Fabian Klein and Justus Dreyling (Freie Universität Berlin)

An Identity Theory Framework for the Study of Transnational Solidarity

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Abstract

Many industrial relations scholars have tried to explain transnational solidarity action as a function of material and institutional constraints. Anner et al., for instance, argue that differences in transnational solidarity can be inferred from sectoral variance in competition and "pre-existing traditions and practices of transnational regulation" (2006, 7). Although "traditions and practices" could imply ideational factors (e.g. culture), their explanation is fundamentally materialist and rationalist. The role of shared ideas for the interpretation of the material world is not considered. As Abdelal, Blyth, and Parsons put it, according to this thinking, "people select certain actions as a rational response to their place in an environment implicitly characterized as an 'obstacle course,' in which payoffs may be opaque, but they are knowable; and it is this 'correspondence theory of the world' (plus a behavioral rule or two) that drives action" (2010, 3). On a macro-level, many of these approaches contribute to our understanding of how material structures and institutions constrain and serve as resources for actors. However, on a micro-level these contributions tell us very little about how *particular* actors interpret their structural environments and, thus, why they choose one course of action over another. Considering the role of shared ideas and, in particular, social identities helps us understand and explain why different actors react differently to similar challenges. Social constructivism has convincingly introduced such concepts in sociology and various subdisciplines of political science, most notably International Relations, but more recently in International Political Economy as well. We argue that Industrial Relations can also benefit from constructivist approaches, especially when doing research on transnational solidarity. In this paper, we show how constructivism and, more specifically, a social identity approach can contribute to transnational solidarity research.

We conceptualize solidarity as a type of social identity. Following Risse, we understand social identities as "social constructions linking individuals to social groups" (2010, 9). Identities relate group membership to specific norms, purposes, relational comparisons with other groups, and cognitive models (Abdelal et al. 2006, 697). Solidarity identities are, then, those

identities that contain strong norms of mutual assistance and participation in collective action. Like other social identities, they emanate from the communicative processes "by which individuals and social groups make sense of who they are and what they want" (Risse 2010, 20). Solidarity identities become relevant for action as they shape how actors endow the world with meaning, how they perceive their environments, and how they interact with group members as well as other individuals or groups. Instead of focusing solely on interest to explain behavior as materialist and rationalist approaches do, most constructivists agree that identities and interests are mutually constitutive. In our understanding, solidarity therefore is more than an attitude or a type of behavior, but a part on an individual's self-conception.

In addition to constructivism, this understanding of social identities is informed by social psychology. Social psychology research on identities has shown that "[i]ndividuals hold multiple identities that are invoked depending on the context in which people find themselves" (Risse 2010, 23). Seen from a social identity perspective, we can thus expect individuals to hold a number of identities that demand to act in solidarity with different group. Sometimes, these demands can be in conflict with each other. The questions that then arise are how strong those solidarity identities are by comparison, in which contexts they become salient, how they interrelate and how actors deal with conflicting demands. Moreover, a constructivist, identity-based approach to solidarity recalls that a group does not need to hold a solidarity identity (or, for that matter, a strong one) just because scholars ascribe an objective quality to it. With regard to transnational solidarity, workers may hold multiple solidarity identities at different spatial levels vis-à-vis other workers that might imply competing demands for solidarity action. Workers also have other solidary and non-solidary identities (e.g. national or political) that may matter in such a context.

The aim of this paper is to conceptualize solidarity within the framework of identity theory. As a first step, we give a selective review of the industrial relations literature on transnational solidarity to show how our conceptualization contrasts with existing approaches. Second, we conceptualize solidarity as a type of social identity and proceed by showing how solidarity identities relate to action. In our view, it is crucial to understand that individuals hold multiple identities. The strength and salience of particular identities and their interrelation shape how actors react in given situations. Transnational solidary action will be more likely if a group of employees identifies strongly with class or other transnational entities encompassing the group towards which solidarity action is required. Fourthly, we discuss the added value of our approach. Lastly, we draw conclusions.

Selective bibliography

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Fabian Klein
Berlin Graduate School for Transnational Studies
Freie Universität Berlin
Ihnestr. 26, 14195 Berlin
Email: klein@transnationalstudies.eu

Fabian is a PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School for Transnational Studies. His dissertation project is about the role of science in policy making.

Justus Dreyling
Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft
Freie Universität Berlin
Ihnestr. 22, 14195 Berlin
Email: justus.dreyling@fu-berlin.de

Justus is a research fellow at the chair of International Political Economy at Freie Universität Berlin's Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science. In the past, he has done research on Global Framework Agreements and is now working on his PhD thesis on the international regulation of intellectual property.