: p. 147).[11]

The normative predisposition of constructivist norm research may not be intended. However, this sort of research pursues a certain politics of reality by naturalizing and strengthening those meanings that are widely shared in the West and accepted as norms, and thereby legitimizing and reproducing those bodies of knowledge and values that are embedded in these meanings. Constructivist norm research, thus, does not provide a neutral, objective view on the world it examines (see already Cox 1981: p. 129). Instead, constructivist norm research is involved in the construction of reality and the knowledge it produces contributes to the reproduction and normalization of hegemonic (and predominantly Western) bodies of knowledge and power structures (Smith 2004: p. 510).

5 Intermezzo

Prof. Sapere: If I understand you correctly, you would criticize norm research on R2P for its Western coined normative understanding of individual rights that is represented as universal?

Sofie: Exactly! Furthermore, the decision based on the R2P norm to intervene in certain conflicts and not in others leads to a denial of the importance of the individual security of marginalized individuals such as women, ethnic minorities or refugees and their exclusion from a recognized and legitimate security discourse.

Prof. Sapere: But then, IR norm research will always be political. This is the crucial point. How do you want to overcome this dilemma?

Sofie: That's true. But in seminars in other disciplines such as anthropology, post-colonialism or gender studies I have learned to pose other research questions and choose other methodological approaches. It is central here to critically question power relations and hegemonic knowledge. It is particularly important to be aware of one's own normative predispositions and one's own normative point of departure. For instance, I find it useful to integrate critical strategies into the research process. When reading the norm literature, I noticed that I read it differently and challenged hegemonic knowledge when I related it to literature from other disciplines. In my own research I can imagine to integrate other writing strategies and individual forms of narration. Through observation of the life of

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11 See on this point also Adler-Nissen (2014), who contrasts the classic argument of socialization of constructivist norm research with her concept of stigmatization.

refugees and narrative interviews, I can describe micro-practices which give a critical perspective on security discourses.

6 Critical Norm Research – Outline of a Research Program

6.1 Social Science and the Production of Truth

From our post-structuralist perspective, which holds that the social is discursively constituted, science can never be objective or neutral. The political character of social scientific research is unavoidable, as any kind of research must be understood as political practice that participates in the construction of reality and thus contributes to the legitimation of one and the simultaneous delegitimation of another social order.

Post-structuralist discourse theory can be understood as a radical and highly political form of constructivist thinking, which builds upon an »anti-essentialist ontology« and an »anti-foundationalist epistemology« (Torfing 2005: p. 13). Ontologically, it rejects the assumption that social reality can be traced back to a stable and given essence. It rather assumes that social reality is produced and stabilized through discourses, and is thus socially constituted. Epistemologically, it assumes that there cannot be a given and stable truth about the world. Truth, rather, is conditioned on hegemonic discourses which specify what is true or false in a given context (Torfing 2005: p. 14). From a post-structuralist perspective, discourse is the central constitutive category of social reality, as it is only in and through discourse that meaning can temporarily be stabilized and the material world becomes meaningful (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: pp. 2–3; Torfing 2005: p. 21; Epstein 2008: pp. 4–8). Discourses can be understood as relatively stable arrangements or »structured totalit[ies]« (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: p. 115), in which meaning and social identities are arranged so that social reality becomes possible in the first place. Discourses are produced and reproduced through the practice of articulation, which is inherent in any social practice, linguistic as well as nonlinguistic, as any social practice confirms and reproduces some meanings while questioning and modifying others (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: p. 105, 113).

Just as our everyday language and social practices, our research is thus part and parcel of the construction and stabilization of a specific, discursively produced reality. The scientific production of truth indeed plays a particularly important role for the discursive production of reality, as in our modern society science

and the scientific discourse are fundamental for the »"political economy" of truth« (Foucault and Gordon 1980: p. 131), i.e., for the production of what is genuinely accepted as true (Aronowitz 1988: p. vii; Litfin 1994: Chapter 2). Scientific research, thus, cannot be seen as a neutral practice and an objective observation of an existing reality. Instead, research practices and theoretical explanations themselves are components of the social construction of reality and must be seen as political interventions in the way the latter is produced and changed.

