Laying Sound Foundations for Social Identity Theory-Inspired European Union Attitude Research: Beyond Attachment and Deeply Rooted Identities*

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Abstract
There is a growing body of literature examining the influence of social identification on European Union (EU) attitudes. Broadly speaking, this literature can be divided into two strands. One strand examines the way social identity affects support for EU integration quantitatively, using opinion poll data. The other draws (often loosely) on social constructivism, using qualitative research methods. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is increasingly invoked in both these literatures and this development is to be welcomed. However, so far engagement with SIT has been rather tentative, drawing largely on theoretically impoverished versions of SIT. It is argued in this article that this practice has resulted in SIT’s theoretical potential being underutilized. At other times, this has resulted in theoretical confusion because SIT explanations are being used alongside other theories whose premises clash with core SIT assumptions. We conclude that more in-depth engagement with SIT’s basic and core tenets will enable quantitative EU identity researchers to move beyond ‘attachment’ to territorial identities, and allow qualitative EU identity researchers to move beyond ‘shared history’, ‘deeply rooted identities’ and ‘resonance’.

Introduction
There is a growing body of literature examining attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and EU identification (Carey, 2002; Evans, 2002; Flockhart, 2005; Franklin et al., 1994; Gabel, 1998; Hellström, 2008; Hooge, 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2005; Marcussen et al., 1999; McLaren, 2002; Ray, 2003; Risse, 2003; Steenbergen et al., 2007). This literature can be divided into two strands. The first examines individual-level determinants, including respondents’ social identities, ‘driving’ support for EU integration, using quantitative opinion poll data. The second draws (often loosely) on social constructivism, and relies more heavily on qualitative methods. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is increasingly invoked in both these literatures to examine the role of identity in EU attitude formation, at times as the main explanatory theory (Caporaso and Kim, 2009; Carey, 2002; Christin and Trechsel, 2002; Genna, 2009; Müller-Peters, 2001; Vetik et al., 2006; Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005) and at other times alongside other theorizing (Curley, 2009; Flockhart, 2005; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2005; Marcussen et al., 1999; McLaren, 2007; Risse and Grabowski, 2008).

We welcome greater uptake of SIT to examine EU attitudes, but we also perceive there to be problems with the way the theory is portrayed and applied. This is unfortunate

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because the full potential of the theory is not utilized when SIT is invoked fleetingly, when it is used in combination with other theories that are contrary to underlying assumptions of SIT, or when impoverished versions of the theory are deployed. One of the consequences of the use of impoverished versions of the theory is the perpetuation of common misunderstandings about SIT – misunderstandings which lead to undesirable methodological and analytical constrictions. The aim of this article is to ‘weed out’ these problems, and to help lay sound foundations for SIT-inspired EU attitude research.

EU attitude researchers are not the only ones to use impoverished SIT versions. Indeed, misconstrued versions of SIT can even be encountered in core readings within the SIT literature (see Haslam, 2004; Turner, 1999). This does of course not excuse us from the duty to ‘get it right’, and a judgement of the usefulness of SIT in attitude research should rest on an accurate, rather than misconstrued, version of SIT. In order to address these problems, it is useful to first outline the basic SIT tenets and the ways in which SIT has been poorly applied, and then to theorize how SIT can be applied more successfully. Engagement with key aspects of SIT is in our view an indispensable first step when developing a SIT analysis of EU attitudes and, as we will see, failure to do so will in fact reduce the likelihood of EU attitude research benefiting from SIT insights.

This article is divided into three sections. The first provides a brief overview of core SIT tenets. The other two sections critically evaluate the use of SIT in quantitative and qualitative EU attitude research, respectively, and outline how some common misunderstandings of what a SIT analysis involves have crept into both these literatures. We conclude that more in-depth engagement with the core SIT tenets will help quantitative EU attitude researchers to recognize pernicious forms of methodological individualism, and to develop more modest expectations about what we can learn from individual-level opinion poll data. In relation to qualitative EU attitude research, we conclude that more in-depth engagement with SIT will help to avoid the tendency to gradually ‘drift’ from constructivism towards historical institutionalism.

I. SIT and Its Core Tenets

We will start this section with a brief overview of SIT theory. For more extensive overviews of the social identity approach, we refer the reader to either the original writings by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986; also Turner, 1982; Turner et al., 1987), or to more recent reviews (Haslam, 2004; Turner et al., 1994). The social identity approach comprises two closely related theories: Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986) and its spin-off; Self-Categorization Theory (SCT: Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987). SIT was developed in an attempt to move away from individual-level explanations for collective phenomena. It aimed to provide a counterforce to those who saw collective behaviour as the mere sum of individuals’ behaviour within the collective or group (for example, Allport, 1924). Contrary to such individualistic approaches, SIT focuses on how socio-structural factors affect self-definition, attitudes and behaviour.

