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A Pragmatic Methodology for Studying International Practices

Sasikumar S. Sundaram¹ & Vineet Thakur²

Abstract

Practice Turn marks an important advancement in International Relations (IR) theorizing. In challenging abstract meta-theoretical debates, practice theorizing in IR aims to get close to the lifeworld(s) of the actual practitioners of politics. Scholars from different positions such as constructivism, critical theory, and post-structuralism have critically interrogated the analytical framework of practices in international politics. Building upon these works, we are concerned with question of how to examine the context of international practices that unfolds in multiple ways in practitioners' performances. Our central thesis is that a distinct pragmatic methodology offers an opportunity to keep with the practice turn and avoid the problematic foundational moves of mainstream practice theorizing. This involves, foregrounding three interrelated processes in examining practices: the role of exceptions in the normal stream of performances, normative uptake of the analysts, and the semantic field that actors navigate in political performances. We argue that this methodology is predicated on its usefulness to interpret practices through reflective social-science inquiry.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the practice turn in International Relations (IR) marks an important wager to get close to the lifeworld(s) of the actual practitioners of politics. Iver Neumann defines practices as “socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly (Neumann, 2002: 630; Also see Ralph and Gifkins 2016; 633). Practice theory consists of various strands of theorizing drawing upon different vocabularies from pragmatism, constructivism, assemblages, to post-structuralist positions for understanding the significance of everyday practices of political actors in international politics.¹ The different orientations and the

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concomitant heterogenous ways of studying practices have offered important advancements for our understanding of the meaning of political action and the dynamics of social change. They all foreground the point that practice is where politics is actually effected and thus focusing on the everyday stuff that drives the world “allows us to better understand dynamics of order and change” in international politics (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015: 449).

The problem arises when we shift the focus from the question of why attention to international practices is important to how, if anything, can one conduct empirical research in keeping with the manifold performances of practitioners. Here mainstream practice theorizing in IR seeks an unmediated access to practices of actors.² This leads to three important epistemological concerns with regard to how the mainstream practice theorists: a) reduce background knowledge of practitioners to habits, b) treat meaning as an objectively stable entity in relations between practitioners and observers, and, c) despite claims to the contrary, privilege stable practices to empirically verify its effects over the dynamics of change (Schindler and Wille 2015; Frost and Lechner 2016; Ralph and Gifkins 2017; Walter 2018; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). Specifically, our concern is that practice theorizing that seeks an “unmediated” access to the lifeworld(s) of the practitioners is unreflective of the normativity of international practices. Instead of offering yet another theory on how to reconstruct the unobservable meaning structures or bring new coherence to different types of practice theorizing, we foreground reflexivity as central to practice theorizing and thus suggest a pragmatic methodology for examining the context of practices.

We propose an analytical triangle of Exceptions-Analysts-Concept Functions as a pragmatic way for a reflexive study of practices in international politics. First, exceptions, in keeping with John Dewey, are understood as problematic situations where a normal course of activity

is interrupted, compelling actors to exercise moral judgment in order to re-evaluate the situation in and through practices (Dewey, LW13). Such a pragmatic conception of the exceptional situation adds a moral component to the interruption of practices and not merely treat them as “disruptions” or “breaches”, as Garfinkel or Latour suggest (Garfinkel, 2002; Latour, 2005). Manifested through explicit or implicit claims of practitioners, exceptions offer a window to examine their political judgment in practices (not mere habits) and their navigation of power dynamics (not merely their tacit sense of the game). Second, the role of analysts as observers of practices and exceptions is seldom discussed. An analyst confronts an abundance of details in studying performances and is thus constantly making choices in interpreting practices. In an exceptional situation, the analyst is compelled to reveal their normative standpoint. By emphasizing the role of analysts in *interpreting* exceptional situations we bring in reflexivity into social-scientific inquiry through their normative uptake rather than aiming to offer an unmediated glaze into the logic of practice. Exceptions and the analysts’ uptake on it reveal normative judgments of the evaluators rather than exposing political hypocrisy or irrationality of the practitioners. Third, foregrounding exceptions and the role of analysts into the logic of practices allows a mapping of the semantic field and offers avenues to analyse how a concept functions within political performances. Specifically, we argue, concepts are relational, and practitioners embody this relationality through making associations. Mapping of exceptions and practitioners’ reasons for (re)negotiations of the situation can highlight the relationality of concepts and help us understand the “interconnectedness of practices” (Kratochwil, 2011: 37). This pragmatic methodology enables an understanding of how a concept, that is of central concern to an analyst, functions in a political discourse. Thus, our framework is *pragmatic* in the sense that we call for examining practices through its associational links and interconnectedness with other practices, rather than aiming to discover their deep foundations. It is a *methodology* in the

sense that the framework offers a structure and logic of inquiry rather than just a tool or technique for systematization of data (Jackson 2010: 25).

