**Identity and Psychology**  
**Discussant comments for Paul Kowert and Donald Sylvan**  
**By Karin Fierke**

Both of these analyses deal with the psychology of self-other categorizations, a very important and largely unexplored terrain in IR. Both claim to be constructivist. Each represents a different point of departure and type of analysis. The types of issues raised by each relate to how we understand the relationship between language and individual or collective psychology. This is an undertheorized area within IR and therefore, while I found points of criticism in both, each are making an important contribution to the further development of this issue.

**Paul Kowert**

Kowert focuses on the problem of collective action and how nation states composed of citizens whose interests might diverge can choose coherent policies. This is also explored in terms of the relationship between this internal process and interstate cooperation or conflict. He presents a critique of the neorealist and neoliberal treatment of the state as an individual. This is contrasted with the constructivist emphasis on language and change. Both the neo’s and constructivists share an emphasis on structure as the primary constraint, whether physical or intersubjective, respectively, but they don’t emphasize how behavior within structure shapes identity. Kowert further discusses the relationship between constructivism and cognitive psychology. It was at this point that this very clear analysis became a bit murky. Kowert states that ‘for language to function there must be categories. But it is up to agents to determine categories.’ This sounds like agents are creating categories of language rather than being embedded in a context where the range
of categories available to them in any case is already a part of their language. This is reinforced in the move to cognitive psychology, where the cognition is prior to the division into self and others. What is the meaning of invention here, i.e. is it that people will invent categories where they don’t exist? What is the basis for such invention other than forms of categorization that are already meaningful to them. For instance, the categorization of Nassar as 'like Hitler’ was less invention than ascription, i.e. of making one context or actor meaningful by reference to another that already has meaning, and which, not incidentally, evokes an immediate emotional reaction and ascribes value to action.

The discussion of MGP similarly assumes the individual engages in a rational process of deciding whether to belong to a group. There is a problematic separation of perception and language, which suggests the perception exists prior to the choice of language. I would suggest the relationship is more organic. On the one hand, perceptions of in group and out group identity are a part of socialization such that distinctions between membership within in and out groups of Arabs and Jews are prior to any individual. Second, akin to the Nassar example, in a case of interaction for the first time, where uncertainty exists, pre-existing meanings are the ground on which individual perceptions are formed, by identifying a family resemblance between the available information about the other and some other type (see Logics of Force and Dialogue). Any causal attribution (e.g. if Hitler, then evil) is dependent on the framework of meaning, which blocks out the ability to perceive complexity, thus contributing to attribution error.

This problem is also evident in the discussion of the leap from individual to nation. The author says that the relationship is one of language translating individual bias
into international relations. Agents on all levels are made meaningful because individuals confer identity on themselves and on the institutions that represent them. It would seem the relationship should be reversed. The author’s formulation separates the individual from the context and ignores the role of a pre-existing language in forming the boundaries and possibilities for such choice. Without putting the language first it is difficult to make the link between individual and collective. This weakness is evident in the case study, since the analysis remains at the level of individual leaders and thus doesn’t really address the question posed at the beginning of the text, which is one about the relationship between individual and collective identity. I would argue that language is what makes this link possible rather than providing a means of translation between individual perceptions. The latter suggests that perceptions somehow exist prior to language and language is applied as a label to give these meaning. Instead, the two are inseparable. The individual is socialized into a culture or a society where part of the socialization, of learning how to perceive, is learning a language. This does not eliminate choice, but it does restrict it.

It would also be quite interesting to expand on the relationship between emotion and power or the role of each. Questions of emotion and power lurk in the background without specific elaboration. What was the emotional role of the Hitler analogy, and how did this contribute to the construction of power? To what extent did the ascription of identity, particularly to Nassar fit within a hierarchy of attributions, which defined what certain types of actors can and cannot do. I am reminded of a recent reference by a news commentator to the downfall of Saddam from grace with the invasion of Kuwait, who
stated that Saddam suddenly became an upstart Middle East leader who had overstepped the line and had to be put in his place. What has the power to name whom?

**Sylvan and Nader**

The question of the role of victimhood and how options get specified is an important one. The point that the representation sets the stage for the selection of options is as well. Victimhood, in a situation of conflict is an important part of identity and action in this respect. While this in and of itself is consistent with a constructivist approach, there could be some further elaboration of the role of constructivism in the analysis itself. The point about leader manipulation is well taken. I wonder however whether the degree of malleability isn’t a function of the status of a conflict. In Yugoslavia, for instance, the manipulation by Milosevic, prior to the outbreak of violent conflict, fanned the flames, and in this sense more directly contributed to the creation of actual victims than in the case of say, Palestine-Israel, where the production of actual victims has been constant over time. However, even in the case of Milosevic, the prior condition of this manipulation was the existence of Serb anger and feelings of victimization in Kosovo, as well as cultural stories of defeat at the hands of the Ottomans.

While feelings of victimization diminish the ability to empathize, I question the language of inducing feelings of victimization. The language of inducement and representation suggest the creation of feelings that would not be there without the inducement, which is quite different than the message communicated in the quote from Rowhaven and Ben Tal (1998), that the groups bring these feelings to the conflict or are preoccupied with their own experience. This is to say that feelings of victimhood can be
fundamental to self definition as a nation and their collective memory. Sharon can manipulate Israeli public opinion, exaggerating the danger, but this is because of an already existing national script in which the collective self is defined in terms of its past persecution. It would be useful to elaborate more on who precisely is doing the inducement and the precise relationship between individual inducer and collective feelings of victimization.

There is one other respect in which it would be useful to elaborate the significance of this approach as constructivist. I found the use of a very formal scientific language of hypothesis testing, etc., in relation to a constructivist analysis of emotions, somewhat jarring. Some reflection on the relationship between the constructivist underpinning of what appears to be a positivist statistical method would be useful for those who associate the former with more post-positivist methods.

In light of my earlier comments about the relationship between victimization and its manipulation as contingent on the actual experience of suffering, and the relationship between prior social meaning and the potential for manipulation, I found the analysis of perception in American students somewhat troubling. I appreciate that this is phase one and phase two will move on to the real victims, but I don’t understand the rationale for using non-victims, at least in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to measure the salience of victimhood. Do the findings reveal anything other than the attitudes of American students? Are the findings at all influenced by whether or not those tested have a Jewish or Palestinian background? There is an element of trauma, whether individual or societal, that sustains feelings of victimization. This element drops out once the study is divorced from the actual context and focuses only on representations, which may have
meaning to the reader, but due to their observer role, say more about their ability to empathize or identity with a distant conflict than actual victimhood. A clearer justification of this choice of subject would be useful.

One issue raised by this more statistical approach is that the categories of victim and non-victim appear quite static. The earlier point that both Israeli and Palestinians find themselves to be victims, when both on some level are also perpetrators, suggests these categories are not so neat. There may be something to be learned from separating out how victims respond differently than non-victims, but the problem is ultimately one of how conflict is sustained, and empathy limited by notions of victimization. It would be useful to elaborate on what is learned from analyzing victims and nonvictims and what the various correlations explain.