

## **From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory**

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*Interest in the concept of identity has grown exponentially within both the humanities and social sciences, but the discussion of identity has had less impact than might be expected on the quantitative study of political behavior in general and on political psychology more specifically. One of the approaches that holds the most promise for political psychologists is social identity theory, as reflected in the thinking of Henri Tajfel, John Turner, and colleagues. Although the theory addresses the kinds of problems of interest to political psychologists, it has had limited impact on political psychology because of social identity theorists' disinclination to examine the sources of social identity in a real world complicated by history and culture. In this review, four key issues are examined that hinder the successful application of social identity theory to political phenomena. These key issues are the existence of identity choice, the subjective meaning of identities, gradations in identity strength, and the considerable stability of many social and political identities.*

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Interest in the concept of identity has grown exponentially during the last decade or so within both the humanities and social sciences. Postmodern theorists in the humanities have challenged traditional conceptions of identity by arguing that the fixed subject of liberal humanistic thinking is an anachronism that should be replaced by a more flexible individual whose identity is fluid, contingent, and socially constructed (Butler, 1990; Novotny, 1998; Villancourt Rosenau, 1992; Young, 1997). Social scientists have also intensified their longstanding interest in the concept of identity in recent years (Jenkins, 1996). Sociologists have pondered and explored the tension between individual identity and the constraints of social structure (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1996; Stryker, 1980). Anthropologists have examined the cultural expression of identity, its meanings, and how it is maintained at group boundaries (Barth, 1969; Cohen, 1986). Social psychologists have focused

on the multifaceted and situationally contingent nature of individual identity (Gergen, 1971; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Markus, 1977). They have also identified social identity as a powerful ingredient in the development of ingroup bias and intergroup conflict (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

The discussion of identity has had less impact than might be expected, however, on the quantitative study of political behavior in general and on political psychology more specifically. Despite the recent emergence of identity politics around the world, researchers of political behavior have been slow to incorporate the concept of identity into their empirical studies. This seems odd, given that demands for group respect and recognition are at the heart of new social movements that argue for the rights of women, religious minorities, diverse ethnic and racial groups, and gays and lesbians (Taylor, 1994). Such movements cannot be explained away as a simple quest for material gain or tangible benefits, and they seem to call for an explanation that incorporates the notion of identity (see also Monroe, Hankin, & Van Vechten, 2000).

Given their political impact, the emergence of strong social and political identities ought to be of interest to political psychologists, and a theoretical approach is needed to advance the study of identity within political science. One of the approaches that holds most promise for political psychologists is social identity theory, as reflected in the thinking of Henri Tajfel, John Turner, and colleagues (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1996; Turner et al., 1987).<sup>1</sup> Social identity theory is useful for several reasons. It has spawned an enormous number of studies in a diverse group of countries (see Brewer & Brown, 1998). Its key findings, perhaps the most famous of which is the emergence of ingroup favoritism under the most minimal of conditions, have been widely replicated (Brewer, 1979; Brown, 1995). It has also generated testable hypotheses that can be applied to a wide range of groups, including those linked to politics. Finally, it addresses the kinds of issues of interest to political psychologists—intergroup conflict, conformity to group norms, the effects of low group status and the conditions under which it generates collective action, and the factors that promote the categorization of oneself and others into groups.

Nonetheless, I believe social identity theory has had less impact on political psychology than it might have had otherwise because of various shortcomings and omissions in its research program. In the spirit of constructive dialogue, I critically evaluate the utility of social identity theory for political psychology by identifying

<sup>1</sup> As will become clear, I focus on social identities and social identity theory but ignore a second strand of political psychology that has defined identity as more truly individual, “something about who persons are in a deep psychological sense” (Young, 1997, p. 32). Inspired by the work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, political psychologists working in this tradition have investigated, for example, the psychology of individual leaders, the mindset of altruists, and the psychological development of terrorists (Crenshaw, 1986; Monroe, 1994; Monroe et al., 2000).

several key issues that hinder its application to political phenomena. I use this critique to outline a research agenda on the nature and impact of identity that cuts across political and social psychology. I begin with a brief summary of political research that has incorporated social identity theory, or notions of identity more generally, into research on intergroup relations. This is followed by a brief overview of social identity theory. I then explore in greater detail the challenges posed by political research for social identity theory. Throughout, I argue that social identity theorists' disinclination to examine the sources of social identity in a real world complicated by history and culture has placed serious limits on the theory's application to political psychology.

### Current Research on Political Identity

There are several strands of research in political psychology that have incorporated the notion of identity. One research strand has emerged around questions of national identity, patriotism, and multiculturalism. An example is provided by Citrin's and Sears' investigations of American identity. They have examined the subjective meaning of being American and uncovered a consensus that it depends on support for the key American values of equality and individualism. Nonetheless, they have also discovered contested aspects of American identity that concern the need to believe in God or speak up for one's country in order to be considered a "true American" (Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990; Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2000).<sup>2</sup> And it is these contentious aspects of American identity that mediate the political consequences of national identity. Individuals who support the 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 et al., 1990; Citrin et al., 2000). Other researchers have also found that the political effects of patriotism depend on its subjective meaning (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999).

Sears and Citrin also uncovered substantial evidence that members of diverse ethnic and racial groups in the United States identify primarily as American and only secondarily as members of their ethnic or racial group. This is at odds with the predictions of social identity theory, which suggests that minority group membership should be extremely salient to African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, thus overwhelming national identity (Citrin et al., 2000; Sears, Citrin,

<sup>2</sup> In a California poll, some 40% of respondents thought that believing in God was important in "making someone a true American." In a national sample (National Opinion Research Center, 1996), 54% of all respondents felt that being a Christian was important in "making someone a true American."

Vidanage, & Valentino, 1994; Sears & Henry, 1999).<sup>3</sup> The inability of simple group salience to account for ethnic identity is reinforced in a study by Gurin, Hurtado, and Peng (1994) on national and ethnic identity among Mexican Americans. They found that Mexican Americans who regularly come into contact with Anglos, and for whom Mexican ethnicity is therefore highly salient, are no more likely to hold national (Mexican) or ethnic identities (e.g., Chicano) than are other Mexican Americans. This raises important questions for social identity theory about the extent to which the salience of one's ethnic or racial group—the key ingredient in identity development for many social identity researchers—explains the emergence of ethnic and racial identities.

Taken together, research on ethnic and national identities suggests at a minimum that identity formation cannot be simply explained by the salience of a group designation. Rather, it hints at the first of four key issues—the subjective meaning of identities—that I believe need to be addressed by social identity researchers before the theory can be successfully applied to political phenomena. As research on patriotism demonstrates, American identity does not mean the same thing to all Americans. And it is the meaning of American identity, not its existence, that determines its political consequences. Yet social identity researchers have tended to ignore this subjective aspect of identities, paying considerable attention to the existence of simple group boundaries while ignoring their internal meaning.

