It's the Process Stupid! Process Tracing in the Study of European and International Politics

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Abstract:

Process tracing is in, acquiring near buzz-word status in certain circles. Europeanists do it; IR scholars do it – all with the goal of bringing theory closer to what really goes on in the world. This makes our scholarship more policy relevant and increases the reliability of our findings - non-trivial advantages, for sure. Yet, such benefits do not come without costs. In particular, proponents of process tracing should be wary of losing sight of the big picture, be aware of the method's significant data requirements, and recognize certain epistemological traps inherent in its application.

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Introduction

"This argument is too structural. It's underdetermined and based on unrealistic as-if assumptions. Moreover, it tells us little about how the world really works." Among many IR scholars and Europeanists, this is an oft-heard set of complaints. Our theories – so they argue – are too detached from the world in which we live.

Consider two examples. Within IR, one has work on the democratic peace. Its central thesis – that democracies do not fight other democracies – is hailed as one of our few law-like propositions in international relations. Yet, as critics rightly stress, we know amazingly little about the process generating such peaceful relations (Rosato 2003, 585-86, ***passim***; see also Forum 2005). In Europe, scholars have for years debated the identity-shaping effects of European institutions. One claim is that bureaucrats 'go native' in Brussels, adopting European values and mores at the expense of national ones. Yet, here too, critics correctly note that we know virtually nothing about the process underlying such potentially transformative dynamics (Checkel 2005a).

In both cases, the proposed solution – the fix - is a turn to process and causal mechanisms. For democratic-peace theorists, such a move would add causal foundations to their predominantly correlational studies (Hamberg 2005). For Europeanists, a focus on process would help rule out likely alternative mechanisms of identity change – for example, those sent to Brussels are already committed Europeans and thus have 'gone native' well before their posting (Checkel 2005b).

So, to paraphrase a former American president, 'it's the process stupid.' However, what does this really mean? What method(s) does one use to study process? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a process focus? I argue that to invoke process is synonymous with an understanding of theories as based on causal mechanisms. To study such mechanisms, we must employ a method of process tracing. But – and here is the punch line – this is not easy. In particular, proponents of process tracing should be wary of losing sight of the big picture, be aware of the

method's significant data requirements, and recognize certain epistemological traps inherent in its application.

The chapter proceeds as follows. A first section provides the basics on a process- and mechanisms-based approach to the study of European or international politics. The next section draws upon my own experience as an inveterate process-tracer to outline how the technique works in practice. I then conduct a next assessment of the method, and, finally, conclude with several reflections on the epistemological pitfalls – and promise – of a mechanisms-process focus.

Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing

What is a mechanism? According to one widely cited definition, it is "a set of hypotheses that could be the explanation for some social phenomenon, the explanation being in terms of interactions between individuals and other individuals, or between individuals and some social aggregate" (Hedstroem and Swedberg 1998, 25, 32-33; see also the excellent discussion in Hovi 2004). Mechanisms operate at an analytical level below that of a more encompassing theory; they increase the theory's credibility by rendering more fine-grained explanations (Johnson 2002, 230-31).

More generally, mechanisms connect things. They are "recurrent processes linking specified initial conditions and a specific outcome" (Mayntz 2003, 4-5). This language of mechanisms is particularly helpful in reducing the lag between input and output, between cause and effect.

An example is helpful. In a recent project on socialization (Checkel 2005a, b), a primary objective was to minimize the lag between international institutions (cause) and socializing outcomes (effect) at the state or unit level. To accomplish this, I theorized three generic social mechanisms - strategic calculation, role playing and normative suasion. In turn, these allowed me to advance 'more fine-grained explanations' connecting institutions to possible changes in state interests and identities.

The foregoing definitions and example beg a key question. Simply put, how does one study causal mechanisms in action? The answer, it would seem, is to engage in process tracing. Consider the following statement, taken from a text destined to set the standard for American-style empiricist/positivist case-study research in the coming years.

> The process-tracing method attempts to identify the intervening ***causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism*** – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable. … Process tracing forces the investigator to take equifinality into account, that is, to consider the alternative paths through which the outcome could have occurred, and it offers the possibility of mapping out one or more potential causal paths that are consistent with the outcome and the process-tracing evidence in a single case (Bennett and George 2005, 206-07; emphasis added).

