For Paul and Don,

I want to start (hopefully not too belatedly) the process of interacting with you both about your interesting papers. The idea as I understand it is to give you a sense of where I’m going so you can respond most thoughtfully and productively, and also to help keep me from making completely inaccurate inferences about, and mischaracterizations of, your work! So let me start with a few general thoughts about how I understand the general perspective of cognitive psychology relevant to identity studies: I’d like to get your reactions as to whether my observations are factually correct or not. Then, I’ll review each of your papers – I though it made sense to do this together since you raise so many similar issues (and you probably know each other’s work well). Finally I’ll offer some general thoughts about how these approaches fit together and what else they might usefully address.

The way I understand it, cognitive psychology reflects a number of basic assumptions about the nature of social reality and how that reality is apprehended. One such assumption concerns the primary role of physical (brain) structure in shaping perceptions and complex conceptualizations (“problem representations”). Accordingly, perception is viewed as a product of certain coping mechanisms which arise from the inherent problem of human information processing: i.e., the virtually infinite range of stimuli coupled with the finite capacity of neural circuitry and consciousness. Specific representations of a given stimulus are therefore understood by cognitive psychologists to reflect prior understandings and (accordingly) selective attention to certain aspects of that stimulus. Perhaps equally important is the prevailing (scientific-positivist-experimental) epistemology for studying thought and decision-making processes, as a result of which streams of ideas are broken down analytically into discrete parts or subsets.

These observations underscore the distinctions between cognitive psychological and constructivist-discursive theoretical approaches to identity. Most importantly, constructivist methodology assumes that narratives and underlying discursive formations are not only socially situated but continually reproduced in ways that reflect social, but not physical, constraints. In particular, constructivists regard discursive formations as being comprised of integrated sets of ideas that fundamentally cohere -- and are apprehended -- as wholes and within socially reinforcing structures. Perceptions and social representations are thus (perhaps naively) assumed to reflect attitudes and interpretations of the social world, rather than the internal physical properties of the brain. For this reason constructivists feel justified in inquiring into macrolevel linkages among groups of ideas. In contrast, cognitive psychologists regard sets of ideas as fundamentally disaggregated in the process of perception. They are therefore are inclined to consider microlevel mechanisms first, and to regard conceptual wholes as arising — perhaps in distorted ways — as the sum of their parts.

My personal feeling is that, as a result of these differences, cognitive and constructivist approaches attend to distinct analytical questions: constructivism attempts to explain why and what beliefs are intersubjectively held, while cold cognitive approaches show how -- but not why or what -- beliefs are held. In
suggesting this, incidentally, I do not mean to imply that constructivism’s agenda ought to somehow take precedence. I would argue instead that these different analytical orientations are each capable of illuminating significant issues, and that while occasionally at odds with one another they are also complementary, as Paul argues (although perhaps in some different ways).

OK, that’s where I’m coming from; I’d appreciate your general reactions. Now I’ll address your papers, and in doing so I’ll come back to the above observations and the basic theoretical and methodological issues they raise.

**Paul Kowert**
Incidentally I’m looking forward to seeing you, Paul -- it’s been a while. I remember you as a brilliant and energetic junior scholar, so I’ve been pleased but not surprised to see you do well. I also remember you as being extraordinarily open-minded, something which I think your integrative paper reflects.

The thrust of your paper, as I read it, is that constructivism cannot explain why particular categories of identity emerge, and that cognitive theory can be helpful in this respect. In particular, cognitive psychology explains identity formation by showing how intrinsic constraints on information processing lead to in-group and out-group categorization. Furthermore, these categorizations themselves -- again due to cold cognitive processing biases -- lead to reinforcing perceptions, including an exaggeration of intergroup differences.

Assuming that I’m right so far, then on a purely theoretical level I would observe, first, that MGP postulates are devoid of social context. (Not a complaint, just an observation.) Instead, MGP assumes that categories arise from strictly physical information processing mechanisms. This has crucial *epistemological* implications, because it allows the researcher to investigate ostensibly atomized individuals with tabula rasa assumptions. For example, MGP’s insights are based on the behavior of experimental subjects who categorize groups, and who are assumed do so by means of the same, fundamentally cognitive processes that operate in the real social world. Again, the key underlying assumption is that subjects can be rendered essentially asocial for the purpose of experimental study. and here is where I personally have reservations. Is it valid to extrapolate from cognitive rules of thumb which become evident in the course of discrete operations performed under laboratory conditions? The same concerns apply to the concept of “miserliness” as a built-in criterion for information processing relevant to decision making. Although it may have predictive utility for concrete problem-solving in laboratory settings, how much does it tell us about identity formation? For example, how convincing is miserliness as a fundamental constraint on social categorization and identification in view of the tremendous complexity of legal, ideological, or cosmological systems of thought?