In a second, related strand of research on ethnic and racial identities, strong identities have been found to undercut national unity and promote intolerance and intergroup antipathies. Thus, Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, and Pratto (1997) found that a strong identity as a member of a subordinate group in the United States or Israel (e.g., African Americans in the United States, Arabs in Israel) results in a diminished sense of patriotism. Likewise, Gibson and Gouws (1999) found that strong racial and ethnic identities among South Africans increase their perceived need for group solidarity, which in turn produces greater antipathy toward outgroups, increases the perception that such groups pose a threat, and promotes intolerance. These findings build on a large body of work that documents the importance of subjective group membership in shaping political attitudes and behavior (Conover, 1988; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981).

On the surface, these results appear compatible with social identity theory because they suggest that membership in a salient minority results in ingroup identity and outgroup antipathy. Yet upon closer examination, it is clear that the crucial ingredient in the development of outgroup antipathy in these studies is the existence of a strong, internalized subjective identity, not simple group membership. Moreover, it is clear that not everyone identifies strongly with their ethnic or racial group. These findings thus raise two additional challenges for social identity

<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Sidanius et al. (1997) reported that black students who identify with their race are less patriotic than black students who do not. This finding contradicts Sears and Citrin's results and is more consistent with the predictions of social identity theory.

theory. First, how do we explain an individual group member's decision to identify as a group member? This aspect of choice has typically been ignored by social identity researchers whose key experimental paradigm—the minimal intergroup situation—assigns members to groups and simply assumes the uniform development of group identity. Second, social identity theorists typically regard social identity as an all-or-none phenomenon. When the group is salient, group identity is paramount. When group membership is not salient, individual identity dominates. But how then do we account for identities of variable strength that persist across situations? When assessed over time, a wide range of group identities demonstrate remarkable stability in both their nature (e.g., African American) and strength. I believe it is difficult to adapt social identity theory to political phenomena without coming to terms with both issues—identity choice and gradations in identity strength.

A third strand of research in political psychology has focused on the nature of political identities, including an identification with a major political party or the adoption of an ideological moniker as a term of self-description (Abrams, 1994; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998; Kelly, 1989). Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Ethier (1995) examined the social nature of political identities such as conservative, environmentalist, liberal, pacifist, radical, and socialist, concluding that they “would expect predictions from social identity theory to be most applicable to ethnic, religious, [and] political” identities because they are more “collective in nature” than other individual aspects of identity (p. 286).

My own research on feminist identity provides an example of this approach. I apply social identity theory to the development of feminist identity and examine the ease with which feminist identity changes in response to information about the social and political characteristics of feminists and their opponents (Huddy, 1997b, 1998). My findings support the extension of social identity theory to political identities and at the same time challenge the theory's view of identities as highly fluid. In support of a social identity approach, I find that feminist identity depends on feeling similar to the types of women depicted as feminists, independently of their beliefs (Huddy, 1998). At the same time, I uncover considerable stability in feminist identity that is at odds with Turner and other social categorization researchers' view that social identities are highly changeable (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992; Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995). In essence, I find that it is difficult to reverse cultural definitions of a typical feminist and, more important, such culturally established group prototypes create a powerful source of identity stability (Huddy, 1997b). The considerable stability evinced by diverse political identities, not just feminist identity, provides an important fourth challenge to social identity theory that has previously gone unexplored.

### Social Identity Theory: A Brief Overview

In reality, there are two distinct branches of social identity theory: the version developed by Tajfel (1981) and Tajfel and Turner (1979), known as social identity theory, and an offshoot developed by Turner and colleagues, referred to as self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). Both theories acknowledge the origins of social identity in cognitive and motivational factors, although they place differing emphasis on them (Hogg, 1996, p. 67). The earliest versions of social identity theory developed by Tajfel (1981) and Tajfel and Turner (1979) placed key emphasis on the psychological motivations that lead a group member to endorse or disavow an existing group membership. Turner et al. (1987) have described this motive as a need among group members “to differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity” (p. 42).

In contrast, the self-categorization theory developed by Turner et al. (1987) has concentrated on the cognitive underpinnings of social identity. Self-categorization theory built on Tajfel’s earliest cognitive formulations to further develop the cognitive factors that promote categorization of oneself as a group member. As noted by Turner et al. (1987), self-categorization theory is a “cognitive elaboration” of Tajfel’s earlier theory that provides an explanation for how individuals come to identify and “act as a group” (p. 42).

#### *Categorization and Salience*

One of the key insights of both social identity theory and self-categorization theory is that principles governing the categorization of everyday objects can be extended to explain the categorization of people, including oneself, into social groupings. Although this connection between identity formation and the principles of categorization is developed most fully within self-categorization theory, the influence of categorization research on social identity theory was present from the theory’s very beginning. Tajfel’s early research and theorizing (1981) began from a purely cognitive perspective, attempting to explain the perceptual distortions that accompanied categorization (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963; for a review of this early work, see Eiser, 1996).

Tajfel then went on to document the astonishing effects of simple social categorization, which are quite well known by now. Blue eyes, a preference for the paintings of Wasily Kandinsky over those of Paul Klee, and calling some people dot overestimators and others underestimators were sufficient to produce a preference for fellow group members and to elicit discrimination against outsiders (Allen & Wilder, 1975; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Doise & Sinclair, 1973; Tajfel, Billig, & Bundy, 1971; for a summary, see Brewer, 1979). The experimental situation popularized by Tajfel and his followers, in which groups were designated by nothing other than a common label, became known as the minimal intergroup situation (for a review, see Diehl, 1990). In these studies “the

subjects believed they had been assigned to groups simply for administrative convenience”; they had no contact with each other, and no reason to believe that they held shared interests (Turner et al., 1987, p. 27). As noted by Turner (1996), Tajfel had not expected this situation to work. In fact, Turner wrote that “his [Tajfel’s] idea was to establish a baseline of no intergroup behavior” and then examine what was additionally needed to foster intergroup discrimination (p. 15).

Not surprisingly, Tajfel concluded that cognitive factors—the perceptual distortions that arise from the accentuation of intergroup differences—could not on their own explain the emergence of intergroup discrimination and, in response, modified social identity theory to include additional motivational factors (Wilder, 1986, pp. 315–316). However, Tajfel implicitly assumed that individuals labeled as group members would categorize themselves as such and internalize the group label as a social identity. Thus, according to social identity theory, additional motivational factors are needed to account for the development of intergroup discrimination, but mere categorization is sufficient to explain the creation of social identity. Unfortunately, the assertion that the simple designation of group boundaries leads to social identity has received considerably less attention than the prediction that ethnocentrism and intergroup discrimination arise as a direct product of categorization.