The points made above indicate that there cannot be a neutral research program. However, it is possible to pursue a research program which does not see itself as a neutral alternative, but rather as a political and scientific counter program to the affirmative *mainstream* of norm research, and which offers a decidedly critical inquiry into (normative) meaning. Above, we formulated three central points of critique towards constructivist norm research: First, it reproduces and strengthens hegemonic and mostly Western value systems and overlooks power and conflict, which are involved in their emergence and proliferation; second, it simultaneously marginalizes and delegitimizes alternative and usually non-Western value systems and, third, it hardly reflects on its own normative predispositions.

The critical research program we suggest in the following proceeds from this critique of constructivists norm research as political practice. In contrast to earlier norm research, it is our central goal to integrate research strategies that help to denaturalize and question hegemonic discourses and bodies of knowledge systems, so that their political character becomes visible. For this goal, we suggest three practical research steps: First, we outline a critical approach to hegemonic discourses inspired by post-structuralism which makes it possible to denaturalize hegemonic bodies of knowledge and value systems and to expose conflict and exclusion in the process of their emergence. Second, we adopt context-sensible research strategies developed in particular by feminist and postcolonial authors, which help to reconstruct non-hegemonic knowledge structures and normative perspectives. And third, we discuss some possibilities of reflecting one's own perspective and normative dispositions as a researcher, as has been suggested, for example, by authors of auto-ethnographic studies.

6.2 A Critical Approach to Hegemonic Discourses

Constructivist norm research focuses in particular on those norms that are broadly accepted as standards of good behavior in the West. It is particularly interested in the activities of norm entrepreneurs and in the strategies they successfully employ to spread these norms. At the same time, the validity claims of

these apparently good norms remain unquestioned and their darker and more exclusive aspects remain under-researched.

The concepts provided by post-structuralist discourse theory are a useful alternative to this procedure. They make it possible to reconstruct the processes through which hegemonic discourses and thus value systems and norms emerge, and to illuminate the conflicts and exclusions involved in the process of hegemonization. As outlined further above, post-structuralist discourse theory presumes that social reality is produced through hegemonic discourses. These discourses are powerful insofar as they temporarily fix and institutionalize a specific, historically contingent interpretation of social reality (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: p. 4; Torfing 2005: pp. 14–15). The productive power of hegemonic discourses thus lies in their ability to make a discursively produced but totally contingent social reality appear as true and given.

This is only possible, however, if alternative constructions of social reality and political order and their validity claims are simultaneously delegitimized and excluded. In other words, the power of hegemonic discourses always has a repressive side to it, as it excludes and marginalizes alternative constructions. Discourses and all social objectivity produced by them are thus inherently political; their formation implies the exercise of power and their sedimentation is the institutionalization of power relations (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: p. 4, 9).

For a critical analysis of global norms, this implies that norms cannot be considered as components of a politically neutral social reality with given validity claims. Rather, norms are always the products of powerful but contingent discourses whose hegemony is built upon the exclusion of alternative value systems and standards of behavior. Critical studies of norms are thus called upon to disclose the power and inherent politics of hegemonic discourses by unveiling these other versions that are delegitimized by them. What such a critical examination might look like is illustrated, for instance, by Judith Renner (2013) in her analysis of the global reconciliation norm.

Since the South African reconciliation process in the mid-1990s, the idea of reconciling post-conflict societies has turned into a global norm (Moon 2008: p. 2; see also Christodoulidis and Veitch 2007: p. 1; Hirsch 2007: p. 186) and reconciliation has come to be seen as a desirable ideal for post-conflict societies. It is generally believed that such reconciliation can be reached through so-called truth and reconciliation commissions, in which the victims and perpetrators of past human rights violations tell the public about their individual experiences. This practice is supposed to heal them from their traumas and to finally lead to reconciliation among them (Humphrey 2002: Chapter 8; Moon 2008: p. 45; Renner 2013).

Numerous actors promote the proliferation of the reconciliation norm in global politics. From the perspective of norms research, therefore, one of the first

questions to be asked would be what discursive strategies these actors employ and whether or not they are successful with the proliferation of the reconciliation norm. Here, for example, Michal B. J. Hirsch (2007: pp. 184–201) explores how transitional justice experts as an epistemic community were involved in the global proliferation of the reconciliation norm.

