In a recent article in this journal, Leonie Huddy (2001) asks whether the social identity approach developed by Tajfel, Turner, and their collaborators can “advance the study of identity within political science” (p. 128). She concludes that “various shortcomings and omissions in its research program” (p. 128) hinder the application of the approach to political phenomena. This paper presents a response to Huddy’s evaluation of the social identity approach. Several aspects of her account of social identity work are challenged, especially her suggestion that it ignores subjective aspects of group membership. The interpretation of the minimal group paradigm is discussed in detail, as are issues of identity choice, salience, and variations in identity strength. The treatment of groups as process in social identity theory and self-categorization theory is given particular emphasis.

KEY WORDS: social identity, self-categorization, political psychology, identity salience, identity strength, political groups

In a recent article in this journal, Leonie Huddy (2001) asks whether the social identity approach developed by Tajfel, Turner, and their collaborators can “advance the study of identity within political science” (p. 128). She suggests that, whereas the humanities and social sciences are producing vibrant, useful discussions of “identity politics,” political science and political psychology are not keeping up in terms of empirical research and causal analysis. Can Tajfel and Turner’s work provide the necessary theoretical infrastructure from which interesting and testable hypotheses about the role of identity in political behavior can emerge? Huddy concludes that the social identity approach is not up to this task because “various shortcomings and omissions in its research program” (p. 128) hinder its application to political phenomena.
There is already an extensive literature in which the social identity analysis is applied to political phenomena. This includes work on leadership (e.g., Haslam, 2001; Haslam et al., in press), nationalism and national identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), persuasion and influence (David & Turner, 1999; Turner, 1991), the development of consensus (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Reynolds, 1998), collective behavior and social protest (Simon, 1998; Stott & Drury, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000), cooperation (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999), impression formation (Reynolds & Oakes, 2000), stereotyping (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, in press; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Oakes, Reynolds, Haslam, & Turner, 1999; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997), prejudice and racism (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; Brown, 1995; Turner, 1999a), and public opinion (Oakes, 2001b; Price, 1989; Price & Oshagan, 1995; Price & Roberts, 1987). Huddy’s comments throw the value of this work into some doubt—has it applied a theoretical approach whose “shortcomings and omissions” render it less than useful in the analysis of political phenomena? This question is important, because Huddy is absolutely right to suggest that the study of political behavior urgently requires a powerful and predictive theory of identity. Have the researchers cited above made a mistake in thinking that the work of Tajfel, Turner, and their colleagues represents such a theory?

The present paper engages with Huddy’s critique of social identity theory with a view to demonstrating that her misgivings are not well founded. In particular, it takes issue with her suggestion that the theory reduces social identity to “the simple designation of group boundaries” (p. 133) and ignores its subjective meaning (p. 130). It is important to clarify these issues, not as a pedantic exercise but because they are absolutely fundamental to the distinctive vision of identity that Tajfel and Turner have offered to social science—a vision that does, I believe, present powerful opportunities for students of political behavior.

I cannot do justice to the depth, breadth, and complexity of the social identity approach in a short article. My aim is simply to assert the defining arguments, as I see them, of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985), and to point readers in the direction of some useful original sources so that they can make up their own minds about the theories’ relevance to political phenomena. I offer the following discussion of Huddy’s objections to social identity work in the same “spirit of constructive dialogue” (p. 128) that motivated her contribution.

Back to Basics: The Minimal Group Paradigm

When Tajfel began to research intergroup behavior, the most important work in the area was Sherif’s famous summer camp studies, in which boys had been assigned to competing, then cooperating, groups in a complex, naturalistic setting (Sherif, 1967). Tajfel wanted to test Sherif’s conclusion that negative interdependence was a necessary condition for intergroup conflict by stripping the intergroup
context down to its absolute essentials, then gradually adding relevant variables and observing their isolated and interactive effects. He designed the minimal group paradigm for this purpose, and in the original “baseline” studies schoolboys were divided by the experimenter into two anonymous, non-interacting, ostensibly meaningless groups. In a subsequent distribution task, they showed a significant tendency to favor their ingroup and discriminate against the outgroup (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971).