There is some evidence that category salience shapes identity. For instance, McGuire and colleagues reported evidence that children in an ethnic minority in their classroom (and whose ethnicity is therefore more salient) are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their ethnicity; children in families where there are more members of the opposite gender are more likely to mention their gender when describing themselves (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). In a similar vein, Hogg and Turner (1985) found that increasing the salience of study participants’ gender increases the likelihood that they think of themselves in gender-stereotypic terms. These findings received confirmation in a meta-analysis conducted by Mullen, Brown, and Smith (1992) in which group salience was found to promote the development of ingroup bias across a large number of studies.

Self-categorization theorists built on this early work to develop more fully the cognitive origins of identity, drawing extensively from developments in categorization research that yielded a new way of looking at categories (Lakoff, 1987; Neisser, 1987). This paradigm shift involves moving away from a “classical” view of category membership, as defined by a set of clear rules or a set of common features, to view categories instead as a fuzzy set with unclear boundaries and a “graded” or probabilistic structure in which some members are rated as more typical or better members of the category than others. Lakoff (1987) referred to this as “prototype theory” and argued that it generalizes to social categories in which stereotypes can be thought of as equivalent to a category prototype. A prototype can either be the most typical group member—an actual person—or a fictional member who embodies the most common or most frequent attributes shared among



group members (Rosch, 1978). Self-categorization researchers believe that it is one's perceived similarity to the prototypic group member that plays a key role in the formation and development of social identity (Hogg, 1996; Hogg & Hains, 1996; McGarty, Turner, Hogg, David, & Wetherell, 1992; Turner et al., 1987).

Self-categorization researchers also hold an extremely labile view of social identities that seems driven almost completely by one's immediate perceptual context. In a paper on Australian stereotypes of Americans, Turner and colleagues stated 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 et al., 1992, p. 5). From their perspective, identities vary in part because social categories (such as age or gender) vary in salience across situations. Indeed, one of the key tenets of self-categorization theory is that individuals constantly shift back and forth between an individual and a social identity (Brewer & Weber, 1994; Simon, 1997; Turner et al., 1987).

It is not just the salience of existing categories, however, that influences the lability of social identities, according to self-categorization researchers: They believe that categories themselves change across social settings. According to self-categorization theory, individuals are more likely to think of themselves as members of social groups under conditions in which the use of a group label maximizes the similarities between oneself and other group members, and heightens one's differences with outsiders (Turner et al., 1987). Thus, categories and their prototypes spontaneously emerge and change with the attributes of category insiders and outsiders. Hogg et al. (1995) echoed this position when they noted that "social identity is highly dynamic: it is responsive, in both type and content, to intergroup dimensions of immediate social comparative contexts" (p. 261). Here, type refers to varying category salience, and content implies a change in the group prototype. In other words, Turner and colleagues believe that group prototypes vary across social settings and thus contribute further to identity shifts.

### *Motivational Influences*

Social identity is not solely a cognitive matter, however. As Tajfel recognized, there has to be something more to identity to account for ingroup bias and outgroup discrimination in the minimal intergroup situation. To round out social identity theory, Tajfel added motivation to what began essentially as a cognitive model of intergroup perception and discrimination, describing this addition as his "second great idea" (Turner, 1996, p. 16). According to Tajfel, a need for positive distinctiveness drives social identity. This means that group identity is likely to emerge among members of a high-status group because membership positively distinguishes group members from outsiders; in contrast, the development of group identity is less certain among members of low-status groups who need to additionally develop an identity around alternative, positively valued group attributes



(social creativity) or fight to change the group's negative image (social change) before membership can enhance their status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Several strands of research demonstrate the motivational underpinnings of social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that one option available to members of low-status groups, especially groups in which membership is permeable, is to deny one's group membership or identify with an alternative higher status group. They referred to this strategy as social mobility, and several researchers have provided evidence of its existence among members of low-status groups (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996; Taylor, Moghaddam, Gamble, & Zellerer, 1987; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Members of low-status groups can also resort to the tactics of social creativity and social change to enhance their group's standing. Again, there is evidence to back this up. For instance, ingroup members tend to elevate the importance of positive ingroup characteristics that confer superiority over an outgroup in defining their group (Mummendey & Schreiber, 1984; van Knippenberg, 1978; van Knippenberg & van Oers, 1984). Lalonde (1992) observed this strategy in action among members of a losing hockey team who acknowledged that their competitors held superior skills but rated their opponents more negatively on other dimensions. Jackson et al. (1996) found that members of a negative group attempted to change their group's status by rating an undesirable attribute more positively or rating the group more favorably on other comparative dimensions.

These findings on positive distinctiveness have their parallel in research on ethnic identity in which identity is more strongly developed among members of higher status groups. Huddy and Virtanen (1995) found that national identity is more strongly developed among Cubans than among other Latinos because they believe their social status far exceeds that of Mexican Americans or Puerto Ricans. Ethier and Deaux (1994) showed that Hispanic students in their first year of college at an Ivy League university who find the university environment threatening to their Hispanic identity view their group as having lower status, which in turn weakens their identification as Hispanic. In a similar vein, Swann and Wyer (1997) found that men are more likely to think of themselves in gender-stereotypic terms—and thus identify with their gender—when in the minority, whereas women, members of a lower status group, are not as likely to stereotype themselves when in the minority.

Some researchers have reasonably equated the need for positive distinctiveness with the maintenance of personal self-esteem, and they argue that group members with low self-esteem should be more motivated than others to boost the group's standing and exhibit ingroup bias. However, a number of studies indicate that it is people with high, not low, self-esteem who are most likely to derogate an outgroup in order to protect group standing (Crocker & McGraw, 1984; Crocker, McGraw, Thompson, & Ingerman, 1987; Long & Spears, 1998; for a summary of findings, see Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Recent research that distinguishes between personal and group esteem suggests that the two need to be separated to understand

the way in which positive distinctiveness works. There is every reason to think that individuals would prefer to be associated with positively esteemed groups, irrespective of their level of self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Indeed, Mullen et al.'s (1992) meta-analysis uncovered significantly higher levels of ingroup bias among members of high-status groups (although there is not complete unanimity on this point; see Long & Spears, 1998).