SIT starts with the assumption that there are different levels of identification and self-categorization, and that we need to distinguish between behaviour motivated by individuals acting as individuals (personal identity), and behaviour guided by a shared identity with others (social identity). According to SIT, group behaviour can only be understood when considering how group members perceive their relationship with their
own group, and how their own group perceives other groups. For example, to understand how a French person perceives Germans, one needs first of all to understand the way this French person relates to their own group: other French people. It is the sense of self that individuals derive from membership of social groups that makes up their social identity.

Building on this assumption that individuals can define their sense of self in social identity (‘we’), or in personal identity terms (‘I’), it is argued that context determines which level of identity is most salient at a particular moment in time. For example, Danish people are likely to self-define as Danish when watching a soccer match between Denmark and Germany, but more likely to define in terms of their personal identity when meeting a friend for lunch (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

In addition, SIT posits that when people self-define in terms of their social identity, they generally seek to positively differentiate their ingroup from relevant outgroups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p. 16). This insight was derived from the ‘minimal group experiments’ in which Tajfel and colleagues randomly assigned participants to one of two meaningless groups and then asked them to allocate points to members of their own group (but not themselves) and members of another group (Tajfel et al., 1971). These experiments showed that participants reliably displayed a pattern of ingroup favouritism, thereby awarding more rewards to ingroup members than to outgroup members. These experiments also revealed a remarkable additional effect: participants, when given a choice, tended to maximize the difference between ingroup and outgroup rather than to maximize joint profit.

These experiments confirmed that ingroup bias could be witnessed even in these very minimal conditions. However, and this is where a first misconception lies, Tajfel and colleagues never concluded that these experiments showed that once individuals identify with a group that they have an inherent or automatic tendency to show ingroup bias and ethnocentricity (cf. Hinkle and Brown, 1990). Instead, they argued that, in this very specific minimal context, ingroup favouritism was displayed because this was the only way to achieve positive differentiation. Indeed, there is experimental evidence that ingroup favouritism disappears when differentiation can be established in another way (Spears et al., 2002), and that groups are often more interested in knowing how they are different from other groups (even negatively different) than in necessarily achieving positive differentiation by favouring the ingroup and putting other groups down (Mlicki and Ellemers, 1996).

Unfortunately, however, these more nuanced points are often neglected in the way the conclusions from the minimal group studies are typically reviewed (Haslam, 2004; McGarty, 2001; McGarty et al., 2002; Oakes and Turner, 1990; Turner, 1999; Turner and Oakes, 1997). Indeed, many have misinterpreted SIT as though the theory predicts a straightforward correlation between ‘attachment’ to groups and ingroup favouritism (Hinkle and Brown, 1990). Such misinterpretations have led to the premature closure of the development of a proper account of the conditions under which social identity is associated with ingroup favouritism and outgroup hostility. As Turner explains,

many readings of the theory assume that [the minimal group experiments] was the end of the story. In fact it was only the beginning [. . .] to suppose, therefore, as many researchers have done, that SIT holds that there should be simple correlations between ingroup bias in some real-world setting and degree of ingroup identification, or status position, or some
measure of personal self-esteem, is seriously to misconstrue the theory. (Turner, 1999, pp. 7–8)

Problematic too is that such accounts do not help to understand how the broader socio-structural context affects individuals’ attitudes towards outgroup members. This is unfortunate because SIT was designed to examine inter-group dynamics not in isolation, but taking full account of the broader socio-structural context in which they occur. Group status is therefore of fundamental importance in social identity theorising. SIT posits that members of lower status groups, in their striving for status improvement, can use a range of self-enhancement strategies. Some of these strategies focus on achieving higher status as an individual (and this is only possible when individual upward mobility appears possible), whereas other strategies focus on achieving higher status as a collective (and this will be the favoured strategy when group boundaries are impermeable and the ingroup status position is perceived as illegitimate). SIT posits that such perceptions determine whether and how lower status groups seek to achieve status enhancement. Enhanced ingroup bias might be one strategy, but it is certainly not the only strategy to promote positive identity and social change (see Turner, 1999, p. 9; see also Turner and Oakes, 1997).

