Beyond Constructivism: Social Psychology's Identity contribution to Conflict Studies

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Abstract

Constructivism borrows its conceptualization of identity from Social Psychology. However, Constructivism's notion of identity remains relatively narrow when compared to Social Psychology, which offers tools to explain how opposing identities lead to intergroup conflict. This article draws a brief comparison between studies of identity, self and other through a Constructivist and Social Psychology lenses. It argues that Social Psychology offers useful tools to explain opposing identities, othering and conflict that could be incorporated into the International Relations research agenda. For that purpose, the 2012 Israeli movie "Out in the Dark" will be shown as example to illustrate these dynamics in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: Identity; Constructivism; Social Psychology; Conflict; Israel; Palestine

Introduction

In the study of International Relations (IR) the issue of identity has become a central concept within the discipline of Constructivism. Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999) has approached identity as a variable to explain how State relations were constructed. This was particularly relevant to the study of anarchy and to the agency-structure debate (Wendt,1992). Moreover, the 1990's saw a growing interest in the study of identity in IR by other Constructivist authors (Neumann, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996; Hopf, 1998) who have explored the concepts application to explain self and other relations, national security and conflict. Despite Constructivism's definition of identity being inspired by Social Psychology (Hopf, 1998) the latter has problematized the concept in a deeper manner. The works of Henri Tajfel (1979, 1982), particularly Social Identity Theory have become prominent in the study of intergroup relations and in the study of conflict. Nonetheless, these have not been incorporated into IR, despite the discipline acknowledgment of the limits of Constructivism's identity (Zehfuss, 2006; Cho, 2012).

This article seeks to understand how Constructivism and Social Psychology look at the issue of identity, emphasizing notions of self and other. The aim is to do an assessment of which tools of Social Psychology can be brought into the study of conflict in IR. Bearing this in mind, the paper will be based upon the following question: "In which ways Social Constructivism and Social Psychology can explain opposing identities in conflict?". The paper will unfold as it follows: Firstly, I will discuss Constructivism's conception of identity, followed by the Social Psychology's definition. Secondly, I will discuss what has been done in IR to link the two disciplines. The final part will use the 2012 Israeli movie "Out in the Dark" (Mayer, 2012) by focusing on the portrayal of Palestinians by Israelis to illustrate how these concepts could be applied.

Constructivism and Identity

Within IR, Constructivism became distinctive due to new approaches to key concepts in the discipline like the agency-structure debate and anarchy in the international system. Opposing neorealism, Alexander Wendt wrote "*Anarchy is What States Make of it*" (1992) where he argued that anarchy could no longer be seen as inevitable. The novelty in his approach was looking at

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state relations from a sociological perspective instead of the traditional materialistic perspective of the discipline. To do so, the study of power and interests had to be linked with conceptions of ideology, identity and culture (Wendt, 1999). Identity became a central concept of Wendt's constructivism. According to the author, identities are formed in a social context, being constructed based on a self and other relationship. Interests are therefore shaped by identities through a process of social interaction, where one actor's identity and interests are a reflection of that same interaction (Wendt, 1992: 404).

Wendt's assumptions on identity were strengthened in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) where he defines identity as:

> […] property of international actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions […] rooted in an actor's self-understanding […]*". These "self-understandings" are always dependent if the other's representation of the self, correspond to the self's own representation of itself" (Ibid: 224).

The author argued that States can assume several types of identities, from collective to be categorized in groups or regimes and also by their roles they play in the system (Ibid: 225-229). Attaching behaviors, intentions and roles to States attaches a degree of humanization, in a process that is called "anthropomorphization" of the State (Guzzini and Leander, 2006: 77). Wendt's work on identity was important for a larger discussion within Constructivism during the 1990's. Linking identity to national security, Peter Katzenstein (1996) explored how national security was shaped by State's identities as a product of their national and international interactions (Ibid.: 12). In this context, identities are defined and redefined (Ibid.: 12). Drawing on Social Psychology's definitions, Jepperson et al. (1996) stated that "selfhood" was projected by an actor and transformed over time through a process of social interaction with others (Ibid: 34). National security interests were formed upon the construction of self-identity in relation to the perceptions of others (Ibid.).

