

# The Dynamics of International Cooperation-A Research Agenda

**Gang He**

*Institute of International Relations, China Foreign Affairs University, Center for Strategic and Security Studies, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China  
Email: zluofau@163.com*

**Abstract:** *International cooperation is an important topic in the study of international relations. This paper reviews and composes the existing research theories on international cooperation, focusing on new and recent theoretical developments, and develops a critical research review of these theories.*

**Keywords:** *International cooperation, International system, Collaborative research, Critical studies*

## 1. Introduction

The process of cooperation between states and its dynamics factors have long been a hot topic of international relations research. From the evolution of community at the level of organizational systems to international cooperation at the national level, from the interactive participation of non-state actors within organizations to the emotional relational ties at the individual level, cooperation relations exist in all areas and levels between states.

## 2. The Dynamics of International Cooperation

Research on national cooperation mechanisms is rich, and the academic community has studied its motivating factors from different perspectives.

### 2.1 Interest-driven cooperation

Rationalist consequential logic is based on the assumption of "economic man" and believes that the actions of actors are the result of trade-offs based on their own interests. From the perspective of consequential logic, the motivation and deepening of cooperation comes from the fact that participation in the process of cooperation can sustainably increase individual benefits. Duncan Snidal, for example, believes that the process of institutionalized cooperation among states reflects the respective rational and purposeful view of interests.

### 2.2 Socialization processes drive cooperation

This view is that the dynamics of sovereign states' participation in cooperation is actually a process of seeking their own socialization. The "socialization process" mainly refers to the unique personality and character formed in the process of interaction between individuals and society, and the process of social life in which individuals gradually transform from biological persons to social persons through learning role knowledge and internalizing social culture. In this process, the social culture is perpetuated and the social structure is maintained. Therefore, the core mechanism of socialization is the learning and internalization of social norms by individuals, but the socialization process of individuals is often considered to be passive, a process of obeying social norms and engaging in specific behaviors under fixed role regulations. Based on the traditional perception of socialization paths, existing research on normative socialization in international relations focuses on two aspects: first, it emphasizes the top-down path, such as the dissemination of international system norms to national actors by international organizations through indoctrination. The second from the perspective of the center-edge path, it is argued that the socialization process of marginal countries is usually reflected in the wholesale acceptance of the norms of the system's core countries and the abandonment of old identities. However, this unidirectional path of socialization studies is far from the increasingly fluid reality of international

relations and ignores the autonomy and agency of actors. Anthony Giddens argues that this view is wrong; "the process of socialization is an actuating process in which individuals are not passive objects of instruction and arrangement, but progressively understand and accept social roles in the process of social interaction." In fact, the process of socialization should be a two-way socialization process, where actors achieve participation in the international system on the one hand, and also shape new international norms on the other.

### ***2.3 The need for ontological security of actors drives cooperation***

According to ontological security theory, the motivation of actors' cooperation comes from the actors' own search for "identity stability". In order to maintain a stable sense of identity and obtain ontological security, actors need the support of two factors, namely, a continuous and historical self and stable and significant others. For the states, the maintenance of a continuous historical self is usually achieved through a state's "unity of words and deeds," that is, the unity of the state's autobiographical narrative with its external actions. Thus, Jennifer Mitzen argues that a state's foreign policy must maintain a unity of words and actions primarily because of the need to maintain a sense of stability of self-identity. On the other hand, the "stable significant other" is another important source of ontological security for actors. Identity is intersubjective and derives from the interaction and recognition of the self and the other. Therefore, a stable sense of identity is inseparable from a stable significant other, and finding a stable significant other becomes an important way and motivating factor for actors to obtain ontological security.

### ***2.4 Public goods demand and the dynamics of cooperation***

Public goods demand theory is a more mature analytical perspective. Since Olson introduced the concept of "international public goods" into the field of international cooperation in 1971, this explanatory framework has expanded from the domestic to the international level. In fact, the main reason why the demand for public goods has become a driving force for cooperation is that, on the one hand, international public goods tend to be increasingly "privatized" and, on the other hand, there is a clear shortage of international public goods, a trend that is increasingly becoming an obstacle to the progress of economic globalization. Therefore, the international community needs to provide public goods that can meet the common needs of the countries in the region through cooperation in the face of various contradictions and environmental and resource risks in globalization. At present, in the face of various global crises, the international community needs new public goods providers, and countries need to cope with risks through cooperation.

