Identity and Method
Response to Noyes, Sylvan and Kowert
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Dorothy Noyes
These comments were a joy to read. The language was almost poetic and the criticism presented in a very diplomatic matter (which is more generally true of the others as well). Since her piece was quite lengthy I have responded below to various references.

The comment that everything in my work was ‘contextual, interacting and interdependent’ was appreciated. I was, however, curious about the claim that I tend to ontologize society. I generally argue that ontology and epistemology are inseparable. I suspect, more unintentionally, the language I use may appear to ontologize society, which suggests I need to be somewhat more perspicuous in my choice of words!

Noyes’ reference to Foucault’s claim that there are no homosexual identities, only homosexual acts was interesting. Similarly, identity per se has never been a focus of my work, but rather the use of language as a form of action. In this respect, the use of identity language is an act with constitutive effects, or particular types of acts, e.g. homosexual, are constitutive of identity. In short, identities and actions are interwoven in our language games for particular types of context.

The emphasis on ‘as if’ reinforces this point. In acting as if one is a tyrant or a terrorist or a democrat, the effect is to constitute the possibility of others reacting to you as a tyrant, a terrorist or a democrat. The acts in of themselves are not beyond interpretation or misinterpretation, but certain categories lend themselves to interpretation within a bounded area. (Someone speaking publicly is more likely to be attributed the identity of democrat than someone throwing a grenade into a crowd of people). In this respect, the ‘conspicuous performances of political maturity’ by the East European, in the face of Chirac’s petulance, was at one and the same time ‘acting as if’ and constituting themselves as mature political players. (They might have responded in a manner consistent with his portrayal of them as childlike). We are always, to a certain extent, ‘acting as if’ in so far as our responses to others may be constrained, but are not determined, by a context. As I have elsewhere argued, ‘acting as if’ one were something other than that dictated by the dominant context can be an important factor in bringing about change.

Noyes’ use of the relationship between mother and child (from Brunner) was insightful and clarifies the point that meaning develops out of a dialogue of interaction, even when this appears to be a dialogue of the deaf. Saddam probably was acting, as was George Bush. Politicians are actors. But more importantly, the notion of ‘acting as if’ does place emphasis on acting (and in this respect the dramaturgical metaphor works). The problem with ‘acting’ or ‘dramas’ is that they suggest something fake, or in the case of politicians, that they are lying. My point is that we needn’t be overly concerned about ‘true’ intentions, since intentions are embedded in the act itself, and constitute the conditions for a response and an interaction. Saddam could simply play the role cast for him (acting as a tyrant) but he could also act as if he were something else (the head of a sovereign and legitimate state) who should be spoken to and listened to. The latter did influence actors other than the U.S. and U.K. In this respect, the plurality of existing
actors was quite important, and this plurality only grew in the run up to the recent invasion.

That all research assumes some approach to language should be obvious and I share Noyes’ frustration that very sophisticated analysts often ‘act as if’ this is not the case. I chose Wittgenstein for this analysis, skipping over any number of other possibilities, because he makes a transition himself, from his early to his later work (and because it is what I do). There may also be a more implicit message that if one of the greatest philosophers of the century can rethink his position, then social scientists could also be somewhat more open minded regarding the assumptions they hold (although I did not think of this at the time).

Noyes’ elaboration on a dramaturgical approach is useful. I recently found myself becoming entangled in the difference between the two in a piece for an anthropological journal about the re-enactment of a World War II script of appeasement, punishment, liberation and justice in the Balkans. I still haven’t quite found my way out and fear the metaphors can become traps in themselves. Noyes is right that the game metaphor is by definition bounded. While one can maneuver in a range of ways at different points in a game of chess, action is still constrained by the rules of that game. But one could arguably say the same about drama. A script or a drama is also characterized by a coherence and a certain predictability – although with more space for surprise twists and turns – that is not unlike the rules of the game. Both make a similar point about the extent to which we are constrained by a context, yet move with some freedom within it. Both are material realities where objects have meaning within that context. Drama does, however, provide much greater space for introducing emotion, which is an issue I have recently begun to address. In any case, my emphasis on pictures and games is hostage to my heavy reliance on Wittgenstein. They are part of the elaboration of a distinction between those ‘pictures that hold us captive,’ and not least the idea of a real world ‘out there’, and different worlds as a product of the institutions, practices and actions that we are socialized into and contribute to reproducing or transforming.

