Process tracing: an analyticist approach

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An Analyticist Approach

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Introduction

This chapter develops process tracing (PT) as a method for Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). It explains what it takes to conduct PT, trace a mechanism, and draw conclusions on that basis. Importantly, I develop a form of PT that is amendable to the more actor-centered and oftentimes, though not necessarily, interpretivist approaches to FPA (Houghton 2007; Hudson 2005). In the PT I propose there is space for *agency* and *contingency*. This means this chapter will not follow the dominant regularity understanding of PT because I hold the assumptions of generalizability that underlay it to be too rigid (e.g., Beach and Pedersen 2019; Bennett and Checkel 2015; George and Bennett 2005; Goertz 2017; Hall 2006; Mahoney 2015). Instead, I treat mechanisms as akin to Weberian ideal types: abstract constructs that are adduced from multiple concrete, contextually embedded, and largely *idiosyncratic instantiations* (e.g., Falleti and Lynch 2009; Guzzini 2017; Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Jackson 2006; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004; Pouliot 2015; Robinson 2017).[1] As I will show, treating mechanisms as analytical constructs allows us to (a) study how a mechanism or concatenation of mechanisms led to a particular outcome; (b) assess how the mechanism(s) functioned in a given context; and (c) abstract from the specific instantiation(s) more general propositions about foreign policy making.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I argue that PT is a method. Although this may seem obvious, it has an important implication that is not always strictly observed: PT does not come with a particular philosophical ontology. As part of my discussion of *the regularity understanding* of PT, I will explain what this means and why it matters. Second, I introduce *an analyticist approach* to PT as a method for studying idiosyncratic cases by treating causal mechanisms as analytical constructs or ideal types. I address, in turn, mechanisms, concrete instantiations, and their portability and explain why this understanding of mechanisms is more amendable to FPA. To be sure, the argument is not that all PT or FPA should follow this approach. To the contrary, it is only to say that more actor-centered and interpretivist accounts may benefit from rethinking what mechanisms are and how they inform our understanding of processes and PT. Third, I provide an example based on my own work on foreign policy narratives and the use of Private Military and Security Contractors (PMSCs)

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by Denmark. Lastly, I offer a short conclusion that reflects on the benefits and challenges of following an analyticist approach to PT.

The Regularity Understanding of PT

Process tracing is demanding. Uncovering a *causal mechanism* or a *concatenation of multiple mechanisms* is a meticulous task. However, before continuing we have to establish what PT is and what it can do. One argument easy to agree on is that PT is a *method*—it is a systematic mode of inquiry that allows a researcher to draw inferences and further our knowledge of the world. That said, in this section I want to make one thing explicit: PT is not concerned, as Patrick Jackson put it, with "the definition of knowledge and the overall goal of empirical research" (Jackson 2016, 27). Put differently, PT does not adhere to any philosophical ontology and does not come with a set of prescribed assumptions about the empirical world and our access to it. PT offers a particular understanding of how outcomes come about—through processes and driven by mechanisms—but what a researcher believes a mechanism is, and how she believes a mechanism can be studied, is not a given. Yet, the particular philosophical position a researcher takes does shape what PT would look like and what conclusions can be drawn on its basis.

In the PT literature, the dominant (and largely positivist) understanding treats mechanisms as supporting regular associations. This *regularity understanding* of PT comes with a set of logical assumptions that are not well-suited for much of FPA. In what follows, I briefly discuss the regularity understanding of PT with an emphasis on the bounded generalizations that are inherent to it. After that, I explain why the road taken in this chapter differs.

In the regularity understanding, PT is applied to *test hypotheses* against a more or less *objective empirical reality* and to come to (moderate) *generalizations* (Beach and Pedersen 2019, 6; Bennett and Checkel 2015, 7; Collier 2011, 824; George and Bennett 2005, 207; Gerring 2004, 348; Goertz and Mahoney 2012, 101; Hall 2006, 27f.; Mayntz 2004, 241; see also Runhardt 2015, 1297). Although differences in emphases and points of contention exist within this group of authors, they understand PT as supporting *nomothetic research* aimed at uncovering the mechanism—understood as a causal pathway or a causally connected sequence of events—that underlies an otherwise regular association (Glennan 1996, 64). This logic is often referred to as the X → M → Y model whereby research is focused on studying the mechanism (M) that relates a trigger (X) to an outcome (Y; Mahoney 2015, 205; but see Waldner 2012; 2016 for a sustained critique on this depiction). The mechanism is generally taken to be the entire sequence between the trigger and the outcome (see Figure 25.1).

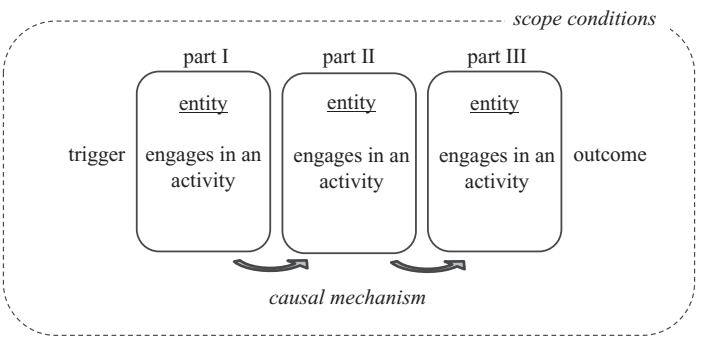

Figure 25.1 Schematic causal mechanism as understood in the regularity understanding.