### ***2.5 The theoretical path of studying international cooperation from the institutional model is to view cooperation as a top-down vertical process of institutionalization***

With the establishment and development of the new institutionalist analytical paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of international cooperation and its research perspective gradually became broadened on this basis, and fruitful theoretical and empirical analytical results were achieved. In fact, neo-institutionalism itself encompasses different academic schools, and each school has a different understanding of institutions, such as institutions as normative principles, institutions as system balancers, and institutions as forms of games. Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, for this reason, have grouped the new institutionalist paradigm into three main theoretical branches: Historical Institutionalism, Rational Choice Institutionalism, and Sociological Institutionalism. Institutionalism, Rational Choice Institutionalism, and Sociological Institutionalism. All three branches of theory stem from the common core assumption that institutions are the basis of all political behavior and that organized political formations cannot exist without institutions. This is because institutional structures determine who can participate in a given political arena, shape the political strategies of political actors, and influence the expectations of political actors. Although these three branches of theory share common ground in terms of core assumptions, their respective applied research, especially on international cooperation, has its own distinctive features.

Rational choice institutionalism's study of international cooperation is based on two major assumptions. First, political actors are all seekers of maximizing material interests and need to satisfy the maximization of individual interests. Second, international cooperation provides these actors with good opportunities to maximize material interests, and such opportunities can help them maximize their individual interests. In the view of rational choice institutionalism, the system is a structure of opportunities brought about by international cooperation, and domestic political actors thus use such

opportunities for their own benefit. Thus, rational choice institutionalism explains the cooperation process of countries by focusing on the timing of these countries' choices of international cooperation regimes rather than on the development process of domestic regimes, so that the theory's analysis of the process of regime formation and its change with the social environment is actually lacking.

To compensate for the shortcomings of rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism puts forward its own theoretical assumptions that human behavior is influenced not only by institutions, but also by the social environment, culture and history in which they live, and by the internalized "logic of social appropriateness" of identity, values and norms. In the study of international cooperation, sociological institutionalism views international cooperation as a process of socialization. First, Long-term interaction between a partner and other organizations or countries may lead to imitating or assimilating. Second, the norms, rules or institutions in the international cooperation process must match the established practices, values and cultural systems within the state, otherwise the cooperation process will not be able to advance. In terms of theoretical logic, sociological institutionalism assumes that established social institutions and concepts shape the preferences of actors, but the theory does not provide a concrete explanation of how established social institutions and concepts are generated. In addition, similar to rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism also upholds a structuralist ideology and is a static analytical perspective, emphasizing that domestic political actors adopt institutions based on "social appropriateness" and that institutions that conform to social norms and cultural values, thus neglecting the analysis of actors' selection process of competitive institutions. This neglects the analysis of the competitive selection process of institutions.

If rational choice institutionalism focuses on the "rational calculus path" and sociological institutionalism focuses on the "cultural path," then historical institutionalism is a useful attempt to reconcile these two theoretical paths. The basic idea of this theory is that the policies and institutions that are initially formed or initiated will continue to influence and determine future policy directions. Historical institutionalism suggests that international regimes may be established initially as instruments for the pursuit of the common good by "rational" states, as realism suggests, but that over time, cooperative participants will have less and less power to control the regime, so that earlier regimes will influence the formation and development of subsequent regimes and policies. In developing an analysis of international cooperation, historical institutionalism emphasizes the temporal dimension of the process of adjustment of domestic political actors to their own cooperative policies. It emphasizes the process of generating, maintaining, and adapting relations between cooperating parties in the process of cooperation. Historical institutionalism argues that history creates the institutional context of cooperation, which in turn shapes the choices of actors. Thus, historical institutionalism's interpretation of the process of international cooperation emphasizes the inertia of previous cooperative institutions, arguing that the rational, strategic bargaining and preferences of the cooperating parties will be limited by the context and policies of previous cooperative institutions, and that once the cooperating parties accept these institutions, the parties will have less and less control over the institutions in subsequent time, and the institutions will become the main force governing the cooperative behavior of the parties. This means that from the initial creation of cooperative institutions and policies, cooperating parties will strive to build institutions in their own favor

Historical institutionalism focuses on the concept of "path dependence" and the historical development and institutional stickiness of institutions, and therefore historical institutionalism tends to divide the development of cooperative institutions into institutional creation and institutional stability, while ignoring the discussion of institutional change and institutional innovation. In essence, similar to sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism still upholds a structuralist perspective that emphasizes the decisive influence of prior institutional structures on present institutional development. Therefore the process analysis of policy choices and exertion of domestic political actors has not attracted the attention of historical institutionalism.

### ***2.6 The Social Learning Model***

The social learning model assumes that countries adopt rules for cooperation because they believe they are intrinsically fit and that the process of cooperation is perceived as legitimate at home. After that, over time, through socialization, persuasion, or habituation, cooperative participants adopt the rules of cooperation. Of course, there are conditions for the social learning model to work: one is the legitimacy of the policy and process, and the other is the need for policy resonance. The most important basis for actors in the contemporary international community to pursue their norms and policies is legitimacy. The acceptance of international cooperation norms and policies by cooperation participants should be legitimate, not only the norms and policies themselves need to be legitimate, but also the process of norm

generation and policy development. Therefore, if a cooperating party unilaterally imposes its norms and policies, its normative and policy legitimacy will be challenged.