In other works I have talked a great deal about the overlap between the language games of analysts and actors, and particularly that on the end of the Cold War. The main point is that given our tendency to be caught up in the language games of a context, without being aware of it, the analyst has to develop distancing strategies. One of these is to make the way identities, actions and interests are constituted in a context the subject of analysis, rather than assuming that we can neutrally fix the meaning of our scientific categories and compare them with the world. In this respect, there may be a relationship between scientific practices that assume monologue and practices of the U.S. that do so. I was a bit stumped by this concern in writing the Iraq article (or for that matter against the background of recent invasion debates). Ultimately power was the decisive factor in so far as the U.S. could simply ignore the worldwide protests and proceed with the invasion. But this ‘realist’ conclusion contains more nuance. First, it does reveal the extent to which practices of power are in part formed by who can speak and who is listened to. Terrorists, for instance, are people who by definition do not deserve to be listened to, as evidenced by the banning of Gerry Adam’s voice from television for years or the disdain with which Tony Benn’s dialogue with Saddam Hussein was held, etc. So who can speak, who is listened to, and who is silenced is an important element in the construction of power. Second, even while the most powerful act as if they don’t hear, they often do and
we need modes of analysis that can seek out this relationship. My earlier work on the end of the Cold War traced the relationship between challenges to the meanings underpinning Cold War relationship, attempts to silence those challenges, and shifts on the part of elites, in both East and West, to adapt these challenges to their own interests. Even the most powerful are dependent on social recognition, a point that Noyes makes in her comments, and are constrained by the need to fit whatever they are doing within a framework of meaning that makes it politically palatable.

Finally, I’m not sure what is meant by not giving up on representation and grounding language in materialism. This is the point of the game metaphor, although it often seems to get lost. We act with material objects, which have meaning within a game, and which relate to all kinds of speech acts as well. In this respect these acts are entangled the world and do not merely represent it. I would argue that the relationship is less referential than constitutive.

Sylvan
Sylvan’s call for more consideration of political psychological factors is important. More recently my work has shifted in this direction with the attempt to grapple with a notion of political trauma. This raises a whole set of issues about what constitutes psychology and whether this requires a focus on the mind of individual actors. I would resist the distinction between ontology and problem representation presented by Sylvan. He raises the question of how parties adopt their initial understanding of a conflict and what creates the context for social interaction. Based on a discussion between Wendt and Doty, these understandings arguably do not, as suggested by Wendt, arise in the mind of individual actors. Rather, as suggested by Doty, actors are always already situated in a context, with a history of meaning and a history of interaction. We cannot, as in the case of Alter and Ego, identify some originary point of interaction. Even Columbus and the American Indians meeting for the first time brought their own frameworks of possible meanings for who the other was, which shaped their initial response. I would be interested to hear a further elaboration of the effect of introducing ontology and problem representation, as suggested by Sylvan and would agree that there is some overlap between the concept of typification and problem representation. They may be two different words for the same process by which the meanings available to us are drawn on to provide coherence to a context, including who the other is, what they are doing, and how we should respond.

How an inconsistency arises against the background of a dominant typification is a problem. One might argue that in the case of Iraq, any inconsistency in Saddam’s behavior was blocked out, at least on the Western side, by the dominant typification of Saddam’s identity. But this could be point of departure for exploring a ‘psychology’ of the situation that goes beyond Saddam’s actions or intentions. In the UNSCOM article, I focus on Saddam’s attempt to ‘act as if’ he was a leader with whom others should engage in dialogue, and the tending toward Saddam in this way by the UN, Russia, France, etc. Arguably, by the time of the invasion debates, whether one could dialogue with Saddam was beside the point. The inconsistency became more wrapped up in a context of continual bombing and economic sanctions over a decade, raising questions about whether Saddam was capable of acting within the typification presented in U.S. and U.K. discourse, and the further costs to the Iraqi people of an invasion. Any intention on his part to use weapons of mass destruction was only relevant if he actually had the
capability to do so. In this respect, the typification shifted from an emphasis on whether Saddam could or should be engaged with to typifications of the plight of the Iraqi people and how invading or not invading would affect them.