Huddy is probably right to describe this unexpected finding as “the most famous” in the social identity catalogue, but it is also the most misunderstood. The “sound bite” interpretation of the findings that spread like wildfire through the literature was that mere categorization—simply telling people that there were two groups and they were in one of them—could provoke discrimination (e.g., see Stephan, 1985; Wilder, 1986). Many researchers picked up on the minimal group findings and the “mere categorization” interpretation in order to make a point about the apparent irrationality and meaninglessness of intergroup conflict, a point that fitted in very well with the emerging field of social cognition and its emphasis on limited cognitive capacity and consequent shortcomings of social thought (for a discussion see Oakes & Turner, 1990). In line with this unfortunate tradition, Huddy presents the minimal group studies as evidence that “ethnocentrism and intergroup discrimination arise as a direct product of categorization” (p. 133). They led Tajfel to assert, she suggests, that “the simple designation of group boundaries leads to social identity” (p. 133). This provides the starting point for her major criticism of the social identity approach—that it involves an “emphasis . . . on groups that lack meaning” (p. 142), and that in general “social identity researchers have tended to ignore [the] subjective aspect of identities” (p. 130).

Let’s go beyond the sound bite and look at how Tajfel and Turner themselves interpreted the minimal group findings. It soon became very clear that, although the studies had been designed to manipulate categorization per se, this was not, in fact, the effective independent variable determining participants’ responses. Turner (1975, 1978) showed that when participants were given the opportunity to distribute rewards on an individual basis before they were asked to divide them between the two groups, they did not then favor the ingroup in their allocations. They experienced exactly the same designation of group boundaries as participants in the original studies, but didn’t respond to it at all. Turner’s crystal-clear conclusion was:

Social categorization per se . . . is not sufficient for ingroup favouritism.

. . . The distinction between E’s classification of Ss into two groups and the identification with these categories by Ss needs to be firmly made. The latter seems to be a necessary condition for the influence of the former. (Turner, 1978, pp. 138–139; emphasis added)

This, then, was the finding on which social identity theory was based—not that “the simple designation of group boundaries” could produce group behavior, but that such designation had no effect unless and until it had been internalized by the
individuals involved. Far from simply “assum[ing] that individuals labeled as
group members would categorize themselves as such and internalize the group
label as a social identity” (Huddy, p. 133), Tajfel believed that this apparent
internalization was the main thing that had to be explained about the minimal group
paradigm. Why had participants taken any notice at all of the experimenter-im-
posed categories? He suggested that the anonymity, lack of interaction, and absence
of specific goals that the minimal group paradigm required left the participants in
a virtually meaningless situation. This could be rectified through identification with
and action in terms of the experimenter’s categories:

Meaning was found by [participants] in the adoption of a strategy for
action based on the establishment, through action, of a distinctiveness
between their own “group” and the other, between the two social catego-
ries in a truly minimal “social system.” Distinction from the “other”
category provided ipso facto an identity for their own group, and thus
some kind of meaning to an otherwise empty situation. (Tajfel, 1972,
pp. 275)

Thus, if it is about anything at all, social identity is about meaning, even in the
minimal group experiments (see Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). Huddy
misunderstands this because she works from a popular misinterpretation of the
minimal group paradigm rather than the actual interpretation promulgated by Tajfel
and Turner. Their interpretation was supported by further empirical work (using
minimal groups and many other methodologies; e.g., see chapters in Tajfel, 1978
and 1982), and it was this interpretation that informed the development of the social
identity approach. The very fact that they did not accept externalized categorization
as the effective independent variable in the minimal group studies was a major
driving force behind the theoretical analysis of group behavior which became social
identity theory and self-categorization theory. Having missed this first crucial
point, it is relatively easy to miss the point entirely. Contrary to Huddy’s assertions
(p. 130), the social identity approach has “the subjective aspect of identities” as its
central concern.