Several comments are in order. First, methodologically speaking, process-tracing provides the how-we-come-to-know nuts and bolts for mechanism-based accounts of social change. Of course, at a very basic level, the method simply tells us to trace the process (duhh). However, it does much more, as it directs one to trace the process in a very specific, theoretically informed way. Between the beginning (independent variable[s]) and end (outcome of dependent variable), the researcher looks for a series of theoretically predicted intermediate steps.

Second and epistemologically, process tracing is fundamentally at odds with more interpretative epistemologies. It only works if you hold things constant in a series of steps: A causes B; B then causes C; C then causes D; and so on. Such an approach, which for sure has tremendous benefits, simply cannot capture the recursivity and fluidity of most post-positivist epistemologies. Many European constructivists would be rightly surprised to learn that process tracing is part and parcel of the constructivist methodological tool kit (Bennett and George 2005, 206). Indeed, those interpretative constructivists who do employ process tracing are very

careful to separate it from the discursive and narrative techniques at the heart of their approach (Hopf 2002).

In sum and to employ the categories of this volume, one can say the following about process tracing.

Basics – The application of process tracing usually means to trace the operation of the causal mechanism(s) at work in a given situation. One carefully maps the process, exploring the extent to which it coincides with prior, theoretically derived expectations about the workings of the mechanism. The data for process tracing is overwhelmingly qualitative in nature, and includes historical memoirs, interviews, press accounts and documents (Gheciu 2005a, b, for an excellent application). Process tracing is strong on questions of how and interactions; it is much weaker at establishing structural context. Logistically, the greatest challenge is the significant amount of time and data that it requires.

Alternative Approaches – In principle, process tracing is compatible with, and complementary to a range of other methods within the empiricist/positivist tradition. These include statistical techniques, analytic narrative (Bates 1998), case studies and content analysis. Process tracing is utilized by both empirically oriented rational-choice scholars (Schimmelfennig 2005) and conventional constructivists (Lewis 2005).

Epistemological Implications – With its focus on variables and causal dynamics, process tracing is a method solidly anchored in positivism. The philosophical foundations of post-positivist epistemologies, with the possible exception of scientific realism (see below), are incompatible with it.

Empirical Application: The Socializing Power of European Institutions

The following analysis is divided into three parts. I begin by defining a particular causal mechanism of socialization – persuasion. The next two sections summarize process-tracing evidence for persuasion's causal impact (or lack there of) on agent identities and interests.

To begin, though, why the focus on socialization in Europe? For one, there are ongoing, contentious and unresolved policy (***Economist*** 2002, 2003) and academic debates (Laffan 1998; Wessels 1998) over the extent to which European institutions promote preference and identity shifts. Moreover, with its thickly institutionalized regional environment and a supranational, polity-in-the-making like the EU, Europe seems a most likely case for socialization to occur (Weber 1994; Zuern and Checkel 2005).

Persuasion as a Mechanism of European Socialization. Socialization refers to the process of inducting new actors into the norms, rules and ways of behavior of a given community. Its end point is internalization, where the community norms and rules become taken for granted (Checkel 2005a). While IR scholars as well as Europeanists have made a convincing case that socialization happens, they have been less clear on exactly how it occurs (Alderson 2001).

To explore this how question, I focus on persuasion as a causal mechanism of socialization – and do so for two reasons. Empirically, there are numerous tantalizing hints in the memoir literature and in journalistic accounts that it plays an important socializing role – most recently, for example, in the EU's Convention on the Future of Europe (Magnette 2004). Beyond Europe, the Chayes remind us that persuasion is a key instrument for promoting socialization within international institutions more generally (Chayes and Chayes 1995, 25-26; see also Koh 1997). Theoretically, sociological studies of international institutions often hint at a key role

for persuasion – for example, when they talk of institutions fixing meanings or diffusing norms. Yet, for the most part, these scholars have left the concept underspecified (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004, ch.2; see, however, Johnston 2001).

