Psychology and Identity

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Comments on Paul Kowert

This chapter poses an important question: can constructivists and political scientists find common ground? The case study is one of the few to apply social identity theory to a concrete foreign policy case.

In my comments, I would like to deal with two issues: whether it is possible to bridge the gap between constructivists and political psychologists; and the application of SIT to foreign policy identity and more specifically, the Suez case.

I am not optimistic about possibilities for finding common ground between political psychologists and constructivists for two reasons. First, for many constructivists, identity emerges out of social interactions, as in the “looking glass self.” The self is a product of society. A key concept in symbolic interactionism is the idea of “taking the role of the other.” Through symbolic cues and experience, the person anticipates the responses of others with whom she must interact. Viewing the self through others’ eyes is what George Herbert Mead called the “Me” component of the self. Interactions with others reinforce, invalidate, or modify her initial definition of others’ attitudes and responses. Her responses to their treatment of her constitute the “I” component of the self. Over time, the self and others negotiate a mutually accepted view of appropriate behavior. Each interaction socializes the person to societal expectations.1

Similarly, Alexander Wendt proposes that a state takes on the role of the other—it internalizes the other’s expectations about who it is. Initially, the state brings to the encounter certain beliefs about who the other is and how it is likely to respond. Through
its actions, the other state confirms, undermines, or modifies the state’s original
preconceptions. By interpreting the other’s actions, a state learns to see itself through the
eyes of the other. Each state assimilates and internalizes the other’s conception of its
role. Through actions and reactions, states implicitly negotiate their identities relative to
each other. Over time, two states learn each other’s beliefs and expectations and adopt a
shared view of who each of them is. Their identities are “constituted” through
interaction.²

Behaving toward the other as if it had certain interests will encourage the other
side to act accordingly. Viewing the other as an enemy or friend is a self-fulfilling
prophecy. If the other views it as an enemy, the state will mirror that identity, a
“reflected appraisal” of itself. The two states will carry those beliefs into subsequent
encounters, where they will again guide behavior.³

For social psychologists, major aspects of social identity are either given at birth
(gender, nationality, social class) or are constructed by the self. The self exists prior to
interactions with others. Similarly, some aspects of a state’s identity are based on
geography and cultural traditions. Why states choose a particular identity may have little
to do with anticipated responses of others.

Second, for many constructivists, the social world is constituted by intersubjective
meanings and practices. Social psychologists do not use the term “intersubjective”
because they argue that people do not have access to the causes of their own behavior,
much less that of others. Social psychologists study the ways in which individual
interpretations of the same event differ.
Kowert discusses the linguistic variant of constructivism as opposed to the symbolic interactionist variant proposed by Wendt. For the benefit of the general reader, it would be useful if Kowert could briefly summarize the principal assumptions and propositions of speech-act theory and show how they relate to identity. For example, I do not understand the relevance for identity of the distinction between instruction-rules, directive-rules, and commitment-rules. What is an example of an instruction-rule? How does it affect state identity?

How does language affect identity? One could argue that social identity affects language, culturally based concepts and knowledge. Japanese has seven levels of “politeness;” English has formal and informal speech. From the standpoint of psychology, categories are abstracted from experience, not invented by the actor.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) has more to offer than “we-they” distinctions or the tendency to homogenize the out-group. Kowert discusses John Turner’s self-categorization theory as part of the “cognitive miser” view of human beings. Turner’s theory, however, is a specialized variant of SIT. European psychologists, led by Henri Tajfel of Britain and Serge Moscovici of France, developed SIT in the 1960s and 1970s in opposition to what they perceived as the overly individualistic and cognitive social psychology as practiced in the United States. American social psychologists viewed groups from the standpoint of individual members; they studied individuals in groups. In contrast, believing that an important part of an individual’s identity derives from membership in a group, social identity theorists study the group in the individual.  