This pragmatic methodology makes three important contributions to practice theorizing in IR. It foregrounds the normativity of analysts in international practices. By focusing on areas where practitioners *ought to* suspend action seen from the normative point of view of the analysts can shed light on the relevance of practitioners' habits, background knowledge, practical consciousness, and thus practitioners' moral judgment in and through practices. Second, the approach allows for critical reassessments of analysts' evaluation of the meaning of practices, with attention to the polysemic nature of meaning. Finally, our methodology focuses on the interconnectedness of practices, which allows a mapping of how a concept functions in a political discourse.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the next section, we elaborate on practice theorizing in IR and elaborate on its criticisms. We focus primarily on mainstream practice theorizing and leave aside the burgeoning literature that explores practices in different ways. There are also two substantive reasons for this choice. First, there is a consensus that Adler and Pouliot's work remains an important site for productive conversations but requires a methodological revision. However, there is little clarity on how to move forward (Duvall and Chowdhury, 2011; Kratochwil, 2011; Ringmar, 2014; Walter, 2018). Second, Adler and Pouliot's indifference to normativity and reflexivity in practices that requires careful engagement with their work for subsequent productive theory-building conversations in IR (à la Schindler and Wille 2015; Ralph and Gifkins 2017; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). In the subsequent section, we elaborate our Exceptions-Analysts-Concept Function triangle with a distinct pragmatic vocabulary. In this section, we will show how our framework builds

and improves upon existing pragmatic advancements in IR. In the third section, we offer a brief empirical illustration of our framework on India's practices on race question in the UN. Although this article is primarily theoretical and a full-fledged case study is beyond the scope, the illustration brings to bear the exceptional situation, role of analysts, and semantic field in a political setting. We then conclude by revisiting the implications of our framework and suggesting further avenues for detailed empirical investigations of reflexivity in international practice.

2. Practice Theorizing, Critics, and Polarization

Practices are patterned performances where a pattern is understood as “a social field of materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki 2001: 12). Practice theory in IR argues that politics unfolds in the actual doings of practitioners rather than through our idealized versions of structures, systems, communication, agency, or ideas. Hence, practice centered research aims to understand the lived experiences of practitioners. Adler and Pouliot emphasize that practices are competent performances, i.e. they are meaningful patterns of actions that are performed more or less competently with an unconscious background knowledge in and on the material world (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4-5). Importantly, a practice is more than a behavior or an action because it patterned, embedded in an organized context, and socially developed through learning and training. So, running in the street aimlessly is mere behavior, running after a thief is an action endowed with meaning, but police squads chasing criminal gang is a practice because it is socially structured and reiterated (Adler and Pouliot 2011:6-7). The idea of practice theorizing is to invite IR researchers to focus on how practitioners “do things”, which is, as Pouliot and Cornut (2015: 300) argue, “essential to understanding both macro-phenomena such as order, institutions and norms, as well as micro-processes of rational calculations and meaning

making.” As units of analysis, they add, “practices show up at both ends of the research design: as generative forces (or explanans) and as outcome (or explanandum)” (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 300).

For Pouliot, an important way to understand how practitioners enact their competent performances is by foregrounding their tacit background knowledge through analyzing their *habitus* (Pouliot 2008, 2010, 2017). At the intersection of structure and agency, habitus is “a system of durable, transposable dispositions, which integrates past experiences and functions at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciation and action, making possible the accomplishment of infinitely differentiated tasks” (Bourdieu quoted in Pouliot 2008, 31). Thus, social structures produce habitus and this habitus as nonrepresentational background knowledge of practitioners in turn generates practices.

Despite the detailed enumeration of the role of habitus as background dispositions of practicing agent, critics point out that mainstream practice theorizing reduces practices to repetition, routinization, and iteration at the expense of the creative dimensions of practical judgment (Brown, 2012; Kessler, 2016; Wiener, 2014). Reducing practices to habits and routines undermines many of the complex interrelations of habitus with conscious performance. Habits surely inform and further constitute background knowledge, but habits and habitus – routine and disposition – are not the same thing and in empirical research, these are confusingly held together. Kratochwil offers a clarification with an engaging metaphor, “...is it sensible to call complicated interactions involving continued cooperation, such as playing soccer, ‘habits’? The participants are required precisely not to do the ‘same’ thing...but to engage in continued mutual adjustment” (Kratochwil 2011, 54).

Further, aiming for unmediated access into practitioners' background knowledge and then reducing this background knowledge to habits means that "relevant" practices are those that are stable and durable in a given field. Uncertainties, exceptions and irregularities in the actors' performances are considered analytically irrelevant and consequently sidestepped. This predisposes practice theory to focus on the reproduction of the systemic mores, and to neglect the creative ways in which background knowledge of practitioners brings about change (Duvall and Chowdhury, 2011: 342). Bourdieu himself emphasized that crises are conduits for reexamining the normally functioning habitus, which the mainstream Bourdieu-inspired practice literature glosses over (Bourdieu 2000: 160). With the emphasis on ontological priority of the logic of practicality, practice theory seeks to directly capture durable unspoken and unconscious performances of actors rather than their occasional exceptions and aberrations and the concomitant varieties of actor's judgment in such performances. Specifically, with the relation of power in habitus, this neglect of focusing on conscious political judgments is justified because as patterns of reproduction of hierarchy those competent performance is a struggle for position, resistance, and domination to acquire field-relevant capital (Pouliot 2017). The emphasis on unmediated access to practices means that the reflections of practitioners are yoked into some forms of durable habitus in order to emphasize the unconscious non-representational aspect of performances. Habitus might be only one of the important elements of an agent's background knowledge and one cannot excuse an agent for failing to exercise political judgment in international politics because of the mysterious pre-reflexive habitus that incline them to perceive, understand, and act upon the world in particular ways.