The stage thus set, I define persuasion as a social process of interaction that involves changing attitudes about cause and effect in the absence of overt coercion. More formally, it is "an activity or process in which a communicator attempts to induce a change in the belief, attitude or behavior of another person ... through the transmission of a message in a context in which the persuadee has some degree of free choice." Here, persuasion is a process of convincing someone through argument and principled debate (Perloff 1993, 14; see also Zimbardo and Leippe 1991; Brody, Mutz and Sniderman 1996; Keohane 2001, 2, 10). To employ my earlier language, it is a social mechanism where the 'interactions between individuals' may lead to changes in interests or possibly identities.

So defined, this is thick persuasion. For sure, there are different levels at which persuasion can occur (Gourevitch, Katzenstein and Keohane 2002). Indeed, there is a long tradition in rational-choice scholarship emphasizing a thin, strategic and manipulative understanding of persuasion – for example, Riker's work on heresthetics (Riker 1986, 1996). Common to these thin definitions is that persuasion does not bring about preference or attitude change (Evangelista 2001, for example).

Persuasion in its thicker sense may thus sometimes change people's minds, acting as a motor and mechanism of socialization. However, the key word is 'sometimes.' The challenge has been to articulate the conditions under which this is likely to happen – so-called scope conditions. Deductively drawing upon insights from social psychology (Orbell, 1988) as well as Habermasian social theory, recent work has made precisely this when-and-under-what-conditions move. In particular, it suggests that persuasion – and its close coneptual relative arguing – are more likely to change the interests of social agents and lead to internalization when the following conditions hold (Checkel 2005a for details).

- *The target of the socialization attempt is in a novel and uncertain environment and thus cognitively motivated to analyze new information.*
- *The target has few prior, ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the socializing agency's message.*
- *The socializing agency/individual is an authoritative member of the in-group to which the target belongs or wants to belong.*
- *The socializing agency/individual does not lecture or demand, but, instead, acts out principles of serious deliberative argument.*
- *The agency/target interaction occurs in less politicized and more insulated, in-camera settings.*

These scope conditions generate expectations for when and how persuasion as a motor of socialization is more likely to be at work. The first condition addresses context; the second and third highlight initial conditions – properties of the socializee and socializer, respectively; while the final two characterize the process of social interaction. They also tell one a good bit about the kinds of data that need to be collected – on the socializee's background, the quality of the interaction context (bargaining? deliberation? mimicking?), and the like.

In this case, process tracing then involves exploring the degree to which these conditions hold or do not. The challenge is "to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism [persuasion here] – between an independent variable (or variables) [international institutions] and the outcome of the dependent variable [degree of agent internalization]" (Bennett and George 2005, 206-07). The following two sub-sections detail such attempts.

Mandates and Actor Independence. The scope conditions indicate that persuasion is more likely in brainstorming (--> mandate) and depoliticized (--> actor independence) institutional settings. I develop these points with an example drawn

from my work on European cooperation over questions of citizenship and membership.

Here, one concern has been to document how European institutions – and, specifically, the Council of Europe - came to new, shared understandings on such issues over the past decade. When the Council seeks to develop new policy and norms in a given area, it sets up committees of experts, which are composed of representatives from Council member states as well as academic and policy specialists. Their mandate is to think big and puzzle through issues in an open way. In the early 1990s, two such committees were established: a Committee of Experts on National Minorities and a Committee of Experts on Nationality. If new norms were these committees' outputs, then the issue for me was the process leading to such outcomes. In particular, what role was played by persuasion?

For the committee on national minorities, there were few attempts at persuasion - of any type - throughout its five-year life. Rather, committee members were content to horse-trade on the basis of fixed positions and preferences. Key in explaining this outcome was the politicization of its work at a very early stage. Events in the broader public arena (the Bosnian tragedy) and within the committee led to a quick hardening of positions. Put differently, these political facts greatly diminished the likelihood that the committee's formal brainstorming mandate might lead to successful acts of persuasion, where Council member states might rethink basic preferences on minority policies.

The story was quite different in the committee on nationality. Through the mid-1990s, nationality was a rather hum-drum, boring issue - especially compared with the highly emotive one of minorities. Initially, much of the committee's proceedings were taken up with mundane discussions of how and whether to streamline immigration procedures and regulations. In this technical and largely depoliticized atmosphere, brainstorming and attempts at persuasion were evident, especially in a working group of the committee. In this smaller setting, individuals freely exchanged views on the meaning of nationality in a post-national Europe.