These ideas about the importance of social identity for understanding attitudes and behaviour were refined within SCT (Turner et al., 1987, 1994). It is worth considering the theory in some depth because it sheds further light on how self-categorization as, for example, Dutch, German or European, shapes EU attitudes. Building on the SIT premise that people can act in terms of their personal or social identity, SCT proposes that people can identify at different levels of inclusiveness, and that people’s sense of self derives from comparative identity processes. In so doing, SCT moves beyond demonstrating the importance of attachment to social groups and predicting the consequences of attachment to groups, to shedding light on the cognitive processes shaping people’s sense of themselves and their place in the social world.

SCT starts from the premise that individuals can self-categorize as an individual (subordinate level), as a member of a group (intermediate level) or as a human (superordinate level). Whether and which of these becomes salient, so SCT argues, depends on the fit of a particular categorization and a person’s readiness to use it (Oakes et al., 1994). For example, an African-American person is more likely to define themselves as African-American in a setting in which race defines ingroup and outgroup boundaries (for example, a meeting initiated by Afro-American employees to discuss equity issues), and if membership of this category has become meaningful to that individual (for example, because of rumours of a wage gap between African-American and other employees). However, this self-categorization is less likely to become salient when race is not the ‘fitting’ self-categorization (for example, in case the unions called the meeting to discuss plans to outsource operations to an overseas company). Categorization is thus a process of meaning making and understanding the self in relation to changing contexts. However, this point is often misunderstood and the process of categorization has instead been described as one of simplification whereby people – conceived as cognitive misers (Fiske and Taylor, 1991) – categorize themselves and others to reduce the complexity of the world around them (see Oakes and Turner, 1990).

In addition, identities, and the norms associated with those identities, are not salient all the time: they only become salient (and guidance for behaviour) when they help to
understand the context. As Jetten et al. (1997, p. 604) explain, in order to understand how commitment is expressed one has to look at both the context and the normative content of identities – that is, if hostility towards other groups is normative within a group, those who are more committed to the group will be more hostile towards others. However, when co-operation with other groups is normative, greater commitment to the group can result in more positive inter-group relations and attitudes. Thus, from a SIT perspective it makes little sense to assume straightforward relationships between negative EU attitudes and ‘attachment to national identity’ (Carey, 2002; Christin and Trechsel, 2002), ‘perceived threat to national identity emanating from EU membership’ (Lubbers, 2008; McLaren, 2002; Vetik et al., 2006; Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005) or ‘trust in powerful member-states’ (Genna, 2009) as this would be to ignore that the meaning of ‘national identity’ shapes the way these factors influence EU attitudes.

Likewise, from this SIT/SCT perspective, it makes little sense to measure ‘attachment’ to the nation-state and EU, or ‘perceived national identity threat’ emanating from the EU, as the meaning of these categories will vary from one context to the next, and depend on what inter-group comparisons are (made) salient. This is because the extent to which people identify with particular categories depends largely on whether that category represents a meaningful basis for self-categorization, and this, in turn, depends on whether (a) that category fits the situation, and (b) whether the perceiver is willing to use that category as a way to understand the context (Oakes et al., 1994; Turner et al., 1987). The concepts of ‘category accessibility’, ‘comparative fit’ and ‘normative fit’ help to understand which social categories (and which us–them distinctions) will be salient in a particular context. In turn, this helps to predict people’s sense of belonging, and preparedness to invest in group membership. For example, these concepts were used in research examining EU attitudes in peripheral sub-state regions, which showed that EU attitudes in these regions are mediated by perceptions of the region’s position within the nation-state, and the extent to which the EU is perceived as a force for positive change in this domestic relationship (Mols and Haslam, 2008). Other work has shown how political leaders can ‘manipulate’ normative and comparative fit perceptions and in that way harness social identities for political projects (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). By reinforcing and perpetuating particular us–them distinctions (Haslam et al., 2011), it becomes possible to account for the way in which opinion leaders gain control over whether or not EU integration will become (or remain) perceived as a threat to ‘us’ and ‘our way of life’.

We welcome the fact that EU attitude researchers have discovered SIT. However, what is to be avoided is the misrepresentation of SIT as though the theory: conceives of social identity as ‘attachment’ to groups; predicts that social identification automatically leads to ingroup favouritism; and examines people’s propensity to simplify the social world through social categorization. As we will see below, these misunderstandings have started to permeate into the EU attitude literature, and this is unfortunate because it not only impedes theoretical innovation, it also increases the risk of SIT becoming dismissed prematurely.