To be sure, these process tracers do not draw (causal) conclusions on the basis of the observation of a cross-case regularity: their focus and conclusions regard the mechanism that connects the trigger to the outcome. However, the overall assumption is that mechanisms do sustain such regularities. Renate Mayntz summarized this position succinctly by arguing that "[s]tatements of mechanisms are accordingly *generalizing* causal propositions … [and mechanisms] 'are' sequences of causally linked events that occur repeatedly in reality if certain conditions are given" (2004, 241). Although critical of the *covering law* model of social science, her critique is not that law-like propositions are wrong but that their domain of application cannot be universal and should be specified through scope conditions or a "ceteris paribus clause" (ibid., 240; see also Glennan 1996, 54).

In this approach, scope conditions thus place limitations on the applicability of a theory. They define the socio-institutional context in which a mechanism can play out and create a "causally homogenous population" of cases—a group of sufficiently similar cases within which the causal relation is expected to hold true (Beach and Pedersen 2018, 838; Rohlfing 2012, 24; 44). PT, then, should be conducted on cases that are "representative" or "typical" of this broader class of cases because this allows a (moderate) generalization from the "studied case" to the "rest of the population" (Beach and Pedersen 2018, 838; see also Beach and Rohlfing 2018; Rohlfing 2014; Schneider and Rohlfing 2019). The regularity understanding thus argues that given certain conditions and the existence of causally important similarities a causal process-as-mechanism is a reoccurring phenomenon that produces the same (or at least a sufficiently similar) outcome every time it is triggered—that is, given the presence of conditions $X_1 \ldots X_n$ triggering mechanism M leads to outcome Y (see Figure 25.2).

A practical example can be taken from Benjamin Brast (2015). Brast studies the regional dimension of statebuilding and argues that interventions "will succeed in establishing a monopoly on large-scale violence if they enjoy the support of key regional actors" (ibid., 81). Brast's aim is "to build a theoretical framework applicable to current interventions" by "test[ing] the proposed theory on a [single] case" (ibid., 94). His X_1 is "liberal statebuilding intervention" and his triggering event is the start of regional cooperation. His outcome of interest (Y) is the establishment of a monopoly on violence. From a number of cases that have both X_1 and the trigger he selects one case, Sierra Leone, to test his hypotheses. He finds the expected relation holds and he is able to uncover the mechanism that sustains the relation (see ibid., 89). Subsequently, he argues that given X_1 and the trigger an equivalent mechanism should lead to a similar outcome in a defined set of similar cases—including Liberia and East Timor (ibid., 95). In short, he understands the discovered mechanism to underlie a bounded

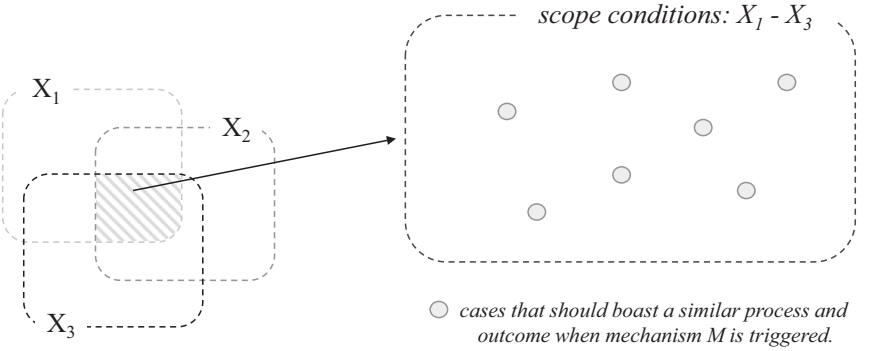

Figure 25.2 Scope conditions and generalization in the regularity understanding.

but regular association and his study offers a well-worked out and coherent example of what PT in this tradition would look like.

However, it is my conviction that this approach is too restrictive for much of FPA. Especially for the more actor-centered and interpretivist approaches, it is too deterministic (Jackson 2006, 33; 2014, 273; Pouliot 2007, 373).[2] Saying mechanisms underlie a bounded but regular association means we assume that actors, under a given set of conditions, will, by and large, act in similar ways bringing about similar outcomes. For instance, as John Owen argued in his mechanism-based approach to the democratic peace: "Liberals *will* trust states they consider liberal" and "agitate for [peaceful] policies" (Owen 1994, 103). This assumption is inherent to the regularity understanding and buttresses (and is buttressed by) the conceptions of *scope conditions*, *representative* and *typical cases*, and *generalizations*. And this assumption may work well for research that is neither interpretivist (and interested in contextually embedded meaning-making) nor particularly actor-centered. In that case, uncovering the mechanism that underlies a regular association adds significantly to our understanding of the world and the regularities we do observe. But if we want to account for or study agency or the potential of local meanings and meaning-making, then we have to allow contingency in our methods and the outcomes of processes. True agency—and therewith agential interpretations, (mis)calculations, understandings, assessments, meanings, ideas, emotions, creativity, and spontaneity—contradicts, at least in potential, regular associations (Jackson 2014, 270f.; Robinson 2017, 509). Agency introduces contingency. And taking agency seriously means our understanding of mechanisms should support "multifinality"—the idea that the same mechanism can produce different outcomes even under the same structural conditions (Guzzini 2017, 432).

