Context and Meaning in Social Identity Theory: A Response to Oakes

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A vibrant debate is a sure sign of a healthy theory. My current exchange with Penelope Oakes (2002) on the application of social identity theory to political phenomena provides clear evidence of the theory's positive vital signs. We may disagree over the extent to which social identity theory holds a specific road map for political research, but we do not differ on the theory's ultimate importance. Like Oakes, I believe that social identity has valuable insights to offer political behavior researchers. Indeed, I wrote my original critique of social identity theory not to dampen but rather to stimulate psychological thinking and research on the theory's benefit to fields beyond social psychology. I hope that the current exchange will provoke dialogue between social psychologists and political scientists and, in so doing, enrich the theory and enhance its contributions to political research.

My original critique sprang from a concern over the relatively meager impact that social identity theory has had on political research (Huddy, 2001). Oakes points out that social identity theory has been applied to several areas of social psychology with relevance for political psychology, including leadership, nationalism, consensus formation, social protest, stereotyping, and so on. But only a handful of this work is conducted by political psychologists or expressly political in content, dealing directly with political outcomes such as protest against government actions (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Klandermans, in press; Simon et al., 1998), political rhetoric designed to influence voter decision-making (Hopkins & Reicher, 1996; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), or identification with a major political party or ideology (Abrams, 1994; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998; Kelly, 1989).

I do not want to create the impression that social identity theory has had no impact on political psychology. There are several well-known political studies that have drawn on social identity theory. For example, Miller and colleagues' (Gurin,

Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981) concept of group consciousness was based on social identity theory and the notion that group identification, low status, and a sense of system blame are central to the development of political action and consciousness. Yet, despite an explosion of theory and research since work by Miller, Gurin, and colleagues in the late 1970s, the theory has had relatively minor subsequent influence on political behavior research.

A recent search of JSTOR, the online journal database, yielded 27 articles in political science journals (including the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*) that included a reference to Tajfel; there were eight articles that included a reference to self-categorization theory. This is a highly incomplete list because JSTOR includes the major American and British political science journals but does not index a number of relevant others, including *Political Psychology.* A search of *Political Psychology* articles in PsycINFO yielded a total of 10 articles that referred to Tajfel and social identity theory and 7 that referred to self-categorization theory across all years. Taken together, this suggests that social identity theory has not had extensive impact within political research, especially in political science. Contrary to Oakes' suggestion, I am not questioning the potential political contribution of research on consensus or stereotyping from a social identity perspective, but rather asking why the rich research tradition spawned by social identity theory within social psychology has not proven to be more beneficial to the study of political behavior.

One of the central concerns that dominated my original critique is that the theory, especially self-categorization theory, places an undue emphasis on the power of context to explain intergroup behavior. This emphasis on situations ignores individual differences in identification, fails to consider the power of enduring cross-situational forces conveyed by history and culture to shape group boundaries and meaning, and neglects the frequently contested nature and meaning of group membership. In addition, a central emphasis on situations to define and shape the meaning of group membership has resulted in a highly fluid view of political behavior that is at odds with a great deal of evidence in political psychology on the remarkable stability in political attitudes and behavior over time and across situations (Sears & Levy, in press). These concerns acquire greater force within political psychology because the field is concerned with explanations for why some groups turn to violent conflict while comparable groups in a similar situation do not, or why members of the same group vary in their level of group commitment and identity despite living in similar circumstances.

A key secondary, and related, concern is that an emphasis on situations has produced research on the consequences of social identity once it has been acquired within a specific setting, but has deemphasized research on the development of identity over time and across situations. Obviously, if identities are highly situational and contextually fluid, it does not make a great deal of sense to study them developmentally. But if identities have qualities that endure across situations, it makes very good sense to examine individual differences in identity acquisition,

growth, and change. In responding to Oakes' specific criticisms, I will return in greater detail to these two central concerns—the power of situations, and the nature and trajectory of identity development.