From Experiments to Theory and Meta-Theory: Social Identity

What the minimal group studies actually did was provoke Tajfel and Turner
into making the crucial connection between social categorization and the self. They
argued that minimal categorization only had effects when participants accepted the
experimenter’s categories as self-defining. The same principle applies, they argued,
outside the laboratory. A sociological categorization (such as race, ethnicity,
gender, etc.) only gains psychological significance once it has been accepted as
self-defining. In Tajfel’s words: “the external designations of . . . groups as such
have very little, if any, correspondence with the development and existence of
internal (i.e., psychological) criteria for membership” (1982, pp. 491–492, empha-
sis in original; see also the lengthy discussion in Tajfel, 1978, pp. 28–38; cf. Huddy, p. 133). How and why do social categories become self-defining? This is, in essence, the question addressed by self-categorization theory (see below) but, as we saw above, Tajfel provided the beginnings of the answer when he suggested that the internalization of categories could be seen as part of a more general process in which people use categories to “structure the causal understanding of the environment,” to make sense of what is going on around them. The self could become a stimulus in this process, such that sense making through categorization could include making sense of the self, developing a “self-definition in a social context” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 61). Social identity refers to one outcome of this process, the aspect of the self-concept that is defined in terms of psychological affiliation with social groups.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is a theory of intergroup behavior. It was developed to explore some of the consequences of the idea that the self may be implicated in and transformed by social categorization. How might this help us to understand observed forms of intergroup behavior, including overt conflict? How might it also contribute to explaining why there is often no apparent reaction at all to intergroup conditions that might be expected to provoke resistance and conflict (cf. Huddy, p. 137; see Tajfel, 1982, chapter 16)? The theory focuses in particular on what happens when a given social identity confers negative self-description and/or low social status on an individual. It is very relevant to understanding the conditions under which “a weak or nonexistent identity [becomes] something that can motivate ethnic hatred” (Huddy, p. 137; e.g., see Tajfel, 1978, p. 39). Under some social circumstances—such as where the status relations between identity-relevant groups are perceived to be illegitimate, perhaps unstable, and the boundaries between the groups impermeable—the desire to establish a more positive self-definition may contribute to the development of strategies aimed at improving the group’s status. These strategies can include overt intergroup conflict. Major predictions from social identity theory, such as those detailing the effects of perceived boundary permeability, have been the subject of intense empirical investigation for many years (e.g., Ellemers, van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988; see Ellemers, 1993; cf. Huddy’s comment that “some studies have begun to examine the permeability of group boundaries,” p. 140).

Where social identity theory focuses on the consequences of categories as subjectively self-defining, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) asks how they get to be self-defining in the first place. As Turner and Reynolds (2001) put it, “the point of [self-categorization theory] is to explain how a sociological group becomes a psychological group” (p. 137). The explanation involves a careful analysis of the categorization process, and the hypothesis that its application to the self—self-categorization—is the crucial mechanism through which subjective identification (“who am I?”) emerges from an interaction between individuals’ characteristics and the context in which they find themselves (see
discussion of the salience hypothesis, below). One of its core hypotheses is that self-categorization varies in its level of abstraction or inclusiveness. Important distinctions are between self-categorization at the human, the ingroup, and the individual levels of inclusiveness (see Turner & Oakes, 1989), and self-categorization at the ingroup level produces salient social identity (see below). Self-categorization theory holds that variation in the self, both between and within levels, is a normal and adaptive feature of social life, “not arbitrary or chaotic but . . . systematic and . . . lawfully related to variation in social contexts” (Turner et al., 1994, p. 458). As identity varies, the cognitive, motivational, and emotional resources brought into play for interpreting the world also vary (see Turner & Oakes, 1997). I discuss aspects of self-categorization theory in more detail below.