A second and related criticism on the practice turn is placed along the vector of practical consciousness versus polysemy (Duvall and Chowdhury 2011). The mainstream version argues that practical knowledge is implicit, non-verbalizable, experiential, and bound-up in practices. As Pouliot puts it, "...a defining feature of the practices informed by the Background is that their rules are not thought but simply enacted. Inarticulate, concrete, and local, practical knowledge is learned from experience and can hardly be expressed apart from practice" (Pouliot, 2008: 271; also see Andersen and Neumann, 2012: 470; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 893).

Despite the importance placed on practical knowledge of actors, practice theorizing treats the meaning of such practical knowledge both for the practitioners and their observers as stable (For this critical assessment see Frost and Lechner, 2016). However, this leads to an unresolvable paradox. It is implied that the meaning of practices is best left to practitioners themselves because they are the ultimate performers in world politics. However, if that is the case, how are observers ever to make sense of subjective meaning since it can only be revealed to practitioners – who themselves may not articulate it or be aware of it? Criticizing subjectivism as merely a method of data collection, Andersen and Neumann argue that observers could replicate the meaning because "practices are 100% observable – they have no elements that cannot be seen, heard or felt" (Andersen and Neumann, 2012: 472). Thus, they do away completely with unobservable motivations and subjective consciousness of actors in meaning-making and treat practices themselves as representations of meaning. However, this way of seeking meaning-in-practice that is empirically recoverable assumes uniformity and commensurability between meanings held by practitioners and those recovered through analysis.

In international politics such an understanding on the uniformity of meaning is problematic. Practitioners and observers may draw completely different meanings out of same set of practices, and the reason for which a practitioner engages in an action might be different from the reason that observers take as practitioner's reason for action. Critical constructivists have long called for double-hermeneutics for understanding the meaning at the level of action and at the level of observation of action (Guzzini, 2000). Others have argued for analyzing the semantic field within which a concept functions and then linking it to action and change of practices (Kratochwil 2011, 37). Critical approaches take the difference of meanings in different perspectives seriously and focus on examining political processes through which some meaning is fixed as dominant. Mainstream practice theorizing ignores this long tradition of interrogating the polysemic nature of meaning within critical constructivist IR because of its exclusive contention against liberal constructivism of Alexander Wendt. A pragmatic methodological strategy would allow for a critical evaluation of the role of the practitioners through the analysts – those who want to impose a logic of practice – while at the same time avoiding the problems of foundationalism which gives the analyst an easy escape into meta-theoretical debates.

The third most common criticism is situated along the vector of continuity versus change. As Adler and Pouliot put it, “[p]ractice typically is enacted in and on the world, and thus can change the physical environment as well as the ideas that individually and collectively people hold about the world” (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 8). Hence, change is the result of misalignment between structures and habitus; i.e. in the distinction between objective structures and subjective dispositions (See Schindler and Wille 2015: 334). There are three domains of change: in the dispositions of practitioners, in their enactment itself, and in the patterns that practices create in international politics.

However, critics seek clarifications and elaboration on the avenues or the “wobble-room” for change. Mattern notes that while asserting that background knowledge “does not create uniformity of a group” and that “there is always ‘wobble room’ for agency even in repetition”, Alder and Pouliot fail to offer a theoretical account of how this is possible (Mattern, 2011 fn.40). This version of practice theorizing overlooks both change *in* practices and changes *through* practices. By taking practices as reflecting habitual background knowledge, one with stable meaning, the conditions and processes through which they serve, first, to bring new ways of enacting performances and, second, the pathways through which the enacted practices can ground new sort of background knowledge is overlooked despite claims to the contrary. Rule bending performances, aberrant practitioners, and those who cannot be accommodated within the systemic mores are ignored in such accounts because within a community ontology diversity is seldom valued (Wiener, 2014: 12). Critiquing mainstream practice theory for being mechanistic when it comes to change, Hopf (2017) outlines several conditions that increase the probability of reflection and change in practices. We argue that the problem is more severe. The current fascination in the study of continuity and change in international practices is an old trope. It maintains an epistemology of having an unmediated access to practitioners’ *competent* performances and then theorizes a wobble room for change. But, foregrounding incompetent practices or even elaborating a list of creative outlets for practitioners cannot account for a full range of connections between practice and change without a normative uptake because the competence itself is a normative notion and the logic of practice is negotiated not constitutive (Walter 2018, 9).