Subjective Identification and Measurement

Oakes describes my characterization of the minimal intergroup setting and the effects of mere categorization as a simple "sound bite" that misses the underlying importance of subjective identity within social identity theory. She points out that Turner and other social identity theorists stressed identification, not categorization, as the critical ingredient in the emergence of ingroup bias. Nonetheless, it is also clear from Oakes' comments that social identity researchers expected subjective identities to arise with relative ease among participants in the minimal intergroup setting—one of the key research paradigms used to test social identity theory—in order for them to make sense of a meaningless situation. Subjective group identities may not occur when individuals are categorized as group members but think of themselves in personal terms, as happens when they allocate resources to themselves in addition to other ingroup and outgroup members in the minimal group paradigm (Turner, 1975, 1978). But barring that situation, social identity researchers have typically assumed the adoption of subjective identities in the minimal group setting, and assumed that this internalization was a product of the situation, varying little if at all among individual group members. Indeed, the existence of ingroup bias in a broad array of minimal groups based on things as meaningless as being randomly classified by the experimenter as someone who over or underestimates the actual number of dots in an image made the attainment of positive distinctiveness seem entirely trivial and led to the widespread conclusion that salient categorization was responsible for ingroup bias (Brewer, 1979).

I may have, therefore, mischaracterized the statements of social identity theorists by suggesting that mere categorization inevitably leads to ingroup bias. But the notion that categorization plays a central role in the formation of ingroup bias is perfectly consistent with the details of the minimal intergroup situation. If the critical ingredient in the minimal intergroup situation is subjective identity, why is it not measured directly as a subjective state? Moreover, a reliance on the minimal intergroup situation places social identity theorists in the uncomfortable position of having to infer subjective identity from evidence of ingroup bias. As Turner (1978) noted, "ingroup favoritism must presuppose some process of active identification" (p. 106). But this is highly unsatisfying if the research goal is to understand whether, and under what circumstances, ingroup identity leads to ingroup bias and conflict, a common research problem within political psychology.

A reluctance to measure subjective identity directly, despite its theoretical centrality, is not just a feature of studies conducted using the minimal group setting; it also emerges in other types of social identity studies. Consider research by Reynolds and colleagues (Reynolds, Turner, Haslam, & Ryan, 2001) on the impact

of authoritarianism on prejudice. For my current purposes, the research findings are less relevant than the method used to assess group identities. Participants were assigned to conditions in which their national, age, and gender identities were made salient by asking them to provide key words that distinguished Australians from Americans, females from males, and young from older people. The key analyses assess the extent to which manipulated group salience moderates the impact of authoritarianism on prejudice. No effort is made to assess the extent to which individuals internalize their nationality, gender, or age. In this study, the situational salience of group boundaries is the key analytic variable, not its subjective internalization, consistent with the strategy pursued in the minimal intergroup setting.

An emphasis on categorization at the expense of subjective identities has hindered the development of scales and other measures of identity that are especially needed by political psychologists conducting survey-based research (Huddy, in press). In a very welcome shift, social psychologists have begun to develop scales that tap a subjective sense of identity (for reviews see Huddy, in press; Jackson & Smith, 1999). Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992; Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994) collective self-esteem (CSE) scale is one of the most widely used of these measures, although there is no general consensus on a specific measure as yet. As Oakes rightly points out, a number of social identity theorists such as Ellemers, Branscombe, and their colleagues have used subjective identity measures in their research for some time (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Ellemers, van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). More recently, self-categorization theorists have begun to include subjective measures in their research (Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). This is a positive development that hopefully will lead to greater consensus on the detailed measurement of subjective identities and will facilitate research on identity development.

Meaning and Identity Development

At odds with my original concern that social identity theory has devoted very little attention to identity development, Oakes argues that self-categorization theory attempts "to specify exactly how subjective identification happens," in addition to explaining its effects, and suggests that this has been a major research focus. She also argues that the meaning of group membership is a central component of this process, despite my claims that social identity has ignored the meaning of group membership. Our differences arise, in part, from a different approach to meaning. According to Oakes, identity salience is based on an interaction between individuals' readiness to apply a category to themselves and the extent to which the category fits their behavior and attitudes in a given situation (Oakes, 1996). But this dynamic formulation captures a very central tension in self-categorization

theory between two kinds of meaning: one that is fleeting and situation-specific, another that is more enduring and stable.

By meaning, I have stable category content in mind—content that is created over time and across situations as a function of cultural and historical factors. And it is this kind of meaning that I believe has been neglected by self-categorization researchers because of the theory's central emphasis on the immediate perceptual setting. Within self-categorization theory, historical and cultural factors are relegated to the realm of "fit" between the category and group members' beliefs or actions within a situation. To be fair, there are two kinds of fit that determine category content and application. The first is comparative fit, which captures the extent to which ingroup members are like each other and different from members of an outgroup. This varies with perceptual context and the relative attributes of ingroup and outgroup members. But identities are also adopted on the basis of normative fit—expectations about the actions and behavior of typical group members. Normative fit, and the stability it implies for identities, is closer to the type of meaning I have in mind as crucial to an understanding of identity development. But this aspect of meaning has not been analyzed very thoroughly within self-categorization research and is, at times, at odds with the theory's fluid and contextual approach.