Finally, part of the distinctive richness of social identity theory and self-categorization theory derives from their explicit commitment to and embodiment of a particular meta-theoretical position within social psychology, that of interactionism (Turner & Oakes, 1986, 1997). Very briefly, this position is anti-reductionist, anti-individualistic, and interested in understanding how psychology is transformed to accommodate and make possible the social. How does the individual become a psychologically social being? The answer offered by Tajfel, Turner, and their collaborators is that social categorization of the self can transform subjectivity:

People are not merely individuals, they are at varying times and in varying ways both individual persons and psychological group members. This enhancement of the complexity of human social interaction reflects the social structuring of the mind through the internalization of representations of shared social locations (i.e. social categorizations) to define and modify the self. . . . Social identities and group memberships, and their related products and processes, are one instance of the general point that the mind is socially structured by means of the self. (Turner & Oakes, 1997, pp. 370–371)

In other words, it is through variable identity—the fact that we can vary our perspective on reality from the singular to the collective and between different social positions at each level—that we are social beings rather than isolated information-processing machines. This analysis provides insights into the social-psychological basis of many issues of interest to political scientists, some of which I touch on below.

In summary, social identity is not “the simple designation of group boundaries” (Huddy, p. 133). At the most basic level, it is about people creating meaning through the active use of the categorization process, the inclusion of the self as a stimulus in this process, and the consequent potential for the self to be defined and to act in collective, group-based terms in some contexts. Thus, far from ignoring the subjective aspects of identities, the social identity approach represents an
explicit attempt to specify exactly how subjective identification happens, and how
identity then functions to influence social perception, thought, and behavior.

**Understanding Groups as Process Rather Than “Herrings”: Salience,
Identity Choice, and Variability in Subjective Commitment**

Huddy asserts that “social identity theory from its inception has assumed the
existence of fixed and known group memberships” (p. 140). Nothing could be
further from the truth. One of the most important messages of the social identity
approach is that identities are emergent, context-specific outcomes of the interac-
tion between the perceiver and social reality, as expressed through the categoriza-
tion process (Turner & Oakes, 1989; Turner et al., 1994; see also McGarty, 1999;
Oakes, 1996a, 2001a; Oakes & Haslam, 2001; Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999;
best:

> It is hardly true that “a group is a group” . . . the psychological existence
of a group for its members is a complex sequence of appearances and
disappearances, of looming large and vanishing into thin air. . . . [We]
make a distinction between a static and a dynamic conception of groups
and of the relations between them. In the static conception, the groups are
seen as “being there” side by side, almost like herrings packed in a box,
coming to life to “perceive” each other whenever prodded into doing so.
. . . In the dynamic conception, groups (and intergroup relations) come to
life when their potential designations as such have acquired a psychologi-
cal and behavioral reality. (p. 485; emphasis in original)

When do the “potential designations” of groups acquire that psychological reality?
As Huddy puts it, “how do we explain an individual group member’s decision to
identify as a group member?” (p. 131). She suggests that “this aspect of choice has
typically been ignored by social identity researchers” (p. 131), but in fact it has
been a major focus of our work:

> To predict when people would define themselves in terms of social . . .
identity, an analysis of the general principles governing the use of self-
categories was developed. We argue that variation in how people catego-
rize themselves is the rule rather than the exception and that the collective
self arises as part of this normal variation. (Turner et al., 1994, p. 455)

The “analysis of the general principles governing the use of self-categories” is also
known as the salience hypothesis. The issue of identity salience is, as Huddy quite
rightly notes, “one of the key forces” (p. 138) in social identity work. Indeed, in
statements emphasizing that subjective group membership was the only type in
which social identity theory was interested, Tajfel once commented that “the
‘salience’ of intergroup relations [is] . . . the cornerstone of the whole edifice’
However, Huddy uses the term salience in a way that is very different from its use in social identity work. Her usage becomes clear in the following statement:

In the extreme, social identity theory researchers suggest that the salience of one’s group membership is the sole determinant of identity. . . . African Americans who work in predominantly white settings should have difficulty thinking of themselves in other than racial terms. (p. 138)

In other words, “salience,” in Huddy’s reading, is simply the external presence of the intergroup boundary (see also p. 133, p. 137), which, she assumes, becomes more significant for individuals in contexts where the category to which they belong is in a minority. She asserts that for social identity researchers salience “is a feature of situations, not individuals” (p. 138). As a consequence, she suggests (quite understandably) that social identity theory and self-categorization theory cannot deal with issues of identity choice and variability in subjective commitment to group memberships.