On the other hand MGP theory may tell us something important insofar as it is able to explain the tendency, on an individual level, for social categorization and resulting intergroup conflict. It may even be that this perspective provides some real purchase for explaining complex social constructions (I will return to this issue
after reviewing essentially similar questions raised in Sylvan’s work). But you obviously find it dubious to make the move directly from MGP to social constructions, as your discussion of Mercer reveals. The problem that you pose, then, is how to get from individual cognitive tendencies to shared social representations. And here is where you bring in constructivism: first, you suggest that this approach can augment cognitive theory by supplying the directionality of identity formation: national identities naturally result from social interaction. Second, constructivism emphasizes the role of language in identity formation, while cognitive psychology shows reveals systematic biases in language processing; the result is potentially predictable patterns of distorted identity formation.

Again assuming I’m reading you right, I have mixed reactions. On the one hand I appreciate what I think you’re striving for, which looks to me like a way of linking instruction rules for identity formation with psychological processes, and showing how the two might interact. On the other hand the practical application is unconvincing to me. As you point out, constructivism does insist that people construct broad social (national) identities. But while that’s true, I don’t find the assertion helpful for fashioning an integrated theory of identity formation, since it is either purely descriptive or tautological (people do this because that’s what people do). It seems to me that the inability to explain why groups create certain highly specific representations remains a major shortcoming of constructivist theory, so that simply coopting this approach’s assumptions doesn’t really move your argument along (although it may propitiate constructivists!).

Ditto the role of language: I’m personally unimpressed by the argument that language exerts tight constraints over communication and conceptualization. That is, rather than seeing language as narrowly determining representations through its internal linguistic-grammatical structures, I regard language as enabling and evocative, or allowing a fairly wide scope of conceptual outcomes depending on an individual’s complex history and personality makeup. Which in fact gets to the issue of nomothetic and idiopathic processes in cognitive psych theory: my own sense is that nomothetic generalizations apply only to *very* broad tendencies, while much of what needs to be explained – certainly with regard to individual decision-maker’s decisions – requires a more qualified, personal account. It seems to me that the intermediate range of explanations is most important and promising for the marriage of cognitive and constructivist theories: fairly specific, bounded domains of interpretation, decision-making and action (patterns of foreign policymaking across analytical communities). Which is where constructivism stakes its most persuasive claims in my view: the idea that discursive tropes and synthetic narratives get socially reproduced and shape the limits of conceivability, as well as providing more specific orientations regarding self and Others (i.e., appropriate action).

This raises a key point that needs to be discussed: the relationship between identity and action. In your case study, agency would seem to figure importantly inasmuch as Eden’s psychology appears to drive key diplomatic decisions (you claim that Eden et al’s changed understanding of Egyptian identity “depended heavily on the behavior of political agents”). And agency seems to me an area in which cognitive psychology might make an important contribution (I’ll say more about that also).
But I am not sure whether we can reasonably conclude that Eden exercised significant agency. He is clearly at the center of something diplomatically significant, and he does reach decisions which appear to be associated with major political developments. Obviously decisions don’t happen without individuals making them, or at least enacting them. But to my mind this doesn’t add up to “agency” in the sense of conscious action that autonomously contributes to outcomes. The issue here, for me, is whether Eden stamped the resulting policy with anything personal. If not, and if indeed the combination of prevailing imagery and MGP biases produced a roughly predictable outcome, then in what way is Eden’s involvement truly agential?

A significant methodological issue, which has implications for interpretation, is how we can gauge changes in identity. You argue that relevant in-group and out-group identities became “more salient” to Eden over the course of the crisis. And to be sure, his imagery does clearly seem to become polarized. But what about baseline social attitudes towards Egypt: is it really true that “in British eyes, the image of Egypt and its leader changed”? What about concurrent social discourse relevant to Egypt and to Britain’s national identity? (This actually does seem implicated, as your reference to an article in the London Times reveals.)

To some extent my misgivings may relate to the inherent limitations of relying on archival evidence. But I suspect that it is linked to divergent philosophical assumptions, many of which are pertinent to issues raised in Don Sylvan’s work.

**Don Sylvan**

Don, we haven’t met but I’ve been aware of your interesting work for quite some time, and I thought these papers were each unusually provocative and creative.