They sought to persuade and change attitudes, using the force of example, logical argumentation and the personal self esteem in which one persuader was held. In at least two cases, individuals clearly did rethink their views on nationality in a fundamental way, that is, they were convinced to view the issue in a new light (Checkel 2003).

That last sentence, however, raises an important methodological issue. How does this tracing of the process allow me plausibly to assert a causal role for persuasion as a mechanism of socialization? Put more prosaically, how would I recognize persuasion if it were to walk through the door? The following can be said. I employed multiple data streams, consisting of interviews with committee members (five rounds spread over five years), confidential meeting summaries of nearly all the committee's meetings and various secondary sources - and triangulated across them. In the interviews, I asked two types of questions. A first touched upon an individual's own thought processes and possibly changing preferences. A second was more intersubjective, asking the interviewee to classify his/her interaction context. I gave them four possibilities - coercion, bargaining, persuasion/arguing, imitation - and asked for a rank ordering. Interviewees were also asked if their ranking changed over time and, if so, why (Checkel 2003).

In sum, non-distributive mandates and actor independence promoted an institutional dynamic where persuasion was able to play a role influencing preferences on nationality. This conclusion is strengthened by asking the counterfactual: Absent these persuasive dynamics would the outcome have been any different? In fact, the regional norms to emerge from the committee's deliberations were different from what otherwise would have been the case. For example, on the question of dual nationality, a long-standing prohibitionary norm was relaxed, thus making European policies more open to the possibility of individuals holding two citizenships (Council of Europe 1997, 2000).

Put differently, persuasion's causal role was facilitated as one moved from institutions as bargaining arenas to institutions as transformative settings marked by a

thicker institutional context (Gourevitch, Katzenstein and Keohane 2002; March and Olsen 2005, 6-7). These findings are consistent with insights drawn from laboratory-experimental work in social psychology on the so-called contact hypothesis (Beyers 2005). In addition, they are corroborated by results from work on epistemic communities in IR theory (Haas 1992), which also emphasizes non-bargaining dynamics in apolitical, technical settings.

Membership and Agency. Beyond the above, there is evidence that persuasive appeals are also promoted by institutional membership rules stressing exclusivity and by agency-level variables. Regarding the former, persuasion aimed at convincing an individual to change his or her basic attitudes appears to work best in front of groups with exclusive membership, where the emphasis is on small, knowledgeable and private audiences. This was the case in the small working group of the committee of experts on nationality discussed above. There is also evidence of such dynamics in small-group settings in post-Soviet Ukraine (Checkel 2001) and post-communist East Europe (Gheciu 2005a, b), as well as in a private monitoring procedure established by the Council of Europe to promote better compliance with human rights in its member states (Checkel 2000).

Here, the process tracing proceeded as follows. Theory told me to expect persuasion to work better in private, in-camera settings. My research design therefore included cases where small groups operated in-camera and where they did not. This allowed me to probe for and indeed find a positive correlation between the degree of privacy and the prevalence of persuasion. Interviews and some documentary data allowed me to establish a plausible causal role for privacy as well (Checkel 2000, 2001). Interview questions were not of the sort 'Tell me how the degree of privacy enjoyed by your group facilitated persuasion.' (Duhh!) Rather, I encouraged interviewees to describe the context of their group interactions (public, private, secret, large, small, *etc*), as well as the predominant group dynamic(s) (coercion, bargaining, persuasion/arguing, imitation).

A final factor linking persuasion to socialization has nothing to do with institutions or their design. Instead, one needs to consider properties of the agents who may be at work within institutions. In particular, an individual's cognitive priors - that is, his/her background and previous thinking on the subject at hand - strongly affect the persuasion-socialization linkage. A robust finding from several different research projects is that novices are much more likely to be open to persuasion (Johnston 2001; Gheciu 2005a, b; see also Hooghe 2005).

For example, in Ukraine, one reason the West was able to persuade and change minds on questions of citizenship and nationality in the first part of the 1990s was the newness of the Ukrainian participants in such exchanges. Many of these individuals were truly novices, with few ingrained cognitive priors on matters of nationality and citizenship. The recruitment of these novice outsiders was a direct consequence of Soviet policies, which saw major policy decisions taken in Moscow. The USSR thus bequeathed Ukraine few qualified home grown personnel of its own.