In fact, though, the third “basic assumption” in the formal statement of self-categorization theory is that identities “become salient . . . as a function of an interaction between characteristics of the perceiver and the situation” (Turner et al., 1987, p. 44). Salience is not a feature of situations, nor is it a feature of individuals—it emerges from an interaction between the two. By “salient,” social identity researchers refer to

> group membership[s] which [are] functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behaviour . . . the salience of a group membership is its current psychological significance, not the perceptual prominence of relevant cues. (Oakes, 1987, pp. 118–119)

According to social identity theorists, then, the simultaneous presence of African and white Americans is utterly meaningless to people unless “their potential designations as [African and white] have acquired a psychological and behavioral reality” (Tajfel, 1982, p. 485; see above). Indeed, the analysis of group membership salience that was elaborated within self-categorization theory was developed in explicit opposition to the work of social cognition researchers who had promulgated the idea that contextual minority status (as in Huddy’s example) drew attention to physical cues associated with minority membership, producing automatic salience for that identity (for discussion and evidence, see Oakes, 1987, 1994; Oakes & Turner, 1986; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). Our argument was that any such mechanism would produce group identifications that were randomly related to important realities of the social context, and that the agency and judgment of the social perceiver had been summarily excluded from consideration.

Our analysis of identity salience involved the adaptation of ideas originally offered by Bruner (1957) in his brilliant discussion of the categorization process.
We hypothesized that category salience would emerge from an interaction between the extent to which the categorization “fits” the stimuli under consideration and the perceiver’s “readiness” to use particular categories. Fit is not about attribute-matching between individual stimuli and category content. It is a process geared to making coherent sense of the entire stimulus field, and it refers both to the comparative, similarity/difference relations between stimuli and to their substantive meaning (see Blanz & Aufderheide, 1999; Oakes, 2001; Oakes & Haslam, 2001; Oakes & Reynolds, 1999; Oakes et al., 1991; Reynolds et al., 2000; van Knippenberg, van Twuyver, & Pepels, 1994). Readiness varies with the perceiver’s context-specific goals, priorities, values, perspective, and so forth (see Oakes et al., 1994, chapter 8). Note that the “fit × readiness” interaction is not only an analysis of group membership salience; it is a general account of the functioning of the categorization process in social perception—a process that involves active, motivated perceivers making sense of the stimulus field in which they are operating. Identity, as a meaningful interpretation of the self-in-context, emerges from this process.

It is true to say, therefore, that self-categorization theorists are “some of the strongest proponents of the view that social identities are highly labile” (Huddy, p. 148), but this is a matter of understanding the identity process rather than describing everyday identity reality. The hypothesis that identity is the outcome of a context-dependent process predicts that it can be highly labile, not that it must change all the time. As Turner et al. (1994) put it:

> We are not putting forth an empirical view of continual flux in [identity] but a theoretical one: that where there are stability and continuity in [identity], these are produced by the same processes that make possible fluidity and change. Stability in [identity] is likely to arise from (a) the stability of the social reality that provides contexts for self-definition, (b) the higher order knowledge frameworks used to give coherence to varying instances of behavior, (c) the social groups, subcultures and social institutions that provide perceivers with stable norms, values and motives, and (d) social influence and communication processes that translate particular conceptions of self and others into social norms and validate the broader elaborative ideologies used in their construction. (p. 460)