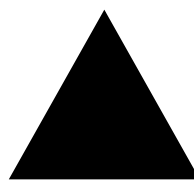
Those who reject the assessment that practice theory conflates habits with mere repetitive performances continue to look for an insider view for uncovering practices. Some resort to

extensive high-profile interviews (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Hardt, 2014; Pouliot, 2010); others study practices by actively being part of the institutions (Neumann, 2016; Schia, 2013), even resorting to participant observation and ethnographic inquiry (Bueger, 2014; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018). Similarly, those who aim to objectively capture the practitioners' meaning in their actual doings of international politics retain a neutral language of observation (Bicchi and Bremberg, 2016). Further, in keeping with the criticism that practice theory privileges stability over change, research on practices is divided between those who expect habits to be markers of stability versus practices conceived as fragile and uncertain in the social order (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015: 510; Hopf, 2010: 543). Building on existing pragmatic interventions on these critiques of practice theorizing we offer a way forward to counter these epistemological problems and still retain an inquiry on practices.

3. A Pragmatic Methodology: A Triangle of Performance

Figure 1

Concept Function



Exceptional
Situation

Role of
Analysts

In this section, we build a framework based on the idea that practices of actors in international politics are ongoing performances that require a pragmatic methodology to address the current epistemological limitations and offer a way ahead for empirical inquiries. Our framework builds upon existing pragmatist approaches to studying international

practices (Boltanski 2011; Schmidt 2014; Abraham and Abramson, 2015; Ralph and Gifkins 2016; Kratochwil 2018; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). It shows that the notion of action is meaningful only against the backdrop of reasons, justifications, and judgments offered by actors in the face of uncertainties, controversies, disputes in the plurality of possible options. However, unlike these accounts, our methodology connects normativity and concept function in practices through the reflective role of analysts.

As analysts exercise their normative evaluation upon practices, exceptional situations of practitioners' performances offer important opportunities to study the reasons and justifications and the moral judgment of actors. As practitioners are part of a web of meanings, the analysts' interrogation can show how a concept functions in political performances. Thus, the role of analysts, their normative uptake on exceptional situations, and the concept function forms an indissoluble package, in the sense that one cannot understand the situated international practices apart from their relation to each other. This is the triangle of performance in international politics (Figure 1), which offers a pragmatic way forward for systematic empirical inquiry on international practices. Let us examine the three components of the triangle in closer detail.

3.1. Exceptional Situation

To begin with, practices unfold in multiple ways in practitioners' performances and thus an analyst confronts an abundance of details in studying performances. Political actors engage in the world through linguistic and non-linguistic structures and make-sense of the world in incredibly complex ways. Focussing on "breaches of normality", as entry points to capture the conditions and processes through which actors encounter tensions *in* practices, offers a helpful way to understand their negotiations *of* practices (Latour 2005; Garfinkel, 2002;

Walter 2018). We agree with the methodological advantage of focusing on breaches, but we suggest treating these disruptions as exceptional situations, because they create situations of moral reevaluation.

Exceptions are, what John Dewey calls, morally problematic situations where a normal course of activity is interrupted, compelling actors to exercise moral judgments. They are called upon to reevaluate the situation and resolve it by specifying a logic of practice (Dewey LW13). First, an exceptional situation questions *what* is good, just, right or appropriate in the course of practice, and creates an occasion for deliberation in politics. Such exceptional situations make explicit – through linguistic or nonlinguistic stances – the implicit practices underling the performances. Yet such exceptional stances are not subjective because the moral component in the situation has its own immanent meaning and the agent aims resolution by coordinating with others. For Dewey, “[m]orally problematic situations are the events where we gain focal awareness of the moral dimension of experience. “The moral life has its centre in the periods of suspended and postponed action, when the energy of the individual is spent in recollection and foresight, in severe inquiry and serious consideration of alternative aims” (MW 5:375) (Also see Pappas 2008: 138). Second, the exceptional situation as morally problematic situation aims at resolution by accommodating the tensions into the ongoing practices. Agents’ engagement in exceptional situations is practical in the sense that the objective is some form of resolution. Again, “[s]ituations that demand reconstruction through inquiry are situations that are qualitatively experienced as unsettled, confused, and indeterminate. The transformation of the pervasive quality of this sort of situation is, in effect, the general function of any inquiry” (Pappas 2008: 86).

Several important considerations on exceptional situations in practices are in order. Exceptional situations are problematic from a moral point of view. In other words, exceptional situations create a rupture to the normal continuation of practices, compels creative performances, and challenges our understanding of the habitual. It is in this moral sense that our understanding of exceptions, as licenses for reflections, is different from the *state* of exceptions, disruption, and uncertainties in other account of practices (Neal 2006). In keeping with our role of analysts (see discussion below), exceptions can be a case of shocking and confusing performance viewed from the vantage point of what actors *ought to* do based on their habits in a stable environment. Exceptions thus are undesirable performances in the light of what one morally and ethically ought to do.