From a post-structuralist perspective, in contrast, research focuses more on the question how it was possible for reconciliation to emerge at all as an accepted authoritative value, and how the privileging of reconciliation excluded and marginalized other normative claims in the course of the hegemonic process. As Renner (2013: Chapter 2) shows in her genealogical analysis of the reconciliation discourse in South Africa, the emergence of this discourse – and thus the emergence of today's reconciliation norm – exhibits some aspects which cast doubt on the universal validity claims of this reconciliation norm and disclose its repressive power. According to this reading, the articulation of today's dominant interpretation of reconciliation as public truth-telling was marked by several breaks and ruptures, which show how contingent this interpretation is and how questionable its validity claims are. The term *reconciliation* was articulated with a shifting meaning over a longer period of time during the transitional negotiations in South Africa. For instance, reconciliation was interpreted as the search for political compromise, as an end to apartheid legislation, as acknowledgement of the political resistance against apartheid or as the release of political prisoners (Renner 2013: Chapter 2). The emergence of today's interpretation of reconciliation as a process of forgiveness and healing through public truth-telling was articulated only later, after the passing of the Interim Constitution. Reconciliation in the sense of public truth-telling about the past is thus neither a given nor a necessary interpretation; nevertheless, it became a hegemonic interpretation of reconciliation which spread around the globe.

Furthermore, the genealogical analysis shows that the hegemony of the reconciliation norm as a standard of an appropriate way of dealing with past violence and repression was possible only as alternative forms of dealing with the past were simultaneously excluded and delegitimized. In the early stages of the South African transition, the practice of reconciliation was actually highly contested. Calls for national reconciliation competed with calls for punitive justice, as voiced for example by the theologians who published the Kairos Document in 1985. According to these theologians, what South Africa needed over and above any kind of reconciliation was justice and the punishment of those who participated in the repressive regime (Kairos 2007: pp. 50–56; Moon 2008: pp. 32–35). At the time then, both reconciliation and punishment would have been equally possible ways of dealing with past violence and repression of apartheid. Although the Kairos theologians were not alone with their claims for justice and

punishment, however, such claims were marginalized through the privileging of the reconciliation discourse.

Claims for punitive justice were countered with the idea of national reconciliation, e.g., by President de Klerk and his National Party, who promoted reconciliation as the only way to a peaceful South Africa (de Klerk 2007: p. 66). The hegemonization of these calls for reconciliation over claims for punitive justice were only possible as claims for justice were step by step excluded from the scope of legitimate action, and punishment was interpreted in terms of revenge and the continuation of violence. This led to the delegitimation of punishment and established reconciliation through amnesty and public truth-telling as the only legitimate form of dealing with the past in South Africa.

In the course of the global diffusion of the reconciliation norm, alternative forms of dealing with the past were also excluded in other post-conflict societies. As Renner (2013: Chapter 5) shows in regard to Sierra Leone, claims by the local population to leave the past behind without a public truth-telling process were marginalized by the reconciliation discourse, as public truth-telling was seen as a legitimate and seemingly appropriate way of dealing with the past. Those parts of the local population who still wanted to refuse their participation in the reconciliation process could only collectively boycott the public hearings, as their calls for an alternative way of dealing with past were ignored due to the reconciliation imperative (see Shaw 2005: pp. 8–9; Renner 2013: Chapter 5; MacKenzie and Sesay 2012: p. 15).

To summarize the points made in this section, the post-structuralist perspective offers an alternative to constructivist norm research as it makes it possible to question seemingly accepted norms and to understand them as components of historically contingent discourses. In addition, it helps to illuminate the darker side of hegemonic norms and to show how hegemony always comes at the cost of alternative forms of action and standards of behavior, which are excluded from the scope of legitimate action. The post-structuralist critique of hegemonic value systems is a first possible step of a critical norm research program. A second step, as will be outlined in the following section, would then be to integrate into the analysis those claims and forms of action that were excluded in the process of hegemonization.