II. Deploying SIT in Quantitative EU Attitude Research

Quantitative EU attitude researchers examine the relative weight of individual-level determinants ‘driving’ support for EU integration using quantitative opinion poll data. This
research has revealed that high-income earners and the better educated are more likely to endorse EU integration (Janssen, 1991). However, in terms of enhancing our understanding of the *motivational* bases of support for EU integration this literature has arguably been less successful. The variables that have been examined in this literature include ‘cognitive mobilization’ (Inglehart, 1970), post-material values (Inglehart, 1977), cost–benefit evaluations (Gabel, 1998), party affiliation (Evans, 2002), national identity threat (Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2002) and party cueing (Ray, 2003; Hellström, 2008; Hooghe, 2007; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2007). The main lesson to emerge from this work is that each of these factors uniquely predicts EU attitudes. However, the processes through which each of these variables affect EU attitudes are not clearly articulated.

It is hence understandable that quantitative EU attitude researchers have turned to SIT for answers (Carey, 2002; Christin and Trechsel, 2002; Genna, 2009; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Lubbers, 2008; McLaren, 2007; Vetik *et al.*, 2006; Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). However, our review of the literature revealed that the above-mentioned misconceptions about SIT have started to permeate into quantitative EU attitude research. Much of this work evokes SIT to examine hypotheses that cannot be derived from this theoretical framework. For example, SIT explicitly rejects the conception of humans as ‘cognitive misers’ (McGarty, 2001; Oakes and Turner, 1990; Oakes *et al.*, 1994), and the notion that outgroup attitudes are the result of ‘cognitive overload’ and ‘cognitive shortcuts’ (as in Fiske and Taylor, 1991). However, SIT has nonetheless been invoked in research examining people’s propensity to rely on cognitive shortcuts and the effect this has on EU attitudes.

For example, Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005) examined the relationship between anti-immigration sentiments and EU scepticism in Denmark and the Netherlands, and found that both attitudes are fuelled by economic evaluations and domestic politics considerations. These authors argue, in our view rightfully, that SIT can be used to shed light on this complexity. However, in explaining preference for one’s nation-state over the EU, SIT is misrepresented as predicting *automatic* bias, when the authors argue that ‘based upon group categorization, people tend to show a favourable bias towards members of their own group and an unfavourable one against members of other groups’ (Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005, p. 64).

SIT was also invoked in a more recent study into the Dutch ‘no’ vote in the 2005 EU Constitution referendum (Lubbers, 2008). In this study, SIT is described as positing ‘that people differentiate between an in- and outgroup to categorize and simplify the world to derive a positive social identity’, and this insight is used to predict that ‘positive ingroup identification based on nationality could be threatened by further EU integration as well as by immigration’ (Lubbers, 2008, p. 62). Here, too, SIT is misrepresented as a theory examining people’s tendency to simplify the social world rather than as a perspective on the way in which social identities acquire meaning. More importantly, and this is not uncommon in SIT-inspired EU attitude research, SIT does little actual analytical work and is one of the theories invoked to underscore the importance of ‘othering’.

Lubbers’ research is nonetheless interesting in that it show that EU attitudes cannot be attributed to a single individual-level determinant. As Lubbers (2008, pp. 80–1) explains, ‘perceived threat to Dutch culture emanating from the EU’ was the primary explanation for the Dutch ‘no’ vote, but in conjunction with a strong effect from domestic politics evaluations, which included several other effects, such as party cueing, second-order...
voting, attitudes towards immigrants and even religion. SIT could, in our view, have been used more effectively by examining how fear of Islam has changed the way in which the Dutch define themselves, and how this changed comparative context affects the changed self-understanding from which the Dutch evaluate the EU.

As a final example, SIT has been invoked in research testing the hypothesis that EU attitudes are mediated by trust in Germany. In this study, it is argued that trust is an important heuristic that people rely on to simplify the world’s complexity and when making complex decisions (Genna, 2009). The underlying idea here is that citizens are socialized into images of EU Member States, and that trust in what currently appears to be the most powerful Member State (Germany) automatically determines people’s trust in the EU. In sum, there are multiple problems here: SIT is not only misapplied, but the theory is not used to derive hypotheses about the context-dependency of EU attitudes.