Here, agents' reasoning under exceptional situations is important. In other words, under exceptional situations, political actors make claims, take stances, and reason their way in and through practices. It shows the practitioner's creative role within the everyday performance, and their conscious consideration of wielding power. There are right and wrong ways of justifying to others who are part of practices and elaborating on one's problematic situations, appropriate and inappropriate ways of making explicit those implicit taken-for-grantedness, and interlocutors of practices distinguish correct from the incorrect performances that are enacted based on the exceptional situation. Thus, the sort of *reasons* offered in exceptional situations or if the practitioners are compelled to offer reasons at all in the first place can shed light on how meaning is sorted out by the interlocutors. Unlike habitual performance, agents here can offer different reasons for the same problem and in a changed political environment some observers can seek reasons for actions that were hitherto taken as habitual. Thus, foregrounding reasoning involves accepting contestations, acknowledging the

unstable nature of meaning, and yet examining how political actors go on managing problems and finding practical solutions.

Finally, exceptional situations as morally problematic situations are windows to understand practices. Focusing on the exceptional situation is a process aimed at restructuring. As Dewey puts it, “Either these habits will have to undergo a restructuring, or the circumstances which elicit them will need to be restructured, if the problematic situation is to be transformed” (Tiles, 1990: 124). Exceptions and actors’ reasons for or against it draws from the implicit norms and culture of the community that the analysts, practitioners and their evaluators are part of. The mapping of exceptional situation can provide important resource for analysts to impose their normative evaluation of the practices. Thus, there are no objectively exceptional situations but one that appears right or wrong in the eyes of the analysts (see next segment). Here practitioners consciously make political judgments, give and take reasons, engage in contestation, justify habits and revise them when appropriate. These are all performances enacted by actors in the social world. One need not understand an exceptional situation as morally problematic situation through a deep immersion into the natural practices of actors. Exceptions and its manifestations remain at the surface level of practices. The role of analysts is extremely important in imposing their meaning and value orientation on exceptional situations.

3.2. Role of the Analysts

In making sense of exceptional situations, it is the analysts who impose a logic of practice and keep track of actors’ stances, reasoning, and moral quandary to glean into the boundaries, meanings, and proprieties in practical situations. In other words, *we*, the theorists who are trying to get a better understanding of what it is the participants are doing when they engage

in practices become unsettled of the wacky and bizarre performances of political actors and treat them as exceptional. It is here that the existing critiques of practice theorizing in IR that elaborate on the difficulties of “immersion” in the lifeworld of practitioners in a pre-theoretical manner attains significance (Kratochwil 2018; Walter 2018; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). We agree with these critiques and argue that the role of analysts is important to impose a *normative* uptake on exceptional situations. Thus, it is the analysts who search for a logic of practice through their distinct normative uptake on morally problematic situations of practitioners.

Three important analytical considerations are important in foregrounding the role of analysts in practice theorizing and it pertains to two questions such as (1) is there a real exceptional situation or only in the eyes of the analysts? (2) is normative uptake of the analysts on morally problematic situation arbitrary through a misunderstanding of what practitioners are doing? (3) How do safeguard against ethical imposition of analysts?³

First, practice theory that invites us to focus on the significance of everyday practices. In the heterogeneity of everyday practices, there are no “real” exceptional situations except the perspective of the analysts who offer to glean into the meaning-structures of practitioners’ life-world. Thus, it is the analysts who draw boundaries to understand the context, fixes meanings in the socially organized situation, and keeps tracks of practitioners’ reasoning in the specific snapshot of events. With the benefit of hindsight and with the availability of time, it is the analysts who glean into the boundaries, meanings, and proprieties in practical situations.

Second, exceptions are practitioners' "faults" seen through the normative lens of the analyst. Practitioners could face exceptional situations and recognize it as such, or they could be wrong or confused about the features of a situation. In both cases, the role of analysts is important to make sense of how the problematic situation gets transformed. Exceptions as morally problematic situations are issues of appraisal and we need not privilege private preferences of actors over common appraisals. Even private accounts of acknowledged exceptional situations need analysis to understand its restructuring. Further, promises are obligatory unless there are overriding situations and actors cannot aver that she did not know the obligations or feign ignorance (Kratochwil 2018:3). In retrospective analysis of the theorists and from their normative stand point, some performance of practitioners appears wacky and bizarre. Here the value orientation of the analyst is important; yet, those analysts cannot impose arbitrary criteria because the analysts must first understand the complex set of beliefs and meaning that led to moral quandary among actors in the first place. The attribution of moral quandary in the exceptional situation involves imposing a theoretical lens to make sense of the situation and thus interpret the interpreted world. Absent this form of theoretical imposition through a careful attention to the network of beliefs, socially accepted conventions, and the sort of morally problematic situations in context, the analysts ends up offering a decontextualized analysis that practice theory rightfully criticizes. By being attentive to the normative uptake of the analysts, we can avoid the path suggested by practice analysis to engage in a pre-theoretical immersion into the lifeworld of practitioners.