Bearing in mind the self and other nexus possible contributions to IR, Iver Neuman, wrote in 1996 a review article where he approached multidisciplinary studies of identity. Among these, he discussed briefly Social Psychology contribution's to ethnocentrism and self-categorization of groups (Neumann, 1996: 144-145). In IR, he mentioned Constructivism as the theoretical branch responsible for bringing the self and other nexus to IR, concluding that future research should focus on the social boundaries between self and other, stating that identity's creation and sustainability should be questioned (Ibid.: 167).

A sociological approach to identity was also the one used by Ted Hopf in his article *The Promise of Constructivism* (1998). For Hopf, identities guaranteed a certain level of predictability and order to the system (Ibid.: 174). Moreover, they played three roles not only in the international society but in society in general:

> […] they (identities) tell you and others who you are, and they tell you who others are. In telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actors (Ibid.: 175).

The same applies to States, which act accordingly to the identity given to them by social practices. However, Hopf argued that it was the intersubjective structure what attached meaning to identity, not being actors the producers of it (Ibid.: 175). He stated that in order for a State to construct its national identity and legitimize it domestically, there was a need of existence of an 'other' abroad (Ibid.: 195). Constructivism's definitions of identity have relied practically on its Wendtian definitions throughout the years, attracting criticism from IR academia – notably, Maja Zehfuss (2006) accused Wendt's identity of undermining "the possibility of constructivism as a theory"

(Ibid.). By using the reunification of Germany as a case-study, she argued that Wendt's identity was "unitary" (Ibid.: 113), "narrow" (Ibid.: 108), "state centered" while it appeared to be "just assumed" (Ibid.: 112). The process of construction of state identity was therefore excluded (Ibid: 111) while identities could not be seen as "bounded entities", being "continuously articulated, rearticulated and contested" (Ibid.: 113), undermining the possibility of being used as "explanatory categories" (Ibid.).

More recently, Young Chul Cho (2012) discussed Constructivism's identity into the concept of national security. Cho acknowledged the existence of "Conventional" and "Critical" Constructivisms. The first, uses identities as explanatory factors for security, by using positivist epistemologies (Cho, 2012: 301). "Critical Constructivism", on its turn, questions the security identity, asking why "insecurity occurs in the first place" taking a more post-positivist approach (Ibid.). Critical constructivists therefore consider that the State has no "ontological foundation" outside self and other discourses (Ibid.: 309). It goes beyond the processes of social interaction, thus questioning identity formulation. He concluded that both "Constructivisms" should be merged into State's identity analysis. Conventional Constructivism could be used to assess the formulation of security identity externally, whereas Critical Constructivism should be used to analyze the domestic processes of formulation of identity (Ibid: 301). By merging the two branches, one could obtain a bolder picture of the state's interests and policy towards itself and other States, meaning getting a richer analysis of State's identity as whole, since both Constructivisms ask different questions (Ibid.: 312).

Bearing in mind Constructivism's definition of identity and the criticism to its limitations, I shall now explore how Social Psychology defines and explains social identities. This will not only offer an alternative to the limitations of Constructivism's conceptualization but will also trace back its roots as Neumann (1996) and Jepperson et al. (1996) argued. More importantly, I will show how Social Psychology offers a deeper explanation of "othering" and how social categorization can lead to discriminatory behavior between groups, often resulting in conflict. The dynamics of intergroup conflict will also be explored further ahead. I will close the section by assessing what has been done to interlink Social Psychology's identity to IR.