**Why It Makes Sense to Turn to SIT for Answers**

How then should researchers conduct research examining EU identity that is truthful to the core premises of SIT? There are a few pointers that are important to keep in mind when we embark on a journey aimed at enhancing our understanding of the finding that ‘Europe’ means different things to different people (Risse, 2003). A first recognition should be that identity in itself does not explain much. Rather, it is important to be mindful of the idea that in a SIT analysis of EU attitudes, ‘identity’ is merely a starting point to examine how different inter-group relations, status positions, context and contents of identity shape national identity and perceptions of what to expect of the superordinate category: the EU. When unravelling how these factors relate to each other and how they affect EU attitudes it is first important to be specific in what identity one is interested in and clear on how that identity sits in the broader network of identities. Thus, it is important to go beyond merely underscoring the importance of group ‘attachment’ and ‘othering’ by specifying who those groups are. This recommendation is consistent with the growing recognition that individuals hold multiple, potentially overlapping identities at different levels of inclusiveness (Medrano and Gutiérrez, 2001; Risse, 2003; see also Marks, 1999). Practically, when examining the role of group identification in explaining EU attitudes, one has to ask the question of whether identity should be measured at a low level of abstraction (for example, regional identity) or higher abstraction level (for example, national identity) and how this level of identity relates to other levels of identification. The importance of this is evident from the work by McLaren (2002), which shows that those who are attached exclusively to their national identity are most hostile to policy integration across the EU.

Second, it is important to understand the process of identification. In particular, in recognition that social identities become meaningful through contrasting with identities that share the same overarching (superordinate) category, one has to assess how different levels of identification relate to each other. Expressions of belonging should be considered in the relational/comparative context in which these expressions were elicited to understand how they relate to EU attitudes. Depending on the nature of these relationships, the EU can be perceived in a positive light because national identity is, for instance, seen as compatible with EU identity (for example, among the Italians; see Cinnirella, 1997) or, as for the British, in a negative light because national identity is perceived as incompatible...
with European identity (Mols et al., 2009). The fact that different patterns emerge when studying EU attitudes in different EU Member States should therefore not surprise us. Since all nation-states are in a unique relationship with the EU, the inability to generalize relationships across nations should be expected. For example, in some national contexts dissatisfaction with the national government translates into EU-sceptic attitudes (Anderson, 1998), while in other contexts those same sentiments can result in more positive EU attitudes (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Kritzinger, 2003). We suggest that to understand why national identity reinforces EU identification in some Member States (Citrin and Sides, 2004), while in others it dampens enthusiasm for EU integration (Carey, 2002; Luedtke, 2005), it is important to map out those perceptions of perceived compatibility between levels of identification. We suspect that in some of these contexts, the EU is perceived as an ally of a disliked national government (and therefore unpopular) while at other times governments’ anti-scepticism can enhance positive EU attitudes among those who are dissatisfied with the nation-state. For example, Mols et al. (2009) showed that Welsh opinion poll participants become more supportive of EU integration when questions had to be answered after British identity had been made salient than when such comparisons had not been made salient. Thus, when the British anti-EU stance was made salient, the Welsh contrasted themselves from the British by embracing the EU more.

These SIT-inspired dynamics are well captured in the Ingroup Projection Model (IPM: Mummendey and Wenzel, 1999) and work has already applied the model to understanding EU attitudes and EU identification. For example, rather than to make general claims about Germans and their relationship with ‘Europe’, Waldzus et al. (2003) showed that Germans only express higher identification with Europe when particular inter-group comparisons are evoked (for example, when thinking about Polish nationals). This is because German participants perceived themselves as more prototypical of the superordinate category Europeans than the Polish and their relative prototypicality explained their commitment to the superordinate category’s cause.

Third, a SIT analysis suggests that willingness to embrace particular identities depends on perceived status differences and identity management strategies employed to change (or maintain) the status quo (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). As Turner (1996, p. 18) explains, SIT seeks ‘to integrate the psychological core with the macro-social realities of group life in societies stratified by power, wealth and status’, and this explains why there is a strong focus in SIT on perceived status differences and perceived scope for social change. According to SIT, there are different ways in which low status groups can respond to perceived status differences, and this response will depend on, among other things, the perceived scope for social mobility (for an overview, see Haslam et al., 2011). In contexts where the scope for individual mobility and social change are perceived as limited or non-existent, groups will resort to social creativity strategies to secure or maintain positive self-esteem, thereby emphasizing the distinctiveness of the group’s social identity.

These SIT insights can also be used to explain why there is often stronger EU support in peripheral regions than in central/metropolitan areas. For example, the notion of perceived status differences was used in a study showing that policy-makers in peripheral United Kingdom regions perceive the EU as a useful ally in the domestic struggle to obtain recognition for regional identity distinctiveness (Mols and Haslam, 2008). More generally, we predict that changes in the socio-structural environment (e.g. the American-led war on terror, EU enlargement, the global financial crisis) change not only the material
environment, but also the relative status of nation-states within the EU. A case in point is the observation that changing attitudes towards the EU in Greece are most likely the result of the country’s changed status within the EU. It is important to be mindful of status relations between nations and threats to status position within the EU to understand whether EU membership is perceived as rewarding or not and thus whether EU attitudes are positive or negative.