Consider the role played by Dr. Petro Chaliy, head of the Citizenship Department in the Presidential Administration through the mid-1990s. Before assuming this position, he was a researcher at the Institute of State and Law of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences; his scholarly work examined constitutional law and local self-governance. Within the government, Chaliy therefore found himself in an unfamiliar position and uncertain environment, dealing with issues of first principle: the fundamental normative guidelines for Ukraine's conception of membership. He was a likely candidate for persuasion.

The process-tracing evidence and research methodology behind such a claim are as follows. I interviewed Chaliy, his close collaborators and his Western interlocutors. I carried out a before-and-after comparison of Chaliy's writings on the subject (citizenship, nationality). I asked the counterfactual: Absent intervention and attempts at normative suasion by regional institutions, would Ukrainian policy have

been any different? Finally, I compared word with deed, examining how and to what degree new beliefs translated into new policy (Checkel 2001).

This claim about noviceness, which comes largely from work in social psychology, can be generalized. The issue is really one of embeddedness. Simply put, social actors, when entering a possible persuasive setting at the European regional level, are in no sense free agents; they arrive embedded in multiple contexts.

Consider the work of my EU collaborators in the project on international institutions and socialization in post-Cold War Europe. Their starting point is that individuals are embedded in multiple international and domestic institutions. However, these analysts go an important step further, theorizing and documenting how particular features of domestic and European organizations can hinder/promote persuasion or role enactment within a variety of EU institutions – including the Commission (Egeberg 1999, 2004), Council working groups (Beyers 2005) or COREPER (Lewis 2003, 2005). The clear conclusion is that efforts to explain the roles of these mechanisms and their link to possible agent socialization will fail unless one systematically controls for prior national embeddedness.

Process Tracing: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

For over a decade, process tracing has been my method of choice for the study of European and international politics. Aside from the work discussed above, my first book – published in 1997 – also explicitly invoked the method (Checkel 1997). What have I learned?

- *Lesson #1 (The Good): Helping to Bring Mechanisms Back In.*

Among a very diverse set of social theorists (compare Elster 1998; and Wendt 1999, ch.2), there is a convergence on the need for more attention to mechanisms. There are good and sensible reasons for this trend. Most important, it moves us away from the correlational arguments and as-if styles of reasoning that too often dominate in

IR and European studies, and towards theories that capture and explain the world as it really works.

Less appreciated are the methodological implications of this social-theoretic turn. Simply put, if one is going to invoke the philosophy-of-science language of mechanisms, then process tracing is the logically necessary method for exploring them. The good news for students of process tracing, then, is that their method is here to stay and will likely be the subject of further philosophical-methodological reflections in the years ahead.

- *Lesson #2 (More Good): Coming to Grips with First Mover Advantages.*

Process tracing can minimize the problems generated in theory testing by the so-called first mover advantage (Caporaso, Checkel and Jupille 2003b, 27-28). If they are honest, most scholars will admit to having theoretical favourites - those arguments to which they are most attached. In empirical research, the tendency, then, is first to interpret and explain the data through the lens of one's favored theory; it has, so to speak, the first mover advantage. Now, this is quite natural. Moreover, the positivist-empiricist tool kit, by encouraging researchers to consider alternative explanations, has built-in checks on its abuse.

Process tracing can make such checks stronger. To appreciate this, recall what the method entails. Between the beginning (independent variables) and end (outcome of dependent variable), the researcher traces a number of theoretically predicted intermediate steps. This step-wise procedure essentially produces a series of mini-checks, constantly pushing the researcher to think hard about the connection (or lack there of) between theoretically expected patterns and what the data say. For sure, the data say nothing; the researcher is always involved in a process of interpreting them. In this sense, problems generated by the first mover advantage can never be eliminated. However, process tracing surely minimizes them.