6.3 Strengthening Local Perspectives through Feminist and Post-Colonial Research Practices

Besides a denaturalization of global hegemonic values we suggest as a second step of our critical research strategy to reconstruct and strengthen local norms

and values that are mostly marginalized by constructivist research. For this aim, critical norm research can resort to strategies suggested by post-colonial and feminist authors who have probably been most explicit in elaborating and theorizing the reflexivity and normativity of their own research. The normative task of questioning hegemonic bodies of knowledge is thereby embedded in an explicit feminist research ethic (cf. Ackerly et al. 2006: p. 225; Ackerly and True 2008: p. 693). In their research, these authors shifted their focus of enquiry to the concrete practices displayed by a discourse and developed techniques of close reading or »utmost listening« (Park-Kang 2011) in order to analyze marginalized perspectives.

Our proposal to practice critical norm research as post-structuralist critic of hegemony demands a different kind of reading as a research strategy. For this purpose, post-colonial theorist Edward Said suggests a »contrapuntal reading« of the Western cultural archive »with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts« (Said 1994: p. 59). Being inspired by classical music, contrapuntal in Said's metaphor means the organized interplay of temporarily privileged topics which together constitute a complete melody. This kind of reading includes a consideration of practices of domination as well as resistance that was carved out of the Western cultural archive (Chowdhry 2007: pp. 102–106). In the context of a critical norm research, this means not simply presuming particular norms as generally valid standards to which local contexts can be compared and evaluated. Rather, it is essential to carve out different bodies of knowledge in their mutual constitution and contingency.

Siba Grovogui's (2011) work on the meaning of human rights can serve as an example of such research. In constructivist norm research human rights are mostly conceptualized as norms with universal validity. Codified as international legal norms, liberal norms of freedom are considered such as the right to vote, freedom of expression or the prohibition of torture. In practical research, the focus shifts to the global diffusion of human rights norms through international organizations and transnational networks to domestic contexts (Forschungs-gruppe Menschenrechte 1998; Risse et al. 1999; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). Through socialization processes the norm-violating state is supposed to institu-tionalize and internalize international human rights standards, which eventually leads to a better human rights practice (cf. the spiral-model of the Forschungs-gruppe Menschenrechte 1998; Risse et al. 1999). Variation in implementation of human rights norms is explained here not with regard to diverging normative contexts, but as a result of the differing degree to which states have implemented a norm.

Grovogui's work makes it possible to challenge this kind of research; he contrasts the importance of human rights for Haitian slaves in the 18th century with those human rights concepts that were established simultaneously in France and the US as part of liberal constitutionalism. Accordingly, three different understandings of political subjectivity developed: While in France the term citizen and in the US the term individual emerged as central categories for people and their rights, the Haitian model of the human person provided a comprehensive understanding of freedom that included caring for the basic needs of all those formerly expelled under colonial regimes (Grovogui 2011: p. 48). Slaves and all other groups who had previously been constitutionally excluded and who initiated the Haitian revolution considered the responsibility of the state for its citizens as a non-discriminating safeguard of the socio-economic right to life. Nevertheless, on the level of the United Nations today, civic and political rights are generally privileged and declared essential human rights, whereas socio-economic rights are considered secondary (Grovogui 2011: p. 63). Grovogui's contrapuntal reading alludes to the multiple genealogies of human rights and emphasizes that Western norms are not unique and inevitable (Grovogui 2011: p. 62).

The possibility that societies outside the West might develop different, but equally valid beliefs about human rights is excluded in the universal concept of human rights based on Western traditions (Grovogui 2011: p. 43). This makes the idea of human rights no less compelling. Rather, it is »[...] possible as often happens in the global South, to imagine protected human rights as existing outside of Western norms, without neglecting the possibility of universalism or universality, which is the appeal of the concept of human rights« (Grovogui 2011: p. 62). Grovogui's perspective thus directs the view of the researcher towards the contingency of seemingly universal global norms and thereby enables a critical reflection of normative predispositions of one's own research.