More recent research suggests several other motives for the development of ingroup identity and ingroup bias, although these await further empirical verification. Brewer (1991, 1993) suggested that ingroup identity depends on a balance between the need to belong and the need for uniqueness, countervailing motives that she combined within optimal distinctiveness theory. According to Brewer, identities need to confer the optimal mix of distinctive and common attributes, thus explaining why members of majority groups evince weaker ingroup identities than do members of minority groups.

There is also continued debate over the role of common fate and outgroup threat as a determinant of ingroup bias, with some studies continuing to report the emergence of ingroup bias only under conditions of intergroup competition (Brewer, 1979; Insko, Schopler, Kennedy, & Dahl, 1992; Rabbie, Schot, & Visser, 1989). For example, Flippen, Hornstein, Siegal, and Weitzman (1996) contrasted the influence of salience and threat on ingroup bias, and they found that it only emerges when group members are threatened by outsiders.

Finally, Mullin and Hogg (1998) have introduced an additional motive to account for ingroup bias. They argued that ingroup bias emerges in the minimal intergroup situation because group members feel uncertain about their views and identify with other group members, especially typical group members, to dispel this unpleasant feeling. This need for certainty was first hinted at by Tajfel (1969), who suggested that the search for coherence may underlie the development of stereotyping and prejudice.

### **Challenges to Social Identity Theory**

This brief overview indicates that social identity theorists have spent time thinking about both the origins of social identity and the development of ingroup bias. Unfortunately, researchers have not allocated their efforts evenly to these two issues. Research findings provide ample empirical evidence of the consequences of group membership for intergroup conflict but shed considerably less light on the development of identity. This is a serious omission for political behavior researchers who are interested not only in what happens once group distinctions are made salient but also in the development of identities, especially strong identities that endure across situations and over time. Evidence uncovered by social identity researchers that simply belonging to a group fuels ingroup bias (in the absence of intergroup competition) is a powerful addition to research on intergroup relations.

But political behavior researchers are often struck by the absence of group conflict despite the existence of distinct and salient groups, or by the weakness of identities (e.g., Asian American) among members of salient groups. This raises a politically important question: Why, despite salient group distinctions, do individuals vary in the degree to which they identify with a group? The answer matters if strong identities motivate group-related action (see below). Each of us has many potential identities derived from diverse group memberships, but relatively few of these identities develop or become politically consequential.

Social identity theory has been faulted for ignoring the powerful identities that create the kinds of intergroup conflicts of interest to political psychologists. Nonetheless, I would like to make a case for studying identities that vary on a continuum from weak to strong. It is important to understand what turns a weak or nonexistent identity into something that can motivate ethnic hatred. But this process would be difficult to understand if all we examined were the very weak identities that arise in the minimal intergroup situation, or the very powerful identities that characterize ethnic or national conflicts. Iris Marion Young (1997) provided an example of this strengthening process in her discussion of women as a social collective. She drew on an incident in a novel by Meredith Tax to describe the transformation of a group of Russian Jewish immigrant women, on the lower east side of Manhattan a century ago, from women who shopped at the same butcher to a collective that organized a store boycott to protest local chicken prices. In this example, a weak former identity is strengthened to the point where it motivates collective action. The process underlying this transformation deserves greater scrutiny than it has received so far.

### Acquired Versus Ascribed Identities

The first challenge that confronts a politically relevant social identity theory is to account for the existence of identities acquired by choice. The historical development of identity from something ascribed by others to something acquired by oneself has been discussed with great erudition by political theorist Charles Taylor (1989) and psychologist Roy Baumeister (1986). Both alluded to the shift in modern identity from attributes that were essentially determined at birth in medieval times—one's religion, occupation, and economic status in life—to identities that are much less deterministic and more subject to choice in the modern era. Religion, education, occupation, sexual preference, and domestic roles can now be fashioned at will to a much greater extent than was possible in the past (Giddens, 1991). This ability to recreate and refashion one's identity many times over is arguably at its extreme in contemporary American society, characterized by its high levels of residential mobility, second careers, and high divorce rates. As a Polish immigrant to the United States says about her American acquaintances, "everyone is always on the move and undergoing enormous changes, so they lose track of

who they've been and have to keep tabs on who they're becoming" (Sarup, 1996, p. 5). This refashioning of identity goes hand-in-hand with the modern desire for authenticity and external recognition—finding one's true self and having it acknowledged by others (Taylor, 1994).

The importance of individual choice in identity acquisition holds even for what we think of as quite fixed characteristics such as race and ethnicity. This is well documented by Nagel (1995), who examined the increasing number of people who report an American Indian race in the U.S. Census. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of people identifying as American Indian more than tripled, from just over 500,000 to almost 2 million. As noted by Nagel, this cannot be explained solely by an increasing birth rate; it also reflects "ethnic switching." Nagel found the greatest increase in American Indian identity among individuals living in urban areas or non-Indian states without reservations, who have intermarried, speak English exclusively, and do not assign their children an Indian race. In other words, American Indian identity has increased among those individuals "residing in parts of the country that permit a wide range of ethnic options" (p. 953). The ability to acquire (or lose) American Indian identity is less prevalent among Native Americans living on reservations, for example, who are assigned a race or ethnicity for official administrative purposes.

The existence of acquired identities thus poses a crucial challenge for social identity researchers. As should be clear from the preceding review of social identity theory, the minimal intergroup situation on which so many social identity studies depend simply does not allow for identity choice. In these studies, participants are essentially assigned to groups and are assumed to internalize their group membership. Research participants are randomly assigned to be dot overestimators or underestimators, lovers of the paintings of Klee or Kandinsky. There is no choice of identity and no exploration of individual differences in the willingness to adopt such experimentally ascribed identities [see Perreault & Bourhis (1999) for a similar criticism of the minimal intergroup situation]. In the extreme, social identity theory researchers suggest that the salience of one's group membership is the sole determinant of identity. Gender identity should be paramount for women who work in male-dominated occupations or work settings. African Americans who work in predominantly white settings should have difficulty thinking of themselves in other than racial terms. But this remains a deeply deterministic view of identity development that omits individual choice. Salience, one of the key forces behind identity shifts (according to social identity researchers), is a feature of situations, not individuals.

Identity choice matters because it is a common feature of social identities outside the laboratory. But it may also enhance the development of ingroup cohesion and outgroup discrimination even within a lab setting. In one of the few social identity studies to examine acquired identities, Turner, Hogg, Turner, and Smith (1984) reported a study in which participants were either assigned or could choose to belong to one of two teams competing in a problem-solving exercise.