Fourth, and finally, a SIT analysis of the extent to which greater EU involvement and engagement involves identity threat can help to understand EU attitudes. Of particular importance is research that has shown that attempts to promote a common ingroup identity can trigger distinctiveness threat (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000). This insight chimes well with the established idea that EU integration is perceived in some Member States as undermining national identity distinctiveness while it is not perceived as related to national distinctiveness in other countries (see Cinnirella, 1997). Examining EU attitudes through the lens of identity threat is also useful because SIT researchers have also identified the factors that will reduce perceptions of (distinctiveness) threat. For example, when subgroup identities are acknowledged and respected within the superordinate identity, perceptions that the superordinate group ‘takes-over’ wane (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000) and this is associated with more positive attitudes towards the superordinate group (for example, the EU).

Thus, adding the concept of ‘distinctiveness’ to the analysis would enable us to develop more refined hypotheses about why there is considerable variation in perceived identity threat and support for EU integration across EU Member States. For example, Hooghe and Marks (2005) examined whether particular ‘communal identities’ are more amenable to EU identification than others, and they found that Scandinavians tend to be far more Eurosceptical than southern Europeans. As the authors acknowledge, it remains unclear whether this is because Scandinavians have a distinctive political economy, or particular identities that lead them to resist Brussels (Hooghe and Marks, 2005, p. 431). From a SIT perspective it would make sense to also examine the possibility that EU integration represents a greater identity challenge for Scandinavians than for citizens of Mediterranean countries. For example, from such a perspective it is not inconceivable that Scandinavian Euroscepticism is fuelled by both knowledge of the economic cost of being a net-contributor to the EU budget, but also growing concern about reduced ability to maintain national distinctiveness.

**SIT as a Means to Come to Terms with Complexity**

A promising start in applying SIT has been made and there is growing evidence from opinion poll research that utilitarian and identity concerns shape EU attitudes simultaneously (Lubbers, 2008; McLaren, 2007) and that ‘identity’ has considerable ‘bite’ on EU attitudes (Hooghe and Marks, 2005, p. 420; see also Lubbers, 2008; McLaren, 2007). Even though such findings and developments have increased awareness of the importance of identity to benefit more from what a SIT analysis has to offer, it is important to enhance engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of SIT. This also to avoid the impoverished theorizing or even misconceptions about what a SIT analysis involves creeping into EU attitude research. That is why we highlighted four SIT premises and key principles that will be useful for any researcher interested in the role of social identity in shaping EU attitudes.
By adopting the SIT conception of ‘identity’ as shared (and context-dependent) self-understanding, we can begin to examine how changes in the perceived socio-structural contexts impact on self-definition and how this, in turn, affects EU attitudes. In so doing, it will become possible to move beyond a conception of ‘identity’ as mere attachment to groups, and to acknowledge that the categories ‘national’ and ‘European’ acquire meaning in comparative inter-group contexts. Rather than look for correlations, it makes more sense from a SIT perspective to acknowledge the uniqueness of the contexts in which EU attitudes are formed, and to look instead for similarities in social identity processes occurring in particular contexts and their impact on EU attitudes.

III. Deploying SIT in Qualitative EU Attitude Research

SIT is also regularly invoked in the qualitative EU attitude literature (Curley, 2009; Flockhart, 2005; Marcussen et al., 1999; Risse and Grabowski, 2008). However, here, too, we see that SIT is often invoked primarily to underscore the importance of social identity and ‘othering’, or to hypothesise about people’s propensity to display ingroup favouritism. For example, the misconception that SIT focuses on the consequences of ‘attachment’ and that it predicts an automatic link between identity strength and ingroup bias can be found in research examining elite-level attitudes towards EU enlargement in Britain, France and Germany (Curley, 2009, p. 651). This research seeks to explain why German, French and British top decision-makers disagree about the desirability of Turkey joining the EU, and this is attributed to a tendency among strong identifying ingroup members to exclude an outsider in order to protect the group identity (Curley, 2009, p. 652).

We agree with Curley that SIT/SCT can strengthen constructivist international relations theorizing, and welcome Curley’s ground-breaking work. However, here, too, it is important to lay sound foundations and deploy SIT/SCT appropriately. In particular, and as noted earlier, rather than assuming that there is a direct relationship between identity strength and ingroup bias, it is important to take account of the way the normative and comparative context shapes these attitudes: attachment (or identity strength) can indeed lead to enhanced ingroup bias, but it can also lead to more co-operative and positive intergroup attitudes (Jetten et al., 1997).