Let me give an example. There are currently two, partly competing, research programs that explore the role of social communication in a middle-ground sense - that is, between the extremes of language as cheap-talk/signaling and language as discourse. One is largely based in North America and operationalizes this linguistic middle ground as persuasion (Price 1998; Johnston 2001, nd, for example); the other, utilizing Habermasian notions of arguing and communicative action, has a strong anchoring in Europe (Joerges and Neyer 1997a, b; Sjursen 2002; Mueller 2004, for example). It is precisely those researchers with a strong and explicit commitment to process tracing – nearly all the persuasion scholars along with a much smaller number of Habermasians – who have been much better at recognizing the limits of their causal stories, and thus also at connecting to alternative theoretical accounts (see, especially, Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Checkel and Moravcsik 2001).

- *Lesson # 3 (Yet More Good): Promoting Bridge Building.*

It has become increasingly evident that process tracing has a central – and necessary - role to play in contemporary debates over so-called bridge building in IR and European politics. Early calls for bridge building were pitched primarily at the theoretical and, indeed, meta-theoretical levels (Adler 1997, for example). The social-theoretic case for building bridges had to be established before the field could move on to the more operational issue of how actually to do it.

Recent years have seen the bridge-building debate move precisely to this operational level. Now, the question is not whether, but how one connects different theoretical tool kits – rational choice and social constructivism, most prominently. To make such connections, scholars have advanced arguments on temporal sequencing and domains of application. Implicitly or explicitly, the method on offer is typically process tracing, as it is extremely useful for teasing out the more fine-grained distinctions and connections between alternative theoretical schools (Caporaso, Checkel, Jupille 2003a; Kelley 2004; Checkel 2005b; see also Fearon and

Wendt 2002). For example, in his work on the EU's Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), Lewis has used process tracing to test a domain-of-application bridge-building argument that connects rational instrumental choice and persuasive dynamics (Lewis 2005).

- *Lesson #4 (The Bad): Weak Theories.*

Process tracing is not conducive to the development of parsimonious or generalizable theories. In part, the reasons for this are social theoretic. As argued throughout this chapter, process tracing is synonymous with a mechanism-based approach to theory development, which, as Elster correctly argues, is "intermediate between laws and descriptions" (Elster 1998, 45). However, in equal part, the reasons are human and idiosyncratic. The typical process tracer is a scholar driven by empirical puzzles. He/she is happy to combine a bit of this and a bit of that, the goal being to explain more completely the outcome at hand. The end result is at best partial, middle-range theory (Bennett and George 2005, 7-8, 216).

Why, though, is this a problem? To put it bluntly, process tracing and the middle-range theory it begets can – if one is not careful – lead to over-determined and, in the worse case, kitchen sink arguments where everything matters. More careful, up-front attention to research design can minimize such problems (see also Johnston 2005).

- *Lesson #5 (More Bad): Proxies Are a Pain for Us, too.*

Process tracing is not a panacea, eliminating all need for tough, informed judgments on the part of the researcher. We often decry the unrealistic proxies that quantitative researchers employ in the construction of data sets. For example, in Europe, there is a vibrant, highly quantitative research program on EU decision-making (Hug and Koenig 2000, 2002). To inquire about decisionmaking means one must know something about state preferences. Yet, the latter are often inferred from survey data

or programs of national political parties. Many would scratch their heads at the use of such proxies.

Less appreciated is that qualitative researchers - process tracers, in this case – face similar problems, albeit at a different level. Consider my own work, discussed above. A central concern has been to theorize and document, via a process-tracing method, the causal mechanisms of socialization. In the examples here, I focused on one such mechanism – persuasion. Did I ever actually see somebody persuaded, see a decisionmmaker change his or her mind? No, I did not - I was not a fly on the wall, secretly observing these sessions. I, too, was therefore forced to rely on proxies – before and after interviews, documentary records of the meetings, and the like.
The lesson here is similar to that given in #4. At an early point, the process tracing, qualitative scholar needs to think hard about the conceptual variables at play in his/her project, and ask what are feasible and justifiable proxies for measuring them.

