International Theory (2020), **12**, 231–237
doi:10.1017/S1752971920000081

International Theory

ARTICLE

Reification, practice, and the ontological status of social facts

Simon Frankel Pratt

University of Bristol, School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, 11 Priory Rd., Bristol, BS8 1TU, UK
Corresponding author. E-mail: simon.pratt@mail.utoronto.ca

(Received 19 February 2020; accepted 3 March 2020)

Abstract
In this reply to Miles Evers, I clarify some of my positions and argue that social facts should not be reified. Just as with norms, they should be defined as arrangements of practices rather than as social objects.

Keywords: philosophy of science; meta-theory; norms; epistemology; ontology; practice theory; social theory

It is both exciting and flattering to have my work provoke sustained and focused engagement from another scholar. Evers (2020) has written a lengthy response to my recent article (Pratt 2020), 'From Norms to Normative Configurations', and while he broadly affirms my argument for more granular and configurational analyses of normativity in IR, he also presents some criticisms of how I propose that this can (or should) be done. I have in turn been offered the opportunity to reply. This does not merely let me 'defend' myself; it affords me another chance to clarify my arguments and the sort of intervention I wanted to make with them, after having seen how they might be received.

To recall, my proposal is that the theoretical category of 'norm' be replaced in some analyses with the alternative category of 'normative configuration'. A normative configuration is 'an arrangement of ongoing, interacting practices establishing action-specific regulation, value-orientation, and avenues of contestation' (Pratt 2020, 61). It refers to the constituents of normativity without concretizing them in the form of an object ('norm'). As part of how I make this proposal, I claim that while normativity exists, norms do not, except as theoretical abstractions that may or may not be helpful to include in our theories. Evers is not convinced by this claim, and I suspect he is not alone.

Evers' position is one that, I think, is at least implicitly shared by many constructivists in the field: reification is an essential and unavoidable part of the process of social construction, and therefore norms do indeed have an objective, if contingent, reality to them. Consequently, scholars still should adopt a substantivist account of

what norms are and, more broadly, of how society is constituted. Per this account, norms must exist as social objects and we must describe them as such, regardless of how relational or multiplicitous we are in how we represent them. Behind this view, I wonder if there is a broader suspicion of the so-called 'turns' towards practices and relations, because as McCourt (2016) observes, they are critical responses to mainstream constructivism. If relational social theory shows that norms are not actually things, it may therefore appear to imply the invalidity of the productive and hugely influential work of many constructivist scholars – work that is still ongoing, and should not be dismissed on the basis of metatheoretical fiat. Hence Evers has sought to merge norms-oriented constructivism and (relational) practice theory while preserving the ontological commitments of both.

Were I to map out the basic gist of Evers' view, it would be as follows:

(1) The social world is constructed out of 'social facts', which are collective beliefs and agreements over meanings. Once produced, social facts constitute objects or structures distinct from practice. Norms are a key kind of social fact.
(2) 'Reification' refers to this process of social fact production and objectification.
(3) It is therefore necessary to reify 'norms', because they are social facts made into objects, and as such must be treated as concrete things in our investigations into the role normativity plays in politics.

These positions are clear and easy to understand, and they are consistent with the assumptions and insights common in the literature on norms. However, I think all three of these argumentative steps suffer from some confusions and misunderstandings about the concepts they reference and employ. I will try to explain what these problems are.

The first problem is the easiest to diagnose: Evers is not using the word 'reification' in the way that I do, or indeed as does any other critic of reification with whom I am familiar, including those whom he cites. Per his definition: reification is 'the act of treating something socially created *as if it were real*' (emphasis mine) (see Evers 2020, page 220). I and other critics of reification believe that social constructions are as real (and, indeed, material)[1] as anything else, and thus the ontological differentiation of social constructions from 'the real' is not part of our understanding of the world (and the word). Flatly, I don't know anyone who thinks that social constructions are unreal fictions in a world of natural facts, which is concerning because much of Evers' essay consists of a defence of the contrary view, and he does not actually specify against whom he is arguing.[2]

[1]One of the key ontological commitments of practice theory and relational sociology is the materiality of the social. While IR scholars often associate 'the material' with the instruments of violence or the products of economic activity, and term 'ideational' the cultural and semiotic parts of social life, I think this arises from a misunderstanding of how bodies and meanings interact in space and time; we may choose to bifurcate the social and natural worlds (though I do not), but meaning is felt and enacted in a physical world, realised in the performances and sensory processes of human beings (and other social animals).