Since I am not familiar with Josephson’s treatment of abduction, it is difficult for me to comment on it. I’m also unclear about the source of the uneasiness regarding my use of the term realist logic. I am perhaps conflating the logic of ‘if Hitler, tyrant, Saddam, etc., then force,’ with a realist logic. I would be interested to know why this conflation is problematic, since the logic of realism, since the end of World War II, has been closely bound up with the identification of new Hitlers. Hopefully this dialogue will also begin to flesh out the relationship between these ideas and the concerns I raised about Sylvan’s post-positivist political psychology.

If by rationalist basis, Sylvan means that I am assuming that rationality and logic are important, then my work does have a rationalist basis. However, one point about the distinction between deduction and abduction is the degree of certainty with which identities exist in the world. Human beings do reason but this reasoning is less a product of individual minds or a logic which exists independently, than shared understanding related to different types of identity, what they do, and how we morally should engage with them. We have fairly standard rules, scripts, etc. for engaging with terrorists, tyrants, partners in peace, recognized democracies, etc. The question of how to know one when we see one and, in cases of uncertainty, this knowing is a part of testing assumptions through the process of interaction.

In my recent work I have argued that political trauma is in part of function groups becoming transfixed by a particular picture of past suffering. This can result in acting in the present ‘as if’ confronted with the past trauma, oblivious to inconsistencies that might call into question this ascription. Avi Shlaim has pointed to this tendency on the part of Israel. Hypervigilance about the potential for the Holocaust to recur has resulted in a failure to take advantage of opportunities for more peaceful solutions as well as an obliviousness to how Israeli practices contribute to the problem. A similar claim could be made about the frequent reference back to Hitler in the construction of American foreign policy. The power of these appeals to past trauma are emotion packed, and in this respect may seem to be contrary to any kind of rationalism. However, references to past trauma also represent typifications of situations that contain a rationale for one form of action over and against others. In this respect, rationality is an important feature of action, but this is not first and foremost a problem of individual minds. Reasoning about who Hitler was or what preventing another Holocaust requires have become standard features of our cultural discourse, about who we are and how we should respond to certain evils in the world, which contribute to the construction of the ‘dramas’ of world politics.

**Kowert and Conclusion**

I started writing this last part before receiving most of my comments and before Ted’s email regarding the content. I was assuming the central task was a summary of our position on identity and method. Since it was already written I will include part of it, for what it is worth. Its seems relevant to some of the concerns raised in Kowert’s piece about the significance of fixing meaning vs. mapping identity change or causation vs.

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1 Bits of this have been lifted from a piece on Language and Method in Francois Debrix, ed., *Language, Agency and Politics* (M.E. Sharpe, 2003).
constitution. Since his comments just arrived, I make connections rather than responding directly.

As mentioned earlier, identity has never been a focus of my work. I would argue, however, that the key issue is one of language. The distinction between fixing identity vs. mapping identity rests broadly on two broad possibilities. In the first, identity represents an essential quality of subjects or objects in the world, which are pictured in our language. Identity language thus acts as a label. The key question for the scientist is finding the right definition for objects and relations in order to compare his or her labels with the world to see whether they correspond. Thus, for instance, our language of rogue states or terrorists refers to unproblematic identities in the world. The reasoning that flows from these given identities is a deductive reasoning, by which an unchanging essence prescribes a mode of interaction.

