Comments for the Panel on Methods and Identity

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Rather than commenting on the papers/chapters sequentially, or trying to review them on their own considerable merits, I'm going to follow Ted's injunction from long ago to look for unresolved issues and avenues for challenging or extending existing research. Although it may have been accidental, these works also have the advantage for this purpose of ranging over about a decade. In fact, since Audie and I were in graduate school together, I've had the pleasure of seeing Norms in International Relations evolve from the beginning. At the other end of the timeline is Yoi Herrera's "Identity as a Variable," which is currently in draft form (though, certainly, a very polished draft). Despite the passage of time, some things remain more or less the same in these discussions of identity. I'll start there.

Identity causes Identity causes Identity

Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and Mc Dermott (henceforth, for simplicity, "Herrera") are absolutely right when they say that problems of definition and measurement "hamper the more systematic incorporation of identity as a variable in helping to explain political action" (p. 1). The readings for this panel all address this problem in some fashion. Although I may want to quibble with a few of the definitions (more on this below), the real problem is the range of disagreement among scholars about how to define identity.

Consider an analogous problem in the field of foreign policy: defining groupthink. At various points in his classic (1972) book, Irving Janis defines groupthink as excessive cohesion in a policymaking group, as concurrency seeking and a reluctance to consider multiple perspectives, and as a failure to learn and adjust policies. In other words, groupthink (cohesion) leads to groupthink (concurrency seeking), which leads in turn to groupthink (failure to learn). So long as one adopts a single definition provisionally, the problem can be avoided. But over time, the result has been the emergence of a body of research that succeeds mainly in demonstrating that closed, cohesive groups (defined by some measures, such as the number and diversity of the people involved) are indeed closed and cohesive (defined by other measures, such as the number and diversity of the ideas they discuss). This is not strictly a tautology, but nor is it likely to strike most people as a brilliant advance.
I think we can see the same thing at work in the rapidly growing literature on identity. I’m probably preaching to the choir here (Herrera et al note, for example, that James Fearon provides fourteen different definitions of identity). In any case, here are a few examples from the readings for our panel:

1. "Social identities can sometimes be thought of … as social facts that structure the world in the same way that materialists believe material facts structure the world" (Herrera, p. 2).

2. "We define collective identity as a social category that varies along two dimensions" (Herrera, p. 1).

3. "A personal identity is 'a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways'" (Fearon, in Herrera, p. 2).

4. "A social identity … is a collective identity—an identity that describes a group of people" (Herrera, p. 2).

5. "The practice of fixing meaning is in conflict with the goal of mapping a change in identities and interests" (Fierke 2002, p. 343).

6. "Social actors make sense of contexts of interaction by situating identities and practices within a framework or typification" (Fierke 2000, p. 339).

7. "I am defining norms broadly here, as shared (thus social) understandings of standards for behavior" (Klotz, p. 14).

8. "Rules are patterns that constitute who we are and how we act in relation to specified others" (Fierke 2002, p. 338).

9. "Identities provide socially appropriate roles that actors perform" (Herrera, p. 4)

10. "Interpretive theorists … identify norms through prevailing discourses. Norms, in this view, are embedded in social structures. Consequently, actors' definitions of their identities and interests depend on a variable social and historical context. Identity then becomes part of the social structure (rather than operating primarily through actors' perceptions and beliefs) that determines behavioral outcome" (Klotz, p. 167-8).

11. "Interpretivists argue that international actors are inherently socially constructed; their identities and interests are partially defined by prevailing constitutive norms, which vary over time" (Klotz, p. 17).

12. "Society is assumed to consist of a social cognitive structure within which operate many discursive formations. Identities constitute these formations" (I couldn't resist adding one from Hopf 2002, p. 3).
My purpose is not to whine about the lack of agreement on basic definitions. It may be inconvenient, but as with groupthink all one really requires at a minimum is a provisional definition for the purposes of developing a given argument. The broader problem, however, is the emergence of a body of research that mainly explains various facets of itself.