3.3. Concept Function

Once analysts take their normative role and foreground exceptions it allows for a practice-based understanding of how concepts work in international politics. First, exceptions allow the analysts to map the semantic field and foreground how practitioners as concept users

relationally engage with other similar concepts in and through practices. According to Sartori, a semantic field is “a clustering of terms such that each of its component elements interacts with all the others, and (as with all systems) is altered by any alteration of the others” (Sartori 1984:52). Utilizing exceptional situations and practitioners’ stances and reasoning on it enables the analysts to understand how practitioners treat exceptions, its connections with some inferences and not others, its justifications in some way but not others, its association with certain other practices and not others. This mapping exercise allows for understanding the variety of meanings imparted by practitioners, observers, and the analysts in the performance setting. Diplomats negotiate for tangible benefits, but their comprehension of what is tangible, the hierarchy of various needs, and their social recognition is shaped by their conceptual framework. But, concepts usually do not operate in isolation; they operate in a matrix of relations. Actors understand concepts not in abstract isolation, but through an immersive historical consciousness. Hence, for different actors, concepts may take different shapes and meanings. Consequently, we argue that actors have their own transcripts, or associative codes, through which they attribute meaning and make sense of different concepts. The objective is not to accurately represent the concepts utilized by practitioners but to offer an incisive understanding of the functioning of concept (and its relationality) in the political discourse.

Third, the semantic field and the practitioners’ use of concepts are not revealing a “reality” but it comes from the eye of the analysts who in hindsight establish a falsifiable map of interconnectedness of practices. In the triangle of performances where analysts, exceptional situations, and concept function come together there is no universalizability of concepts but a consistent contestation where concepts are linked together in a web of other linkages made explicit by the analysts. Thus, exceptions provide important analytical sites to understand how concepts function in the political discourse by seeing how the exceptional stances of

practitioners through the normative uptake by the analysts shows the connection with a host of practical activities of the performing agents.

Thus, taking the triangle of performance where analysts-exceptional situations-concept functions come together, we address the problems of habits, meaning, and continuity versus change that bedevils mainstream practice theorizing in international politics. First, exceptional situations in the eyes of analysts are not mere repetitions of unconscious background knowledge of the practitioners. Specifically, the bizarre and liminal uncertainties in the morally problematic situation create, metaphorically, a cognitive punch for the analysts to examine the conditions and processes through which performing actors exercise political judgment on the situation. Second, exceptional situations and the role of analysts in interpreting the interpreted world shows the different meanings in the actual enactment of practices. Like other pragmatic accounts we are non-foundational. Unlike other accounts we bring reflective role of analysts in practices and connect it systematically to concept usage. Thus, as Ralph and Gifkins argue, “[t]his is not to say that insider values are necessarily inappropriate. It does mean, however, that external critique is needed to hold insiders to account” (Ralph and Gifkins 2016, 637). Foregrounding the value orientation of the analysts enables us to avoid the assumption that meaning has to work within a universality criterion where the language of observation has to meet the language of action used by agents in practices. Finally, the triangle of performance offers a way to see how practitioners and their interlocutors utilize concepts in distinct ways and thus evaluate and move past (or not) from a situation. Practice theory that pays attention to normativity in exceptional situations through the reflective role of analysts is useful for mapping how concepts function in international politics.

4. Illustrating our Pragmatic Methodology

The set of practices we consider our case study here is a resolution entitled ‘The Treatment of Indians in South Africa’, which had a 17 year-long life at the United Nations (UN).⁴ First brought to the UN by India, still under colonial rule, in 1946, the resolution critiqued South Africa’s racial treatment of Indians in South Africa. Clearly, people of Indian-origin faced political and economic discrimination in South Africa, and Indian practitioners had decided to take the matter to the UN on the pretext that it affected peaceful conduct of relations between the two countries. Jawaharlal Nehru’s signature on the file – literally the inaugural act of India’s foreign policy – eventually led to the resolution titled ‘Treatment of Indians in South Africa’, which after an intense diplomatic battle was passed by the UN General Assembly on the midnight of 8 December 1946. For the next 17 years, the Indian diplomats continuously highlighted racial ill-treatment of Indians by South Africa, and indeed, the country consistently fought against South Africa’s racism against Indians and Africans (from 1952). Except in one instance, where an Indian diplomat almost agreed to a strange racial pact with South Africa.

By late-1949, the Cold War had begun to set in, and at the UN countries mostly voted as per alliance allegiances. India’s own behaviour in Hyderabad and Kashmir had evoked sharp reactions, allowing South Africa to accuse India’s of moral duplicity. Not wanting to antagonize UN members as Kashmir was about to come up for discussions, B.N. Rau, the Indian permanent representative to the UN, suggested to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs that in that particular year India should lay low on the South African issue. He proposed that he would informally reach out to the South African UN mission. So, in October 1949, he arranged a meeting with the South African diplomat G. Jooste in New York (Jooste 1949).