Context and Fluid Meaning

Self-categorization researchers stress the highly fluid nature of identities to underscore the dynamic nature of perception and category content. In the extreme, self-categorization researchers believe that "salient self-categories are . . . intrinsically variable and fluid, not merely being passively 'activated' but actively constructed 'on the spot' to reflect the contemporary properties of self and others" (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992, p. 5), as I noted in my original critique. Other self-categorization studies exemplify this highly fluid approach to identities (Haslam & Turner, 1992a, 1995; for a summary see Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999).

Undoubtedly the meaning of an identity is sufficiently varied to allow its different facets to be emphasized in different situations. But Oakes et al. (1999) went beyond this conception to state that "contextual variation [in categorization] is not a matter of core stability and peripheral change" but rather "both categories and attributes are context-specific, mutually defining outcomes of the categorization process" (p. 71). This suggests little room for enduring concepts.

I am not alone in questioning the extent to which category meaning is a function of perceptual context. Reicher, an original proponent of self-categorization theory, parts company with Turner, Oakes, and others on this point (Herrera & Reicher, 1998; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001). Reicher and colleagues argue that an emphasis on the immediate perceptual context within self-categorization theory cannot adequately explain the development of political categories because

it leaves little room for their social and political definition. In Herrera and Reicher's words, "the definition of categories is not open to debate" (p. 982) within self-categorization theory. In one of their studies, they analyzed understandings of the Persian Gulf war and found that pro- and anti-war students viewed a videotape of the war very differently, not because of the immediate perceptual situation (which was held constant in this instance) but because they viewed the tape from very different perspectives that mirrored competing elite constructions of the war (Herrera & Reicher, 1998).

Herrera and Reicher's (1998) research on the meaning of the Gulf war raises another serious concern about the way in which meaning is handled within self-categorization theory. Within political contexts, the meaning of groups is often highly contested. Consider research on American identity. Individuals who support less consensual, nativist aspects of American identity such as being Christian are more likely to oppose policies designed to benefit new immigrants, view negatively the impact of immigration, and believe it is difficult to become American without adopting American customs (Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990; Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2000). It would not be surprising to find similar differences in the meaning of Australian, English, or Canadian identity, with comparable political consequences. But self-categorization theorists tend to assume that identities have a single shared meaning that may vary across situations—or at least among those who share a common salient self-categorization—but is nonetheless consensual within a given context (Haslam et al., 1999; for a similar argument see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

The other vexing question raised by an emphasis on the contextual creation of meaning is how existing group identities and their associated meaning influence the interpretation of situations, or, as Reicher and Hopkins (2001) put it, "how categories make contexts" (p. 40). There is clear evidence, for example, that strongly identified individuals, especially those in low-status groups, view social inequalities as more pervasive within a given context—and are more likely to express grievances about their circumstances—than less highly identified group members (Huddy, in press). This is difficult to explain if grievances simply reflect the realities of social context. It is easier to explain, however, if highly identified individuals are assumed to internalize more completely the politicized meaning of being a member of a disadvantaged group and to endorse associated beliefs about discrimination and the systemic origins of inequality.

Normative Fit and Stable Meaning

Thus, self-categorization theorists argue that the meaning of an identity varies with perceptual context, as conveyed by the comparative fit between a category label and the relative attributes of ingroup and outgroup members. Yet this is somewhat at odds with the notion of normative fit (another ingredient in identity salience), which implies extreme stability in the meaning of an identity. This

tension creates confusion over the relative stability of identity salience and meaning, and raises nagging questions about how identities and their content develop and change. As Reicher and Hopkins (2001) noted, this creates an image "of a world of constantly shifting contexts and constantly varying self-categories, but of no systematic movement" (p. 40).