The broadest definitions of identity are probably those associated with the constructivist focus on language and speech acts. The usual suspects are Wittgenstein, Habermas and, in international relations, Kratochwil (1989) and Onuf (1989). A concern for language runs through all the readings for this panel. Language, it would seem, gives things identities by giving them names, and thus making them distinct from other things. This is my interpretation of #1 on the list. It makes word, concept, category, label, and identity all roughly synonymous. Definition #2 seems to narrow the range to specifically "social" categories, but since all language is social this may not help (cf. Wittgenstein's argument against private language in *Philosophical Investigations*). These definitions make it possible (though trivial) to consider identity either the cause or consequences of just about anything.

Most of the rest of the list associates identity specifically with agents. Definition #3 uses identity to refer to attributes of individuals; #4, to attributes of groups. Definition #5 is similar (linking identity to interests, which presumably only agents have), but it provides an interesting contrast with #1 and #2. Language fixes meaning. Of course it also allows changes in meaning, and this is accomplished through changes in language. So, although I think I understand Fierke's analytical purpose (the desire to explain the fluidity of meanings in international relations and other social contexts), I don't really understand the claim that fixing meaning is in conflict with mapping a change in identity. In fact, #6 seems to reverse course, treating identity as a tool for making sense (using frameworks or types that, again, fix meaning).

Like definition #6, the next three associate identity with the behavior of agents. Specifically, #7 says that norms are shared standards for behavior, #8 says that rules are patterns of behavior, and #9 says that identities provide socially appropriate roles. These definitions let norms, rules, and identities function in approximately the same way (as behavioral prescriptions). This isn't so bad (again, maybe they're just synonyms), but #10 also associates norms with prevailing discourses and social structure. And taken together, #11 and #12 complete the circle. Definition #11 lets constitutive norms (social structures?) define identity, and #12 lets identity constitute discursive formations.

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1 For what it's worth, it seems to me that language always defines "the boundaries of meaning prior to analysis" (Fierke 2002, 343). Of course it may define them through interaction as well. In this case, it does both. So I suspect it's not possible to identify a philosophical move that will relieve us of the burden of imposing our categories on the world (even as it imposes categories on us).
When one applies these definitions in practice (here, I won't point any fingers other than to say that I also belong on the receiving end of the criticism), we find that the meaning attached to certain behaviors (identity *qua* meaning) might depend on behavioral prescriptions (identities) that identify kinds of agents (identity) and rely, in turn, on prior discursive formulations (identity). Identity causes identity causes identity.

I haven't made any effort to be comprehensive here. If Fearon has identified 14 definitions of identity, then I suspect the group of luminaries Ted has assembled could do even better (worse?). There's no point in making a fetish of the proper definition. It's arbitrary. But the danger for research in this area is that it can feed mainly on itself, and this doesn't look as unseemly as it should because of the slippage in definitions. This said, if there is a chronological progression in these readings, it's toward greater and greater self-consciousness in addressing these problems.

*Constitution and Causation*

One distinction that is observed consistently in most of these papers is that between constitution and causation (or regulation, or prescription). A great deal of constructivist work (not just these readings) nods in the general direction of this distinction before proceeding to focus on whichever of the two is important for the argument at hand. The difference is apparent here in the contrasting emphases of Fierke and Klotz. Although there's plenty of overlap, I think Fierke is more concerned with the problem of multiple meanings and interpretations of international politics. And the bottom line for Klotz is (anti-racist) behavioral prescriptions.² I realize this characterization doesn't do justice to the complexity of either argument. The constitution of state identity (e.g., as pariah) is central to Klotz's argument, and it's clear in Fierke's (2000) discussion of identities attributed (through either deduction or abduction) to Saddam Hussein that behavioral prescriptions follow closely behind.

Yet both of these works treat the difference between constitution and causation/regulation as a fundamental distinction in language and logic. Fierke develops the distinction through a discussion of Wittgenstein, beginning with the claim that "positivism and constructivism rely on distinct philosophies regarding the relationship between language, logic, and the world" (2002, 334). From the early Wittgenstein of *Tractatus*, we get the "logic of pictures"; from the later Wittgenstein of

² Audie: I realize that this claim is especially a stretch in the case of your book, since you let the constitution of state identity do much of the explanatory work. Still, although the constitution of identity is central to your argument, it's driven by (international) condemnation—that is, by a regulative phenomenon.
Philosophical Investigations, we get the "logic of games." The first logic sees language as representation (that mirrors reality for positivists, and constitutes reality for constructivists), whereas the second logic sees language as rules that regulate behavior, including what we can say. Similarly, Klotz observes the distinction between constitutive norms (p. 17) and regulative norms (e.g., norms as constraints or motives, pp. 25-27).

