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“Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination”

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This article introduces an issue of *International Organization* dedicated to discussing the role of epistemic communities in inter-state policy coordination. Haas argues that modern decision-makers have faced growing technical complexity and uncertainties in addressing policy issues, and thus increasingly have relied on knowledgeable experts. A network of such experts can create an "epistemic community" in which members share technical knowledge related to a particular field as well as normative principles, causal beliefs, and a shared conception of interests. Because of their claim to expertise, such epistemic communities can diffuse norms and values as well as technical knowledge and thereby influence policy outcomes.

The author introduces competitive explanations for national behavior, including conditioning by systemic factors, unit-level factors, as well as interactions between the two, and raises the question of whether states promote non-material values (ideas) (1). Haas admits that systemic conditions and domestic pressures impose constraints on state behavior, but argues that states have wide latitude in choosing actions. Moreover, states' choices are influenced by how they define their interests, how problems are framed, and what alternatives are presented (2,4). The author proposes mechanisms by which epistemic communities influence this process, arguing that communities of authoritative experts control and channel information to decision-makers and thereby can foster new patterns of state behavior (2-4).

Since Haas is only introducing other articles, he does not offer detailed evidence or empirical testing in his article. However, he introduces a general claim that in several policy areas, epistemic communities framed the issues for debate and thereby influenced subsequent developments consistent with their preferred outcomes. These policy areas include international trade in services, nuclear arms control, management of whaling, protection of stratospheric ozone, food aid, international banking regulation, and creation of the foundations of the post-World War II economic order (5).

The article discusses the origins of epistemic communities, beginning with the growth of professionalization in Western societies, which included increasing professionalization and bureaucratization of public policy-making (8-9). This fostered growth of trans-organizational and even trans-national communities of professional experts and increased decision-makers' tendencies to defer to policy-area experts (9-10). Haas admits that policy choices remain highly political, especially when scientific advice is ambiguous or conflicting, or when issues involve allocation of resources (11-12). However, the advice of area experts holds more sway under uncertainty, such as when crises arise or a new policy arena forms in which policy-makers have limited preconceptions concerning the state's interests or policy alternatives (14-16,29).

The article defines an epistemic community as a network of professionals with recognized expertise in a particular area and an authoritative claim as a source of policy-relevant knowledge. Such a community shares the following features:

- normative and principled beliefs
- causal beliefs
- notions of validity (criteria for evaluating knowledge in their domain of expertise)
- policy enterprise (common practices associated with a set of policy problems) (3,16-18)

Epistemic communities differ from interest groups because the communities' shared causal beliefs and understandings of cause-and-effect shape their interests, rather than vice-versa. Unlike interest groups, they are not focused on outcomes that are contrary to their causal beliefs (18).

Haas investigates approaches that emphasize the social construction of reality and psychological theories of decision-making. He rejects the notions of "radical constructivists" who contend that "...there is no 'objective' basis for identifying material reality and all claims for objectivity are therefore suspect" (21). Instead, he allies his approach (and the approach of most of the articles in the edited volume) with what he calls "a limited constructivist view." This approach assumes that while the categories by which objective reality is identified are socially constructed, a "...consensus about the nature of the world is possible in the long run" (23). Hence, while epistemic communities "...provide consensual knowledge, they do not necessarily generate truth" (23).

Haas then turns to the role of ideas in determining policy choices (26-28). He recognizes that "[i]t is the political infiltration of an epistemic community into governing institutions which lays the groundwork for a broader acceptance of the community's beliefs and ideas about the proper construction of social reality" (27). However, determining the mechanisms by which ideas are diffused and accepted is a problematic area of social science research. "Without compelling answers to the questions that remain in this regard, it is difficult to support the argument that ideas are independent variables and not just intervening variables" (27). He adds that epistemic communities act to channel ideas to decision-makers and also circulate ideas between states. Combining these notions with psychological theories of decision-making can specify the exact mechanisms that explain the independent causal role of ideas in policy outcomes (27-34).

Haas concludes with guidance for further research and outlines the following tasks:

- identifying community membership
- determining the community members' principled and causal beliefs
- tracing communities' activities and demonstrating their influence on decision makers
- identifying alternative outcomes that were foreclosed because of communities' influence
- exploring alternative explanations for the actions of decision-makers.