

EXPLAINING ETHNICITY

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Although scholars often treat “ethnicity” as one of the most important phenomena in politics, nothing close to a consensus has emerged about not only what its effects are but also what it is. Theorists typically divide this debate into two camps, usually dubbed “primordialism” and “constructivism,” but these categories are unhelpful and actually obscure some of the most important questions. This study recasts the debate by providing a micro-level explanation for why and how people tend to think and act in terms of macro-level identity categories in the first place. Drawing heavily on recent psychological research, this approach reveals why ethnicity is special and why it is ascribed importance by researchers in fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, and political science. As it turns out, neither constructivism nor primordialism is fully accurate, and theorists are advised to think in terms that are more consistent with psychological research.

Keywords: ethnicity; identity; nationalism; race; ethnic conflict

Social scientists broadly agree that ethnicity is among the most important phenomena in politics. They also tend to agree that we are only at the beginning stages of understanding it. Nothing close to a consensus has emerged about not only what ethnicity’s effects are but also what it is in the first place. For some, it is an emotion-laden sense of belonging or attachment to a particular kind of group (Connor, 1993; Horowitz, 1985; Shils, 1957). For others, it is embeddedness in a web of significant symbols (Geertz, 1967, 1973; Smith, 2000). Still others see ethnicity as a social construct or a choice to be made (Anderson, 1991; Barth, 1969; Royce, 1982). One recent view treats it above all as a cognitive process (Brubaker, 2002; Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, in press). Some even call ethnicity a biological survival instinct based on nepotism (Van den Berghe, 1981). A few consider it a mix of these notions (Fearon, 1999; Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Laitin, 1998). To

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make things more confusing, analysts have typically lumped these richly diverse perspectives into two supposedly opposing camps, usually dubbed “primordialism” and “constructivism.” This dispute has generated some brilliant research projects, but until we converge on a common understanding of these fundamental conceptual issues, social scientific progress will be slow.

This article contributes to such a convergence by engaging the debate from the vantage point of a more fundamental level of analysis, directly addressing the most basic question of ethnic politics: Why does “ethnicity” exist in the first place? To answer this question, this study provides a micro-level explanation of why and how people tend to think and act in terms of macro-level identity categories. In doing so, it engages important new findings in psychology that do not so much shed light on the constructivism-primordialism debate as allow us to transcend it by starting from a more basic premise. The result reveals why ethnicity is special and why it is identified with important political dynamics by researchers in fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, and political science. As it turns out, neither constructivism nor primordialism is fully accurate. Although identity is found to be inherently situational and always changing, to the consternation of primordialist accounts, it is never “multiple.” Moreover, what we think of as identities are in fact sometimes “age old” and can be “reawakened,” as primordialists’ instincts would have it. I argue that this perspective, once we shed the unhelpful labels *constructivism* and *primordialism*, better accounts for the totality of social science evidence than do alternative conceptions, thereby providing a more solid building block for the development of social science theory.

THEORIES OF GROUPS AND GROUPS OF THEORIES

Theorists usually begin by discussing the debate between what most call “primordialism” and what is variously termed “constructivism,” “circumstantialism,” or “instrumentalism” (I use *constructivism* for now). It is somewhat ironic that scholars so sensitive to nuance in the behavior of their “ethnic” subjects should so readily endorse these labels, which in many cases reduce to gross oversimplifications of the works discussed.¹ Nevertheless, to foreshadow part of this article’s central argument, scholars have felt a need to categorize works in a simple way because the “reality” of each scholarly conceptualization of ethnicity is often so complex and finely differentiated from other such notions that to treat each one on its own terms in a comprehensive

1. Some, such as Chandra (2001) and Fearon and Laitin (2000), cope by subdividing the constructivism category.

literature review would require far more text than readers, not to mention journal editors, would want to stomach. These categories, primordialism and constructivism, thus become useful points of reference for locating one's own work in relation to that of others.

The primordialist image of ethnic groups may be likened to various stones constituting a "wall" that is society. As between such stones, there are clear-cut and enduring boundaries between groups. Each group has its particular constitutive features (cultures, traditions, histories, physical traits, language repertoires, religion, etc.) that also do not change and that tend to be quite consistently distributed within the group. Extended kinship relations are usually said to be the critical element that holds each group together and imbues it with its emotive power.

"Primordialists," as identified both by themselves and by others, rarely adhere so strictly to such tenets as their scholarly rivals often assume. Like geologists, primordialists do not argue that the subjects of their studies are eternal; instead, one can certainly point to a period in time during which both groups and stones were created. As the self-avowed primordialist Van Evera (2001, p. 20) remarks, "ethnic identities are not stamped on our genes"; but once formed, groups tend strongly to endure. Even Shils (1957), usually cited as a seminal primordialist, explicitly writes about the perception, not the reality, of the primordality of ties and is very clear that people vary "normally" in the intensity of their attachments to their groups and that there are usually only a few hard-core believers. Likewise, Geertz (1967), in his widely referenced work, writes not so much about the actual "givens" of life but the "assumed" givens, implying a critical element of perception that mediates between the category and the individual.² Nevertheless, Geertz does argue that these group identity systems take centuries to crystallize and are quite stable in the face of major societal upheaval. Primordialists following Shils and Geertz also refer primarily to group perceptions of the primordality of their groups, not actual common blood histories and absolute cultural bonds, but claim that these perceptions have real implications for behavior (Gil-White, 1999). Van den Berghe (1981) is virtually alone in this literature in explicitly positing a biological basis for primordialism; he argues that humans have evolved a nepotism instinct that now seizes on any major physical differences between people to produce group formation.

For constructivists, the "stone wall" is but a facade masking a much less well defined structure. In his landmark work, Barth (1969) argues that the defining feature of an ethnic group is not the particular elements of culture or kinship that differentiate it from other groups but the mere fact that bound-

2. This point has also been made by S. Wilkinson, as well as Fearon (1999), citing Laitin.

aries are perceived and persist. Group membership criteria and group membership itself tend to change over time as people come and go and develop new traditions and ways of life, but a group itself nevertheless endures as a way of structuring social life. Although Barth (1969) does not theorize on group origins, many other constructivists focus on precisely this, arguing that modernization or even concrete state policies play large roles in forming groups where no group consciousness existed before. Ethnic groups, they argue, are thus not holdovers from ancient times but very recent phenomena. Many constructivists see ethnic identity as enduring once created (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983). Others take constructivism a step further, arguing that national identities will gradually fade as modernization brings peoples into more intense interaction (Deutsch, 1966; Haas, 1986). Still others go much further, claiming that identities never become “locked in” and that people are always at least somewhat free to change them, subject to certain constraints (costs, skills, physical endowments, etc.) (Banton, 1997; Brass, 1991, 1997; Brubaker, 2002; Gorenburg, 1999; Nagel, 1994; Okamura, 1981; Royce, 1982). This latter view sees great scope for the elite manipulation of popular ethnic identities, manipulation these authors tend to see as a key causal factor in ethnic politics.