Although the difference is widely accepted, Onuf (1989) holds that "the distinction between constitutive rules and regulative rules is itself untenable" (p. 51). They're not different kinds of rules (not, that is, different kinds of language), but rather different effects of language. All language is constitutive insofar as it participates in the process of defining categories. And, only slightly more controversially, all language is regulative. Perhaps the easiest way to see that is to look at what Onuf—following Black (1962) and more generally Austin (1962)—says are the three basic things language can do (illocutionary speech acts): assert, promise, and direct. All of these have regulative force, in that they are social acts as well as descriptions (as positivists would have it) of something. Even assertions, as social acts, call for a response (consent, disagreement, etc.), though they might not produce one.

This matters because efforts to be scientific sometimes lead scholars to sacrifice attention to the regulative aspects of language in favor of sociological notions of norms as custom or habit. The regulative force of norms (and identities) is thus consigned to a special domain of interest—the purview of international lawyers and those (few) others interested in moral and other behavioral regulations in international relations. This is a definitional slight of hand that serves to carve out a separate space for scientific studies of norms. It helps to "legitimize" the topic, but it does violence to constructivist (and probably most other post-positivist) philosophies of science.

Will Any Method Do?

Conveniently, this brings me to questions of method. Herrera et al probably offer the most extensive discussion of method among these readings, but all of the authors are clearly concerned with the measurement of identity. One can only applaud the commitment of each to multi-method approaches.

The five approaches identified in Herrera are: discourse analysis, quantitative content analysis, cognitive mapping, surveys and interviews, and experiments. First, a minor quibble: what constitutes the boundary between one method and the next? Cognitive mapping may well rely on quantitative content analysis, and this in turn is a particular form of discourse analysis. Presumably—just as King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argued that qualitative research employs the same logic of analysis as quantitative research—these various ways of studying texts all embrace roughly the
same logic, paying attention in varying degrees to content, structure, frequency, etc. So perhaps the methodological distinction here is really between (1) observation of texts, (2) observation of behavior (e.g., surveys and interviews), and (3) manipulation of behavior (experiments).

Now to the more important question. As implied above, I share Herrera's bias toward "methodological eclecticism" (p. 7). So, I imagine, do Fierke and Klotz. It feels good to take this position, because it means respecting what other scholars do. As I read these papers, though, I began to wonder about the relationship between ontology and methodology, particularly given the important role language (text) plays in constructivist ontology. Unsurprisingly, Fierke and Klotz both pay careful attention to language. They could do this in a variety of ways, and so one might just as well suggest computer-assisted cognitive mapping rather than the sort of careful, historical analysis they employ. What could an experiment or even a nomothetic survey instrument tell a scholar committed to historical contingency in the emergence of meaning (i.e., Giddens, 1984)? I suppose it's possible to treat these, too, as texts, but that would just serve to deny methodological distinctions (all methods, in other words, would be the study of texts). So, does the linguistic turn mean that all methods must be methods of studying text?

**Concluding Points**

I wrote all of the above before looking at the comments from Sylvan and Noyes (which, by "virtue" of my own tardiness, I now have the opportunity to do). Don Sylvan's reactions remind me how potentially fruitful the dialogue can be between experts in cognitive mapping and those interested in language and identity. Since my own background is also in political psychology, I think I share with him a predisposition in favor of this conclusion. And I suspect the work of people like Michael Young would go a long way toward helping to clarify issues like those raised above in the section discussing constitution and causation. I wonder (Don, maybe you know…) what computational linguists make of Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) fairly limited typologies of speech acts. Do they serve the purpose of mapping speech?

Dorothy Noyes' comments are just wonderful. The position they lead to, toward the end (associated with Vico and Dilthey), is essentially the same as the position I attribute to Onuf (1989). Were it not for this, I might have expected a professor of English to be content with reducing all methods to the study of text. So much for my preconceptions.

**References**