In the meeting, B.N Rau spoke with, as his South African counterpart recounted, with “an unexpected measure of frankness” (Jooste 1949). Rau told Jooste that that “the feverish attempts in his country to destroy all caste inequalities were resulting in what in actual practice amounted to discrimination against the erstwhile ruling castes such as the Brahmins, to which he belongs.” Having gestured to Jooste that he himself was unhappy with the dismantling of the caste order in India, he then proceeded to sympathise with the South African position. He stated that “Indians who went to South Africa did not belong to the best type and that, as in Burma, they may have exploited the local population and given India a bad name.” Consequently, the South African government’s treatment of them “might be fully justified and that in fact India would not mind discrimination against our local Indian community if only it was not based on racial lines” (Jooste 1949).

He now suggested a mid-way: “a small number, say 10, of the cultured and best type of Indians” could be sent to South Africa “as a token to the world that the racial equality of Indians was recognized” in that country (Jooste 1949). After a period of time, they could be given full citizenship rights. As soon as South Africa took these steps, Rau assured, India would withdraw its opposition. As a “bulwark ... against Communism in the East”, Rau added, India had taken a leadership position, and, hence, “could not accept the position of being the inferior race.” Further, he believed that the South African application of the racial criteria was “playing into the hands of the communists who ... [represent] ... themselves as the liberators of the oppressed and the champions of freedom and liberty” (Jooste 1949).

From our normative viewpoint – we the analysts – engaged in archival method of studying practices, this was a truly exceptional proposal, which otherwise fails to fit the strictly anti-racist stance of the 17 years of Indian diplomatic practice at the UN. Issue of racial

discrimination against Indians in South Africa was a problematic situation and the exceptional stance of Rau justifying caste discrimination to validate race-based equality was truly startling. Here normal course of activity interrupted and created an occasion for reflection. Not only had Rau seemingly given up on India's anti-racism stance, but he also had disowned India's own diaspora. Seemingly, Rau had given up India's opposition to South Africa's discrimination and advised to take a more caste-based rather than race-based route to discrimination. In other words, Rau explained to Jooste that it was not discrimination per se that Indians objected to, but the basis of discrimination. If South Africa could in principle accept that Indians as a race were equal, it could in practice continue to discriminate against them. At the Headquarters in Pretoria, South African diplomats considered it a non-serious proposal, and hence advised Jooste to not follow up on it. It was never again mentioned.

Now examining the moral judgment of the Indian practitioners in such exceptional stances shows the *reasons* for such positions and the semantic field of Indian practitioners' engagement with the concept of race. India had only recently come to an agreement with Canada about allowing only 150 Indians into Canada as a way of assuaging India's complaints about racial discrimination against Indians in both immigration policy and against resident Indians. Indeed, Rau had specifically mentioned this precedent in his meeting with Jooste. Further, during his non-violent struggle (Satyagraha) in South Africa in the early twentieth century, Gandhi himself had made a similar proposal to the Transvaal government, where he asked that the Transvaal government allow only 6 Indians to enter its territory (Swan 1985). This would mean that in principle, Transvaal had accepted the equality of Indians, but in practice, it could continue to discriminate against most "low-caste" Indians. Faced with constant complaints about the racist treatment of Indians across the British Empire, Indian leaders and diplomats had repeatedly emphasized that much of the Indian emigration during

colonialism served the needs of Empire and consequently it was mostly in the form of indenture. In other words, only those “low-caste” Indians emigrated. The reasoning, not the motive, was that the upper caste “cultured” Indians rarely emigrated and thus there was a skewed idea of India to the other settler states.⁵

This analysis of the Indian practitioners’ exceptional stance, from the normative view of the analyst and the reasons for such positions shows the semantic field of Indian imagining of *race* in international politics in its interconnection with caste, culture, and civilization. Caste and culture, in the Indian imagination, were entwined so was Indian practitioners claims on civilizational superiority. Indian culture always stood for Brahminism; and even the principle and practice of non-violence – which underpinned India’s foremost claim to civilizational greatness – in a Dalit reading of history was a Brahmanical construct to perpetual social immobility in India. As Rau pointed to Jooste, “the best type of Indians” were those who represented the elevated nature of Indian civilization (in other words, upper castes). For Rau, discrimination purely based on skin colour was regressive, but based on culture and caste was justified.

That the Indian opposition to racial discrimination on international platforms was entwined with justifications of discrimination based on civilization/culture shows the connection in practices on caste, race, and civilization. Indeed, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, several Indians had argued that civilization/culture provided a more useful category of establishing a hierarchy among people/nations, rather than race. Even Nehru, as Antoinette Burton (2012) has shown, acceded to civilizational hierarchy as a basis of international order, which placed Africans at the bottom of the hierarchy. India’s own claim

for a great power status, as Nehru repeatedly said, was based on India being a civilizational power (Nehru 2004 [1946]: 48, Chacko 2012).

Indian anti-racist diplomatic practice is not inherently anti-discriminatory as others seem to argue (Davis and Thakur 2016; Lloyd 1991); indeed, it allows forms of discrimination to continue against most Indians overseas and Africans. Instances of justifications of discriminations against Africans on grounds of culture by Indian diplomats from leaders to diplomats abound (Burton 2012). Hence, what is assumed to be racial discrimination is in fact understood through associative operative codes of culture/civilization. An Indian understanding of race thus could only be understood in relation to such ideas of culture/civilization.