A number of theorists seek to synthesize primordialism and constructivism, usually by carving out more or less separate domains for each to operate in explaining human behavior. Laitin (1998) argues that culture is “Janus-faced,” with both a constraining primordial element and a manipulable, flexible, constructed element, an argument elaborated by Fearon (1999). Scott (1990) sees identities as primordial but their relative importance as constructed. Nagata (1981) avers that circumstantial factors determine how and why certain aspects of shared culture are “primordialized” such that people come to accept them as primordial for the purposes of defining who is a group member. Some advance new labels for their own work. In the notable case of Smith (2000), *ethnosymbolism* means that the symbols unifying nations can be ancient and enduring even though groups can invoke them in new ways for new purposes at different points in time. Horowitz’s (1985) seminal work foregoes efforts to categorize theories, conceptualizing ethnicity as centered on extended kinship but also as multidimensional and thus manipulable.

Two general conclusions about this literature are germane to the present argument. First, it appears that the primordialism-constructivism distinction is somewhat miscast, obscuring a fundamental question. Real-world primordialists and constructivists agree that identities are constructed (i.e., that beliefs about primordality are formed) during some identifiable period in history, that their symbolic content can vary to some degree over time, and that there is at least some variation in the intensity or nature of group identi-

fication across members. Further, many constructivists concur with primordialists that group identities tend to be quite stable once created. The most striking divide thus appears to be between (a) those who contend that individuals can change identities relatively easily, even once identities appear “crystallized” in society, and (b) those who argue that this is, for most practical intents and purposes, impossible because people think about ethnicity in primordial terms. If one calls the former view “instrumentalism” because it refers to the possibility of instrumentally altering individual ethnic identities within constraints, then the real debate appears to be between instrumentalists (Barth, Banton, Brass, Brubaker, Fearon, Gorenburg, Laitin, Nagel, Okamura, and Royce) and those whom one might call “perdurabilists,” who cast individual-level ethnic identities as highly durable (perdurable) once constructed (Anderson, Deutsch, Geertz, Gellner, Gil-White, Haas, Horowitz, Nagata, Scott, Shils, Smith, and Van Evera). Positing that people are less locked in, the former group tends to attribute less inherent emotive content to ethnicity than the latter. With the debate no longer cast in terms of ancientness or constructedness but in terms of how strongly individuals are tied to ethnic identities, it becomes clearer that a convincing resolution will require an answer to a fundamental question: Why do people have “identities”?³ The following pages aim toward such a resolution and answer.

A second general conclusion regarding this literature, given the centrality of the question just posed, is that surprisingly few of the works regarded as landmark studies in political science, anthropology, sociology, and history engage the extensive research that has been done on this topic in the field of psychology.⁴ This has led to a number of difficulties for both instrumentalists and perdurabilists. For example, without an underlying psychological theory, instrumentalists explaining political phenomena as the “elite manipulation” of ethnicity beg the question, Why does such manipulation succeed? That is, what makes ethnicity a powerful tool for elites to wield? Thus Brass (1997) explains “Hindu-Muslim riots” in India by pointing to the inflammatory role of organized elite “fire tenders.” But why is what these fire tenders tend considered to be “fire,” not something less combustible, such as, say, perceptual categories or information filters? Similar difficulties plague many perdurabilist accounts. Indeed, as Finlayson (1998, pp. 145-146) has noted, it is commonly just assumed that ethnic bonds involve “emotion” or “passion” because of their “nature”: All too frequently, little explanation is given as to why ethnic motives should be any more powerful than, say, materialist

3. D. Posner raised this question years ago in a joint readings course with the late M. Saroyan.

4. Outstanding exceptions include the works of Brubaker et al. (in press), Fearon (1999), Horowitz (1985), and Laitin (1998).

ones. Connor (1993) writes passionately about the nature of the ethnonational bond without citing a single source that was clearly indicated to explain it. Smith (1999, 2000) similarly satisfies himself by simply asserting that ethnic symbolism has special power and emotive appeal, without grounding his work firmly in psychological research. Likewise, Geertz (1967, p. 128) avers that the force of primordial sentiments is rooted in the “nonrational” foundations of “personality” but essentially stops there. Thus, without clear psychological underpinnings, many theories of ethnicity either court tautology or leave some of the most interesting phenomena unexplained.

With the debate on ethnicity helpfully recast, this essay now reapproaches it from a more fundamental vantage point, advancing a theoretical proposition about the nature of identity itself that is well grounded in psychological research. This proposition and the ensuing implications tie together strands of research in various social sciences that have developed largely in isolation of one another but that have great potential for cross-fertilization.⁵ Often, the findings of others that once seemed contradictory are revealed to be complementary in unexpected ways.⁶

IDENTITY AS “SOCIAL RADAR”

It is useful to treat the notion of identity as the set of points of personal reference on which people rely to navigate the social world they inhabit, to make sense of the myriad constellations of social relationships that they encounter, to discern their place in these constellations, and to understand the opportunities for action in this context. It is, in a certain way, a kind of social radar, a perceptual device through which people come to see where they stand in relation to the human environment. In the most basic sense, then, *groups* are defined by common relationships to points of social reference. Of course, the reality of group behavior involves much more than this, but the core premise is essential as a point of theoretical departure.

This claim hearkens back to some of the founders of modern social psychology. Mead (1934, pp. 200-202) was perhaps the first to argue that perceptions of self are inherently about the relationship between the self and the social community, of which the self is a part and in which the self is uniquely

5. It thus furthers efforts to distill meaning from common usage (Fearon, 1999; Laitin, 1998).

6. Thus no claim is made that all authors whose empirical results are cited interpret them in the way done here. Where this essay proffers rival interpretations, distinguishing tests are warranted.

positioned (see also Morris's introduction in Mead, pp. x, xxiii). Self-consciousness, he argues, is the process of being able to conceive of oneself from the perspective of others. Although Freud (1923/1960) wrote little about identity and placed great emphasis on behavioral drives coming from the internal id, the id never had free rein in his conception because it was always constrained by, and struggling against, the ego and superego, both of which are structures that mediate relations with the outside world (Erikson, 1968, pp. 20-22). Developing the psychoanalytic tradition to address the concept of identity, Erikson took Freudian notions to a more social conclusion, arguing that identity cannot be understood apart from the social world: "In fact, the whole interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical, for which identity formation is of prototypical significance, could be conceptualized only as a kind of *psychosocial relativity*" (Erikson, 1959/1980, pp. 18-20; Erikson, 1968, p. 23).