If this is our understanding of agency and foreign policy making, then we need an approach to PT that accommodates that understanding. In what follows, I systematically introduce PT from the "analyticist tradition" (see Jackson 2016, 153ff.) treating mechanisms as analytical constructs or ideal types.[3]

An Analyticist Approach

When we apply PT to FPA, we are interested in the mechanisms that shape policy outcomes. We want to study *how* a given outcome came about. Moreover, to be scientifically interesting, PT should be both specific about the case at hand—how did *they* arrive at *that* decision?—and inform FPA more generally—what mechanisms were uncovered and are they applicable to a wider set of cases? In this section, I lay out an *analyticist approach* to PT that treats mechanisms as analytical constructs and that is interested in (a) studying how a mechanism or concatenation of mechanisms led to a particular outcome; (b) assessing how the mechanism(s) functioned in a given context; and (c) abstracting from the specific instantiation(s) more general propositions about foreign policy making. Following this approach, a mechanism is *an analytical construct that defines, in abstract terms, how a given set-up or entity transfers motion in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations* (partially adopted from McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004, 24). A distinction is made between the mechanism as abstract ideal type—the mechanism proper—and the concrete instantiations that exemplify it (Pouliot 2015, 238). Below, I first focus on the *mechanisms proper*, I then discuss *concrete instantiations*, and I close with a reflection on the *portability* of mechanisms.

Mechanisms. I treat mechanisms as analytical constructs and as akin to Weberian ideal types (Bengtsson and Hertting 2014, 717; Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 13; Jackson 2006, 43; 2014, 271; Pouliot 2007, 379; 2015, 238; Robinson 2017, 508). As such, a mechanism

is an abstraction that captures the essence of a social phenomenon (Weber 2014 [1904], 124ff.).

First, mechanisms are distinct from the process. This argument resembles David Waldner's who also argues that it is generally not a single *mechanism* that defines the whole *process* (Waldner 2012, 65; 2016, 29f.; see also Robinson 2017, 508). Rather, a process typically comprises multiple mechanisms each with their own logic and contribution and each at their own position in the larger sequence of events. If PT studies the "cogs and wheels" of the social world (Elster 2006 [1989], 3), then the particular concatenation of cogs and wheels that brings about an outcome is the *process* and each piece of machinery, each cog and each wheel, is a *mechanism* with a number of typical characteristics that affords a particular flow, motion, or activity.

Second, mechanisms are abstractions drawn from multiple concrete yet diverse instantiations and, as such, are (scholarly) *constructs*. Take a "cog" as mechanism. In the abstract, a cog is a toothed wheel with the ability to transfer motion when spinning. This ideal typified description captures the most important characteristics (toothed wheel) and features (transfers motion when spinning) of cogs. It also distinguishes cogs from nuts, bolts, and wheels. Yet, what any existing cog looks like and what its function is in a process is an empirical question. There are metal cogs and ones carved out of wood, cogs that spur acceleration and cogs that produce a distinct sound upon every rotation. What all cogs have in common, however, are the ideal typical features that mark the abstraction. In fact, the abstract image is derived from the study of a (great) number of cogs and by *abstracting* from those concrete instantiations the characteristics of the mechanism proper—that is, the characteristics that the instantiations share and that are not part of their contextual setting (Pouliot 2015; 235). It is, moreover, abstraction that makes a mechanism a social construct (Robinson 2017, 508). Abstraction is the product of scholarly choice and interpretation. It is always based in what the researcher deems the "essential elements" of a situation to be and about deciding what causally relevant characteristics are to be included and what can be left out (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 14; see also Goertz 2006, 27ff.). As such, while mechanisms are deduced from reality, they are "*not a depiction* of reality" (Weber 2014, 125). Moreover, through the continuous empirical study of distinct instantiations our understanding of the mechanism will, over time, be refined and amended. An ideal type in use is always an ideal type under construction as our understanding of the mechanism is constantly challenged, refined, adapted, or re-confirmed. As Weber noted, "all ideal typical constructions are transitory" (Weber 2014, 133). Finally, the fact that we can discuss and (dis)agree on the strengths and weaknesses of a given mechanism shows that it exists, *as construct*, in our (scholarly) discourse only. A mechanism is a "mental image" that "in its conceptual purity … cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality" (ibid., 125; see also Pouliot 2007, 374).

Third, mechanisms are our "conceptual tools" (Weber 2014, 129). They are our "analytical" and "heuristic" devices (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 13; Pouliot 2007, 374). We apply mechanisms to grasp, describe, and study reality. They allow us to compare or contrast cases as particular instantiations of "something" or "some-process" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004, 24; Robinson 2017, 508). Our abstract understanding of a cog allows us to recognize a cog when we see one and gives us the tools to compare and contrast one instantiation to others. Moreover, mechanisms allow us to summarize and communicate: *It was a case of a spinning cog transferring motion!* Their primary value is thus as heuristics and guides to research as we compare and contrast reality—concrete instantiations—to them (Weber 2014, 129). In fact, the empirical analysis of a mechanism-as-analytical construct is not about establishing its "truth value" or "accuracy". Instead, the relevant question is whether a given mechanism

is *useful*—whether that mechanism affords an understanding and point of entrance for our studies (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 15; Jackson 2014, 271; Pouliot 2015, 252).