From the second perspective, identity is always a part of a language game, which constitutes a set of attributes, actions and relationships to others. While these language games rely on relatively stable features of our grammar, the logical relationship is tautological, i.e. true by definition, rather than referring to some essence in the world. Thus, the grammar of terrorism constitutes a set of rules, which are stable but not unchanging, by which we know what a terrorist is, what they do and how they interact with others. However, this language game does not point to an unproblematic essence. One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter or partner in peace and the relationship between the language game and particular subjects, such as Bin Laden or the PLO, is subject to change. There are any number of examples of actors who have at one point in time been engaged as if they were legitimate players of one sort or another who were resituated in a different language game, which corresponded with a change in the field in which they interacted with others. The process of abduction is one by which actors negotiate uncertainty regarding the identity of another, beginning to act toward them ‘as if’ they were one type or another (e.g. a legitimate state or an outlaw), which establishes a field for the other to respond, and thus an interaction (and further unfolding of a drama, game, etc.).

The first approach can be understood in terms of the second, but not vice a versa. Applying labels is something we often do in using language. It is a language game in itself, which reduces complexity, allowing us to make sense of the world we are operating in. A label is sometimes a description of an entity in the world as it has been historically constituted. A chair is a chair is a chair, although a Swedish chair may be quite different than a Japanese one. They do, however, share a family resemblance as objects we sit on. Alternatively a label may be constitutive in that it reproduces identities within a particular world. For instance, use of the label ‘Ustasa’ to refer to a Croat in the early 1990s created a much different identity for any particular individual than the label Yugoslav or simply Croat. It constituted the individual as a Nazi intent on genocide rather than a citizen of a multicultural state or a republic of that state. This may be the difference between ‘we have always understood such and such to be X, although it could have evolved otherwise, vs. we will make X into Y or emphasize some detail of Xness over others, even though X could be any number of things. In any case, the regulative aspect is embedded in the constitutive, in so far as knowing what something is or does, is inseparable from norms of how one should interact with subjects or objects of that kind. In this respect I agree with Onuf that the two are inseparable.
The labels ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ have historically constituted distinct identities within Christianity. Given a world comprised of Catholics and Protestants we now use these words to describe or label members of either group and this will be accurate in relation to these two broad categories. Each contains further distinctions, such as Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, etc. The larger category of Christian can be juxtaposed with that of Judaism, Islam, etc.

However in a place like Northern Ireland ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ are more constitutive of a conflict than purely descriptive, and they overlap with other more explicitly political categories of ‘Nationalist,’ ‘Republican,’ ‘Unionist’ and ‘Loyalist.’ A further example illustrates the significance of this. After I was offered a job in Belfast, my mother (not incidentally from Garrison Keillor country) asked whether this was the place where Catholics and Lutherans were fighting one another. The question was comical because, while Lutherans are Protestants, the Protestants in Northern Ireland are not Lutherans. The category Protestant functions with a much more limited and politicized meaning in Northern Ireland. Its use is less descriptive of the larger category Protestant, which includes Lutherans, than constitutive of a historically specific group of Protestants who lay claim to a part of the Irish isle as part of the United Kingdom. To establish a hypothesis based on any one pair of labels from this context (Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Republican, Unionist or Loyalist) is to establish an entire field of identity, action and meaning, which overlaps with the field constituted by the other pairs, but is not identical. Depending on what one is setting out to do, it is arguably more interesting to construct a map of how the different fields overlap and interact, and the objects populating these fields. Northern Ireland itself (or Ulster) is a category in a Unionist language game which assumes a province of the United Kingdom, as distinct from the ‘north’ or the ‘the six counties’ in the Irish linguistic field. Colors, and most notably orange and green become cultural objects on this map as do different forms of sport, etc.

On Identity and Eclectism

Kowert raises the question of methodological eclectism, which I agree with. A final point regards the relationship between labeling and disciplinary identity. Within disciplinary debates, the labeling of ‘positivists’ or post-modernists’ is a language game, i.e. an action relying on rules with constitutive effects. When a Critical Theorist (in the tradition of Habermas or Gramsci) or a Wittgensteinian constructivist is referred to as ‘post-modern,’ they are incorporated into a politicized category that is not descriptively accurate, but constitutes a position within a disciplinary conflict. As far as language is concerned, Habermas or Wittgenstein may have a place on the same family tree, as arguably logical positivism does, but they represent different assumptions and ends than post-modernism.