In addition, the theory is arguably also underused in Curley’s work. From a SIT perspective it might have been more meaningful to examine whether the attitudes of these decision-makers change when other categories become salient. For example, based on the normative and comparative fit principles, one might expect that these officials are more sceptical about Turkish EU membership when the issue of religion is being brought into the equation (thereby rendering the categories ‘Islam’ and ‘Christian’ salient), but more relaxed when the issue of European energy security is raised (rendering the categories ‘European’, ‘Russian’ and ‘Turkish’ salient). Thus, the frame that dominates the discussion is of utmost importance to understand attitudes: Turkish membership would be perceived as more problematic in a context where the discussion focuses on religion than when discussing energy security.

Our review of SIT-inspired EU attitude research revealed that misconstrued versions of SIT are less common in qualitative than in quantitative EU attitude research. Nevertheless, in qualitative EU attitude research it is rather common to encounter studies in which SIT is underused, or used to complement other types of analysis, and this tends to lead to...
analytical ambiguity. That said, there is considerable evidence of in-depth engagement with core SIT/SCT concepts such as the notion of identities at different levels of inclusion, category salience and comparative identity. For example, these principles were used in research showing that elite-level politicians can reconstruct the meaning of national identity, and appeal to different social categories to change the nation’s relationship with ‘Europe’ (Marcussen et al., 1999). Another example is a study examining the gap between Danish mass and elite opinion on EU integration (Flockhart, 2005). In this study, SIT/SCT’s category salience concept was used to show that divergence between mass and elite opinion related to different historical experiences and social comparisons.

These qualitative studies are a useful starting point, but they arguably do not use SIT’s full potential. What characterizes the above-mentioned studies is a degree of ambiguity as to whether identities are ‘deeply rooted’ in shared historical experiences (as historians and historical institutionalists will argue), or fluid, context dependent and subject to leadership influence (as social constructivists and social identity theorists will argue). One way in which qualitative EU attitude researchers have sought to resolve this ambiguity is by proposing a stages framework in which historical institutionalism is used in first instance to identify ‘critical junctures’ and competing idea sets, while SIT/SCT is used in a subsequent stage to explain which competing idea set ‘won the day’ (Flockhart, 2005; see also Marcussen et al., 1999). We propose that more robust engagement with SIT/SCT literature, and in particular that on leadership and followership, will enable qualitative EU attitude researchers to increase analytical consistency and develop accounts of EU attitude formation that are more in keeping with social constructivism.

Certainly, a stages approach is useful insofar as it enables us to account for the historical context as well as leadership and persuasion, and this may suffice when dealing with crises or ‘critical junctures’ which retrospectively can be labelled as ‘real’ (for example, the collapse of communism, the fall of the Berlin Wall). However, as Marcussen et al. (1999, p. 630) acknowledge, crises are only ‘real’ insofar as they are perceived and constructed as such, and what remains unaccounted for, when relying too heavily on historical institutionalism, are imagined critical junctures: instances in which leaders succeed in persuading followers that leadership and drastic policy change is required to protect norms and identity, and to fend off an imminent crisis.

A case in point here is populist leaders cultivating the perception that multiculturalism has failed, and arguing that drastic policy change is required to protect western culture from the influence of radical Islam. These dynamics are starting to have a real impact on EU attitudes (Krouwel and Abts, 2007), even though it is far from certain whether we are dealing with a real crisis. This raises doubts about the historical institutionalist idea of leaders requiring a historical window of opportunity to promote ideational and identity change. The SIT/SCT literature on leadership and followership in our view offers a more useful starting point for examining these dynamics and their effect on EU attitudes, and this is the research area which has most to gain from more robust engagement with SIT/SCT, and from engagement with the SIT/SCT literature on leadership and followership more specifically.

To be sure, we agree that ‘real’ critical junctures offer increased scope for leaders to reconstruct the national self-understanding (identity change), and we do not oppose the practice of using SIT/SCT to complement historical institutionalist analyses. However, as social identity theorists have shown, contestation about the meaning of ‘national identity’
is a permanent feature of the political struggle for leadership, and that those able to (re)define the group’s shared self-understanding will gain considerable leverage over whether a situation will be regarded as a crisis or ‘critical juncture’ (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001; Haslam et al., 2011). Certainly, a leader’s knowledge of shared history will help them to find a way to make certain ideas resonate. However, as SIT/SCT theorists have shown, a leader’s influence derives in great measure from their ability to promote a new self-understanding and a new narrative about the group’s history. Put differently, in this SIT/SCT perspective it is a leader’s ability to frame ‘who we are’ and ‘what we are about’ that determines whether certain ideas become perceived as resonating with history (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001; Haslam et al., 2011).