But what, then, does a mechanism consist of? Similar to the regularity understanding, mechanisms should include entities that engage in activities (Machamer, Darden, and Craver 2000, 5). "Verbs have replaced nouns" and actors take the place of the passive descriptors that are central in variable-oriented research (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004, 50). A cog (entity) may transfer motion when spinning (activity); a politician (entity) may vie for votes (activity); a parliamentary committee (entity) may arrive at a recommendation (activity); and so forth. Important however, rather than the methodological individualism espoused by some—which holds that social mechanisms are based in the individual decisions of discrete humans and should thus be studied at this level (Boudon 1998, 199; Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 11ff.; León-Medina 2017, 161; Little 1998, viii)—I see no objections to studying collective actors and macro-level processes without reverting to the individual-level. As McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly argued, limiting the method to "individual-level processes … severely limit[s] our ability to interpret collective processes" (2004, 25; see also Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1149). Actors *can be* discrete human beings, and the focus of a study *can be* on how their position in a given social setting shaped a particular policy outcome, but it need not be.[4]

Concrete instantiations. As noted, an analyticist approach to PT differentiates between the abstract ideal type and the instantiations that inform it. This point can hardly be overemphasized. The description of the ideal type, like a good definition, can be short and focused. The instantiations—an instantiation being a mechanism's occurrence or manifestation in empirical reality—, however, are always contextually embedded, case specific, and often times part of a larger process. Concrete instantiations combine with their specific environments, whereby the environment (and potential other mechanisms) may either support, propel, constrain, or counteract their characteristic motion. "And", and this is an important distinction form the regularity understanding, "because mechanisms interact with the contexts in which they operate, the outcomes of the process cannot be determined a priori by knowing the type of mechanism that is at work" (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1147; also see Jackson 2014, 274). Mechanisms are "multifinal"—the same mechanism can bring about different outcomes (Guzzini 2017, 432).

Take rational decision making as mechanism. We could define the ideal type as a decision based on the collection of information, the weighing of pros and cons of identified alternatives, and deciding for the best option. Whether we take an instrumental, bounded, or value-based understanding of rationality does not matter for the example. Now, let us say that rational decision making is ubiquitous. From this, it may be intuitively clear that every concrete instantiation is different. Each instantiation involves different actors, dealing with different questions, in a different setting. Logically, then, each outcome, each final decision, will also be case specific. Rational decision making can result in ordering food for dinner, in switching to online teaching in times of a pandemic, or in abstaining from voting on a resolution in the UN Security Council. However, although the concrete "outcome[s are] significantly different", the "mechanism is essentially the same" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004, 27). "On the fundamental level of mechanisms … all are analogous" (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 21) and the different cases, despite their differences, are "analytically equivalent" (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1148). If we are interested in studying rational decision making, we could study each of these cases.

Of note is that the concrete instantiations are the empirical objects of study. To learn about a mechanism, we study its instantiations. Three related things are likely to be in focus of an empirical study.

First, the researcher would expose what the *particular instantiation* looked like. How did the typical characteristics manifest themselves in this case and how, if at all, did the mechanism's motion push the process forward? The analytical narrative should be more than a thick description. It should focus on the mechanism and its causal relevance and thus on those entities that pushed, shoved, and moved—that is, that engaged in activities. It should also explicate how those activities were relevant to the process: what did they change, bring about, or make (im)possible? Second, the researcher would study the functioning of the mechanism in its *specific context* and as part of a *specific process*. How did the socio-institutional setting in which the instantiation was embedded spur, change, or limit its typical motion? Third, a researcher would compare and contrast the instantiation to the ideal type and see if broader lessons about the mechanism and its functioning can be learned.

A hypothetical example: imagine a study on the use of a presidential veto in "Owncountry". To understand this instantiation, we have to look at the *process* of which it is part and the *socio-institutional context* in which it is embedded. Figure 25.3 provides a sketch of what such a hypothetical process, including multiple mechanisms, could look like. The process runs from the trigger—a public uprising in "Neighborland" and the immediate violent crackdown by Neighborland's authoritarian ruler—through three distinct mechanisms to the outcome—the freezing of the assets of Neighborland's leaders despite a parliamentary decision to, as always, not interfere with Neighborland's internal politics. The three identified mechanisms that conjoinedly shape the process are: "societal pressure" (Mechanism I); "parliamentary decision making" (Mechanism II); and "presidential veto and decree" (Mechanism III). The mechanisms run partly in parallel, partly in sequence, and, or at least so we may assume, what happens as part of one mechanism influences what happens in another.