Social Psychology's Identity and contributions to IR
From a Social Psychology perspective, an approach to identity should start by making a distinction between "self" and identity. Identity can be seen as a "tool" that the self uses to express and show itself to the world (Owens, 2006: 207). In this sense, identity implies a relationship of sameness and distinctiveness towards others (Ibid.). Owens points out three types of identity: *personal*, *social* and *collective*. The first has to do with personal characteristics (e.g. personality), whereas the second concerns groups. The last belongs to "demographic categories" (Ibid.: 214). I shall be focusing on social identity due to its relevance to study intergroup conflict. According to Owens there are two ways of looking at Social Identity Theory – the one brought by Goffman (1963) or the "sociological social psychology" approach, or the one put forward by Tajfel (1982), the "European psychological social psychology" (Owens, 2006: 224). I will be assessing Tajfel's conceptualization since it sees identity as a cognitive tool that "individuals use partition, categorize and order their social environment […]" (Owens, 2006: 224). Goffman's approach is more sociological and has to do with "groups, statuses and categories" to which individual membership goes through a process of social recognition (Ibid.).

Moving forward to Henri Tajfel's contribution – which is still today widely used to study intergroup relations and behaviors (Owens, 2006; Hoggs, 2006; Brewer, 2007), it was based on a series of empirical experiments with groups during the 1960's and 1970's which later led to the

edition of his book *Human Groups and Social Categories* (1982)[1]. Tajfel was trying to understand collective behavior and at the same time trying to break a level of analysis paradigm on the individual. To him, social context could not be ignored (Ibid.: 53; Tajfel, 1979: 184). He argued that due to "social reality" in groups, individuals used cognitive instruments to guide them and define themselves accordingly to their social environments (Tajfel, 1982: 58-59). It was in the context of combining an individual psychological approach but at the same time acknowledging social systems' influence in behavior that Tajfel came up with "Intergroup behavior theory" (Tajfel, 1979: 183-184). The theory consists of three mental processes: *social categorization*, *social identity* and *social comparison* (Ibid.: 184). The first one corresponds to a categorization of the social world into *ingroups* and *outgroups* (Brewer, 2007: 695). We divide people and ourselves into categories according to age, nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc.. The second corresponds to identification, which translates into enhancing the favoritism of the ingroup, boosting a positive self-image (Tajfel, 1979: 185). The third and last process corresponds to the ability of human beings to compare their ingroup with the outgroup, on a basis of similarity and dissimilarity (Ibid.: 188). These processes are useful to explain intergroup conflict, since ingroup positiveness and outgroup distinctiveness result in social phenomena like discrimination, which arises as products of categorization, identification and comparison.

Tajfel presented a theory of Intergroup conflict (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) by using the three mental processes mentioned above and once again carrying on experiments. He claimed that the more intense the group conflict is, the more the person will act upon her group membership rather than individual traits or characteristics (Ibid.: 34). The person's "intergroup behavior" will overlap her "interpersonal behavior". Social categorization occurs at the minimum division of people into groups. "Categorization leads to ingroup favoritism and discrimination against the other group". (Ibid.: 39). The authors define social identity as "aspects of an individual's self-image that derives from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Ibid.: 40). The social identity corresponds to social identification process where individuals try to bring out their self-esteem through the positive aspects of their social identity. Subsequently, comparison is used as tool of selection and evaluation of relevant relational attributes (Ibid: 41). It is important to bear in mind when social identity is not satisfactory, that the individual will either try to change groups or bring out other positive aspects of his group (Ibid: 40).

Intergroups relations are a useful tool to study relations between groups but also to analyze IR, since international relations are "often fraught with conflict and exploitation and characterized by intolerance and prejudice" (Hogg, 2006: 479). Relating to these types of "Intergroup attitudes", Hogg refers to stereotyping and prejudice as "schemas or prototypes" of the process of social categorization (Ibid: 487). They serve to legitimize actions "planned or committed by one group against other group" (Ibid.; Tajfel, 1982). Stereotypes and prejudice become more intensified and unchangeable under intergroup conflict. (Hogg, 2006: 479). Splitting stereotypes from prejudice was the aim of Marilynn Brewer (2007) who sought to differentiate group cognition (stereotypes) from intergroup relations (prejudice), despite recognizing that the two are interrelated and influence one another (Ibid.: 687). Nonetheless, she regrouped stereotyping as cognition and prejudice as a consequence of intergroup relations as follows:

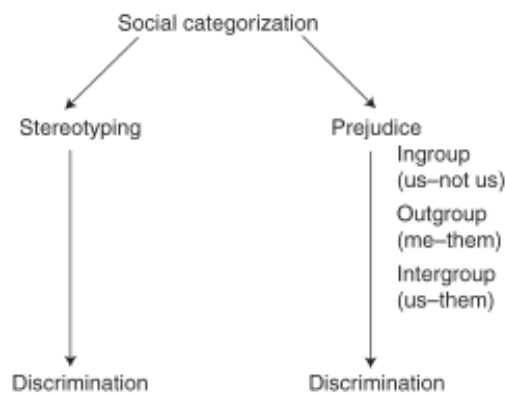[1] This is the Portuguese Edition of the Book published in 1982.

Figure 1: "Consequences of Social Categorization" (Brewer, 2007: 696).

By placing stereotypes on the left or in the cognitive side, "categorizing stereotypes" have both evaluation and behavioral functions. The evaluation of these categories can be either positive or negative – positive and negative stereotypes (Ibid.: 696). In terms of behavior – "Stereotype-based discrimination arises when persons are treated differentially as a function of their category membership based on beliefs about the category as a whole" (Ibid.).

On the right side of the figure there are three types of prejudice as a product of intergroup relations which leads to discrimination. The first concerns ingroup favoritism, while the second means a complete disassociation without the need of emphasizing the ingroup towards an outgroup, usually accompanied by "hostility" (Ibid.) – discrimination against LGBT people can be an example, since it harms directly the outgroup without any personal benefit or gain (Ibid). The last one and relevant to the study of conflict is an antagonist "us v.s them" type of prejudice. This prejudice is based upon group comparison or competition, where the outgroup is seen as a threat. "It is motivated more by ingroup protection […] as well as antagonism towards the outgroup" (Ibid.: 697).

Concluding now the analysis of contributions of Social Identity Theory and acknowledging its similarities with Constructivism's identity, I shall discuss briefly what has been done to incorporate Social Psychology into IR. The first attempt to combine Social Psychology with International Relations, came from Kelman (1965) who intended to bring together "the study of international behavior of individuals" and the "study of international politics". He refers to the last as the study of prediction of the behavior of states (Ibid.: 565). His definition should not however be placed out of context, since Classical Realism dictated the IR paradigm of that time, which also relied on behavioral assumptions on human nature.[2] In the 1990's and with the rise of Constructivism, Kowert (1998) came up with concept of "attributional bias" to study the State's national identity. To the author, cognitive psychology brought more to the definition of identity, since it explained human cognition and its categorization of the social world into self and other" (Ibid.: 106). Based upon much of Tajfel's work on intergroup conflict, Kowert introduces the concept of "attributional bias" as the tendency of an ingroup to exaggerate the distinctions of an outgroup (Ibid: 107). Here, the outgroup's characteristics are also homogenized making it behavior become predictable (Ibid). Using the Suez crisis as case-study, the author puts forward three assumptions on national identity. Firstly, conflict will reinforce the categorization between political groups, bringing out their identities. Secondly, conflict will exaggerate the outgroup differences and will lead to further homogenization of it. Thirdly, the behavior of outgroups will be associated to their intentions and desires. An increase in the outgroup's power will lead to a

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[2] See Morgenthau (1948).

"stronger" attributional bias (Ibid.: 108-109). Kowert's "Attributional bias" has remained quite unexplored in general IR literature, however it was further explored by authors like Tom Casier[3] to analyze power and identity in EU-Russia relations. There have also been other contributions which intended to link Social Psychology and other theories of IR.[4] Nonetheless, for purposes of this paper's scope I shall now move to the illustration of the categorization of a Palestinian other in Israeli fiction.