A social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value
and emotional significance attached to that membership.” A group is made up of two or more individuals who belong to a common social category such as nationality, race, class, occupation, sex, religion, ethnicity, and so on. According to SIT, people are motivated to have a positive social identity, because their group’s relative status reflects back on them. It is this motivational component of SIT that is missing from Kowert’s discussion of SIT and of identity in general. Identifying with a national group is more than just an artifact of language or cognition. Because they identify emotionally with their group, people fight and die on behalf of their state or ethnic group.

Social groups—whether professions, jobs, races, universities, or ethnic groups—may be arrayed on a status hierarchy. Belonging to a low-status group is damaging to self-esteem. States as well vary in strength, resource endowment, geographic location, and so on. In short, there is a preexisting status and power hierarchy, a structure if you will, that shapes state interactions and identities. The desire for status plays an important role in states’ construction of their identities. Reportedly, Arabs around the world were humiliated by Saddam Hussein’s defeat by American forces. This is also an example of how people have multiple social group memberships, and therefore have a repertoire of identities from which to choose. Whether people identify with a particular social category is a matter of choice. It is interesting that when confronted with defeat of a neighboring dictator, whom no one liked, residents of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia see themselves as Arabs.

This brings me to the case study of the Suez crisis. Much more could be done here to bring out the role of social identities in shaping Eden’s reaction to Nasser and the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Loss of the empire removed the props from Britain’s
former status as a great power. This loss of prestige must have been very difficult for the English to endure, and could have contributed to Eden’s overreaction to Nasser. Kowert mentions the threat to Britain’s reputation as a major power, but this could be elaborated and made more central to the argument.

A realist could easily refute the argument that Eden was threatened by what Nasser was rather than what he did. Eden was worried about future Egyptian actions if the country became communist. Presumably, if Nasser was leaning towards communism, he might very well carry out many actions than would be harmful to U.S. and British interests, such as helping to spread revolutionary fervor to the oil-rich Arab states. If Nasser had been an African leader whose country had no oil, would Eden and Dulles have reacted so strongly to his communist inclinations?

SIT distinguishes between an individual’s social and personal identity. Kowert’s case study does not make clear this important distinction. Most of the negative attributes that Eden imputed to Nasser applied to him personally, and not to Egypt. Character and personal identity are not synonymous. An individual’s personality identity consists of features that distinguish him or her from the group.

Sylvan

The excerpts indicate a progression toward the argument that problem representation shapes the way people see themselves. Certainly, much psychological research suggests that the framing of a problem can have a big impact on the options that actors prefer.

Whether and how problem representation affects identity needs further elaboration and explication. Social identity is constrained by one’s group memberships,
many of which are ascribed rather than voluntarily chosen. While I can choose to live in California or become a professor, I cannot become a man or a professional basketball player. According to SIT, groups can exercise creativity in how they evaluate a group characteristic. For example, minority groups can put a positive spin on characteristics that are negatively evaluated by society, such as “Black is beautiful” or the “Gay Pride Movement.”

Along those lines, I am skeptical that one can manipulate the identity of American undergraduates so that they can adopt the perspective of the Palestinians and Jews. These identities are deeply rooted in place and history. What one might be able to do experimentally is to manipulate which of an individual’s identities he chooses to identify with.

Sylvan and Nadler want to test the hypothesis that a collective sense of being a victim has a detrimental impact on empathy with the outgroup. Roderick Kramer and colleagues found that groups tend to blame the other side for the conflict, so that they are always reacting to the other side’s provocation. This is a variant of the group attributional error discussed by Kowert. People attribute their own group’s behavior to situational pressures while explaining similar behavior by the outgroup as a reflection of dispositional traits.

Sylvan and Nadler hypothesize that the degree of commitment to the group mediates between perceived victimhood and empathy. They might also want to consider the hypothesis that perceptions of being victimized can increase one’s commitment to the group. For example, after 9/11, many Americans had a heightened sense of collective identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world.