Pending our research interests, we can approach this case differently. The principal investigator of a research project titled "*The (ir)rationality of presidential vetoes*" would probably zoom in on mechanism III, lay-bare how decision making functioned in this particular case, and how societal pressure shaped the decision. The conclusions would focus on what *this specific instantiation* reveals about the *mechanism proper* and its functioning in a specific context. Moreover, this instantiation is likely to be but one of multiple instantiations that will be compared and contrasted with the ultimate aim to learn about presidential vetoes more broadly. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly noted, "mechanisms … reappear in a wide variety of settings but in different sequences and combinations, hence with different collective

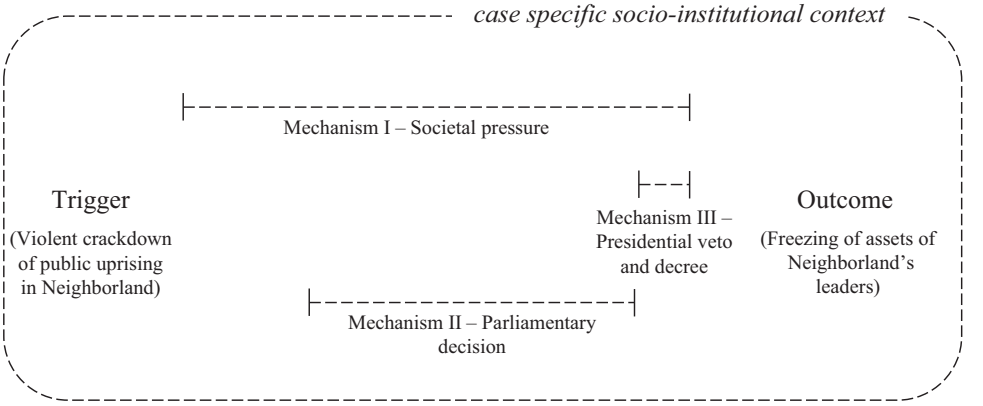

Figure 25.3 Schematic process of a hypothetical concatenation of mechanisms.

outcomes" and this invites us to study "[c]ommon properties across historically and culturally distinct settings" (2004, 23–24; see also Robinson 2017, 508). By contrasting multiple yet diverse instantiations, we can refine our understanding of the mechanism and learn about its (dis)functioning in distinct contexts.

Alternatively, a researcher may start from an empirical interest in the case: how can we explain that, after years of non-interference, Owncountry now froze all assets of the leadership of Neighborland? In this case, the researcher would study the *process* in its entirety. Either inductively, deductively, or as part of an iterative process they would uncover which mechanisms—which tools from our scientific toolbox—afford an understanding of the case. The three mechanisms would probably be of equal interest: how did Owncountry civil society come to protest the developments in Neighborland? How did parliament arrive at the decision to disregard Owncountry's civil society and continue politics as usual? And how did the president come to the alternate conclusion, veto parliament's bill, and issue a decree? The outcome of this study would be a thick, holistic explanation of the case. Yet the mechanisms, once specified, *guide* the research and the discussion of the findings. The researcher would draw on them to zoom in on causally relevant entities and activities and to show how the mechanisms combined and motioned the process forward. We would learn about the case-specific process and how this particular concatenation of mechanisms led to a particular outcome. But the study would also provide a basis to reflect on the abstract mechanisms and their typical characteristics and motions—that is, it allows us to draw broader inferences and (re)confirm, amend, or adjust our understanding of the ideal types.

Portability. Going back to the earlier given definition: a mechanism is an analytical construct that defines, in abstract terms, how a given set-up or entity transfers motion in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. This definition should be largely explained by now. Only the portability—the "over a variety of situations"—can still be differentiated from the treatment of generalizations in the regularity understanding. As I argued, understanding mechanisms as supporting regular associations is too deterministic for much of FPA. It minimalizes agency and assumes that actors, whether individual, small groups, or collective actors, will, by and large, act similarly under the same structural conditions. This assumption may be accurate enough for some research, but it is problematic for the more actor-centered and interpretivist approaches to FPA.

Understanding mechanisms as analytical constructs foregoes this problem. As analytical constructs, mechanisms can travel—they are "portable constructs" (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1159)—but their portability lies in their abstraction (Guzzini 2017, 434; Pouliot 2015, 251). On *the abstract level of mechanisms*, general features, characteristic similarities, and typical motions can be discerned, contrasted, and analyzed. On this abstract level, mechanisms travel. On *the concrete level of instantiations*, however, we are likely to find mechanisms manifest differently. On this concrete level, instantiations are integrated into distinct processes and contexts and are explicitly expected not to be the same—neither as the ideal type nor as other instantiations. This allows us to talk, simultaneously, about the "principles of portability and indeterminacy" of mechanisms (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1147). Mechanisms are portable in that we would expect the same mechanism to occur more frequently in reality. Yet, they are indeterminate in that we would expect the causally relevant characteristics to manifest and work differently in different situations, bringing about different outcomes. And it is exactly the acknowledgment of the indeterminacy of mechanisms on the one hand, and the contextual embeddedness of their instantiations on the other, that opens space for *idiosyncrasy*, *agency,* and *contingency* in analyticist PT.

In short, the outcome a mechanism produces cannot be determined *a priori*. Much depends on the creativity and agency of the actors involved as well as on the socio-institutional context in which it is embedded and the presence of other mechanisms that may allow, support, or counteract a mechanism's typical motion. This, perhaps, is what most distinguishes an analyticist approach from the regularity understanding. Where regularity-oriented researchers would have strong expectations about outcomes based on established or hypothesized scope conditions, analyticists would say they may know the *typical motions* of a mechanism but that they cannot know, in advance, how those motions did or will manifest themselves (if at all) in a particular instantiation. However, I believe that to be a strength of analyticist PT: by empirically studying contextually embedded instantiations, it *captures the idiosyncratic nature of cases* and encourages in-depth investigations; and by abstracting from the concrete instantiations more general lessons about the mechanism(s) proper, it *refines the conceptual tools* through which we approach and understand the world. Analyticist PT allows for variation and agency on the case level, while advancing our knowledge and understanding of the world by, bit by bit, explicating the different mechanisms that function in it on a more conceptual, abstract level.

