

ISA Workshop on New Frontiers in Norms Research
The Watson Institute, Brown University
March 17, 2017

Final Report

Workshop Summary

This workshop sought to advance two goals: 1) to develop and strengthen the growing international network of scholars studying international norms by forging connections between scholars who have yet to meet; and 2) to advance the literature on international norms by enhancing the quality of scholarship through exposure to scholars working across a diverse range of theoretical and methodological approaches. The workshop was highly successful at achieving these goals.

The workshop began with a provocative question: has term “norm” fallen prey to conceptual stretching, such that it has lost its theoretical clarity? The discussion centered on how we can understand social action in the absence of norms, the methodological difficulties of identifying a norm when one exists, and substantive implications for the study of social theory and social action. Although the question was not resolved, the discussion was both lively and productive.

The remainder of the workshop consisted of three panel sessions of papers grouped thematically by topic. These sessions were “Challenges to Norms of State Sovereignty,” “Norms around Economic and Social Rights,” and “Law and Sovereignty.” To maximize time for discussion, each author limited presentation to no more than five minutes. Participants provided focused, high-quality feedback on each paper, but also considered how the papers on each panel were in dialogue with each other. Additionally, the morning’s opening questions about the conceptual clarity, theoretical importance, and methodological challenges of norms were recurring themes during the day, and were frequently raised in the discussion of the papers.

The closing session concluded with a summary of points of agreement and disagreement throughout the day. Participants generally agreed that the norm concept had been used too loosely but disagreed with what sorts of evidence would be required to know a norm existed. Some participants wanted constructivist theory to generate more “testable hypotheses” than it currently has, but others remained concerned that positivist approaches would limit important theoretical innovation. There was a general consensus that conversations between rationalist and constructivist scholars could help to hone understandings of “norms,” and participants were able to engage in cohesive theoretical discussions remarkably well despite coming from different theoretical “camps.”

In sum, the workshop was extremely productive. In fact, many of the conversations started during the course of the day continued over drinks and dinner, indicating the excitement and energy surrounding this new research agenda on norms.

Participation

The workshop brought together a set of scholars reflecting a considerable degree of diversity in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches, career stage, and geography representation. Table 1 lists the participants.

Table 1: Participants of the Workshop

Participant	Title	Affiliation
Michelle Jurkovich (co-organizer)	Assistant Professor	University of Massachusetts Boston
Melissa M. Lee (co-organizer)	Assistant Professor	Princeton University
Daniel Altman	Postdoctoral Fellow	Harvard University
Dina Bishara	Assistant Professor	University of Alabama
Noelle Brigden	Assistant Professor	Marquette University
Sammy Barkin	Associate Professor	University of Massachusetts Boston
Ryan D. Griffiths	Senior Lecturer	University of Sydney
Ian Hurd	Associate Professor	Northwestern University
Giovanni Mantilla	Assistant Professor	CIDE
Kathryn Sikkink	Professor	Harvard University
Benjamin A. Valentino	Associate Professor	Dartmouth University

Accounting

Brown University's Watson Institute hosted the workshop on the campus of Brown University in Providence, RI. The workshop was awarded a budget of \$15,330 by ISA.

Post-Workshop Plans

There are a number of potential pathways for post-workshop engagement. One possibility is to put together an organized panel proposal for ISA 2018. Several papers presented at this workshop were in the early stages of development, and would benefit from additional feedback from ISA participants. The natural synergies between papers and the panel format of our workshop would easily facilitate a set of organized panel submissions for ISA. A second possibility is to propose a symposium for an ISA journal. A symposium submission would consist of shorter contributions from interested workshop participants. Lastly, participants also plan to submit their papers for review at top political science journals.