This brief illustration is meant to show how our framework based on a pragmatic methodology can enable an engagement with international practices and at the same time avoid the epistemological problems of mainstream practice theorizing. Our normative position that race is a neglected dimension of international politics and questions of hierarchy embody postcolonial states has triggered this inquiry. However, any such historical case study of practices along the lines of Exceptions-Analysts-Concept function can elucidate much of the actual doings of practitioners without foundational moves. For example, the two central assumptions of Pouliot's "subjectivist" methodology of modernist practice theory are: a) background assumptions are shaped by practice; and b) such assumptions can be inferred by focusing on routines (Pouliot, 2007: 370). In our illustration, focusing on routines hides the complicated ways in which background assumptions functioned for Indian practitioners. Rau's proposal was not followed up because it did not fit with the habitual behavior that South Africa had come to expect of India, but as far as India's diplomatic practice is

concerned, the proposal to discriminate was intertwined with moral judgments on how to justify India's civilizational/caste based superiority. It also showed how practices on race are interconnected with other practices on caste and civilization that could be missed from the existing "subjectivist" methodology.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we provided a pragmatic methodology to address the current epistemological problems in mainstream practice theorizing and offered one plausible way ahead for a reflective inquiry of practices. Our proposed triangle of Exceptions-Analysts-Concept Function guides inquiry on practices by suggesting that analysts with their distinct normative uptake should focus on practitioners' exceptional situations in order to examine the moral judgment and reasons in the resolution of the problem. We further suggested how practitioners' engagement with exceptional positions reveals how they use concepts, the semantic field, and the interconnectedness of practices.

There are at least three implications of our pragmatic methodology for the study of international practices. First, the role of analysts or the role of IR scholar is very much important in practice theorizing than the existing mainstream accounts give credit. The normative position of the analyst is important to make sense of the disruptions, exceptions, problems, and the so-called wacky situations in the actual stream of international practices. Textual study of practices is appropriate for historical research but analysts in participant observation and interviews is not a neutral evaluator of practices either. Making explicit the normative position of the analyst can go a long way in understanding practices. In this way,

it can evaluate and hold accountable those practitioners co-opting competency because they are the ones enacting the policy (Ralph and Gifkins 2017, 636). Second, practice theorizing should not aim to objectively “reveal” the hidden reality or the real background dispositions of actors but make intelligible the interconnectedness of practices in a network. Here, our pragmatic method and the semantic field within which practitioners make sense of their engagements, can shed light on how a concept functions in a political discourse. Such an inquiry is important for grasping the different meanings both acknowledged and attributed by political actors. It avoids the problem of pure empiricism because it is sensitive to theory-laden interpretation of the analysts in making sense of practices and the polysemic nature of meaning in international politics. Finally, the pragmatic methodology aims to engage in inquiries on practices as a continuous process. Morally problematic situations foregrounded through the normative perspective of the analyst are subject to revisions and adjustments from different normative perspectives. Without another grounding of practice theory from a critical realist or constructivist position, this pragmatic methodology can still shed light on different conditions of possibility of practice. To be sure, the triangle of our Exceptions-Analysts-Concept Functions in a semantic field should be elaborated in many ways particularly in clarifying the mechanisms between exceptions as experience and analysts’ emotions for example, concept network and its limits, and on the moral purpose of practices. This article is only a first step for a broader invitation for a normative perspective on practice theory in international politics.

Notes

¹ Different strands of practice theory in IR range from Pierre Bourdieu’s praxeology (Adler-Nissen, 2013; Huysmans, 2006; Pouliot, 2008, 2010, 2017); to Actor-Network Theory (Büger and Villumsen, 2007; Latour, 2005); to narrative approaches (Devetak, 2009; Neumann, 2002, 2005, 2016); to communities of practice approach (Adler, 2005; Adler and Greve, 2009; Bicchi, 2011); post-structuralist analysis (Hansen 2011) and various strands of pragmatism (Boltanski, 2013; Hellmann, 2009; Kratochwil, 2011; Wiener, 2014; Abraham and Abramson 2015; Kratochwil 2018; Grimm and Hellmann 2019).

² When we refer to “mainstream practice theorizing,” we focus primarily on the works that affiliates and converges rather uncritically with Pierre Bourdieu’s distinction of objective structures and subjective dispositions to offer an unmediated access to what practitioners do in international politics. Relevant works include, Pouliot (2010, 2017); Adler and Pouliot (2011); Neumann and Pouliot 2011; Andersen and Neumann 2012; Adler-Nissen 2013; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Bucchi and Bremberg 2016; to some extent even Joseph and Kurki 2018 who aim to bring back scientific realism to practice theorizing.

³ We thank the anonymous reviewers for raising and helping us clarifying these points.

⁴ Archival research for this textualist study of practices draws from Thakur 2017.

⁵ See for instance, VS Srinivasa Sastri’s report on his tour of the white Dominions in 1922 (Sastri 1923).

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