The paper you wrote with Nadler sets up an intriguing hypothesized relationship between victimization, commitment, and inter-group empathy. Rather than reviewing the argument and the specific findings, I’d like to focus on a crucial area of disagreement between us about methods and subjects, which I think reflects a larger substantive disagreement about the nature of identity and the “appropriate” analytical locus of mental constructs.

The problem for me with this study is that the methodology employed does not allow you to investigate the role of victimization (or commitment) AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, since these identities and associated feelings are *supplied* to experimental subjects. This, by design, removes the social discursive context from specific identities, which therefore become essentially constellations of abstract ideas, divorced from what we might conjecture to be connected meanings, norms, and alternative identities. As a result, when I read about subjects’ responses to the questions you pose, my assumption is that their answers are best understood as reflecting a process of logical inference (“based on what I’ve read, someone believing this would be most likely to say XYZ”) rather than a process of (presumably emotionally laden) identification. Of course, the follow up study you propose with actual Israelis and Palestinians might well remove these objections; I don’t know how you’re designing that study but at least it would engage a fully
discursive context and, presumably, emotionally vivid identities.

In the outline of the paper with Horowitz, I am absolutely fascinated by your proposed study of musical tastes and attitudes toward Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. Since the study outline is so concise I have more questions than comments. I again want to know about social discursive context, as well as the meanings attached to specific musical genres. Do those you categorize as representatives of the out-group (Mizrahi Jews) understand the music they perform as Muslim, Arab, or Palestinian? And if so, what does that mean to them? What does it mean in the societies or more narrow communities in which they live? Is the act of representing music of the “other” – assuming that’s how it’s construed – itself a conscious political statement, or expression of empathy and co-identification? Ditto perceptions of Palestinian Arabs in this regard: do they understand the music as “theirs,” and does this carry any particular normative implications?

The references to related literatures, as well as the suggested significance of cultural brokers, is very interesting to me (and right up my research alley), but obviously that’s all I can say at this point without seeing more....

Finally, on your paper “Reflecting on the Problem of Problem Representation.” This was also hard for me to react to critically because many of the chapters were described in such a concise way that it was hard to pick up their flavor or really to understand their contribution (this isn’t meant as a criticism though, because I’m sure this would not be a problem if one had already read the chapters). Still, I am struck by the assumption – which is nicely and clearly articulated – that information processing approaches make in interpreting representations: that is, representations are treated as being “instrumental to the goals of political actors.” In other words, as I understand it, information is processed within the framework established by the decision maker’s worldview – subject to constraints imposed by inherent physical limitations – so as to facilitate a rational strategic response conducive to the achievement of certain (hierarchically ordered) goals. While I don’t find this problematic, it does again illustrate the differences in analytical focus between cognitive psychologists and constructivists. The question that I think most constructivists would raise here is the role of antecedent beliefs in determining not only goals but also the means for achieving them. In other words, to what extent does the social construction of goals themselves, along with their embedded meanings and underlying logics of conceivability and appropriateness, shape the ensuing representations? Of course, once the scope of conceivable goals and their social derivation is controlled for, it appears as though the available information -- and the way in which such information is serially processed -- is the key factor in determining decision outcomes. Constructivist approaches would push the focus of inquiry back to the larger social and ideational context. The question is what trade-offs inhere in these different approaches.

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One trade-off (and now I come back to the observations I made at the start) seems to me to involve analytical determinations of the possible sources of change.
Discursive approaches regard representations as emerging largely outside of individual actors. Thus, representations are viewed as being embedded in broad narratives and linked to more specific formations. Through a process of role taking and interaction an actor incorporates and continually reproduces his/her own as well as prevailing social constructions. Probably for these reasons, it seems to me that socialization tends to be stressed more so than agency in constructivist scholarship.

I need to qualify this statement immediately: while Onuf and others insist on the scope of actor determination of specific categories, in practice, as I read the field, such accounts are not only under-represented but also under-theorized. Although structurationist theory insists on the mutual constitution of actors and identities, in so much of the available scholarship actors appear already identified and thereby constrained, leading to a certain theoretical circularity (which Wendt tries to escape by postulating an artificial “starting point A” between ontologically primitive actors). On the other hand contestation is widely acknowledged to provide a potential basis for change, as is agential virtuosity (incidentally Rod Hall’s work is important in demonstrating this empirically).