In what follows, I explicate one such mechanism. In relation to state employment of Private Military and Security Contractors (PMSCs), I look at how narrative, and more particularly *discursive interventions*, shapes (produces) the boundaries of foreign policy. This means I zoom in on a mechanism that is itself part of a broader and ongoing process. A mechanism, moreover, that I hold to be ubiquitous: narrative and discursive interventions shape foreign policy throughout. Yet, each instantiation of the mechanisms will likely be different as narrative and discourse are always situated and shaped by the local socio-historical context in which they are embedded.

Denmark and the Decision not to Employ Private Military and Security Contractors

In this section, I show what understanding mechanisms as analytical constructs means for more actor-centered and interpretivist approaches to FPA. Personally, I conduct interpretivist research focusing on the narrative basis of foreign policy (see also Oppermann and Spencer in this volume). In what follows, I first elaborate the mechanism proper, I then show how this mechanism can be used to study a concrete instantiation, and I close by discussing the mechanism's portability.

The mechanism. The mechanism I present (based on what was an iterative and prolonged research process) is a double-barreled gun. It produces, simultaneously, two interrelated outcomes: a policy outcome and an identity outcome. The argument is that foreign policy making is based in *narratives*, in "the total collection of stories that we tell and that are told about us" (Ringmar 1996, 452; see also Subotić 2016, 612f.). It is essentially a mechanism of *justification* (Jackson 2006, 24). Based in the rhetorical tools and the understandings of reality that are available to them, actors, in justifying their positions, interpretations, and policy suggestions, narrate the world around them. They give meaning to other actors, events, and objects and they collectively demarcate what can be done in name of the *self*—the state (e.g., Browning 2008, 14; Doty 1993, 303; Guzzini 2012, 53; Jackson 2006, 24; Somers 1994, 614; Weldes 1996, 280). In this case, I am interested in how, by positioning (narrating) the self in relation to PMSCs, a state's collective identity and plausible courses of action, and therewith foreign policy, are simultaneously defined and plotted. The mechanism thus regards the narrative constitution of identity and foreign policy and the instantiation I address is the

case of Denmark, 2001–2013.[5] Empirically, I draw on a mixture of parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, semi-structured interviews, government policy documents, statements by officials, think tank publications, and earlier scholarly work to show that the Danish narrative about PMSCs is simultaneously a narrative about Denmark and about the boundaries of foreign policy.

The instantiation. In Denmark, the use of PMSCs was, and is, controversial. The Danish Defense approached PMSCs with constraint and outsourcing remained limited (van Meegdenburg 2019, 30). This, despite the fact that commonly referenced post-Cold War functional pressures (van Meegdenburg 2015, 327ff.), also affected the Danish Defense (Mandrup 2013, 44). How can we explain this? Overall, the public debate on PMSCs in Denmark is marked by a taken-for-granted negativity—as if it is obvious that PMSCs should not be employed. The way PMSCs are narrated defines Denmark as a country that *does not do that* and makes policy suggestions to employ PMSCs difficult to rhetorically sustain and justify. In this case, the *narrators* (politicians and civil servants, but also journalists, pundits, ministries, and NGOs) are the entities and the activity they engage in is uttering of a discursive intervention. The outcome of interest is the parallel constitution of a state identity and foreign policy.

For instance, in June 2005, during a debate on the "In Larger Freedom" reform-plan for the United Nations, PMSCs came up (Folketinget 2005a). The exchange was between members of parliament Margrethe Vestager (*Radikale Venstre*, Danish Social Liberal Party, centrist) and Troels Lund Poulsen (*Venstre*, Denmark's Liberal Party, center-right). In an earlier position paper, the *Radikale Venstre* (RV) included the following suggestion: "Give the UN the opportunity—in acute cases where Member States fail—to engage (recognized) private military companies (PMCs) in peace operations until the regional organizations and the UN itself have the capacity to solve the peacekeeping/creative tasks" (Radikale Venstre 2003). During the debate, Poulsen referred to this position paper and asked Vestager why one would engage PMSCs; "would it not be better to make sure that it is countries that contribute"? Vestager's reply has three interesting components: (1) she stresses that "it is clear […] that the absolute best thing is that it is the countries that take responsibility […]. There can be no doubt about that"; (2) she acknowledges "this is a very controversial proposal"; and (3) she points out that much needs to pass before the option would be considered. Poulsen—who switches to calling PMSCs mercenaries ("*lejesoldater*")—subsequently asks Vestager what, then, would be examples of "reputable companies that have mercenaries"? Vestager answers she has no concrete examples and stresses, instead, that RV sees this as an emergency option when "big and principled things are at stake, such as genocide", and all other options have been exhausted. The conversation goes on for a bit. In reply to Kristian Pihl Lorentzen (also *Venstre*), Vestager notes that "naturally" democratic control over the execution of force must be ensured, but ends thereafter. The suggestion to explore PMSCs as an emergency option for the UN is not included in the final vote (Folketinget 2005b).