More recently, many social psychologists have found a great deal of experimental confirmation for the assumption that uncertainty reduction is a fundamental human motivation driving the nearly universal tendency for humans to divide themselves into groups (Brown, 1988, p. 227; Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002, p. 586; Hogg & Mullin, 1999, pp. 253-255). As Hogg and Mullin (1999) put it,

People have a fundamental need to feel certain about their world and their place within it—subjective certainty renders existence meaningful and thus gives one confidence about how to behave, and what to expect from the physical and social environment within which one finds oneself. (pp. 253-255)

Uncertainty is aversive because it correlates with a lack of control over one's life. Subjective uncertainty can thus give rise to feelings such as unease and fear (Hogg & Mullin, 1999, pp. 253-255; Van der Dennen, 1987, pp. 39-46). An evolutionary explanation for the origins of such a drive is highly plausible (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992; Van der Dennen, 1987, p. 47), although such a claim is as of now impossible to test definitively.

People, these researchers find, tend to categorize themselves and others in ways that help them make sense of the social world they inhabit. This facilitates recognition and response to members and nonmembers of these categorizations (Brown, 1988, p. 227). These processes of sense-making (developing personal points of reference) can sometimes be conscious, but as Brown (2000, p. 264) notes, they may also occur automatically, outside of awareness. Such processes, notably a drive to categorize even in the face of high similitude, are documented even in young children (Hirschfeld, 1996, p. 195). One should not assume that uncertainty reduction is the only motive

for human action, but it is often a prerequisite for the realization of other major human goals, such as survival and well-being. Thus Hogg and Mullin (1999, pp. 253-555) note that people strive for certainty only in those areas of life that are subjectively important to them.

These findings are consistent with a host of fascinating empirical results coming out of multiple psychological subdisciplines. One of the most widely cited emerged from the research program known as social identity theory (SIT). Pioneering this effort, Tajfel (1982) and associates sought to pinpoint the source of human grouping tendencies by trying to find the “minimal group,” the “thinnest” set of conditions that can be found to generate detectable group-oriented behavior. Tajfel discovered that people begin to behave in a “group” manner, favoring their own group (the “ingroup”), primarily when there is some notion of having a *common fate* with other group members, a finding firmly in line with the notion that groups involve common reference points to the social world. This commonality of fate, however, can be “minimal” indeed and still produce significant group-oriented behavior. Tajfel’s participants consistently showed ingroup favoritism even when groups were formed by categorizing people according to such trivial commonalities as whether they over- or underestimated the number of dots on a page. In the end, he found that simply telling people that they belonged to a particular group was enough to produce group-oriented behavior (p. 23). Although limitations have been established to some of Tajfel’s claims based on these findings, the core result that minimal categorization produces group-oriented behavior has been replicated in very different cultures, justifying Brown’s (1988) claim that this constitutes an “empirical consensus” (p. 224).⁷ Differences in minimal common fate stand up to competing pressures; Tajfel (p. 24) reports that when intergroup categorization and interpersonal similarity are pitted against each other, categorization prevails. This further indicates that what drives human group formation is less the quality of the potential members (as sociobiological theories sometimes presume; Van den Berghe, 1981) than the quality of the relative social positioning of potential members vis-à-vis a common point of reference in the social world (something that produces a commonality of fate).

The present argument should not be construed as based on SIT, as commonly conceived, but instead as helping explain or interpret some of its major

7. For example, Tajfel’s measure of group-oriented behavior was ingroup favoritism in how subjects allocated material rewards. This has been found to be contingent on expectations of ingroup reciprocity embedded in the experiments but unrecognized by Tajfel (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Yamagishi, 2003). But with this expectation removed, group-oriented behavior (ascribing more positive feelings to the ingroup than the outgroup through a survey instrument) is still found to occur, although in a form different from material reward allocation (Yamagishi, 2003).

findings, just as the present conceptualization also does with important findings in the psychoanalytic (Erikson, see above) and cognitive (see below) traditions of psychology. In fact, this essay explicitly rejects the SIT notion that pervasive group formation is driven by an inherently discriminatory urge, that people gain self-esteem from association with positively valued groups and that they thus categorize to ascribe positive traits to their own groups and more negative ones to outgroups (a pessimistic theory indeed). Instead, as described above, the key “motive” driving pervasive group formation and categorical thinking is posited to be uncertainty reduction. Hogg and Mullin (1999) provide a direct head-to-head test of the uncertainty reduction and self-esteem hypotheses by replicating Tajfel’s (1982) minimal group experiments in conditions of greater and lesser uncertainty. Remarkably, they find that the self-esteem produced in such experiments tends to depend on levels of uncertainty.⁸ People, this and other research suggests, derive self-esteem from their ability to successfully impose some modicum of cognitive order (meaningful social categories) on an uncertain social world.⁹ To posit that identity can be usefully seen as a self-locating device in an uncertain world is thus to be in tune with contemporary research stressing both the fundamental importance of identity and the driving psychological forces of human behavior.

Identity, then, is necessarily both situational and ever changing. Because identity is defined by a person’s relationship to the social world and represents a self-positioning within it, it is inherently situational (Okamura, 1981; Royce, 1982). One crucial implication is that identity itself changes as a person’s environment changes because environmental change forces a reevaluation of the person’s relationship to that environment, at least on a minimal level. Moreover, because identity depends directly on the state of the social world, we see that identity cannot be a stable state of mind but is instead inherently dynamic (Erikson, 1968, pp. 22-24), “perpetually in the making” (Cohen, 1974). Identities change every day (if only at the margins) as people encounter new situations, meet new people, acquire new specialties at work, or come under the authority of new institutions. These minor changes can have real, if often unconscious, implications for behavior. Tajfel’s (1982) research was described extensively above because it effectively shows how little “situational change” is needed to generate meaningful identity change

8. The strong self-esteem hypothesis is under fire in other ways, too. See Abrams (1999, p. 202); Brown (2000, pp. 334-336); Farnham, Greenwald, and Banaji (1999); Forsyth (1999, p. 80); and Hogg and Mullin (1999, p. 251).