The above caveat notwithstanding, cognitive approaches would seem on the whole to imply a greater emphasis on agency, insofar as individual decisions are highlighted and dissected (again, Paul’s chapter does this very explicitly). I’ve already raised a specific question about this in the context of Paul’s historical case, but here I’d like to address it more generally. To my way of thinking the cognitivist perspective on agency is a rather truncated one: while representations and subsequent decisions form within an individual actor’s mind, the information processing operations that anterior to them are seen to be essentially outside the conscious control of the actor. This suggests significant limits to actual freedom of action. Nevertheless, pursuant to such information processing, actors are assumed by cognitivists to possess an autonomous rational capacity for strategic choice.

While the distinctions I am drawing are neither iron-clad nor necessary – after all, constructivists are epistemologically capable of exploring agential change, and cognitive psychologists are epistemologically capable of considering the feedback between proposed decisions and prevailing social beliefs – what I’m suggesting is that different theoretical orientations tend in practice to highlight certain questions and attract certain modes of inquiry, while relatively obscuring others.

In a sense the ultimate origin of representations is an unanswerable question. Nevertheless, it gets at a basic assumption made by constructivists, regarding the socially embedded nature of thought and action. In contrast, one key contribution of cognitive psychology for grasping sociality may be that it highlights the manner and extent to which “nomothetic” or stably applicable “biases” in information processing at the individual level may actually produce aggregate social outcomes. Those of us who embrace constructivist approaches over the essentiality of the social, per se, but do we really have any basis for privileging the social in ontological terms? It may be that psychological approaches are capable of illuminating some key sources of social cohesion precisely by revealing the generativity of individual-level cognitive processes. While such processes remain theoretically underspecified, there is no
reason why they could not be developed more fully.

In any case, thinking about differences in terms of analytical trade-offs (which are presumably zero-sum) may not always be helpful. It seems to me that you are correct in saying that cognitive psychological and discursive approaches may be complementary at times, insofar as they illuminate different aspects of problem representation. In contrast to the above discussion of different perspectives on change, in which constructivist and cognitive approaches appear somewhat at odds, I would suggest that the complementarity between constructivist and cognitive approaches are most apparent in terms of the insights they offer regarding stability.

To repeat a point I’ve already made, it seems to me that cognitive psychological approaches accept – or do not problematize – the central characteristics of the prevailing worldview within which decisions are made. Rather, the intention is to explore the process whereby decisions are made within a given context. Discursive approaches, on the other hand, explicitly problematize context by exploring the nature of ideas and arguments that constitute the prevailing (and perhaps alternate or subaltern) worldview. The point of such exploration is to uncover relationships between ostensibly fundamental assumptions, causal beliefs, norms, and identities, in order to understand how specific decision processes become possible to begin with. By not attending to these questions, and by instead examining specific goal-oriented processes and subsequent actions which take the underlying context for granted, cognitive psychological approaches shed light on the mechanisms of social reproduction. Indeed, this is often what such research manifestly sets out to explain: why information searches are bounded and internally circumscribed; why simplifying short-cuts are taken, why satisficing outcomes are sought and accepted; why information processing reaffirms expectations instead of challenging them. In these ways cognitive psych helps explain why socialization tends to predominate, and why social and discursive contexts tend to remain relatively stable.

Discursive approaches do – as you say – explore how “decision makers use language to communicate, and thereby define the nature of the issues with which they are dealing.” But they do so by showing how decision makers and their definitions are embedded in broader frameworks of meaning that are reproduced in social contexts, thereby calling attention not only to linguistic conventions, but also to the interpersonal roles and expectations, network relations, and institutional patterns that tend to perpetuate identities and specific social constructions. Here it seems to me that discursive and cognitive approaches can complement one another by showing how physical/mental and social constraints produce mutually reinforcing tendencies for stability in prevailing representations.

Last thing: I have some questions for you both about the role of emotions (something I’m thinking about), given the fact that you both favor cold cognitive approaches. Can we really understand, say, Eden’s polarized identity formation and exaggeratedly negative dispositional attributions concerning Nasser without exploring his own (emotional) psychology? Or victimization attitudes among Arabs and Israelis? Are cold and hot cognitive processes interchangeable, or is one more important than the other under certain conditions? For example, in Paul’s chapter,
how do we know that increased salience *per se* was responsible for Eden’s skewed attributions? In other words, how do we know that the increased salience of these specific identities wasn’t merely a reflection of deeper animosities that were becoming pronounced for other psychological reasons? Doesn’t this raise the distinction between cold cognitive as opposed to hot affective or even psychodynamic processes? Does this matter? Or does it matter less in social contexts than in individual ones?