Sylvan Response to Larson, Fierke, Blum comments

Let me begin my response by noting the difficulty of the task I gave the discussants in this group: I provided very brief and disparate pieces with little "glue" holding them together, and equally little overt attention to either the concepts of identity or social constructivism. In addition, at least one of the discussants was unable to obtain most of the materials I had listed as my material to read. Therefore, this essay will be as much a clarification of some of my ideas on that subject as a response to the three discussants who earnestly tried to "squeeze" cryptic ideas on these topics out of the material with which I provided them.

It is important to note that I see myself as having evolved intellectually over the past few years. Labels aside, I have been seeking to study foreign policy decision making and identify concepts that would help me in that pursuit. Especially in my recent work on Israeli-Palestinian relations, I am convinced that a better understanding of the concept of “identity” is a crucial step in making sense of the dynamics of the relationships between Palestinians and Israelis.

Blum comments

Let me first respond to Doug Blum’s comments. Doug’s comments may well capture what some cognitive psychologists argue, but they certainly do not represent either my thoughts, my research, or my dispositions. I have no desire to accomplish what Doug characterizes as the analytical focus of cognitivist approaches, which he sees as to “show how – but not why or what – beliefs are held.” In that sense, my work is much closer to what Doug sees as the constructivist agenda: “to explain why and what beliefs are intersubjectively held.” In my JCR article with Stu
Thorson, we try to get at exactly “why and what beliefs are held” by discussing the relationship between ontology, problem representation, and option selection. I see the primary contrast with most social constructivist work with which I am familiar being that we use individual building blocks and then proceed to try to understand the group. In that sense, I see my brand of political psychology as quite complementary with social constructivism. Where each is weak (political psychology on groups, and social constructivism on the origins of group understandings) is exactly where the other scholarship could be quite helpful. In fact, I have been told that at least one graduate seminar focusing on social constructivist thought in IR includes the Sylvan and Thorson JCR piece for exactly that reason.

Doug’s critique of the Sylvan-Nadler use of victimization is an important one. I agree that in the case of the U.S. subjects that the identities are in some ways “supplied” to the subjects. However, it is important to point out our explicit acknowledgment that “The research reported begins from the assumption that victimhood is a socially constructed aspect of problem representation, in the sense that external events and situational forces can increase the salience of group members' sense of victimhood, or decrease it.” What we are guilty of is not more clearly emphasizing our research design in the version I sent to this conference’s discussants. What we did is provide a specific background biographical story for subjects who were Palestinian “victims” and different stories for those who were Palestinians low on victimhood, for Israeli victims, and for those who were Israelis low on victimhood. The stories varied mention of 1948 family land repossession in the case of the Palestinian victims, and the Holocaust in the case of Israeli victims. We do report tests that show that subjects understood these identities, and felt that they had adopted them in answering subsequent questions. Having made that important
distinction, I freely acknowledge both that the applications to actual Israeli and Palestinian subjects, now underway, will get at a socially constructed aspect of victimhood more directly and naturally, by measuring as opposed to creating the phenomenon, and that Doug is quite correct in noting that what we have done more closely approximates “based on what I’ve read, someone believing this would be most likely to say XYZ.” The difference is that we are not telling them to act as victims would, but rather giving them a background from which they will infer an (admittedly adopted in the US case) identity that includes “victimhood.”

In reacting to Doug’s comments on the brief Sylvan-Horowitz research design, I can only nod in agreement. Every single one of the questions Doug poses is one that we hope to investigate. Only by doing so will we have the potential of entering the discourse on the role of identity in such a functionalist realm. As a footnote, the interviews on which this work will be based are at this very moment being conducted in the Middle East.

Doug’s reflections on my chapter in the Sylvan-Voss volume on problem representation are also on track. There is a small section of that chapter that was once larger. It contrasted two schools of thought in the application of problem representation. One school is information processing - about which Doug is commenting - while the other is discourse analytic. It is a very long story (which I’m happy to explain over some liquid refreshment) why the final version published by Cambridge University Press gives short shrift to the latter. One observation that I might add to my dialogue with Doug, though, is based on observation of scholars working on issues of problem representation from each of these traditions. The terminology employed is radically different, but the insights are often quite similar. For instance, two contributors to the original version of the Sylvan-Voss volume studied debates in the US Congress during the 1990
Gulf War. One adopted an overtly “information processing” approach, employing such terminology as “goals” of different groups of speakers, while the “discourse analysis” scholar referred to “dominant discourses” and “counter discourses.” Their conclusions were incredibly similar, both identifying the same groups of speakers, and both drawing conclusions regarding the critical nature of each group’s problem representation for trying to interpret the politics of decision.

I do agree with Doug’s observation that cognitive approaches such as mine place a greater emphasis on agency than do most social constructivist approaches. However, I quarrel with the statement that such an emphasis on agency is “truncated.” As I stated earlier in this essay, a dialogue between social constructivism and political psychology has the potential to lead all of us to have less truncated stories to tell.

**Larson Comments**

I could not agree more with Debbie’s comment that “whether and how problem representation affects identity needs further elaboration and explication.” That is a centerpiece of my research program now, and while I certainly don’t have a comprehensive answer at this point, I begin to reflect on that issue in part of Sylvan-Voss, and now in Sylvan-Horowitz.

My response to the skepticism you express (and share with Doug) about manipulation of US undergrad identities is again sensible. Please look at my response in the comments to Doug.

Debbie’s comments about interaction effects between victimization and commitment are quite reasonable. In fact, in our analysis, we have undertaken such tests and find preliminary evidence supporting your assertion that there is an interaction effect.
Fierke comments

Karin’s comments on Palestine-Israel victims is an engaging one. You comment that in that case, “the production of actual victims has been constant over time.” My response is in line with what I see as a social constructivist view: If one were to look at two Palestinians whose families each had their land confiscated in 1948, or two Israelis who were holocaust survivors, there is every reason to believe that there would be variation within the two pairs (i.e., the two Palestinians differing from each other, and the two Israelis differing from each other) in terms of the degree of victimization that they feel. One factor in this variation could be a type of manipulation by leaders, similar to the Milosevic “fanning the flames” scenario that you mention.

I’d love to begin a dialogue with you about your assertion that “an already existing national script in which the collective self is defined in terms of its past persecution” is necessary to elicit individual victimization. Don’t we have a chicken and egg problem here (or perhaps even turtles all the way down)? What is the source of the existing national script? It is in answer to this type of question that I am convinced that political psychology and social constructivism each have something important to contribute, but that neither has a convincing answer by itself.

Another elaborate dialogue could ensue over the notion of positivist and post-positivist methods. I tend to argue that it is not the technique that is positivist, but the interpretation of any analysis. Those who employ statistics to discover the single knowable reality (or truth) are, in my view, positivist. However, in my understanding of the world, employing statistics as part of a discourse is not impossible (nor is it, in my view, necessarily positivist).
On the issue of the representation of victimization in Sylvan-Nadler as being static, I plead guilty as charged. That is, indeed, a drawback of experimental method, and a reason why my own work (and a work style I virtually force on all of my dissertation advisees) seeks to employ multiple methods, in the broadest definition of “methods.”