9. Ingroup-favoring behavior found in such experiments results from other factors, for example, expected material gain from ingroup reciprocity (note 7) or mere interpretational bias (Forsyth, 1999, p. 387).

on the part of individuals; mere assignment to a group is enough, under controlled conditions, to induce group-oriented behavior (Hogg & Abrams, 1999, p. 10). Even the psychoanalytic icon Erikson (1959/1980) bases his theory of identity largely on external social change. People, he argues, tend to experience different levels of change in their relationships to the social world at different stages of life; the most acutely felt change tends to occur during adolescence, because the way the environment affects people changes dramatically during this time. Nevertheless, he stresses that identity is never "formed," even after adolescence, but that it is a lifelong development. The notion of identity as a set of personal points of reference need not imply passivity on the part of a person, because people can work to change the ways that they interact with the social world and to alter the way that it relates to them, as in Erikson's notion of identity quest.

Of course, people do tend to experience a sense of continuous identity, often even identity constancy or stability. Psychologists have explained this by the facts that not everything changes at all times and not all change is dramatic change. Many of the reference points that are most important to people are likely to remain quite stable, such as family relationships, national citizenship, gender, language repertoire, and place of residence (Abrams, 1999, p. 208). Memory of these important contexts and their relationships to a person also adds a sense of continuity to existence. Further, when new situations arise, they often are not totally foreign, having been either anticipated or experienced in some form before. Laitin (1998) and Calvert (2002) add that important identity dimensions can remain stable as coordination equilibria: A person may have little incentive to invest in learning a new language, for example, if he or she is uncertain that others will do the same; when all think this way, no change occurs. Thus rich *constellations* of reference points tend to persist and are enduring, but particular points in these constellations are constantly changing to varying degrees as people encounter new situations. As will be elaborated, some points of personal reference take on meaning beyond the situations to which they originally referred, lending an additional sense of continuity (Abrams, 1999, p. 208). The kind of minor identity change that is constantly experienced can be so routine that it is hardly noticed as "identity change." But when major reference points do change for a person, as with Erikson's (1959/1980) adolescents, the effect can be profound, even an "identity crisis" (Hogg & Mullin, 1999, pp. 266-267).

THE “THICKENING” OF IDENTITY DIMENSIONS

To conceptualize identity as the set of personal points of reference that locate the self in the social world is to say more than that identity is about making sense of reality (which it is). It is also to say that there is a certain informational content in each “identity dimension” (point of personal reference), information about the relationship between an individual and a referenced object. At the most minimal level, this information is simply that the individual is in a particular category of people defined by a common point of reference. This bare-bones notion of identity is what has been discussed so far. But some identity dimensions can tell an individual more than “I am in this category of people,” adding, “therefore the following things could possibly affect me.” This latter kind of information is an important part of what makes identity politics interesting.

Particular points of personal reference are invested with meaning beyond the simple act of reference when one encounters situations that tie these reference points to tangible alterations in one’s life chances. This typically happens when one’s fate is somehow determined by one’s belonging to a particular category (Sacks, 1992, pp. 42, 401). The term *categorization* thus refers here to a person’s perception of membership in a certain category, having a reference point in common with others to some aspect of the social world. In the tradition of Geertz (1973), it is helpful to use the adjective *thick* to denote high levels of meaning. Personal points of reference or categorizations, therefore, become “thicker” when they come to have greater importance in people’s lives, when people’s lives are affected in more ways by the referent. We now turn to a discussion of important kinds of situations that tend to thicken identity categories.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

It has already been suggested that people’s life chances can directly depend on social categories (common points of reference). This can happen in several ways.

Intrinsically important distinctions. Some limitations or opportunities in life chances are intrinsic to particular kinds of distinctions. Perhaps the most important such distinction involves communication difficulties. People speaking different languages face transaction costs inherent to the linguistic differentiation. This will make groups of people who speak different languages and who encounter one another in almost any kind of social setting immediately aware of a relevant categorization: those who speak one’s lan-

guage and those who do not. Communication costs are associated with cultural differences as well as language. As Geertz (1973) brilliantly illustrates, two people who know the same words and grammatical rules can still arrive at tragicomic misunderstandings if they are not intimately familiar with the thick symbolic systems in which each other operates. One person's twitch is another person's conspiratorial wink.

Distinctions imposed on people. The vast bulk of categorical limitations on people's life chances are imposed by the broader social environment, not the intrinsic nature of the categories themselves. It is clear that when one set of people (or sometimes even a single person) treats another as different and has the power to affect that other set's life chances according to this perceived difference, this perception of difference can be expected to become salient to the set of people receiving the treatment (Forsyth, 1999, pp. 378-383). One way elites can make categorical distinctions important is to base the allocation of material resources on them (Banton, 1997; Forsyth, 1999, pp. 378-383). Psychological research also clearly shows that the presence of a threat of some kind to group members that is based on the group categorization, as in intergroup conflict, tends to produce group cohesion, ingroup favoritism, distrust, a willingness of individuals to accept centralized group leadership, an emphasis on winning over considering the merits of the particular issue at stake, and a lack of intergroup communication (Forsyth, 1999, p. 388; Tajfel, 1982, p. 15; Van der Dennen, 1987, pp. 35-36). This effect is well documented in wartime (Shils, 1957; Tajfel, 1982, p. 15). Although many argue that conflict is a result of group solidarity, psychological research finds strikingly little evidence that this is true. Some research even finds that more cohesive groups are more likely to employ cooperative strategies in prisoners' dilemma situations (Brown, 1988, p. 200-205). Overall, the preponderance of evidence suggests that, as argued here, situations of intergroup conflict can promote the cohesion of the groups involved, though not in all situations (Banton, 1997; Brown, 1988; Scott, 1990).

POINTS OF PERSONAL REFERENCE AS RULES OF THUMB

Thus far, I have assumed that perception is perfect, that people instantly and accurately assess their relationships to each element of the social world, and that the totality of their relationships constitutes their identity. The difficulty is that a critical element of perception lies between all referents and the individual doing the referring. Taking this further, it is a matter of consciousness what one's relationship is to various aspects of the social world, an element one cannot take for granted (Bourdieu, 1990; Cohen, 1974; Geertz,

1973). It is here that one begins to see the vast promise of cognitive approaches for the study of identity (Brubaker et al., in press).

This article proceeds from the uncontroversial notion that the human brain is a less-than-perfect information-processing organ, that the cognitive capacity of humans is limited. Although some research has contested the degree to which the brain is capable of large-scale information processing, the key point is that the brain is such that large-scale information processing takes time and energy, imposing costs on endeavors to make sense of highly complex phenomena. This assumption is unquestioned by empirical researchers (Simon, 1985; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Turning to the realm of identity, treated as a person's set of personal points of reference, it is clear that any attempt to perfectly assess one's relationship to everything in the social world, to uniquely respond to every individual, is a futile task in all but the smallest societies.