Members of winning teams indicated higher self-esteem and cohesion when they had been assigned to the team. But members who voluntarily chose their teams were more likely to report high self-esteem and group cohesion when they had lost, suggesting a stronger sense of group commitment when identity is acquired than when it is ascribed. Perreault and Bourhis (1999) extended this research to include the effects of identity acquisition on the development of outgroup discrimination. They found that group identification increases in strength with the sense that lab group membership is voluntary. Moreover, strong ingroup identification in this study increased discriminatory behavior against an outgroup in a resource allocation task.

### *Individual Differences in Identity Acquisition*

The notion that social identities are more often acquired than ascribed hints at the importance of individual differences in the process of identity acquisition, an issue that has been largely ignored by social identity researchers. Is there, for instance, individual variation in the general proclivity to identify with social groups? Duckitt (1989) suggested that authoritarian behavior can be explained in part by the stronger tendency of some individuals to identify with dominant social groups, such as whites in the United States or Christians in western Europe. Can such tendencies be accounted for by basic personality traits such as an intolerance of ambiguity, a need for coherence, or the absence of an openness to experience? Perhaps individuals who are less open to experience or intolerant of ambiguity prefer ascribed to acquired identities and feel uncomfortable with the myriad identity choices that confront individuals in contemporary society.

In one of the few studies to directly examine individual differences in identity acquisition, Perreault and Bourhis (1999) explored the effects of ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, and personal need for structure on strength of ingroup identification in an experimentally created lab group. They found that all three personality measures are correlated with strength of group identification, but that these relationships with identification appear to be driven by ethnocentrism. In other words, individuals who express antipathy toward outsiders are more likely to adopt an ingroup identity in the lab. In some ways, Perreault and Bourhis' findings raise more questions than they answer. What are the origins of a general dislike of outsiders? Does this drive the desire for an ingroup identity? Or are there additional underlying personality attributes that explain both ethnocentrism and the adoption of ingroup identity? Obviously, more research is needed to untangle the personality traits most likely to influence the adoption of group identity. Other individual differences that deserve consideration include the motivational factors discussed above as possible determinants of ingroup bias—high self-esteem, the need to belong, the need for uniqueness, and the need for certainty. The study by Perreault and Bourhis is an encouraging first step in this direction. It is extremely important for political psychologists to understand why some individuals in a given social

and political context adopt a group identity, whereas others in identical circumstances do not.

### *Group Differences in the Freedom to Acquire Identity*

Groups also differ in the extent to which they allow individuals the freedom to acquire or discard a group identity. Both a group's permeability and the degree of ambiguity surrounding group membership are likely to influence identity acquisition. Some studies have begun to examine the permeability of group boundaries, especially for groups that differ in social standing, and have found that group members are quite willing to discard membership in a low-status group (Jackson et al., 1996). Indeed, research by Wright (1997) suggests that boundary permeability need not be very extensive for group members to contemplate individual rather than collective solutions to problems of low ingroup status. This finding hints at the existence of weak group identities among members of permeable groups.

Permeability is not just a feature of highly fluid groups; it can also characterize membership in relatively fixed groups based on ethnic and regional boundaries. Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke (1999) found that East Germans differ in how easy they think it is for an East German person to be considered West German, and that individuals who think passing as West German is quite difficult hold stronger East German identities. In contrast, East Germans who view regional boundaries as relatively more permeable are more likely to adopt West German identity and are, in turn, more likely to think of themselves as just German.

Questions of group permeability raise concomitant questions about the influence of *external labeling* on identity acquisition. If group membership is obvious to others, it will be more difficult for a group member to avoid being labeled as such. It may be relatively easy for an East German to pass as someone from the West, but much more difficult for an African American to avoid being labeled black. Less permeable group boundaries and a higher incidence of external labeling should increase the likelihood that a group member will internalize group identity. Relevant external cues include skin color, gender, group-specific facial and other physical features, language, and cultural practices, although the latter two are obviously easier to change than overt physical characteristics. Conversely, attributes that can be hidden or disguised enhance the role of choice in identity acquisition (see McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Groups also vary in the ambiguity of group membership, a related but separate point. Social identity theory from its inception has assumed the existence of fixed and known group memberships. And empirical studies have concentrated on research with unambiguous naturally occurring groups or experimental groups with clearly defined boundaries. But membership in some groups does not neatly fit this profile. This may be especially true for groups defined on the basis of political ideology or beliefs. For many people, the boundaries of political groups (with the

exception of political clubs or organizations) are probably vague and difficult to discern. Is someone who endorses legalized abortion and needle exchange programs but also proposes smaller government and free-market principles a liberal? What is the demarcation point between liberal and moderate? At what point does moderate shade into conservative? These questions are difficult to answer, and they muddy popular understanding of ideological labels.

The boundaries of political categories are more vague than social categories based on ethnicity or race, for example. Although a person of mixed-race parentage might ponder whether to describe herself as black or Latino, there is no question that she can legitimately claim membership in one or both groups. But this is not the case for political categories. Thus, although it is possible to paraphrase Tajfel and define identification with various sociodemographic groups based on age, race, or ethnicity as a “self awareness of one’s objective membership in the group *and* a psychological sense of attachment to the group” (Conover, 1984, p. 761), this definition is more difficult to apply to groups whose membership criteria remain ambiguous. The impact of ambiguous group membership on identity acquisition and retention has received much less attention than the permeability of group boundaries, but it would not be surprising to find that it too inhibits the adoption of group identity, especially when group membership holds negative connotations.

### Boundary Versus Meaning

The existence of acquired identities leads to further questions about the basis for such identity choices. To better understand how identities are acquired, it is helpful to consider the distinction that has emerged in several different lines of research between *belonging* to a social category and internalizing its *meaning*. Anthropologist Frederick Barth (1969, 1981) called this the difference between nominal identity based on a name and virtual membership based on an experience. Others have referred to this as the difference between a category in which individuals are “united by some common characteristic” apparent to outsiders and a group in which members “are aware of their similarities” and define themselves on that basis (Jenkins, 1996, p. 23). Young (1990) construed this as the difference between a superficial association in which individuals retain their sense of individual identity and a group that constitutes part of the individual self. In her view, membership in an association is equivalent to adding another adjective to one’s self-description—analogue to acknowledgment of a common group boundary—but conveys little more about shared experiences or a common outlook. On the other hand, membership in a group shapes and influences an individual’s identity.

For me, this distinction embodies the difference between group boundaries and the meaning of group membership. As already noted, social identity research has focused on the extent to which group boundaries define group membership and



shape the adoption of group identity. But this emphasis on boundaries has occurred at the expense of the meaning of group membership (Deaux, 1993). If all group identities were simply ascribed to group members, a knowledge of group boundaries may be all that is needed to understand the consequences of group membership. But when group identities are acquired, the meaning of group membership may have a powerful influence over the voluntary adoption of identity and its consequences once acquired.