This exchange is not about Danish employment of PMSCs but about giving the UN the right to do so in extreme cases. However, the narrators do position Denmark in relation to PMSCs, leading to a number of interesting observations. For one, it may be noted that Poulsen switches to calling PMSCs "*lejesoldater*"—mercenaries. Like in English, this term has a more negative connotation but it is regularly used to refer to PMSCs (e.g., Høi 2007; Sangild 2009). Second, Vestager replies defensively and stresses the RVs agreement with shared values and priorities: states are—"naturally", "of course", "it is clear", "there can be no doubt about that"—the "preferred means of conflict resolution". And she notes the RV is aware the proposal is "very controversial". Lastly, as Vestager also brings up, it is noteworthy

that Poulsen problematized this particular point from a document that contains 55 concrete suggestions—it clearly caught Poulsen's attention.

In the period under investigation, this was the only parliamentary exchange on the topic. Newspapers devoted some space to background stories—notably on Blackwater in the light of scandals and often referring to them as *lejesoldater*—but direct employment was not discussed. As my interviewees noted: "Well, we simply did not consider, I think, using [PMSCs] for anything" (Knudsen, interview).[6] "No one has talked about, debated, or even considered using defense contractors for, for instance, guard service … in Afghanistan. We don't do that" (Petersen, interview).[7] "We don't think like that" (Malm, interview).[8] Interviews, in this type of research, may be second-best sources because they do not probe the narrative itself but the interviewees' reflections on the practices and understandings that informed decisions (Pouliot 2007, 370). However, given triangulation, they can offer valuable insights. For one, Jes Rynkeby Knudsen explicated what remained implicit in the parliamentary debate in 2005. Reflecting on the "political view", he noted that "Denmark is clearly very cognizant of the fact that the monopoly on the use of force is a state monopoly … [it] is a state prerogative" (interview). Moreover, it is interesting to note that Rasmus Helveg Petersen and Major Kim Malm drew on an implicit understanding of "we"—Denmark—whereby that "we" explains why PMSCs are not employed: "we", because of who we are, because of what we stand for, "don't do that". As Nina Tannenwald argued, it is noteworthy when a particular norm (or taboo) is "a shared but 'unspoken' assumption of decisions makers" and when the justification for non-action simply notes that "because of who we are […] 'we just don't do things like this'" (1999, 440).

So what does the above tell us in terms of the mechanism I am interested in? How does Denmark, in narrating PMSCs and the Danish relation to PMSCs, (re-)produce, simultaneously, a particular identity and foreign policy? First, by referring to PMSCs as mercenaries an implicit sense of illegitimacy is contained in the debate. The use of the term (re-)establishes how Denmark thinks about and relates to PMSCs. At the same time, it demarcates a policy space. Poulsen shows this by asking which would be examples of "reputable companies that have mercenaries"? It becomes a contradiction in terms. Similarly, the questions and answers largely reproduce PMSCs as controversial actors: by saying the proposal is "very controversial", its controversiality is (re-)established. Overall, Denmark is narrated as a country that holds to the primacy of states, where PMSCs are controversial, and where employing PMSCs-cum-mercenaries is a rhetorical contradiction.

To be sure, this application zooms in on a specific instantiation of the mechanism. Earlier, however, I argued mechanisms are generally part of a larger process, often including multiple mechanisms. Two short observations in relation to that. First, other mechanisms were implicitly present. The newspaper articles referred to, for example, are part of the public narrative. Yet, the selection of "newsworthy stories" is itself a distinct mechanism. This mechanism runs partly in parallel, partly in sequence to the foreign policy narratives, and what happens as part of one mechanism influences what happens in the other—newspaper articles may influence parliamentary debates and debates may shape what is considered newsworthy. Therefore, even when not in focus, other mechanisms are generally present and (co-)shape what happens in the mechanism of interest. Whether those other mechanisms can and should be explicated depends on the interests and expertise of the researcher. Second, the way I understand it, foreign policy making is best conceived as an *ongoing* process revolving around continuous collective narratives that are temporarily "fixed" or "stabilized" in action—in policy outcomes (Bucher and Jasper 2017, 393; Jackson 2006, 15). As such, what we are dealing with is a sequence of instantiations of, essentially, the same mechanism.

Clearly, the above offers only a snapshot. Where space allows, we would want to display the collective narrative in full, tap into a multiplicity of sources and discursive interventions to show how a narrative reproduces or contests a given relation, and how that narrative, inherently and simultaneously, (re-)produces a space for legitimate policy and sets forth a particular understanding of the collective self. For now, I hope the above offers a sufficient illustration.