Once an opposition becomes a part of the normal language games for operating within a context, it is quite easy to put it to use without being aware of how the language itself obscures and misleads, or how it ‘bewitches.’ Most people probably adopt the language unwittingly as part of their context. However, some may use the language strategically, to reinforce the boundaries for purposes of disciplining or gate-keeping, at which point it is not only constitutive of a conflict, but of a hierarchy, which becomes wrapped up in power relationships and the allocation of resources and reward. In the
scholarly world, the power is not by definition imposed by ‘positivists’ over ‘post-modernists’ and may vary with context. An empiricist in the context of British IR may feel no less oppressed by the use of the ‘positivist’ label than a ‘post-modernist’ in the United States.

While identity labels may be more or less deliberately employed, they do silence and they do become expressions of power, which are opaque precisely because they become part of our everyday language and their meaning is no longer questioned. Undoubtedly an earlier era of exchange involving, for instance, traditionalists (English School) and behavioralists also relied on labels that silenced and constituted a hierarchy of status. The irony in the present context is that the label ‘post-modernism’ has a role in silencing a more direct discussion of the role of language in international relations. There are two silences revealed in this naming game, which reflect widely held assumptions. The first is that ‘positivists’ do empirical research, while ‘post-modernists’ are engaged in discourse analysis and deal merely with language. This distinction presumes that empirical research and discourse analysis are mutually exclusive or at the very least point to separate realms of inquiry. The one studies the real things of the world and the other studies language. Language has little to do with the former, except as a set of labels to represent this world. Discourse analysts have taken great pains to emphasize that discourse does not mean they are dealing ‘merely’ with language but the term discourse unfortunately carries this connotation. The second characteristic is a disciplinary hierarchy. The hierarchy concentrates scholars that are otherwise quite diverse into two camps. Those who deal with the world scientifically are ‘positivists’ and those who deal with language are ‘post-modernists.’

Both labels represent a dilution of meaning, and a subsequent misuse. Thus, David Singer, Kenneth Waltz, and Alexander Wendt are all ‘positivist’ although they represent significantly different approaches to analysis. By contrast, Nicholas Onuf, Richard Ashley and Cynthia Enloe might be referred to as post-modernists,’ while the work of only one of them would reasonably fit within this tradition. They are as different as the aforementioned scholars in their methods and the philosophical traditions to which they adhere. The lines have been drawn, scholars are forced to choose or are – against their own wishes – given an identity. One consideration in this choice is the continuing dominance of ‘social science’ an end in itself,’ particularly in the U.S. Another consideration is the derogatory connotation attached to the label ‘post-modernist.’ One no more wants to be associated with the latter than with rogue states or terrorists, although some have defiantly adopted the label as an act of critical resistance. The labels are often used in a political manner to demarcate and to place someone outside the boundaries of debate. They do not represent a world neatly divided up into ‘positivists’ and ‘post-modernists.’

At the core of the problem is whether words for identity can be treated as labels for something ‘real’ that exists independently in the world or whether language is

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2 Michael Nicholson frequently made this point.

3 These two labels do not in themselves constitute an opposition, i.e. positivist and post-positivist or modernist and post-modernist. I use them because they have the most derogatory connotations of the various labels presently in circulation.

4 Interestingly, Waltz himself claims not to be positivist (while often identified as the representative of positivism) and Wendt does claim to be positivist (as well as constructivist).
inextricably bound up with identity and action within the world. Dramatic events from the end of the Cold War to the emergence of post-Cold War dialogues to a new war on terrorism have raised serious questions about the existence of timeless and unchanging identities of international politics that can be ‘pictured’ in language. But it is not merely a question of whether our methods assume that scientific language mirrors the world, or whether language features in the constitution of the world. It is also a question of these labeling practices among academics in their references to one another.