- *Lesson #6 (Still More Bad): It Takes (lots of) Time.*

Process tracing is time intensive and, to put it ever so delicately, "can require enormous amounts of information" (Bennett and George 2005, 223). This is true, and means researchers need to think carefully about their own financial or temporal limits before committing to a process-tracing methodology.
For example, my studies of persuasion and socialization in European institutions have required a significant amount of data collection, including five rounds of interviews spread over five years and a close reading of numerous documents (both public and confidential). I find the results important and have had them published in several leading journals (Comparative Political Studies, International Organization). Yet, the project, in large part because of its mechanism, process-tracing focus, has taken a long time to bring to fruition. My point simply is that while all scholars face trade offs when thinking about the relations among productivity, research endeavors and research methods, these dilemmas may be particularly acute for process-tracers.

- *Lesson #7 (Yet More Bad): Losing the Big Picture.*

By its nature, process tracing forces the researcher to exam, well, questions of process. In making such a methodological choice, it is all too easy to lose sight of broader structural context and the normative implications of one's work.

On structural context, my research on socialization is a case in point. Basically, I went to the micro-level, focusing on individual decisionmakers and the social-psychological and institutional factors that might lead them to change their minds in light of persuasive appeals. For example, one of my hypotheses is that persuasion will more likely work when the persuader 'acts out principles of serious deliberative argument' (see above). I duly tested this proposition and found support for it.

Yet, when I presented my findings at several different conferences in Europe, interpretative constructivists noted a problem with my logic. Simply put, I had no way – theoretically or methodologically – for figuring out what counted as a serious deliberative argument. I had just assumed it adhered to the individual. Instead, they correctly pointed out that it was equally plausible that my persuader's arguments were legitimated by the broader social discourse in which he/she was embedded – in my case, changing discourses on citizenship and nationality in Europe.

Constructivist colleagues were thus suggesting that I had lost sight of the broader (social) structural context. In positivist-empiricist terms, I had a potential problem of omitted variable bias, while, for interpretativists, the issue was one of missing the broader forces that enable and make possible human agency. Whatever you call it, the point and lesson are the same: Process tracers need to take care not to lose sight of this bigger picture.

Normative context is a second area where process tracers may be prone to overlook important dynamics. By normative, I do not mean norms as invoked by conventional constructivists, where the term is conceived as a cause of behavior.

Rather, I refer to the normative implications of one's research and findings. Consider work on international institutions. If the focus in early studies was whether they mattered, the central concern now is how and in what ways institutions have effects (Martin and Simmons 1998). And such effects may have normative implications – good or bad.

In my collaborative project on socialization and international institutions, our main goal was to document precisely how institutions had effects – socialization dynamics in our case. All participants adopted a mechanism-based approach, and many combined this with a process-tracing method (Schimmelfennig 2005; Gheciu 2005a; Lewis 2005, for example). Our findings bear centrally on debates over the relation between states and institutions, and how the latter may change the interests and identities of the former.

Yet, while we were busy tracing such dynamics, we forgot to ask important normative-ethical questions. Is it legitimate and just that West Europe – through the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe – imposes norms and rules on applicant countries from East Europe that in some cases (minority rights) are flagrantly violated by those very same West Eurpean states? What are the implications for democratic and legitimate governance if state agents acquire supranational allegiances and loyalties? Put differently, what international relations theorists may celebrate as the deepening of international institutions may easily be dismissed by normative theorists as undemocratic (Zuern and Checkel 2005, 1072-74). These are important questions – and all too easy to forget when one is busy mapping causal processes.

- *Lesson #8 (The Ugly): The Dreaded 'E' Word.*

Most process tracers are empirically oriented scholars who just want to get on with it – that is, conduct research on the fascinating world around us. The paradigm wars and meta-theoretical bloodletting are for others. On the whole, this is a healthy attitude. Especially for those rational-choice scholars who employ process tracing

(Schimmelfennig 2003; Kelley 2004, for example), this neglect of philosophy is understandable. The variable-oriented language of process tracing fits well with their own positivist-empiricist epistemological orientation.

What, though, about constructivism and process tracing? Leading constructivist theorists seem split, with some explicitly (Wendt 1999, 82) or implicitly (Ruggie 1998, 94) endorsing the method, while others appear much more sceptical (Adler 2002, 109). Such disagreements are not surprising. As argued earlier, process tracing is fundamentally at odds with the interpretative epistemologies that under gird many forms of constructivism (Adler 2002; Hopf 2002, ch.1, for excellent discussions).