When one combines the fundamental human imperative for uncertainty reduction with the limited cognitive capacity of the human brain, one is led to a very important way in which some identity dimensions (points of personal reference) can take on a great deal of "extra" meaning. When relatively simple, visible points of personal reference become coincident (or significantly probabilistically correlated) with other less visible, more complicated points of reference that are important for independent reasons, the simpler, more visible ones can serve as "rules of thumb" (or shorthands) in the process of recognizing and responding to other people for these "independent reasons." Points of personal reference, then, even group labels, can become thick with meaning not only in the implications of the original referent but also in connoting relationships to other referents seen to be correlated with the original. At their most robust, these rules of thumb can involve whole patterns of recognition and implied appropriate relational action to such an extent that they can be fruitfully analyzed as cognitive schemas.¹⁰ Hogg and Mullin (1999) find that by identifying oneself as a group member, one effectively replaces aspects of individuality and unshared attitudes and behaviors with an "in-group prototype" that prescribes shared beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors appropriate to that particular categorization. Evidence suggests that adopting a group categorization as a rule of thumb is an automatic, not a controlled, cognitive process—unconscious, rapid, effortless, and involuntary (Forsyth, 1999, p. 77). Such processes reduce subjective uncertainty both in an individual's action and in how the person fits into the social world, making navigation of it more efficient and productive (Allport, 1954, p. 19; Brown, 1988,

10. On schemas and (ethnic) identity, see Brubaker et al. (in press) and Knight, Bernal, Garza, and Cota (1993, pp. 223-225).

pp. 227-228; Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 30; Forsyth, 1999, p. 78; Hirschfeld, 1996; Hogg & Mullin, 1999). When many need to do this simultaneously, these rules of thumb supply useful focal points for coordinated action (Calvert, 2002; Laitin, 1998).

Identity, to summarize, is not an evenly distributed set of personal points of reference. Instead, it is “lumpy,” combining some thick and some thin social categorizations. But if some identity categories take on the properties of rules of thumb for the purposes of social navigation whereas others do not, and if no single hyperthick category comes to define all elements of human interaction, what determines which rules of thumb will be activated?

Invoking thick categorizations. Research suggests that people tend to categorize others depending on both the *accessibility* of the category and the *fit* between the category and observed social reality (Abrams, 1999; Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999, p. 59). Psychologists have distinguished between two types of accessibility. A social category is said to be *chronically accessible* if it is available to people through memory and *situationally accessible* if through the situation itself (Hogg & Mullin, 1999, p. 252). An individual may find a categorization to be chronically accessible if that category is frequently activated (hence fresh in memory), if it is cognitively linked to other categories that are in use at the time, or if people have some particular motivation to use that category (Abrams, 1999; Hogg & Mullin, 1999, p. 252). To say that a category is situationally accessible implies that it is somehow immediately available in the situation itself through direct contact, active suggestion, and cues in the environment (Brubaker et al., in press, p. 25; Hogg & Mullin, 1999, p. 252). One way in which categories remain accessible in a situation is through ongoing interpersonal discourse (Schegloff, 1991). Accordingly, Brown (2000, pp. 273-274) reports that merely mentioning or subliminally suggesting the category “Black” before asking a person to evaluate another makes this category and related stereotypes more likely to be used.

Nevertheless, important research makes abundantly clear that the mere accessibility of a category does not guarantee its use but that people also tend to weigh available categorizations on the basis of how well they fit a situation. That is, accessible categories will be used to interpret a situation only if they help make sense of it, accounting reasonably accurately for similarities and differences among people (Abrams, 1999; Hogg & Mullin, 1999, p. 252; Oakes et al., 1999, p. 59). This effect has been found to be quite strong, capable of overpowering even the thickest categorizations when the latter “fit” the demands of a situation poorly and when some other categorization, even a completely new one, fits significantly better. Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides

(2001) show that by altering a situation in the right way, Americans, whose culture is steeped in racial consciousness, can be made to stop thinking even unconsciously in terms of race. When participants were shown a dispute involving people of different racial appearances, patterns of mistaken recollection revealed that the participants did (at least unconsciously) use the category of race as a shorthand for remembering who was on what side when no clear alternative was available. This was true even when the fit of racial categories was far from perfect.¹¹ But when experimenters introduced a fully arbitrary but visible distinction (differently colored shirts) that did correspond well to sides in the dispute, the participants almost entirely dropped race as a categorization, even on an unconscious level, instead structuring assessments of the situation in terms of shirt color. "Any readily observable feature—however arbitrary—can acquire social significance and cognitive efficacy when it validly cues patterns of alliance" argue Kurzban et al. (p. 15388).

Such findings strongly reinforce a claim that what is observed in social categorization is not usually the operation of context-independent cognitive representations that invariably impose themselves on any social interaction. Instead, it reflects a process of establishing thick points of personal reference, enabling one to navigate the social world as efficiently and successfully as possible. Although thick categorizations are often quite stable, research is also clear that how people categorize others and the subjective content ascribed to these categories can alter radically as context (points of common reference) shifts (Oakes et al., 1999, pp. 59-60).¹² People are even found to ascribe different values or traits to themselves as context varies (Abrams, 1999, p. 200).

Because situational fit strongly influences the tendency to resort to categorical thinking, and because category thickening is held to be a mechanism for uncertainty reduction, we might expect more use of thicker social categorizations as uncertainty levels rise. Hogg and Mullin (1999, p. 266-267) report that many studies have found just this. Massive uncertainties such as economic collapse and social upheaval are widely associated with the broad

11. Noting this resistance to disconfirmation, Sacks (1992, p. 336) calls categories "knowledge protected against induction." One might also explain this as path dependence (North, 1990).

12. Some see "cognitivism," with its U.S. roots, as an individual-centered, context-free approach, as opposed to "European" social psychology (e.g., SIT). These subfields have increasingly converged (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). Thus cognitivist Hirschfeld (1996) posits both that people impose preformed categories on reality and that context affects how they are employed and constituted. See Brubaker et al. (in press) for an approach to ethnicity proceeding mainly from cognitivism.

appeal of very “thick” (encompassing, compelling) social categories involving ethnic stereotypes and group conspiracy theories.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

According to this perspective, “ethnic identity” (or ethnicity) is that set of personal points of reference, thick and thin, that involve what we call “ethnic” distinctions between people. An “ethnic group” is thus a set of people who have common points of reference to these ethnic dimensions of the social world and who perceive that they indeed have these things in common and that these similarities are captured by a label, the ethnic group’s name. By *ethnic*, most follow Weber (1978) in referring mainly to such points of personal reference as perceptions of common descent, history, fate, and culture, which usually indicates some mix of language, physical appearance, and the ritual regulation of life, especially religion. Some usefully add a requirement of scale: A group defined by an ethnic categorization must transcend face-to-face relationships (Horowitz, 1985), containing (in principle or practice) the elements of a complete division of labor and reproduction (Brass, 1991, p. 19). Dimensions of ethnicity can thus be both thick and thin, varying in the density of meaning they connote. Indeed, what we typically think of as an active ethnic group is a grouping based on a thickened social categorization that is robustly important in a wide variety of social situations and that has been transformed into a useful rule of thumb for evaluating and reacting to one’s relationship to others in the social world. Overall, then, ethnic identity is just like any other set of identity dimensions except that it involves traits commonly referred to as “ethnic.” Ethnicity is a certain kind of social radar.