[2]In fairness to Evers (and to Searle, from whom he draws his account of social construction), there may be dogmatic rationalists or positivists who hold something like this view, but certainly none of the critical constructivists who express concerns about reification.

But this does raise a question I myself did not bother to answer, and clearly should have: what actually *is* 'reification' and the critique thereof? This is a surprisingly hard question to answer. More than 30 years ago, Pitkin (1987) found over 20 different meanings for the term. Berger and Luckmann (1966), whom Evers cites, defines reification as 'the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will' (106). Or, to 'bestow on [institutions] an ontological status independent of human activity and signification' (107). But the critique of reification is not just that we should recognize when something is the product of society (rather than god or pre-social nature). It also is that we should recognize the consequent *plasticity* of institutions. This is what Lukacs meant in his 1923 essay on reification, when he defined it as the phenomenon whereby 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity"' (Lukács 1971, 83). Giddens, despite ultimately advancing a substantivist view of society, is among the most explicit and helpful on this:

> [Reification] should not be understood to simply refer to properties of social systems which are 'objectively given' so far as specific, situated actors are concerned…reified discourse refers to the 'facticity' with which social phenomena confront individual actors in such as way as to ignore how they are produced and reproduced through human agency (1984, 180).

To reify a practice is thus a discursive move that denotes its outcomes as objects rather than periods and places of stability, arising from human action. This misses how the things we call 'social facts' are arrangements of practices, and do not exist independently of them.

To claim that reification is simply the process of establishing social facts, which practices then 'bind together' (see Evers 2020, page 226), confuses the production of institutions with the specific fallacy of treating them as having an existence independent of their ongoing constitution. Searle himself is clear about the difference. His (1995) account of the construction of social reality is that certain kinds of common beliefs and institutions are produced through communicative actions, whereby constative speech acts organize practices around consistent meanings and symbols, establishing them as normative and making them focal points of collective intentionality. He calls these stabilized practices social facts. This often grants social facts an objective character in the minds of the people interacting with them – and grants 'deontic power' to those with the authority to create them (Searle 2010). But Searle's 'social facts' are not objects. While Searle is a realist about the physical world, he is not a realist about the autonomous causal powers of social structures.[3] Social facts are (usually tacit) agreements of belief and action. They cannot be 'bound' by practices because *they are* practices, even if it is often helpful to build explanations out of references to them as though they were something independent and distinct.

[3]And yet Searle's work is often conflated, by IR scholars reading him, with a melange of realist social ontologists, such as Bhaskar or Giddens, who do think that social structures exist in distinct and autonomous ways.

Treating social facts as objects is thus itself an act of reification. As Honneth (2008) observed, when social scientists or philosophers develop an abstraction or objectification of a phenomenon, it is a necessary part of theory-building and explanation, but they may mistakenly identify the boundaries of the abstraction with the edges or possibilities of the social relations it was created to describe. This is reification: turning a tool of theory into a presumption about the future of a social arrangement. This is what the literature on norms often does, in my view, by forgetting that societies do not truly have boundaries, and thus that the categories we use to analyse and explain society do not refer to its real form, because they impose borders upon the borderless (Mann 1986). A 'norm' thus helps us talk about something, but the discourse about a thing need not circumscribe it, and arguably never can.