I had originally argued that groups are often treated as if they are immutable within social identity theory, a claim challenged by Oakes. My concern is linked to the way in which normative fit is handled by self-categorization researchers, especially in studies in which characteristics such as age, gender, or nationality are made salient and assumed to have a well-understood set of attributes (Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2001). As an example, consider work by Reynolds et al. (2000) on the traits used by Australian university and TAFE (vocational) students to describe themselves and members of the other group. The researchers' primary concern was to document the link among trait valence, trait typicality, and ingroup bias. The central point here is that the attributes of university and TAFE students were assumed to be constant in this setting; a small control group of university students rated other university students as intellectual, ambitious, and analytical whereas they rated TAFE students as down-to-earth, practical, and realistic. These typical group characteristics were not examined as a function of the immediate situation and were effectively regarded as fixed in this research. My concern is that meaning is more complex than is implied by this approach; it differs among individual group members and can develop over time in response to external events (although not necessarily in response to the details of every situation).

In summary, there is a general tension within self-categorization theory over the extent to which identities are generally fluid or relatively stable in meaning. The overall picture is one of ever-changing identities in the context of quite stable group attributes. Unfortunately this lends little insight into how category meaning develops over time, or in response to competing political rhetoric concerning the qualities of group members. It also sheds little insight on identity development. How can identities mean different things in different situations and produce divergent consequences, even while anchored by very fixed and stable qualities? Under what circumstances might a politician succeed in shifting the meaning of political identity? Are there limits to the success of such attempts? What types of individuals would be most susceptible to attempts to politically manipulate the meaning of group identity? What types of political appeals or external events are most likely to strengthen social identity? These questions are of interest to political psychologists, but self-categorization theory does not offer any clear set of answers to them at present.

Accessibility and Individual Differences

Oakes argues that category salience, and hence identity development, is not simply a feature of situations but rather is an interaction between category fit and an individual's readiness to apply a category in a given situation. This is an important claim because I had originally criticized social identity theorists for paying too little attention to individual differences in the process of identity development. As described by Oakes, readiness to apply a category depends on "the perceiver's context-specific goals, priorities, values, perspective, and so forth." This is a very broad list, raising questions about whether the concept of readiness allows for very precise predictions about identity adoption.

Self-categorization researchers have narrowed this list down to some extent, by focusing on the preexisting strength of group identification as one of the central characteristics that determines group members' readiness to apply a category to themselves (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Oakes et al., 1991; Spears et al., 1999; Turner, 1999; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). There is some murkiness however over whether readiness and, by extension, the strength of group identification is a facet of individuals or of the collective. Haslam et al. (1999) stated that readiness or the accessibility of a category "is conferred by societies, cultures, and ideologies" (p. 810), although this makes it more difficult to understand why identity differs in strength among group members. Nonetheless, if we assume that readiness is a feature of individuals, the concept of readiness places researchers in the odd position of arguing that identities are quite variable across situations and yet are based on an underlying, stable level of identification. In general, the origins of identity strength remain untested and largely unexplained, creating a serious problem for political psychologists who are keenly interested in understanding the factors that govern identity strength.

Work by Spears et al. (1999) provides an exception to this trend, as noted by Oakes. They argue that identity strength is a function of the combined forces that influence identity salience within a given context. This is an interesting idea that deserves closer empirical scrutiny. Does identity strength shift after an individual has been placed in a situation in which the comparative context highlights a very different aspect of group membership than embodied within usual stereotypes? How long does this endure over time? Are strong group identifiers immune from such effects? In one of the few studies to contrast identity strength with contextual factors, Veenstra and Haslam (2000) clearly found that preexisting identity strength had far greater impact on collective action among members of the Australian Services Union than did the manipulated context in which some union members were reminded of a current dispute between the government and the union move-ment and others were not. More research along these lines is needed to examine the relationship between identity strength and context and to illuminate the process of identity development.

Gradations in Identity Strength

In my original critique, I argued that social identity theory does not allow for shades of identity. Oakes counters that this is not the case, and that there are a series of studies that have focused on the measurement of identity strength. Her claim is true, as I note above. What remains in dispute is how well the theory allows for such gradations in identity strength. I had originally criticized social identity theory for viewing identity as either social or personal but not accommodating something in between that might account for degrees of identity. This view is challenged by Oakes, who claims that social identity researchers emphasize an identity continuum that ranges from personal to collective.

At best, self-categorization researchers are ambivalent on this point. Reynolds et al. (2001), for example, stated that "people can categorize themselves as individuals (in contrast to other individuals) in terms of their personal identities, or they can categorize themselves as a group (in contrast to other groups) in terms of social identity" (p. 428). That sounds very all-or-none to me. They went on to claim that there is actually a "psychological discontinuity" between acting as an individual and acting as a group member. In a similar vein, Oakes, Haslam, and Turner (1998) have suggested that "shifts toward social identity produce *depersonalization* of self-perception and behavior" (p. 77, emphasis in original). This does not leave much room for a continuum. Turner (1999) allowed for the prospect of a continuum by suggesting that self-categorization researchers have moved closer to the view that both personal and social identities could be salient at the same time. Nonetheless, he went on to state that "the perceptual effects of the different levels [social or personal] will still tend to work against each other as a function of their relative strength" (p. 11).