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT ETHNIC CATEGORIZATIONS?

This begs the question of whether there is anything special about the set of things listed above as constituting ethnic dimensions of social life. Why do so many scholars, practitioners, and political observers assume that ethnicity is distinctive, having special power beyond that commanded by more run-of-the-mill social categorizations? In answering this question, it is helpful to start with the aforementioned robust finding in psychology that people are most likely to use social categories as perceptual shorthands for complex situations when these categories (a) are readily mentally accessible, either through memory or the nature of a situation itself, and (b) fit a situation at hand well, providing reasonably reliable clues to behavior (Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Kurzban et al., 2001; Oakes et al., 1999). Because of several proper-

ties, one can see that ethnic markers, more than many other distinctions among people, tend to be readily accessible in and/or fit well with situations that are directly relevant to people's well-being.

Barriers to communication. Many of the ethnic traits identified by Weber (1978) and others inherently tend to involve barriers to communication. Although this is most obvious in the case of linguistic differences, it is also true of cultural differences, as noted above (Bourdieu, 1990; Geertz, 1973). Because communication is intrinsically important to social life, the presence of a communication barrier renders such differences immediately relevant (situationally accessible) in social encounters, making it more likely that they will be used as rules of thumb. Moreover, barriers to communication also inhibit disconfirmation of the simplifications that social rules of thumb imply. It becomes easier to believe "distorted" post hoc explanations for unexpected behavior on the part of other groups to the extent that one is not privy to the cultural idiom that would make the unexpected seem like common sense. If all this is true, we would expect ethnic differences involving major cultural or linguistic divides to rise in importance as communication between groups becomes more widely technically possible and demanded in society. Deutsch (1966), Gellner (1983), and Hechter (2000) compellingly make the case that industrialization has involved just such processes. We can thus account for the apparent rise in the salience and politicization of ethnic (especially national) identity in the modern age without resorting to a claim that such identity is inherently "modern" (a fallacy revealed by Smith, 2000). Additionally, Bowles and Gintis (in press) point out that more efficient communication among members of "ethnic networks" also creates incentives for members to maintain them for economic reasons.

The importance of communication does not imply that such ethnic categories will inevitably be invoked or politicized. As argued above, whether an accessible categorization is activated also depends on the nature of a situation. The point is simply that there is something about ethnic points of personal reference that is more conducive to thick categorization than is the case with many other personal reference points, other things (including situational fit) held equal.

Visible physical differences. Much less powerfully but still significantly, visible differences are also quite conducive to social rules of thumb. Even when there is no prior memory of such differences being socially important, visible differences between people have been shown to be powerfully "situationally accessible" and readily used as mnemonic shorthands to keep track of complicated coalitions (Kurzban et al., 2001, as discussed above). Be-

cause physical differences are often part of what we call “ethnic distinctions,” ethnicity is somewhat more likely to be invoked as a social rule of thumb than are other distinctions that do not involve either barriers to communication or visible differences between sets of people, *ceteris paribus*. It must be remembered, however, that there is nothing inevitable about any particular set of physical differences being invoked as a thick categorization to structure social life (Hirschfeld, 1996). Kurzban et al. (2001) show that even race in America can be “erased” if a situation is such that other cues become more reliable predictors, and Banton (1997) observes that much of the importance of “race” in the United States derives from particular power structures in that country.

Congruence with important exogenous factors. There are other reasons to expect ethnicity to be quite useful as a social rule of thumb. For one thing, the two kinds of ethnic traits just described, modes of communication and physical difference, have historically tended to be territorially concentrated (territory itself sometimes being described as a component of ethnicity) (Hechter, 2000, p. 24). This is understandable because both communication and reproduction possibilities (which pass on inherited physical traits) depend on social contact, opportunities for which tended to be quite limited for most people up until the industrial age. Other things important to people’s life chances also have historically tended to be differentially concentrated geographically, most notably economic development and sometimes even class or peculiar economic specializations (Bates, 1974; Hechter, 1975). Ethnic categories, coterminous neither with the whole of human society nor with the realm of face-to-face groups, can thus be expected to be at least somewhat correlated with levels of economic development. When levels of correlation are relatively high, the logic presented above would lead us to expect that ethnicity might come to be seen as a very useful rule of thumb by which people make inferences not only about other people’s language repertoires or appearances but also socioeconomic backgrounds, economic power, and life potential. This is likely because the latter traits are often less immediately perceptible than ethnic traits, but they are extremely important to people’s life chances, making a rule of thumb for efficiently drawing inferences about them very attractive. It is also quite common to find societies in which two groups live intermingled in the same territory but each group tends to be concentrated in a particular line of work. In such cases, too, one can identify a certain propensity for these ethnic distinctions to become rules of thumb for assessing people on a wide variety of other traits commonly associated with economic and social status.

Three classic social scientific works on ethnic politics help illustrate this dynamic interweaving of ethnic and socioeconomic status. Studying Africa, Bates (1974) demonstrates that economic development took place unevenly in terms of geography and that pockets of development and underdevelopment often tended to coincide with territorially concentrated cultural differences, producing long-lasting disparities in power and wealth. Competition over resources, he found, thus tended strongly to be structured along ethnic group lines for the reasons outlined here. Hechter (1975) has shown how ethnic differences can become fused with class differences in a "cultural division of labor." This can facilitate the rise of "internal colonialism," by which cultural markers (in Hechter's case, Irish ones) come to be widely associated with class differences, thereby binding whole ethnic groups to a limited range of economic and social opportunities. Dawson (1994) illustrates how the social structure imposed by White leaders in the United States has rendered the life chances of African Americans so heavily dependent on a particular conception of race, even in the spheres of economics and social interaction, that many tend to find it more cost effective to calculate the benefits of governmental policies for the race as a whole than for themselves as individuals. Dawson dubs this race-based calculation the "Black utility heuristic," a notion supported by Lublin's (1997) finding that by far, the strongest predictor of African American voting is race, not socioeconomic position.