All of this is to say that 'social facts' are not the same kind of thing as object 'norms', conceived as things with properties independent of their constituent parts. Simply put, it would appear Evers has conflated Searle's account of social construction with something like the duality of structure and agency, whereby institutions are emergent structures that exist on a different ontological level as action, and are able to exercise a sort of downward causal power that shapes the very processes that produce or sustain them (Elder-Vass 2010). This is apparent in his statement (see Evers 2020, page 225) that most scholars talking about this agree that practices take place within structures that enable and constrain them – what relational sociologists have referred to as 'co-determinism' (Dépelteau 2008) – and distinguish between supposedly material things like technology and intersubjective 'beliefs' like language. Needless to say, neither of these positions are typical of IR relationalists and practice theorists (McCourt 2016; Adler 2019), who tend to conceive of the social as ontologically flat. Our view is that there is no layering of structures and agents, but rather a spread of relations, fluctuating more in some places than in others, forming constellations that *have structure* but are not *structures*.

Put differently, most relationalists, pragmatists, and practice theorists are likely to see institutions, fields, or otherwise durable social arrangements as configurations of practices that are made stable through the ongoing work and power of practitioners. For example, while Evers identifies Jackson's 'rhetorical commonplaces' (Jackson 2006) as the 'joining together of European and American norms' (Evers 2020, page 228), it is absolutely critical to Jackson's account that they be seen as unfolding communicative practices without a bounded and substantive character.[4] Categorizing them as objects is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

This error is a common one in our field, and I think it arises from a restrictive view of normativity – one fixated on formal institutions and overlooking the ways rightness, correctness, propriety, and virtue are established through diffuse arrays of disciplinary practices (Foucault 1977). For example, Evers (see Evers 2020, page 225–6) writes that my approach cannot distinguish between practices like 'walking upright and engaging in torture', when only the latter is 'defined by a collectively held norm'. While there are physiological reasons why upright walking is comfortable and efficient for most members of the species *Homo sapiens*, it is completely wrong to argue that it is not also *normative*. Were I to walk on all fours as I go

[4]Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, personal correspondence.

about my business at work or while out shopping, I would attract a lot of curious attention (or concerns about my mental health), and if children began imitating me, their parents would likely tell them they should stop and walk normally. I would *feel* how wrong my way of walking was for the setting, because I would notice the looks I received, the murmurs of onlookers, and the fact that I was the only person doing it, even if nobody came up to me and told me 'it is wrong to walk on all fours'. Indeed, this makes 'walking upright' a very good demonstration of when it becomes helpful to talk in terms of normativity but less helpful to talk about 'norms'.

I did not make this point well in my article. Evers is correct to question the coherence of the approach I took instead, which is to suggest that scholars start by looking at what they would be inclined to call 'a norm' – something that admits of formalization or abstraction – and then 'de-reify' it into a normative configuration. This connects my own approach to the necessary pre-existence of a recognizable 'norm-like' institution, and raises the question of whether I therefore presume 'norms' to be things in the process of arguing that they are not. It might have been better for me to take a firmer stand on this, to argue that 'norms' do not and cannot exist as independent things, and to use anthropological examples such as the one above to show how and why I take this view.

But this approach is not consistent with what I think theory exists to do, and also why I have proposed a new concept. The value of a theory does not come from isomorphically depicting a world 'out there'. Instead, it lies in the ways it lets theorists arrange their depictions of the world ways that allow us to orient ourselves within it, from the perspectives of those already inside it (Dewey 1929). Theory is meant to be *helpful*, by ordering a confusing array of transactional processes and phenomena (Dewey and Bentley 1949), and make satisfying judgements about what we should all be doing (Cochran 2002). A theory need not trace the contours of reality to give us traction on it.

This brings me to the problem with the third part of Evers' argument: that we must include 'norms' in our explanations of normativity because norms exist. But I am not a scientific realist, and as already noted, I take a pragmatic view about when a concept or term belongs in a theory. Even if norms do exist, I think the value of focusing on their role in shaping the action must be an empirical question, though normativity itself is necessarily always present. What I mean is that the actual practitioners or actors whom we study may or may not institutionalize or stabilize normativity around 'norms', and they may or may not be talking about 'norms' when they contest, resist, manage, maintain, and innovatively transform the disciplinary and normative processes of social life. A policymaker or bureaucrat, for example, may self-consciously refer to the normative configurations they confront as 'norms', or at least arrange their discourses and practices around specified principles or conventions. But if they don't, why should we, as scholars, do it for them? By developing a broader and less presumptive vocabulary for talking about normativity, we do not need to make these assumptions in advance about how the world looks and works for the people whom we study, and we are free to choose our analytical categories with broader pragmatic and anthropological scope.

