Constructivism

Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed. This view refers to the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge that are also called ontology and epistemology in research language. Alexander Wendt (1995) offers an excellent example that illustrates the social construction of reality when he explains that 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean nuclear weapons. These identifications are not caused by the nuclear weapons (the material structure) but rather by the meaning given to the material structure (the ideational structure). It is important to understand that the social relationship between the United States and Britain and the United States and North Korea is perceived in a similar way by these states, as this shared understanding (or intersubjectivity) forms the basis of their interactions. The example also shows that nuclear weapons by themselves do not have any meaning unless we understand the social context. It further demonstrates that constructivists go beyond the material reality by including the effect of ideas and beliefs on world politics. This also entails that reality is always under construction, which opens the prospect for change. In other words, meanings are not fixed but can change over time depending on the ideas and beliefs that actors hold.

Constructivists argue that agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures. Agency can be understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system that consists of material and ideational elements. Returning

to Wendt's example discussed above, this means that the social relation of enmity between the United States and North Korea represents the intersubjective structure (that is, the shared ideas and beliefs among both states), whereas the United States and North Korea are the actors who have the capacity (that is, agency) to change or reinforce the existing structure or social relationship of enmity. This change or reinforcement ultimately depends on the beliefs and ideas held by both states. If these beliefs and ideas change, the social relationship can change to one of friendship. This stance differs considerably from that of realists, who argue that the anarchic structure of the international system determines the behaviour of states. Constructivists, on the other hand, argue that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992). This means that anarchy can be interpreted in different ways depending on the meaning that actors assign to it.

Another central issue to constructivism is identities and interests. Constructivists argue that states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities are representations of an actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests. They are important to constructivists as they argue that identities constitute interests and actions. For example, the identity of a small state implies a set of interests that are different from those implied by the identity of a large state. The small state is arguably more focused on its survival, whereas the large state is concerned with dominating global political, economic and military affairs. It should be noted, though, that the actions of a state should be aligned with its identity. A state can thus not act contrary to its identity because this will call into question the validity of the identity, including its

preferences. This issue might explain why Germany, despite being a great power with a leading global economy, did not become a military power in the second half of the twentieth century. Following the atrocities of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime during the Second World War, German political identity shifted from one of militarism to pacifism due to unique historical circumstances.

Social norms are also central to constructivism. These are generally defined as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Katzenstein 1996, 5). States that conform to a certain identity are expected to comply with the norms that are associated with that identity. This idea comes with an expectation that some kinds of behaviour and action are more acceptable than others. This process is also known as 'the logic of appropriateness', where actors behave in certain ways because they believe that this behaviour is appropriate (March and Olsen 1998, 951–952). To better understand norms, we can identify three types: regulative norms, constitutive norms and prescriptive norms. Regulative norms order and constrain behaviour; constitutive norms create new actors, interests or categories of action; and prescriptive norms prescribe certain norms, meaning there are no bad norms from the perspective of those who promote them (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). It is also important to note that norms go through a 'lifecycle of norms' before they can get accepted. A norm only becomes an expected behaviour when a critical mass of relevant state actors adopt it and internalise it in their own practices. For example, constructivists would argue that the bulk of states have come together to develop climate change mitigation policies because it is the right thing to do for the survival of humanity. This has, over decades of diplomacy and advocacy, become an

appropriate behaviour that the bulk of citizens expect their leaders to adhere to. Liberals, on the other hand, might reject the notion of climate change politics in favour of continued economic growth and pursuing innovative scientific solutions, while realists might reject it due to the damage that climate policies may do to shorter-term national interests.

Although all constructivists share the above-mentioned views and concepts, there is considerable variety within constructivism. Conventional constructivists ask ‘what’-type questions – such as what causes an actor to act. They believe that it is possible to explain the world in causal terms and are interested in discovering the relationships between actors, social norms, interests and identities. Conventional constructivists assume, for instance, that actors act according to their identity and that it is possible to predict when this identity becomes visible or not. When an identity is seen to be under- going changes, conventional constructivists investigate what factors caused which aspects of a state’s identity to change. Critical constructivists, on the other hand, ask ‘how’-type questions such as how do actors come to believe in a certain identity. Contrary to conventional constructivists, they are not interested in the effect that this identity has. Instead, critical constructivists want to reconstruct an identity – that is, find out what are its component parts – which they believe are created through written or spoken communication among and between peoples. Language plays a key role for critical constructivists because it constructs, and has the ability to change, social reality.