Symbols and myths of common origin. Even myths of common origin, often said to be the distinguishing feature of ethnic groups but whose "power" is notably underexplained, can be shown to have properties as rules of thumb that help account for the special force often attributed to ethnic categorizations in group identity and intergroup relations (Armstrong, 1982; Cohen, 1974; Smith, 2000; Snyder & Ballantine, 1997). As discussed above, social categories are more likely to be used as rules of thumb to the extent that they both are mentally accessible and are capable of making "sense" of particular social situations with reasonable reliability. Ethnic symbols can be seen as serving to evoke (cue, make situationally accessible) ethnic categorizations (even ethnic schemas) as well as to further thicken these categorizations by evoking them in a wider range of situations than they would otherwise be, increasing the chances that thick ethnic categorizations will actually be activated for social interpretation and behavior.

This helps provide the psychological underpinnings to Smith's (1999, 2000) previously unexplained assertion that ancient, historical symbols are inherently potent. Symbols are more likely to be effective the broader, the more robust, and the more enduring is the impact on people's lives that the associated categories connote. Ethnic symbols can gain such powerful con-

notation via reference to shared histories, blood relationships, and past commonalities of fate because all of these lend credibility to suggestions of future such commonalities of fate for those who have a certain relationship to these symbols. Of course, these symbols must be congruent with commonly held understandings of history and collective identifications to be considered plausible. Without plausibility, people are unlikely to find the categorizations that the symbols imply situationally “fitting” enough to employ. Intuiting this power potential, charismatic politicians often cultivate symbols that are plausibly old in their efforts to mobilize followings (Connor, 1993; Snyder & Ballantine, 1997). Symbols that actually are old (as documented in historical texts and oral traditions, for example) can be among the most plausible.¹³ Thus there is an element of path dependence (North, 1990) to ethnic symbolic forms that helps us account for the continuity we see in the national symbolism so eloquently described but underexplained by Smith (1999). We must keep in mind, however, Cohen’s (1974) insight that symbols are by their very essence ambiguous, frequently and characteristically imbued with new meaning. The continuity of ethnic or national symbols in no way necessitates the continuity of their meaning.

This symbolic logic also helps us understand the imagery of kinship that is so commonly observed in ethnic politics (Horowitz, 1985). Although family bonds clearly reflect more than an urge for uncertainty reduction, kinship functions in important ways as a singularly thick and accessible social category. But because “humans are unable to recognize copies of their genes in others,” kinship categorizations remain based on context-dependent social cues (Neyer & Lang, 2003, p. 318). It is highly plausible, then, that the invocation of symbols connoting kinship outside the family realm essentially reflects efforts to extend the meaning (especially obligations) of family to new situations, warning people that their fates depend on the category in family-like ways. Such symbolism gains plausibility and power when myths of common descent dominate.

All of these properties of ethnicity not only promote the use of such thick categorizations by individuals in understanding and guiding their actions in socially complex situations but also (and thereby) provide incentive for elites to invoke ethnic categories to camouflage or provide political cover for controversial actions. As Brass (1997) documents, much ethnic violence in India has not in fact been initiated by ethnic groups or even “ethnically” hostile masses. Sometimes the initial bloodletting is random; specific networks of thugs and politicians then provide (where it plausibly fits) an ethnic interpre-

13. Plausibility also hinges on media and access to falsifying data (Snyder & Ballantine, 1997).

tation to ride the tensions to personal political or material gain. Sometimes such networks launch the violence themselves. This essay's theory of ethnicity now provides the missing micro-level underpinnings of Brass's account: People are psychologically disposed to invoke thick categorizations to help them make sense of complex situations, and Brass makes brilliantly clear that the social environment surrounding such acts is highly complex. Ethnic categorizations in places such as India are particularly likely to be invoked because they are highly situationally accessible (indeed, institutionalized by the state) and often involve barriers to communication; symbols powerfully connoting a sense of shared fate; and readily observable markers that for historical reasons correspond plausibly to important political, economic, or social divides. The networks of thugs Brass identifies play on precisely these aspects of ethnicity, distorting understandings, inhibiting disconfirmation, adding deadly meaning to perceptions of common fate, and making newly accessible ethnic symbols that connote these meanings and that activate ethnic schema in a widening set of important situations.¹⁴

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS THINK ABOUT ETHNICITY

The preceding analysis has major implications for how social scientists fundamentally think and talk about important notions such as identity and identity change.

IDENTITY

The above analysis makes clear that the term *identity* is often used to refer to concepts that should be distinguished more clearly to facilitate theory advancement. The usage advocated here connotes the complete self-concept of a person, the totality of points of personal reference, both thick and thin, defining that person's relationship to the social world. But scholars also often use it to refer to something more specific, what I have called here a "thick categorization," a robust point of personal reference that has become a rule of thumb imputing high group solidarity. When Nagel (1994, p. 154) avers that the individual carries a "portfolio of identities," she has this latter basic meaning in mind, as does Laitin (1998) when he writes of a new "identity in formation" in the former Soviet Union. To reduce the term *identity* to refer merely

14. Thus Varshney (2002) finds that the most peaceful towns are set apart by intergroup networks that counteract communications difficulties and reduce ethnic correlation with other key cleavages.

to a thick categorization, though, is to invite a great definitional problem that can complicate theory, discourse, and, most importantly, understanding: At what point do categorizations become thick enough to call “an identity”? Conceptually, the location of any such threshold would be arbitrary because, as this essay has sought to make clear, categorizations can take on a wide variety of levels of meaning. This thickness can range from the minimal (“I belong to this group”) to the extremely robust and compelling (as with “Black” in the United States). That is, “thickness” is best thought of as varying along a continuum, one with many dimensions representing different ways in which categories can be relevant to people. To use *identity* to refer to thick categorizations obscures this inherent and very interesting variation in the thickness of categories. One could, of course, add adjectives, producing terms such as *strong identity* to refer to the thickest categorizations and *weak identity* for the thinnest. But this sacrifices any gain from using *identity* to refer to thick categorizations in the first place, because now any categorization is already some kind of identity: A minimally thin one (à la Tajfel, 1982) would still be an identity, just a very weak one. Identity thus loses its connotation of referring to thick categorization.