It is difficult for political psychologists to focus exclusively on group boundaries because the very process of labeling groups, and thus defining group boundaries, becomes ensnared with the meaning of group membership. Consider the labels for ethnic and racial groups in the United States. It is sobering to discover that the U.S. census has used a different set of categories for racial and ethnic groups in every national census (Martin, DeMaio, & Campanelli, 1990). The census classification of Mexican Americans affords an interesting example of this inconsistency. In 1930 Mexicans were counted as non-white; in 1940 they were considered as persons of Spanish mother tongue; in 1950 and 1960 they were regarded as white persons of Spanish surname, and in 1970 as persons of both Spanish surname and Spanish mother tongue (Fox, 1996). Disputes over the meaning of group membership also result in battles over who draws and defines group boundaries. The adoption of the term African American, championed by Jesse Jackson, carries with it notions of African ancestry that alter the meaning of black identity and may not appeal to all, or even many, black Americans (Martin, 1991). Feminists in the United States battled among themselves in the late 1960s and early 1970s over who could and who could not be rightfully considered a feminist, with conflicts erupting over one's political ideology, sexual preference, and the gender of one's children (Ryan, 1992).

An emphasis in social identity research on groups that lack meaning may seriously hamper our understanding of both identity acquisition and its consequences. Consider German nationalism. For obvious reasons, many Germans feel some lingering unease at the notion of strong German nationalism and resist a patriotic identity even when their German identity is made salient. As empirical evidence, Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky (1990) found that German students do not expect other Germans to evince ingroup bias against Israelis in a resource allocation task, but Israeli students predict the emergence of ingroup bias among Israelis against Germans. Quite clearly, such expectations arise from the history of relations between Germans and Jews, not the salience of their respective national identities.

In diverse groups, group members may attach different meanings to group identity (Cohen, 1986; Jenkins, 1996). Diverse meanings arise when the same group exists in different regions of a country or when the same group emerges among distinct national subgroups or subcultures. It can also occur when the meaning of group membership is contested, perhaps for political reasons. Such differences in meaning can have a dramatic impact on the consequences of identity, as seen above in research by Citrin and colleagues on American identity. Mexican

identity in the United States affords an example of this phenomenon. Mexican Americans born in the United States hold a binational identity as both American and Mexican American (Gurin et al., 1994). Individuals born in Mexico, however, associate being Mexican American with being Mexican and rarely think of themselves as just American. In addition, being Latino or Hispanic is tied to a politicized, pan-Hispanic identity for U.S.-born but not for Mexican-born individuals. Obviously, such findings suggest that it would be more difficult to unite non-U.S.-born Mexican Americans around the terms Hispanic or Latino, which they do not regard as inherently political.

To complicate matters further, the internal meaning of a group can be quite different from its meaning to outsiders (Cohen, 1986). Group members' attempts to elevate their group's standing and redefine negative identities play a role in this discrepancy. Group members may even choose to internalize a group identity because their conception of what group membership means is different from that of potential members who fail to adopt the identity. The important point is that we need to examine the conception of both insiders and outsiders to arrive at the meaning of group membership.

Of course, it is relatively easy to urge the further study of group meaning, but quite another matter to actually do so. Tragically, there is no shortcut. Meaning is created over time by culture and history and requires careful investigation. This sounds daunting, yet social identity theory suggests several key places to begin the search. I briefly consider four factors that help to imbue group membership with meaning: the valence of group membership, the defining social characteristics of typical group members, the core values associated with membership, and the characteristics of common outgroups who help to define what the ingroup is not.

*Valence of group membership.* As summarized in the earlier overview of social identity theory, identity development seems to be inhibited among groups that are viewed negatively, especially when group boundaries are permeable.<sup>4</sup> Individual differences in the perception of a group's valence may also help to account for identity development. Some Americans, for example, are proud of their overseas image and look forward to encountering fellow Americans outside the United States; others cringe when they hear an American accent in a Paris café and attempt to flee the scene as quickly as possible in anticipation of local anti-Americanism. It may be possible to transform such reluctant Americans into patriots under special circumstances, but it is certainly more difficult than for Americans who willingly embrace American identity. Moreover, the valence of identity depends on the meaning attached to the symbols of patriotism. Not surprisingly,

<sup>4</sup> There is some tension between the influence of low group status and group salience on identity acquisition. To the extent that low group status heightens group salience, it may actually enhance identity acquisition. But this effect needs to be distinguished from the effects of low group status independent of group salience, whose effects are quite opposite and serve to hinder the development of group identity.

Americans who came of age during Vietnam feel less patriotic and are less attached to symbols such as the flag than are older Americans of the World War II generation. These examples show the potential of studying the valence of group membership among those who do and do not identify with the group, and among those who can and cannot be reasonably considered potential group members.

*Identification with a prototype.* Self-categorization researchers have highlighted the importance of a group prototype or typical group member in defining group membership. The prototype approach suggests that greater attention should be paid to the types of people who typically exemplify group membership (and give it meaning). According to self-categorization theory, group members' similarity to the group prototype should enhance identity development. The defining characteristics of the prototype may also hold the key to understanding group members' behavior. An in-depth analysis of a group prototype should help to uncover the existing basis of similarity that drives group identity and the kinds of people who are most and least likely to adopt group identity. If conservative southern male congressional representatives in the United States exemplify the contemporary Republican, it would not be surprising to find that working women in the northeastern and western United States distance themselves from the Republican party. If Tony Blair is synonymous with the Labor party in Britain, blue-collar union members may be reluctant to identify as Labor party supporters. The news media are an especially good place to begin the search for the characteristics of prototypes that exemplify social and political groups, given the narrow range of people who appear in the news (Huddy, 1997a). Such "objective" analysis should be coupled with the subjective impressions of the group prototype among members of both the ingroup and the outgroup.

*Core values.* In addition to the characteristics of typical group members—overt signals that can be expressed in dress, language, and lifestyle—meaning can also be gleaned, according to Barth, via group members' basic value orientations. Fox (1996) provided a fascinating account of the effort to forge a pan-Hispanic identity in the United States through an emphasis on common values. In his view, one of the unifying themes that has emerged to describe Hispanic commonality is a shared support for populist democracy, with an emphasis on personal liberty and support for the "little guy." Indeed, Fox gave political values a more central role in the creation of a pan-Hispanic identity than shared history, a common language, or similar ethnic background.