Apart from critical reading, feminist and post-colonial approaches also apply ethnological research methods that are sensitive towards the position of the speaker in order to reconstruct marginalized knowledge. In her seminal work on sexualized language in national security discourses, Carol Cohn (1987; 2006), for instance, applied ethnographical methods that are based on listening, experiencing and reflecting one's own position in relation to the subject matter. Real listening enables the researcher to hear what otherwise would remain unheard (Kronsell 2006: pp. 110–111). In Cohn's case study it was the discursive normality of a professional discourse about nuclear destruction that was initially completely abstracted from its subject matter and highly technological. This discourse ascribed an apparently unquestioned rationality to the security professionals and enabled the speakers to unemotionally talk about nuclear death.

While Cohn ironically reveals the phallocentric subtext of this hyper-masculinized (Nandy 1988: p. 35) discourse, the most surprising finding of her work is that the suggestive normality of this »technostrategic« language (Cohn 1987: p. 690) at some point started to influence her own perception. Cohn describes how learning to speak the language of defense experts gave her the feeling of gaining control over her object of investigation (Cohn 1987: p. 704). Yet, this discourse is not innocent: »Technostrategic language can be used only to articulate the perspective of the users of nuclear weapons, not that of the victims« (Cohn 1987: p. 706).

From the perspective of this research, the above discussed example of IR norm research on human rights could be criticized for neglecting how people are affected by human rights violations in diffusion and socialization models. Spike Peterson, for instance, points to the deficits of liberal Western and individualistic traditions of the human rights norm which only seek to provide protection from direct violence and not structural violence as experienced by women through domestic violence, prostitution, genital mutilation or dowry killings (Peterson 1990: p. 305). While one can identify other possible pre-definitions and omissions among those aspects, the critique remains that subjective experiences of injustice are abstracted in the model-like language of spirals, stadiums or life cycles. An ethnological strategy that does not only grasp the perspective of socializing actors thus makes it possible to focus on those who are excluded from the hegemonic interpretation of human rights norms and permits an emancipatory, context sensible and less essentialist research.

As the practice of critical reading and listening considers the experiences of different subjectivities, this points to the contingency of value systems. Thus, the critical reading of overlapping and discrepant experiences generates new interpretations of norms and normativity that are not immediately evaluated according to hegemonic criteria. First of all, contrapuntal reading addresses different questions to IR norm research: it asks for the origin of supposedly global norms, the conditions of their attainment and what function they serve (Grovogui 2010: p. 243). This strategy of critical reading illustrated here goes hand in hand with a careful or »utmost listening« that, in accordance to Sungju Park-Kang (2011), stands at the beginning of every critique. Thereby utmost listening means concentrating on the dialogue partners with full respect and time, to reflect one's own context and to revoke one's personal predispositions (Park-Kang 2011: p. 875). This kind of critical reading and listening enables a non-essentialist and empathic understanding of social change and local contingency that is often concealed by the politics of reality of constructivist norm research (Grovogui 2010: p. 244).

6.4 Reflection of the Normative Predispositions of Researchers through Auto-Ethnography

The third aspect of our critical norm research program is the reflection of one's own perspective. Norm research, as any research, is always part of a particular political economy of knowledge. For example, Carol Cohn's work (1987; 2006) illustrates the suggestive power of an apparently rational and highly specialized discourse, but her case also points to an epistemological problem that follows from our post-structuralist framework: the question of the reflexivity of the researcher, who ascribes certain subjectivities to social actors in her research. In our example of the South African reconciliation norm, certain political practices are uncritically presented as good while alternative forms of dealing with the past are repressed. Epistemological violence is executed here in highly subtle ways, namely via seemingly apolitical norms that inscribe certain practices and subjectivities into the protagonists. Recognizing these practices as forms of domination and violence at all is not self-evident.

On the contrary, the questioning of one's own position as a producer of truth requires a critical practice that does not find enough consideration in the final products of social science research (Brigg and Bleiker 2010: p. 781; Doty 2010: p. 1048; Inayatullah 2011b: pp. 5–7). A strategy from anthropology that may help norm researchers to reflect their own experiences and perspectives theoretically is auto-ethnography (Inayatullah 2011a).

»Autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts« (Spry 2001: p. 710). As a technique of academic writing, this method aims at both the reconstruction as well as the critique of the own speaker's position (Brigg and Bleiker 2010: p. 781). Thereby, a first step is to activate the speaking self in the process of scientific writing. Roland Bleiker and Morgan Brigg (2010: p. 777) criticize the convention in IR to eliminate the person of the writer as a subject that takes certain decisions and is thus involved in the research process in multiple ways from the actual text (see also Dauphinee 2010; Doty 2010; Löwenheim 2010). Instead, they argue for an explicit reflection of the own situatedness as researcher. This strategy can take various forms: the investigation of the own case can show how international politics affects the individual in everyday life (Hülsse 2011: p. 56; Löwenheim 2010: pp. 1023–1025). Reconstructing your own life story can serve to illustrate the complexity of contingent environments and different »form[s] of being-in-the-world« (Jackson 2011: p. 169; see also Kumarakulasingam 2011: pp. 32–37). It can also help to justify why a specific research perspective or topic have been selected in the first place (see Chan 2011; Edkins 2011; Inayatullah 2011a). Explicitly reflecting one's own

situation can also be used to deconstruct a hegemonic discourse (El Alaoui 2011: pp. 41–44).

Elisabeth Dauphinee (2010) probably confronts herself (and us as readers) most radically with ethical questions that go hand in hand with problematizing her role as a scientist. In her auto-ethnographic reflection about her research on the Bosnian war she questions her responsibility as a producer of truth who builds her professional career on her interview partners' life experiences. Dauphinee splits the question of how her research serves the researched into three aspects that she relates to the problem of academic voice as formulated by Roxanne Doty (2004: pp. 378–383; 2010: pp. 1049–1050): firstly, research can only narrowly depict social reality; secondly, to a certain degree the representation of social reality always consists of epistemological violence; and thirdly, it is all about disciplinary narrative conventions that finally determine what can be said and what cannot (Dauphinee 2010: pp. 805–808).

Therefore, auto-ethnography can be applied as a critical reflection on functioning of academic conventions, while at the same time questioning those mechanisms, being »a counter technology and mentality, which deconstructs the processes through which one became a governable person« (Löwenheim 2010: p. 1028). Governable means here the repression of the researcher under a disciplinary convention by which the position of the writing subject is erased from the text by style and form of academic writing, even though a strict divide between knowledge-producing subject and the object of knowledge is impossible. Naeem Inayatullah calls this play of a simultaneous absence and presence of the author a »precarious fiction« that is based upon the fictional distancing of the writing subject in academic prose. The ideas of the author hereby speak for themselves without revealing the author as such (Inayatullah 2011b: p. 5). In norm research (as in other political science research fields) the biographical context or the story of a text's emergence is rarely made explicit (but see Kruzel and Rosenau 1989). This, however, would be particularly desirable in cases where researchers are politically active or in an advising position.[12]

The question which role the writing self should play in an academic text is the object of a controversial discussion among proponents of auto-ethnography. Dauphinee cautions against a contest among IR scholars about »who writes the prettiest sentence about a war zone« (Dauphinee 2010: p. 817). Brigg and Bleiker emphasize in contrast that auto-ethnography is not about some kind of academic *l'art pour l'art*, but about a theoretically driven examination of one's own worldview and subjectivity. Yet, as a different form of academic

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12 Compare research on democratic peace and its political implications in contributions by Smith (2011) and Geis (2011).

writing, auto-ethnography is also employed as a stylistic device in this kind of research. Feminist and post-colonial authors often use their texts toy perform the critique they wish to articulate. A good example for this are the texts of Anna Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling, who often use unusual paths in their papers, for instance to support the articulation of marginalized voices (Agathangelou and Ling 2004a,b; 2005). Poetry, fictional dialogue and role play are used here as rhetoric devices to reconstruct emotions and thus underline the text's argument also through its form. These texts are at the same time (also) critical interventions, in which the authors take a political standpoint against a discourse that is considered as hegemonic.