Portability. It should not come as a surprise when I say the above is but one instantiation of a mechanism that occurs frequently in reality. Although not explicitly conceptualized this way by all (but see Jackson 2006; Robinson 2017), different instantiations of this mechanism can be found throughout the FPA literature—including studies from the 1990s until today; studies focusing on countries from the North, East, South, and West; and studies focusing on the foreign policies of big and small states (Bacik and Afacan 2013; Browning 2008; Bucher and Jasper 2017; Campbell 1992; Commuri 2010; Crawford 2002; Fofanova and Morozov 2013; Guzzini 2012; Hopf 2002; Jackson 2006; Krebs 2015; Ostermann 2019; Ringmar 1996b; Robinson 2017; Stengel 2020; Subotić 2016; Weldes 1996; Zehfuss 2001). Despite their differences, the above studies all argue that it is in and through narrative that a state's collective identity is defined and courses of action are plotted. The outcomes are wildly different: the USA as innocent and provoked to self-defense by the Soviet Union (Weldes 1996); Serbia as historically victimized and incomplete without Kosovo (Subotić 2016); and India as shifting between more secular and religious self-understandings and a less or more antagonistic foreign policy (Commuri 2010). Yet, the mechanisms, the underlying motions, are essentially the same: in justifying policies, positions, and interpretations, actors (re-)produce both a state's identity and delimit the space for action. As such, the abstract mechanism is portable. We can apply this understanding of foreign policy narratives to contrast and compare different cases. The concrete instantiations, the concrete narratives and the concrete identities and foreign policies they produce, however, are always contextually embedded and can be understood only in their specific contexts.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that FPA that takes actors' interpretations, (mis)calculations, understandings, assessments, meaning-making, emotions, creativity, or spontaneity seriously—regardless of whether it is also interpretivist—would run into logical problems with the structural conditions that underpin generalizations in the regularity understanding of PT. Understanding mechanisms as analytical constructs foregoes these problems. Following an analyticist understanding, mechanisms are *portable* but *indeterminate* and therewith create space for *agency* and *contingency*. In short, a mechanism's abstract and ideal-typical motions are general and portable—they can be used to compare and contrast different instantiations across a multitude of case—, but its concrete manifestations, especially when shaped by human activity, are instantiation specific and indeterminate. Variation in outcomes does not prove a mechanism wrong, it simply shows that mechanisms can manifest differently in different contexts.

In fact, one of the major benefits of the analyticist approach is that it invites the researcher to truly study a case holistically and include in their final account all aspects, big and small, that were deemed causally relevant without compromising the portability of the mechanism. This is possible because the analyticist approach makes a clear distinction between the concrete and contextualized instantiations on the one hand, and the conceptual, theoretical,

and ideal-typical mechanism that is derived from these instantiations on the other. This distinction dissolves the trade-off between inclusive and parsimonious accounts that haunts generalizations in the regularity understanding. It makes it possible to conduct both in-depth, thick, qualitative, situated, and, when wanted, interpretivist work *and* to abstract from that work elegant conclusions that may inform future research and refine our understanding of the workings of one or more of the mechanisms that shapes our world.

At the same time, this also constitutes a challenge. Although the implications of the differences between the regularity understanding and an analyticist approach are substantial, the actual differences are subtle. Especially since causal language can be employed, I would advise those who conduct analyticist PT to avoid using terms common to the regularity understanding. Instead of talking about scope, contextual, or structural *conditions* it would be better to talk about the (socio-institutional) *context* or, perhaps, the contextual *embeddedness* or *situatedness* of concrete instantiations. *Generalizability* can be named *portability*. When referring to a single empirical manifestation of the mechanism a *case* would be an *instantiation*. And a *causal mechanism* probably can be best qualified as the *abstract mechanism*, the *ideal-typified mechanism*, or, as I did, the *mechanism proper*. Of course, variations on this theme are possible but making a clear distinction in terminology would remind the reader of the distinctions in meaning—distinctions that are not, I like to emphasize, stylistic. Terms such as "causal mechanisms", "generalizability", and "scope conditions" come with pre-established meanings and those meanings are strongly informed by the (dominant) regularity understanding of PT. As such, I fear that lest terminology is clearly distinguished, well-explained, and used carefully and consistently, the analyticist process tracer may be misunderstood and perceived as incoherent.

In all, the above is not to say that *all* PT should follow an analyticist approach, or that PT that follows a regularity understanding is less valuable or insightful. To the contrary, it is simply to say that more actor-centered and interpretivist approaches to FPA, and social science in general, may benefit from rethinking what mechanisms are and how they inform our understanding of processes and outcomes.

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Notes

1 "Idiosyncratic" means specific, unique, or singular and the term "instantiation" refers to a discrete occurrence of the mechanism in reality—that is, an instantiation is a "case of" the mechanism.
2 See Beach and Pedersen (2019, 22ff.) for a discussion of ontological determinism in the regularity understanding.
3 I will use these two terms, "analytical construct" and "ideal type", synonymously.
4 Likewise, a study can assume actor rationality (thin or otherwise) and focus on path dependencies or other theoretical notions, but making these "the fundamental logic of action behind all social mechanisms" (Bengtsson and Hertting 2014, 714) unnecessarily essentializes human action and imports theory into a discussion about method.
5 These are the years Denmark was most actively involved in Afghanistan and Iraq.
6 Jes Rynkeby Knudsen, then Director of the Danish Military Manual on international law, interview by author, Copenhagen, 12.09.2012.

7 Rasmus Helveg Petersen, then defense spokesperson for the Radikale Venstre, interview by author, Copenhagen, 12.04.2012.
8 Major Kim Malm, then Finance and Budget Department of the Ministry of Defense, interview by author, Copenhagen, 12.11.2012.

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