Research by Schwartz et al. (1990) illustrates one way to assess the values underlying group membership. In their study of German and Israeli students referred to earlier, students ranked 19 terminal and 18 instrumental values on the basis of their own preference order and that of their national group. Not surprisingly, one's own views and those of one's group are related, although this link is stronger for Israeli than for German students. This suggests that an important source of national identity—shared values—is stronger among Israeli than among German

students and hints at an important source of weakened national identity among Germans.

*Differences from outgroups.* Outgroups do more than signal group boundaries; they also communicate information about what the group is not. This notion is integral to the view of categories advanced by Lakoff, Rosch, and others and has been fully incorporated into the thinking of self-categorization researchers. Yet almost no one has examined the portrayal of outgroup members to shed light on the meaning of category membership. What happens, for instance, when an appealing group emerges as the enemy? During the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment, Phyllis Schlafly helped to define the meaning of feminism for many women by demonstrating that homemakers and women who were not pursuing careers were outside the feminist label. The notion that outgroups help to define category membership is linked to Barth's (1981) view that much of the meaning of identity is created at its boundaries in interaction or dialogue with outgroup members. One obvious political implication of this finding is that group identity may be more diffuse and less intense in the absence of a clear outgroup to sharpen the meaning of group membership and identify the kinds of people who lie outside the group boundary.

### Shades of Group Identity

There is growing recognition among identity researchers that the effects of group membership depend to some degree on identity strength. This evidence is often interpreted as consistent with social identity theory, although I perceive inconsistencies here between an emphasis on identity strength and current thinking among social identity researchers. Mullin and Hogg (1998) provided an example of some of these inconsistencies. They acknowledged, for instance, that intergroup discrimination depends in part on "the degree of ingroup identification," but went on to discuss how group identity results in a depersonalization or a fusing with other group members that tends to reduce one's sense of individuality, minimize ingroup differences, and promote conformity to the group prototype. The loss of individual identity that accompanies the emergence of group identity sounds like an all-or-nothing phenomenon that does not easily accommodate shades of group identity.

I am concerned that the identity continuum advanced by social identity researchers, anchored at one end by social identities and at the other by aspects of individual identity, leads to a very stark view of identity that is at odds with reality. As we know from survey research, social identities are adopted by degrees and represent something intermediate between an all-encompassing group identity and a distinctively unique persona. This is certainly true for political identities. If anything, younger Americans demonstrate an increasing aversion to extreme political identities when asked to indicate whether they think of themselves as

strong or not-so-strong Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives (Abramson, 1976, 1979; Keith et al., 1992). The labels “independent” and “moderate” have increased in popularity while the number of strong identifiers has declined over the last several decades. In a similar vein, women are more likely to call themselves feminists if they can qualify feminist identity by indicating that they are not especially strong feminists (Huddy, Neely, & LaFay, 2000).

I believe these shades of identity arise from feeling closer to or farther away from a group prototype or key values endorsed by prototypic members. The existence of shaded identities only becomes clear once we move beyond a view of social identity as inclusion inside a group boundary to look more closely at the influence of meaning on identity development. Boundaries connote an all-or-nothing membership; meaning holds out the possibility of degrees of similarity. Forcing group members to think of themselves either as group members *or* as distinct individuals misses the complex nature of identity, which is simultaneously individual and social (Deaux, 1993; Jenkins, 1996).

More important, there is evidence from Branscombe and her colleagues (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1990, 1993) that shades of group identity influence the development of ingroup bias and outgroup derogation.<sup>5</sup> Other studies replicate their findings. Japanese students who identify strongly with their vocational school are less likely than weak identifiers to denigrate their fellow ingroup members after reading negative information about their group (Karasawa, 1991). Perreault and Bourhis (1999) found that individuals who identify more strongly with their group are more likely to discriminate against an outgroup in a resource allocation task. Germans with stronger regional identity feel more positively about their region than about the nation and demonstrate greater regional homogeneity (Simon, Kulla, & Zobel, 1995). Purdue students who identify strongly with their school exhibit higher levels of ingroup bias and ingroup pride (Jackson & Smith, 1999). Individuals with a strong identity as a member of a marginalized group (e.g., sexual and political) are more likely than those with a weak identity to accept their identity, share it with friends and family, and feel less estranged from society when they participate in a group-related electronic news group (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

There is even some suggestion that the strongest forms of identity may be the least affected by context. Kinket and Verkuyten (1997) differentiated strength of ethnic identity among Turkish and Dutch schoolchildren aged 10 to 13 who attend primary school in the Netherlands. They distinguished ethnic self-identification (“In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself to be . . .”) and self-description (using a measure analogous to Kuhn and McPartland’s Twenty Statements Test) from ethnic self-evaluation [using aspects of Luhtanen & Crocker’s (1992) self-esteem scale; e.g., “I feel good about being Turkish”] and the introjection of one’s ethnic

<sup>5</sup> For an exception, see Hinkle and Brown (1990).

group (“If someone said something bad about Turkish people, would you feel almost as if they had said something about you?”). They found that the highest (or strongest) level of identity (introjection) is unaffected by classroom context (e.g., percentage of Dutch and Turkish students), whereas the lowest (or weakest) level is most affected. As the authors noted, these findings suggest that social identity theory may have actually overestimated the effects of situational salience on identity by focusing on relatively weak identities created in the lab.

Political psychologists have always included measures of identity strength in their research, and this measurement approach finds vindication in the results of the recent social psychological studies reviewed here. But more needs to be done to incorporate the notion of identity strength into social identity theory, especially the transition from weak to strong identity. Identity strength can be assessed using the traditional approach, which asks whether one is a strong or not-so-strong identifier. But new approaches are also emerging in social psychological research. One of the most interesting of these is based on work by Aron and colleagues (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Smith and Henry (1996) developed Aron’s method to assess the extent to which automatic attitudes about a group’s attributes are incorporated into the self-concept. Group members who respond more rapidly to traits that are characteristic of both themselves and an ingroup are assumed to have internalized their group identity more completely. This approach may prove to be an important tool for examining individual differences in identity strength and may provide deeper insight into the process of identity development.

### Identity Stability

There is continued disagreement among researchers on the relative stability and fluidity of social and political identities. On the one hand, social identity researchers tend to emphasize the fluidity of identity, highlighting how identities change with social context. On the other hand, social identities such as partisan and ethnic identity demonstrate remarkable stability over time when assessed in surveys on social and political topics, and they are much more stable than a range of other social and political attitudes (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1990; Converse & Markus, 1979; Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Sears, 1983; Sears & Henry, 1999). The discrepancy between social identity researchers’ view of identities as highly fluid and the remarkable stability of social and political identities observed in panel studies needs to be resolved.