Thus, self-categorization theory has no difficulty dealing with “strong identities that endure across situations and over time” (Huddy, p. 136), but it does treat them as expressions of the identity process rather than fixed aspects of cognitive structure or personality. This is also relevant to the issue of what Huddy calls “shades of identity.” She is right to draw attention to “the notion of identity strength” (p. 147) as an important research topic, but she appears to be unaware that it is already a well-integrated element of the social identity approach (e.g., see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). There is extensive evidence of measurable differences in individuals’ current commitment to group memberships, and these can have significant...
effects. Some of this work will be of particular interest to students of political behavior, as it examines group members’ willingness to engage in collective action (e.g., Simon, 1998; Simon et al., 1998; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). This work also cautions against simplistic understandings of differences in identity strength. Veenstra and Haslam (2000), for example, found that defining the context in conflictual terms increased highly identified union members’ willingness to engage in collective action, relative to contexts in which conflict was not mentioned. In contrast, conflict decreased willingness among less identified members, but this effect was attenuated when the notion of threat to the union was also introduced. In other words, willingness to engage in collective action depended on an interaction between identification and aspects of the social context. Veenstra and Haslam (2000) concluded:

> While identification impacts upon willingness to participate in collective action, such behaviour is also sensitive to the broader context within which it is defined. . . . This finding is critical, as it suggests that collective action does not result from chronic psychological factors (with social identification potentially akin to an individual difference in this respect), but rather is a meaningful response to subjectively apprehended features of social reality. (p. 168)

Similarly, Spears et al. (1999) cautioned that being able to measure differences in identity strength across individuals does not mean that these differences reflect some fixed, stable self-structure or trait. They argued that identity strength can be understood as “the momentary and sometimes more longstanding crystallization” (p. 61) of the same influences that underlie variations in identity salience. Importantly, Spears et al. rejected any attempt to explain group-based behavior in terms of individual processes operating without reference to contextual factors (e.g., trait-like individual differences); this sort of reductionism “is precisely what social identity theory tried to escape from” (1999, p. 61).

Finally, Huddy suggests that social identity theory and self-categorization theory treat social identity as “an all-or-nothing phenomenon” (p. 145)—when group memberships become salient, individual identity is entirely overwhelmed. This is in reference to the theoretical notion of an identity continuum, which was first introduced by Tajfel to refer to a descriptive differentiation between interpersonal and intergroup behavior, but was later modified by Turner (1982) to establish personal and social identity as distinct causal influences on social behavior. More specifically, Turner discussed the way in which the cognitive workings of the categorization process (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) could create a functional antagonism between self-categorizations at different levels. For example, as a consequence of the tendency for ingroup-outgroup categorizations to accentuate perceived similarity within a group, the more that individuals defined themselves as group members, the less they would be aware of their distinctive individuality (see Turner & Oakes, 1989). Huddy comments that this “leads to a very stark view
of identity that is at odds with reality [in which] social identities are adopted by
degrees and represent something intermediate between an all-encompassing group
identity and a distinctively unique persona” (p. 145).

This is precisely why social identity theorists talk about a continuum, which
involves, by definition, two extremes and all points in between. Although it may
be useful for theoretical purposes to focus on instances of strong identity salience
at each end of the continuum, in reality self-categorization “never fully embodies
any one level but arises from a dynamic, fluid process of conflict and compromise”
(Turner & Oakes, 1989, p. 245). As Turner et al. (1994) elaborated:

Most of the time there are probably psychological and objective factors
making for the salience of multiple self-categories that may reinforce or
conflict with each other. [Self-categorization theory] proposes that there
is a continual competition between self-categorization at the personal and
group level and that self-perception varies along a continuum defined by
the conflict between the two and their shifting relative strengths . . . what
becomes salient is probably rarely a single category or level of self-cate-
gory. This is simply a convenient way of talking about the dominant
self-category where self-perception reflects the conflicts and compri-
mises among several competing, alternative ways of categorizing self in
a situation. (p. 456)

Once again, the important point is that identity emerges from an active, perceiver-
driven process of (self-)categorization, a process that is producing meaning by
defining stimuli in context-dependent, relational terms (see Oakes, 2001a; Oakes
& Haslam, 2001).