An Overview of the Palestinian Other in Israeli fiction
In the case of the portrayal of Israel towards Palestine, one is faced with the challenge to pick up a key moment to analyze self and other dynamics[5]. I will not be picking any particular moment but will rather focus on a work of fiction to give an example of how the dynamics of intergroup conflict are also projected into fiction. One has to also bear in mind that Social Identity Theory was based on empirical experiments and what I intend to discuss here is merely for sake of illustration and not a case-study. The example I am bringing here into discussion is the one of the 2012 Israeli film: "Out in the Dark" (Mayer, 2012). The film is quite illustrative of some of Tajfel's and Turner (1979) assumptions in ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. It also reflects Kowert's attributional bias (1998), since there is also a degree of exaggeration of the other and a homogenization of the same. The movie tells the story of a Palestinian psychology student boy who falls in love with an older Israeli man. On one hand, the film portrays Israel as a progressive nation, respectful of LGBT rights, on the other Palestine is seen as an intolerant, underdeveloped place of extremism and violence. The same goes to the Palestinian's boy family and community. The Palestinian boy struggles with its illegal status in Israel and with the anti-gay sentiment at home, struggling between becoming a spy, being a traitor in Palestine and his romantic relationship.

I shall not enter here the discussion on LGBT rights and on "Pinkwashing"[6], but my point is to show how some of the mental processes defended by Tajfel and Turner (1979) or Brewer (2007) above are relevant. The differentiation between the ingroup and the outgroup is evident, since there is a positive image associated with being Israeli and progressive, while the Palestinian is seen as intolerant, violent and oppressed. Another possible reading of this, is reminiscent of the "unsatisfaction with social identity" (Tajfel and Turner, 1979: 40) where the ingroup will bring out their positive aspects to maintain their social identity. This could lead to a larger discussion on the branding of Israel "as the only democracy in the Middle East" (Pappé, 2013: 9) and its response towards international criticism, by showing progressiveness on LGBT rights. On the outgroup level, social categorization is evident, by portraying them negatively, with stereotypes and prejudices that show a sentiment of superiority towards the other group in as us-them dynamic (Brewer, 2007: 697). Whether this type of prejudice seeks just to harm the outgroup or protect the ingroup from an external threat, should be a discussion to be held on a more empirical basis rather than on fiction. I will wrap up the discussion here and move forward to the conclusion.

Conclusion
I sought on this paper to explain how Constructivism and Social Psychology share assumptions on identity but at the same time differ. These are two different theoretical approaches, within two distinctive disciplines. However, when the aim of the research is to study conflict, the two should dialogue more in terms of getting a wider and deeper analysis of identity. Nonetheless, one might encounter a problem of level of analysis. Constructivism in IR studies collective identities of

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[3] See Casier (2016), Casier and DeBardeleben (2017).
[4] See Goldgeier and Tetlock (2001), Rathbun (2009).
[5] For more studies on this see Klein (2004), Adwan et al. (2014).

States, while Social Psychology uses small groups of people to conduct their experiments, as we have seen from the Tajfel's studies. This can also bring problems to the discussion on positivism or post-structuralism components of Constructivism, since the methodology is different.

I have shown how the useful tools that Social Identity Theory can be used to analyze conflict, by showcasing the portrayal of the Palestinian other in the 2012 Israeli movie "Out in the Dark". Despite not being an actual case-study that used Social Psychology's methodology, I used its theoretical assumptions to illustrate how these issues of identity, social categorization and intergroup conflict are also reflected in the works of fiction. I have to admit, that despite taking a more Constructivist approach to this illustration in particular, Social Psychology can and should be used to study drivers of conflict like othering, prejudice and so forth. I will conclude by stating that future research in conflict studies should incorporate more multidisciplinary approaches since it will enrich our understanding of conflict actors, their dynamics and the conflict's background.

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