If I am correct and this is such a problem, why has it received virtually no attention? One part of the answer is that process tracing has been taken on whole heartedly by the conventional-modernist constructivists who explicitly subscribe to an empiricist-positivist epistemology. The fit between method and meta-theory is nearly perfect.[1] Moreover, the normalization of epistemological discourse – 'we're all positivists, so why talk about epistemology' – in IR journals such as ***International Organization*** and ***International Studies Quarterly*** furthers this sense that all is in order.

Yet, it is not. As many European scholars have noted (Zehfuss 2002, chs. 1, 6; and, especially, Guzzini 2000) and as I argue below, constructivists need more carefully to explicate their epistemological assumptions. This is true in general and all the more so for those who endorse methods like process tracing. And such a rethink will likely require a turn to post-positivist philosophies of science.

[1] Note that I say 'nearly perfect.' Indeed, leading conventional constructivists appear to recognize the latent misfit between process tracing and constructivist epistemology. Why else would they advocate that the method be implemented through a so-called bracketing strategy (Finnemore 1996)? With bracketing, one first holds structure constant and explores agency's causal role, and then reverses the order. Agency and structure, each in turn, are thus bracketed. The recursivity at the heart of many constructivisms is lost.

Conclusions and Implications

After the numerous criticisms and queries in the preceding section, readers may be surprised by my bottom line. Process tracing is a fundamentally important method – for both constructivists and rationalists, be it in IR or European studies. Its current application leaves much to be desired, but the problems are all fixable. Personally, after a decade conducting process-oriented research on topics as diverse as the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, human rights and European institutions, I am a much better scholar for it. The signal benefit of process tracing is that, if done properly, it places theory and data in close proximity. One quickly comes to see what works and – equally important – what does not. This learning process goes on at various levels – methodological, theoretical and meta-theoretical.

This said, process tracers need to think harder about the logical and philosophical bases of their process- and mechanism-based approach. Positivism as a philosophy of science will not do the trick. Its instrumental view of theoretical concepts, which leads to the use of as-if assumptions, and correlational view of causation are at odds with a mechanism-based understanding of social reality that focuses centrally on process (Wight 2002 for an excellent discussion).

Instead, process tracers should turn to post-positivist philosophies and, in particular, to scientific realism. The latter is fundamentally about mechanisms and thus establishes causation through non-correlational means - precisely what much process tracing in IR seeks to accomplish. Scientific realism is also epistemologically opportunist in that "no one method, or epistemology could be expected to fit all cases" (Wight 2002, 36; more generally, see Lane 1996). With such qualities, scientific realism would seem well placed both to give process tracing conceptual grounding and – equally important – create an epistemological platform broad enough to unite conventional and interpretative constructivists.

In one sense, my argument is nothing new. Indeed, social theorists such as Wendt have argued in favour of scientific realism as the most appropriate

philosophical and epistemological stance for an IR centrally concerned with mechanisms and process (Wendt 1999, ch.2). However, missing - to date - is the logical, follow-on step: What are the best methods for generating such knowledge on mechanisms and process? Process tracing is a likely candidate (see also Bennett and George 2005, 147-48, 214). Given a foundation in scientific realism, process tracers can then begin to ask hard questions about their community standards – standards anchored in a philosophically coherent base. What counts as good process tracing? How do we know process tracing when we see it? How can discourse/textual and process-tracing approaches be combined (see also Hopf 2002)?

The argument here can be generalized. Mainstream, empirically oriented IR scholars in the US need to get serious about philosophy of science and epistemology. All the talk about and applications of bridge building – to take just one example – are coming under increasing criticism precisely for their fundamentally unclear philosophical basis (Zehfuss 2002, 5-6, ch.2; Checkel 2004, 241-44). Proponents of process tracing do not want to be in a similar situation a few years hence.

Following on Wendt (1999) and others, I have argued for scientific realism as one way to address these philosophical and epistemological gaps. There are surely other ways. Employing strikingly similar process- and mechanism-based language, Katzenstein and Sil (2005) have recently advanced analytic eclecticism – with roots in pragmatist philosophies – to achieve the same end. That end is to give IR a middle-ground philosophy and epistemology that can fill the vast methodological space between American-style positivism and European post-structuralism.

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