Questions about the relative stability of social identities hold particular interest for political scientists. A highly fluid and contingent view of identity clashes with the political reality of newly emergent independence and social movements around the world that argue for the rights of women, diverse ethnic and racial groups, and gays and lesbians. The sustained commitment that underlies the actions of individuals

in such movements seems at odds with the notion of identities as highly contingent and changeable. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence from everyday politics that political and national identities can be manipulated by the words and actions of political leaders, can shift in intensity with normative support for a movement's goals, and can vary in salience across settings.

John Turner and colleagues are some of the strongest proponents of the view that social identities are highly labile. Hogg and Turner (1985) found, for example, that increasing the salience of study participants' gender increases the likelihood that they think of themselves in gender-stereotypic terms. But, as noted above, self-categorization researchers also believe that categories themselves change across social settings. This spontaneous emergence of social categories revolves around the temporary formation of a group prototype or typical group member who embodies the group's distinctive attributes—those that are shared among group members but are absent among non-members.

Yet the views of Turner and colleagues do not capture the substantial stability observed across a range of social and political identities. As I have noted, one persistent criticism leveled at social identity theory is that much of its empirical base depends on information about identities that are relatively weak or nonexistent prior to the experimental setting in which they are created. It is hard to believe that longstanding political identities linked to major ideologies or political parties would exhibit the same high level of fluidity as an artificial identity created in the lab. Kinket and Verkuyten's (1997) evidence that strong identities are more resistant to social context, discussed above, supports this point.

It is also difficult to believe that a group prototype can be changed as easily as suggested by self-categorization researchers. As we know from numerous stereotype studies, there are many ways in which respondents can rationalize the existence of an exceptional group member without shifting their underlying image of the group as a whole. One explanation for this, provided by Stangor and McMillan (1992), is that information about unusual group members is discounted because groups are expected to exhibit internal diversity. A single exception does not violate the general rule. In contrast, greater attention is paid to inconsistent information about an individual who is expected to demonstrate consistent behavior. On the basis of these findings, group prototypes should also be resistant to change, especially within groups that have an established history and, thus, meaning outside a lab setting.

The actual fluidity of group prototypes is difficult to gauge from current research. There is a tendency among self-categorization researchers to simply assume that group prototypes vary with social context. A study by McGarty et al. (1992) demonstrates this approach. In their research, they construct small groups of three to five individuals, assess their views on a range of topics, and designate the prototype as the individual whose views are most like those of other group members and least like the views of outgroup members. In other words, they impose a group prototype on group members in this lab situation. But this is not the same



as examining the prototype of a group such as American Jews. It is easy to portray a Woody Allen double as a typical American Jew but harder to fit atypical Jews such as the Three Stooges into the category. Does the category prototype change simply because one is in a situation in which atypical group members predominate? This seems unlikely and raises serious questions about the degree to which prototypes change with situational factors, and whether social identities are as fluid as suggested by self-categorization researchers.

The two major sources of identity instability in self-categorization research—group salience and changes in the group prototype—deserve much closer attention than they have received from researchers to date. My research on feminist identity suggests that it is much easier to alter the salience of feminist identity than it is to shift the nature of the group prototype (Huddy, 1997b). When the word “feminist” is included in an experimental news story about the women’s movement, it enhances feminist identity among women who like feminists and dampens identity among those who oppose feminists. These effects are in line with the predicted effects of group salience. But changing the meaning of feminist identity proves to be more difficult. Altering the description of feminists in the news story from the leaders of a women’s rights groups—the typical feminist—to ordinary women, such as homemakers and clerical workers, proves unconvincing to study participants. Women who hold views similar to those expressed by feminists in the story only adopt feminist identity when such views are expressed by the leader of a women’s rights group. Holding views similar to those of a feminist depicted as an ordinary woman has no effect on feminist identity. Apparently, ordinary homemakers, working women, and working mothers stand too far outside the feminist prototype to realistically convey information about the views of feminists; simply describing these women as feminists does nothing to change this fact.

### **A Research Agenda**

The preceding review and discussion highlights several important directions for future research on political and social identities. First, it is important to expand the scope of social identity research to include a range of real-world identities of varied strength. Social identity researchers are paying greater attention to identities that exist outside the lab, but the choice of such identities (e.g., gender, occupation, college major) is rarely discussed explicitly. Greater thought should be given to the choice of these real-world identities and greater attention paid to identities that vary in strength. In this proposed research agenda, there is a role for the weak identities created in the lab. But such weak identities cannot form the entire basis for this research. Identities created in the lab exhibit considerable fluidity, yet the evidence reviewed here suggests that strong identities are resistant to the effects of context. The weak identities studied in the lab may also underestimate the role played by identity in shaping intergroup conflict. There is no question that identities created

in the lab result in pervasive ingroup bias. But the effects of strong identities play an even more powerful role in motivating outgroup discrimination.

Second, we need to know more about the interrelated processes of identity formation and development. It is important to understand how identities are acquired; it is equally important to understand their progression from weak to strong. Membership in real-world groups is probably on average weaker, and occasionally much stronger, than the identities observed in a typical social identity study. In the real world, weak identities are a product of commonly ambiguous criteria for group membership and frequently permeable group boundaries. Such real-world identities are frequently weaker than those observed in the lab, where group membership is clear-cut and highly salient. On the other hand, some real-world groups have a well-established group prototype, have a clear-cut enemy, and are associated with values that are linked to definitive historical moments or cultural practices. This should result in much stronger group identities than those typically found in a lab setting. The role of political actors and events in the process of identity crystallization is of particular interest to political psychologists. To what extent can politicians redirect or intensify identity by making salient specific meanings of group membership or focusing on a particular enemy? The psychological origins of identity development deserve much greater attention than they have received to date.

Third, to better understand the process of identity development, more research is needed on the characteristics of individuals that predispose them to adopt group identity. Some individuals may be very willing to adopt multiple identities, whereas others prefer to define themselves on the basis of one or two key group affiliations. What are the key personality characteristics that identify such individual differences? Are there some individuals who simply avoid group categorizations altogether, preferring to view themselves and others as unique individuals? And at what point are such resistant individuals caught up in societal forces that impel them to internalize ingroup membership and develop antipathy toward an outgroup?

Fourth, individual differences alone will never completely explain identity development. If identities were a stable feature of individuals, it would be difficult to account for dramatic changes over time in levels and strength of national and regional identities. To illuminate the process of identity development, we also need to understand the meaning of group identity. Understanding the connotations of group membership for group identifiers, potential identifiers, and outsiders will help to explicate the process of identity development. The meaning of a group identity may also shed light on the differing consequences of group identity for group members' behavior, attitudes, and values.

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