IV. Discussion

SIT is increasingly invoked in the EU attitude literature, and we welcome this development. However, our review of SIT-inspired EU attitude research revealed three problems in the way it has been applied. The first problem that has crept into this literature is the common misunderstanding that SIT focuses narrowly on attachment to groups and its consequences, and that the theory predicts a simple correlation between attachment and ingroup bias. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding has crept into both the quantitative and qualitative EU attitude literature. The second problem is the incorrect portrayal of SIT as a theory about people’s propensity to simplify the social world using ‘cognitive shortcuts’ or simplistic ‘us–them’ distinctions. This misconception is problematic because it increases the risk of SIT becoming dismissed prematurely as overly reductionist.

The first two problems are arguably easily avoided. However, overcoming the third problem we identified – SIT being underused – requires a more fundamental rethinking exercise, and acknowledgement that a SIT analysis starts with questioning how and why people become committed/attached to particular groups. Once this is appreciated, we can start tackling the more specific challenges facing quantitative and qualitative EU attitude researchers. For the former, more in-depth engagement with SIT will result in greater awareness of pernicious forms of methodological individualism, and more modest expectations about what individual-level data tell us about EU attitude formation.

The main problem with quantitative opinion poll data is that they tell us little about the inter-group context participants had in mind when they were asked about their attachment to the nation and support for EU integration. The underlying question, here, is whether we can aggregate individual-level data and come to conclusions about the group in question as a whole. As Haslam (2004, p. 26) explains:

[SIT holds that] in order to understand perceptions and interaction [...] we must do more than just study the psychology of individuals as individuals. Instead, we need to understand how social interaction is bound up with individuals’ social identities, – their definition of themselves in terms of group membership.

Indeed, this goes back to the SIT principle of a qualitative difference between behaviour/attitudes motivated by personal identity and behaviour/attitudes motivated by social identity, and once this is appreciated it becomes clear why it is important to question survey participants about the inter-group context they have in mind.
For qualitative EU attitude researchers drawing on social constructivism, closer engagement with SIT will reveal a tendency in this line of research to gradually drift from constructivism into historical institutionalism, and this manifests itself in analytical ambiguity. What remains unclear in such accounts is whether identities are ‘deeply rooted’ in shared history and hence resistant to change (‘sticky’) as historical institutionalists will argue, or malleable, context-dependent and subject to alternative interpretations as constructivists would argue. Our hunch is that qualitative EU-attitude researchers often resort to historical institutionalism ‘faute de mieux’, and this is understandable if we accept that social constructivism itself does not equip us with the necessary tools and concepts to demonstrate exactly how identities become meaningful. However, those engaging with the core SIT/SCT tenets will discover that SIT principles can be used to strengthen social constructivism and, more importantly here, be used to develop accounts of EU attitude formation that are more in keeping with social constructivism.

As noted earlier, we do not oppose the use of historical institutionalism in EU attitude research, and we accept that EU attitudes can become ‘institutionalized’ and embedded in culture. A case in point is British Euroscepticism, which is being perpetuated by a number of formal and informal British institutions (Baker, 2001). However, what comes to mind is the common critique that historical institutionalism is better at explaining stasis than change. Indeed, in order to explain, say, the relatively sudden mood-swing against the EU in France and the Netherlands, knowledge of ‘shared history’ and ‘critical junctures’ will not take us very far. In those cases, it may be more useful to adopt an SIT/SCT perspective, and to consider the way in which leaders have managed to redefine the shared (national) self-understanding and how this has changed EU attitudes.

Conclusions

One of the challenges facing EU attitude researchers is an incomplete construction of ‘identity’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 23), and it does indeed make sense to turn to SIT for answers (McLaren, 2007, p. 236). We welcome the fact that EU attitude researchers have started to invoke SIT. However, at the same time we are concerned about the use of impoverished/misconstrued versions of SIT, and limited appreciation of how it can really advance EU attitude research. An assessment of the usefulness of SIT in EU attitude research should of course rest on an accurate, rather than misconstrued, understanding of the theory, and failure to recognize the above-described problems will not only reduce the extent to which SIT can advance EU attitude research, but also increase the risk of it being rejected prematurely and for the wrong reasons. We hope that, by drawing attention to these problems, and by providing an overview of the SIT/SCT concepts that might form useful theoretical building blocks, this article contributes to laying sound foundations for SIT-inspired EU attitude research.

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