Conclusions

Huddy has questioned the usefulness of the social identity approach for an
understanding of political behavior on the grounds that it ignores the subjective
aspects of identity and is therefore unable to deal with important issues of interest
to political scientists, such as identity choice and variation in identity commitment.
I have attempted to show that the subjective aspects of identity are in fact the main
raison d’être of social identity theory and self-categorization theory, and under-
standing identity choice and variation are at the core of their mission. Ironically, I
believe that many of Huddy’s critical comments would have been perfectly
reasonable if they had been aimed at social cognition research rather than social
identity work (see Oakes & Turner, 1990; Tajfel, 1981). Some political scientists
are fairly critical of the a-contextual, meaning-free approach adopted in “political
cognition” work (e.g., Herbst, 1998), and I wholeheartedly share their misgivings.
I hope I have been able to convince readers that, far from exemplifying this trend,
social identity theory and self-categorization theory offer an explicitly interaction-
ist, meaning-focused alternative.
I have concentrated on the theoretical fundamentals of social identity theory and self-categorization theory rather than the full complexity of their analysis, and I have not cited chapter and verse of relevant empirical evidence; readers can find further detail in many of the sources referred to throughout the text. As I noted at the outset of this paper, there is already extensive published work demonstrating the usefulness of applying social identity theory and self-categorization theory to aspects of political behavior. One particularly relevant example is the work of Reicher and his colleagues, which has demonstrated the way in which new, politicized identities can arise as a consequence of the salience dynamics operating in protest situations (e.g., Reicher, 1996; Stott & Drury, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998). These studies provide very clear evidence of the contextual variability of identity, and of the fact that “longstanding political identities linked to major ideologies” (Huddy, p. 148)—such as whether one sees oneself as a moderate or an oppositional radical, or whether the police are neutral guardians or a despised outgroup—certainly can change.

Interestingly, political scientists have also begun to apply the analysis in empirical work. One example is a recent paper in *Party Politics* that tests a self-categorization explanation of partisanship instability in the United States (Josefson, 2000). I do believe that the social identity approach has a great deal to offer to those who study political behavior, whatever their discipline. Among other things, it enables a genuinely interactionist analysis, eschewing both individualism and social determinism. It explicitly theorizes the *psychological group* as a distinctive force in social and political behavior—not demographic categories, and not loose coalitions of individuals, but individuals transformed through shared social identification. It offers a mechanism—self-categorization—through which we can predict and explain the social psychological aspects of identity formation. Perhaps most important, it is prepared to confront the theoretical and empirical complexity of the idea that *identity is an interactive product of person and social context*, not an element of personality or a cognitive structure in the head, and certainly not an automatic effect of “the simple designation of group boundaries” (Huddy, p. 133).

Way back in 1931, Kurt Lewin contrasted the Aristotelian approach of fixed effects and typologies with the Galileian method of dealing with interactive process in context. He advocated the latter. Despite repeated attempts to reduce the social identity approach to a dated, dog-eared catalogue of categorization effects, it continues to resist this distortion and assert itself as deeply, essentially Galileian (Oakes, 1996b; Turner, 1999b). It is about the complex processes that underlie the complex outcomes that we know constitute the reality of social and political relations. No doubt there are shortcomings and omissions; there have already been some major revisions in our understanding of several issues [e.g., contrast Turner (1982) with Turner et al. (1994) on identity as cognitive structure vs. process, and Oakes (1987) with Oakes et al. (1994) on the related shift to “perceiver readiness” rather than “category accessibility” in the salience hypothesis]. As our aim is real scientific progress, we hope that social identity theory and self-categorization
theory will continue to develop and improve. Critics who are prepared to engage with the ideas in all their complexity will play an important part in this process.

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