We hesitate at this point to regard auto-ethnographic writing per se as method for more reflexivity in norm research. This point is also questioned in the literature: while Brigg and Bleiker (2010) regard auto-ethnographic writing as a kind of reflective device for knowledge production, Dauphinee (2010: p. 813) and Doty (2010: pp. 1049–1050) agree that auto-ethnography is not a method with which the problem of a researcher's subjectivity or normativity can be solved easily. Nevertheless, the perspective of the »I in IR« can lead to individual and very personal insights about the clash between theory and the subject of I/international R/relations (Inayatullah 2011b: pp. 9–11).

Thus, three greater areas can be identified in which auto-ethnographic strategies promise additional value for critical norm research: firstly, the relation between the writing subject, the subject matter that is being researched and the reader is addressed openly and thereby becomes accessible for critique. This can affect the choice of the research topic as such, which always involves the non-consideration of other possible research topics (Smith 2004), but can guide an explicit questioning of one's own epistemological position. This, secondly, leads to a re-politicization of the research process, for instance, when normative implications of one's own research are reflected (for examples, see Dauphinee 2010 or Doty 2006 and 2010). In this context, Doty (2010: p. 1048) pleads to establish "human connections" in the process of academic writing that provide the possibility of a formal counter-narrative of hegemonic IR conventions. Thirdly, researchers can integrate their own individual experiences as an activating and critical method in academic teaching. Oded Löwenheim (2010: pp. 1044–1045), for instance, argues that the explicit reflection of his own individual experience as Israeli soldier gave his students deeper insights in the ethical implications of security in teaching (see also Amy 2011; and Stump 2011).

To express it more clearly: of course, we do not claim at this point that norm researchers should only make their own experiences the subject of their research. Neither do we believe that a new focus towards feminist or ethnological methods

would be the ultimate answer for critical norm research. However, we believe that our proposal to practice critical norm research as a deconstruction of hegemonic bodies of knowledge cannot be without any impacts on the way such a critical knowledge production is practiced. For this, we not only need a strategy to reconstruct local and often marginalized knowledge, we also have to be aware of the disciplinary consequences that go hand in hand with writing as academic knowledge production. In order to make alternative voices audible, critical norm research also needs to regain its own voice.

From a methodological point of view this is not very controversial if the point is to make one's own situatedness explicit and open to discussion. But beyond that we consider the everyday practices that fuel an academic economy of knowledge particularly important to be reflected, be it in the formulation of research questions, in real listening in field research, in the process of academic writing or in teaching. For this reason we understand this contribution only as a first step on the way to formulating a research program for critical norm research.

7 Possibilities of Critical Norm Research

The research program proposed here attempts to set a counterpoint in constructivist norm research. Constructivist norm research mainly analyzes norms that are widely accepted in the West, thereby leaving them unchallenged and even strengthening them by representing them in terms of a moral progress in local societies. Our critical research program suggests emphasizing aspects of power and domination at play in global norm diffusion while at the same time identifying the contingency of value systems. Therefore we resorted to post-structuralist, feminist, post-colonial and auto-ethnographic perspectives and research practices. Based on these perspectives we plead for a critical perception on political phenomena and social reality, as well as a stronger reflexivity in social science research. Surely, these research practices are not the only ones that can be useful for critical norm research, but from our point of view they offer a fruitful approach and a critical political alternative vis-à-vis the prevalent practice of constructivist research.

8 Epilogue

Prof. Sapere: That is all very well, but can you really re-politicize social science that way, and if so: Is this really desirable? Overall your criticism and your prop-

ositions are comprehensible; but nonetheless, I have my concerns. On the one hand, most IR scholars would certainly agree with your claim for more reflexivity in one's own research. But your post-structuralist perspective and the suggested practices seem to be quite radical. With your basic assumptions, any statement about real word developments eventually becomes impossible. Don't we have to give up doing research altogether, if we follow this approach? (*He looks anxious at his watch. Office hours ended long ago, and this appointment did not proceed as usual conversations. Shortly Prof. Sapere's seminar will start, but Sofie does not seem to be diverted from her criticism.*) My IR seminar will start now, but we will continue discussing this issue next week.

Sofie nods and leaves the office slightly disenchanted. Prof. Sapere hectically packs his documents and is about leaving the room, when he suddenly returns and picks up the bibliography of research strategies which Sofie left on the table. Prof. Sapere skims through it and decides to ask his students today why they decided to study political science.

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