In terms of policy resonance, the implementation of a particular collaborative policy by a collaborative participant can have an impact on the learning of other participants. When there are cooperative participants who are less effective in implementing cooperative policies, the learning and emulation of this policy by other participants can be negatively affected. In addition, the adoption and implementation of cooperation policies by participants are also influenced by the domestic public, and whether the public supports the government's policy changes in the cooperation process will directly affect the country's cooperation process. If the government adopts cooperative policies that contradict the historical perceptions of the domestic public, the country will face greater resistance to learning the norms and policies in the cooperative process.

Social learning theory views the cooperation process as the acceptance of legitimizing rules, yet this theory's explanation remains inadequate, it lacks a dynamic theoretical perspective of observation.

### ***2.7 Narrative and International Cooperation***

Currently, there are four main directions of language studies in international relations: first, speech act studies, which consider language as an action, represented mainly by Onufre's rule constructivism; second, the focus on the role of language in constructing meaning, emphasizing the impact of the use of language games on meaning and behavior; third, the post-structuralist focus on the study of discourse itself, focusing on the analysis of the process of discourse formation and textual analysis ; and fourth, narrative studies, which argue that identity can be constructed and maintained through narrative. Among them, speech act research and narrative research are more inclusive of the "practice turn," but the speech act research agenda is mainly concerned with the practice of language itself, without fully recognizing the importance of practice itself. Narrative research has focused on the construction and influence of narrative structures on identity, while research on the role of "narrative" in practice is in its infancy. Currently, linguistic constructivism is less concerned with the study of narrative, but with the "narrative turn" in social science research, the importance of narrative research is coming to the fore.

With the development of narrative studies, its scientific research status is also rising. As mentioned earlier, if Jerome Bruner established the epistemological status of narrative, De Certeau placed it in a more ontological position, arguing that narrative first "acts" in social practice in order to open up the frontiers for the latter. This chapter therefore upholds the linguistic constructivist principle of the primacy of discourse (narrative), but at the same time focuses on the impact of discourse (narrative) on practice for analysis. However, practice also influences actors' narratives to some extent, so this paper does not deny the ontological status of practice, but builds on post-structuralist and De Certeau's theory of practice, weakening practice and highlighting the priority of discourse (narrative), with a view to better integrating linguistic constructivism into the current process of practice turn.

Although less attention has been paid to the study of narrative in the study of the language of international relations, the concept of "narrative" itself has great potential for research. Not only does narrative provide the cognitive basis for practice, but it can also, by virtue of its "practicality," open up space and direction for practice, providing the "script" and "theater" that practice requires. The "script" and "theater" required for practice. As the social practice of participation in practice, the same need to narrate the first "line". The practice is carried out by actors in a certain space-time, cognitive and emotional context, and the participation practice must also take place in a certain space-time and be bound by space-time, so there is no participation practice that is not bound by any conditions. Therefore, when actors engage in a certain activity or process, they first establish the space in which they are about to practice through a certain narrative and provide a corresponding script of action and legitimacy for their practice. Through continuous narrative and participation in practice, the space for the actor's action is expanded. Participation in practice is a process of active practice by the actor. Since "human subject homogeneity derives from the experience of intersubjective recognition,". Therefore, the goal of participating in the practice is to have one's "autobiographical narrative" recognized by the other, that is, the recognition of the "new script" of the practice, so as to obtain new identity recognition and identity expansion.

In summary, this paper argues that a causal relationship can be established between narratives, participation in practice, and identity recognition or identity expansion, in that actors' narratives provide the cognitive basis, action script, and practice space for their participation in practice. Through participation in practice, the legitimacy and practice space of actors' practice are further confirmed and

expanded. This is a stage-by-stage cyclical process. The theoretical framework can be illustrated as follows: through continuous narratives and practices, the legitimacy and practice space of the actor is continuously enhanced, and its goal is to obtain the recognition of the identity of the other and to realize the expansion of its own identity.

### 3. Critical review

The above representative views explain the dynamic process of state cooperation from different perspectives, but most of them have several flaws and shortcomings. First, the "dichotomy" between structure and actor is still present in all explanatory frameworks, and the actor is considered as a "conditioned" subject. The logic of rationalist analysis assumes that "rational human" actors will respond in the same way under a given structure based on the logic of maximizing their own interests. The essence of public goods theory is also to take the scarcity of public goods as a structural context and to explore the cooperative intentions of actors in that context. While the two-way socialization process theory focuses on both the structure and the actor, it lacks a discussion of structural classification contexts, and in fact, the actor's actuation will vary across contextual structures. Second, the existing explanations lack theoretical analysis of agency and processivity. Although the two-way socialization theory and the ontological security theory include the socialization process of the state and agency in the discussion to some extent, the theory itself is not well developed, especially on which factors will affect the agency process, and how the agency will shape the existing structure and other problems are not paid enough attention.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Author contributions

G.H. was the sole author of this article

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