Although some advocate effectively throwing out the term *identity* as hopelessly muddy (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), the present study has attempted to show that it can be formulated in a way that is highly meaningful, coherent, and, as Fearon (1999) would require, well grounded in both scholarly and commonsense usage. The recommendation made here, then, is to reserve *identity* to refer to the complete set of a person’s points of personal reference, lumpy though they may be, to the totality of things that constitute the self-concept, the person’s sense of how he or she fits into the social world.¹⁵ As for what to call thick categorizations (if that term itself is not preferred), the term “identification” is suggested.¹⁶ Identification is precisely the placing of oneself in a social category that is meaningful—exactly that which interests us.¹⁷ It would therefore be more productive not to talk about someone acquiring a “new identity” or about a new identity being created but

15. This article thus advances Laitin’s (1998) and Fearon’s (1999) efforts to distill meaning from the term. Both researchers boiled it down to an interlinked but bifurcated notion: “constructed” social identity plus more “primordial” personal identity. The present study’s formulation is more fundamental, arguably subsuming these two usages in a more coherent concept. To conceive of identity as points of personal reference clarifies that even “senses of personal identity” are perceptions of particular kinds of thick relationships to the social world and hence come under pressure or change as these relationships change (Abrams, 1999; Erikson, 1968). See Gaertner et al. (2002) on psychology perspectives doubting the primacy of the “individual self.”

16. See Brubaker and Cooper (2000) for additional advocacy of the term and an important caution.

17. Forsyth (1999, p. 78) discusses what is typically held to be involved in identification.

instead to refer to the formation of a “new identification.” Because the term itself implies a process, one can easily refer to identifications that are strong and weak, thick and thin, waxing and waning, and so on, without introducing confusion because *identification* does not imply that any particular threshold level of thickness is necessary for a self-categorization to be called an “identification.” Of course, it is also possible to refer to these concepts by the more information-laden terms developed in this article, including *points of personal reference*, *social categories* or *social categorizations*, *identity dimensions*, and related variations. This usage is also consistent with much of the literature in psychology, which frequently uses the terms *identification* and *categorization* in much the same way. Indeed, Brubaker et al. (in press) make the highly appropriate recommendation for researchers to directly engage not only these but also more purely cognitive theoretical concepts, such as schemas.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Instrumentalists often assert that people have “multiple identities.” In light of the preceding, it would be more fruitful (and more satisfying to lay audiences, who may associate the latter with a mental illness) to say instead that people have multiple identifications, multiple dimensions of identity, but not multiple identities. A person has only one identity at any given point in time, consisting of the totality of personal points of reference ordering that person’s relationship to the social world. This semantic point is important because maintaining the notion of identity as a person’s complete set of points of personal reference helps one not lose sight of the integrated, whole nature of a person that most people experience (Cohen, 1974, pp. 54-55; Harré, 1984). Much of what is said by some instrumentalists to be “identity switching” is in fact not “switching” at all but instead a change in the differential emphasis placed on distinct dimensions of the same overall, unified identity in response to a change in situation that makes a given categorization more useful, accessible, or accurate in uncertainty reduction.

IDENTITY CHANGE

One key implication of the above ideas is that identities are inherently dynamic, constantly changing, at least to minor degrees, as the social environment to which identities refer changes. To claim that identity “shifts” or “changes” is unsurprising—this in fact happens constantly. Similarly, it is hardly interesting to observe that identifications are created, because these can be so thin as to involve little more than an awareness of the things to

which the identifications refer. As long as there has been a polity known as France, for example, there has been a French identification. But at the very point of France's founding, for the vast majority of peasants, who were little affected by doings in Paris, "French identification" was probably not much thicker than Tajfel's (1982) laboratory groupings. What is extremely important, however, is when identifications become thick with meaning, especially when they serve as rules of thumb that structure a wide range of a person's social activities. Thus when Weber (1976) recounts the fascinating process whereby "peasants" were turned into "Frenchmen," he is not so much describing the creation of a French identification as how it became thick with meaning for average French people, fostering intensified solidarity that produced important behaviors such as consent to serve in the French military. Recognizing that identifications can be thick and thin, and avoiding the conflation of the notion of identity with that of thick categorization, one not only better understands Weber's argument but also has better language to comprehend Beaune's (1990) finding that French national feeling (an identification, but a weak one) predates the modern era. One would also do well to follow Brubaker (2002) in paying attention to the "thinning" as well as thickening of identifications so as not to overemphasize the durability of "groupness."

CONCLUSION

I have argued that conceiving of identity as personal points of reference helps us understand why ethnicity exists and is widely regarded to be so important. In some ways, the result resembles a reconstituted primordialism. But the primordial element is not that groups themselves are necessarily "permanent," "ancient," or "impassioned," but that (a) people have a deeply rooted psychological mechanism facilitating social categorization; (b) there tends to be intrinsic value to those markers we call "ethnic" in constituting boundaries distinguishing these groupings; and (c) some ethnic identifications are in fact quite "old," thick, and/or stable. But in other ways, the findings seem decidedly constructivist: (a) Group identification is not intrinsically linked to emotion; (b) identity is constantly and inherently changing as the environment changes, and, critically; (c) identifications and the meanings associated with them are highly manipulable by both elites and the "identifying" individuals themselves.

This furthers recent efforts to develop the individual-level underpinnings of theories of ethnic behavior (Brubaker, 2002; Calvert, 2002; Fearon & Laitin, 2000). It not only accounts for a broad range of psychological research from Tajfel (1982) to Erikson (1959/1980, 1968) to Hirschfeld

(1996); it also ties seminal insights from perspectives so diverse as Smith's (2000) ethnosymbolism, Geertz's (1967, 1973) webs of significance, Brass's (1991, 1997) instrumentalism, and Fearon's (1999) and Laitin's (1998) rational choice into a coherent concept of identity. One key implication for theory is that if ethnicity derives not from inherently conflictual, primordial group urges or from any universal drive to raise self-esteem at outgroups' expense but instead from an individual's need to make sense of the world for whatever important goals a person pursues, then ingroup-favoring behavior often considered ethnic is likely to have its most fundamental roots in other human motivations, such as desires for physical security, material resources, or status.¹⁸ Ethnicity, then, serves to structure such action by providing people with social radar that they use to efficiently identify or impose social possibilities and potential constraints in a world of immense uncertainty and complexity.¹⁹ By beginning with such an understanding of why people have ethnic identifications in the first place, theorists are better positioned to converge on key concepts and to more rapidly advance understanding of ethnic politics and solutions to ethnic conflicts.

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18. One thus finds new grounding for intuitions developed, for example, by Posen (1993) on security, Bowles and Gintis (2003) on material gain, and Laitin (1998) on (in part) status.

19. The behavioral claims of this essay are amenable to formal modeling, although it suggests less potential in modeling identity itself as having intrinsic value as part of the utility function (as do Akerlof & Kranton, 2000) than in following Bowles and Gintis (2003) by examining effects of particular traits of ethnic identifications (for them, the facility for communication). Other outstanding efforts drawing on game theory can be found in Breton, Galeotti, Salmon, and Wintrobe (1995) and Calvert (2002).

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