Moreover, social identity researchers have typically viewed one's placement on this continuum as a function of situations, not individuals (Tajfel, 1978). Thus, once behavior has fallen into the realm of the social, it is "to a large extent independent of individual differences" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 44). In other words, once group loyalties are evoked, there is uniform behavior among group members. An intermediate sense of loyalty can arise as a function of situations—when feelings of both personal and group loyalty are evoked—resulting in a middling sense of affiliation. But a theory of group identity that rests heavily on the power of context does not really explain why some individuals are more fully committed group members than others, and why this commitment is relatively stable across situations. Thus, even though Tajfel referred to individual group members' differing levels of commitment, there is nothing in the theory that explicitly accounts for this.

Whether personal and social identities are discrete or form part of a continuum is especially critical to the notion of identity strength. If identities are either social or personal, it is hard to understand why they would vary in strength among group members. If, on the other hand, they reflect a mixture of personal and social identity

attributes, it is easier to understand how some individuals might feel closer than others to the typical group profile, resulting in grades of identity strength. A closer examination of identity development would shed light on these issues and align theory with the growing use among social identity researchers of scales that tap subjective identity strength.

Further exploration of individual differences in identity acquisition also seems indispensable to understanding degrees of identity strength. Oakes makes clear that identity strength is not a function of "fixed aspects of cognitive structure or personality." But this resistance to examining individual differences in identity strength hinders the application of self-categorization theory to political behavior. The individual strength of ethnic and racial identities is quite stable over time. This finding parallels evidence on the temporal stability of political beliefs and values (Sears & Levy, in press). What causes this stability? It could be, as Oakes suggests, that it derives from stable social reality and norms. But how does a strong identity arise in the first place? Why do some group members adopt group membership more readily than others? It will be difficult to answer these questions without acknowledging differences among group members in the degree to which they fit notions of a typical group member in some chronic sense. It is also worth considering whether there are personality characteristics that propel some individuals toward group membership. When it comes to politically relevant identities such as feminism, environmentalism, or conservatism, an analysis of individuals' long-standing political values and beliefs will play a central role in understanding the adoption and development of group identity.

Social Identity Theory and Political Psychology

Work on social identity proceeds at a breathtaking pace within social psychology (Turner, 1999). Research has taken several interesting and new directions that hold considerable importance for political psychology. The movement away from the minimal group studies is encouraging. The direct assessment of identity strength is critical. In this respect, research by Ellemers and Branscombe on the impact of identity strength is particularly welcome (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2002; Spears et al., 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1995). As an example, consider research by Branscombe et al. (1999) on the interaction between threat and group identification. They uncovered evidence that highly identified group members may react to threat with a show of solidarity, whereas low identifiers scramble to distance themselves from the group. This finding holds important implications for political psychologists.

The troubling reality, however, is that social identity theory has not accounted well for the development of an enduring sense of identity strength that spans situations. Social identity researchers tend to reject the view that such differences arise from individual differences and instead list "momentary and sometimes more long-standing crystallization of past contextual influences and ongoing alle-

giances" (Spears et al., 1999, p. 61). But this is very vague for what may become the central variable within social identity research. Acknowledging the prospect of stable individual differences in identity strength does not negate the effects of context completely; rather, it places clear limits on it. It also helps to sidestep the problem of determining the causal role of identity strength when it is both a product of the situation and shapes reactions to the same situation, when it "can be a dependent and an independent variable" (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 1999, p. 3).

Ultimately, social identity research is moving in a positive direction to acknowledge the importance of preexisting identities and group norms both theoretically and empirically. But the theory needs greater flexibility in accounting for the development of stable norms and identities. The continued emphasis within self-categorization theory on the power of situations is highly limiting and hinders the ability to study identity strength and meaning independently of specific situations. Moving away from a singular emphasis on situations and the power of perception as the cardinal influence on identity development and group-related behavior may reduce the theory's theoretical parsimony, but may increase its psychological reality. This would certainly facilitate the acceptance of a social identity approach among political psychologists.

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