The same goes even if norms don't exist, except as terms of discourse. To be clear: I have argued that norms cannot be structures or objects. But this does not

make it indefensible to build theories that include 'norms' as convenient and helpful concepts. When actors are evidently explicit about the formal institutions or principles they are adhering to, when actors propose new institutions or wholesale replacements of one institution with another, are in agreement over the name and meaning of institutions, contesting their rightness but not their content, a clear and useful explanation of normative change may refer to 'norms'. I think there are many situations or areas of life that are like this, especially when it comes to matters of policy. Even if I think that 'norms' prohibiting the use of landmines or the keeping of slaves in reality comprise diffuse configurations of practices, I am persuaded that they are coherent and stable enough to make it unnecessary to 'de-reify' them.

In other words, I have proposed the concept of 'normative configuration' not to tell IR scholars how normativity really works, nor prove that 'norms' should be dropped from our theories, but to better establish alternative avenues for us to talk about normativity. The extensive metatheoretical labours of my article are just aimed at establishing greater disciplinary and epistemic space for doing so when it is helpful. Right now, the field is well trained to associate normativity with 'norms'. Often this is a good way to explain a process or outcome, but sometimes it is not. Without a broader conceptual vocabulary, we must force instances of the latter into the analytical frameworks we have developed for the former, and we may not even 'know it', in the sense of lacking categories to represent to ourselves the less formal, more diffuse, more *relational* ways our social life gains its shape. This is why, in the part of my article discussing methodology, I began with the assumption that we will see something 'norm-like', and my intervention is to offer an alternative way forward from there.

My hope in this reply is that I have clarified what I have proposed and why I have proposed it. I have pointed to some misconceptions about the arguments I have made, but I also have tried to understand where they come from and how I might have done better to avert them. I am also glad to see broader sympathy with my interest in granular and configurational analyses of normativity, regardless of whether 'norms' are part of them. Evers and the editors of *International Theory* have afforded me a rare opportunity to reflect and refine a provocative piece of writing. I only wish I could do so with all of my work, and I am deeply grateful to them for it.

References

Adler, Emanuel. 2019. *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Knowledge: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.

Cochran, Molly. 2002. "Deweyan Pragmatism and Post-Positivist Social Science in IR." *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 31 (3): 525–48. http://mil.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/03058298020310030801 (November 24, 2012).

Dépelteau, François. 2008. "Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency." *Sociological Theory* 26 (1): 51–73.

Dewey, John. 1929. *The Quest for Certainty*. New York: Milton, Balch, & Company.

Dewey, John, and Arthur Bentley. 1949. *Knowing and the Known*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Elder-Vass, Dave. 2010. *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure, and Agency*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Evers, Miles M. 2020. "Just the Facts: Why Norms Remain Relevant in an Age of Practice." *International Theory* 12 (2): 220–30.
Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.
Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Honneth, Axel. 2008. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. 2006. *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
Lukács, Georg. 1971. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." In *History & Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, 83–222. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Mann, Michael. 1986. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
McCourt, David M. 2016. "Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism." *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (3): 475–85.
Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1987. "Rethinking Reification." *Theory and Society* 16 (2): 263–93.
Pratt, Simon Frankel. 2020. "From Norms to Normative Configurations: A Pragmatist and Relational Approach to Theorizing Normativity in IR." *International Theory* 12 (1): 59–82.
Searle, John. 2010. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Searle, John R. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Cite this article: Pratt, S. F. 2020. "Reification, practice, and the ontological status of social facts." *International Theory* **12**, 231–237, doi:10.1017/S1752971920000081