

# Constructing the Other: Forming Identities Through Ascribed Preferences

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***Abstract:** The construction of identity is a central concept in the constructivist approach to international relations. Much of the scholarship on identity formation has focused on how an agent acquires its own identities and how those identities affect the actions that the agent takes. International relations, however, requires not only understanding how your identity affects your own actions, but also requires understanding how the identities of the other agents with which you interact affect their actions. This paper proposes that the identities of “the other” are constructed by one agent ascribing preferences to the other agent based on cues embedded in the social, cultural, and political setting within which the interaction takes place. Preferences are decision rules that operationalize the interests of agents. An agent perceives the identity of another agent by attempting to understand the other agent’s interests and goals. In other words, one agent knows the other agent by knowing what it wants. Understanding how agents know the other is critical in the contemporary world where new agents rapidly emerge from old social, cultural, and political formations.*

## Constructing the Other: Forming Identities Through Ascribed Preferences

The protests that began in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011 were no accident. As Ashraf Khalil, a reporter for *The Times* of London stated, “The events of January 25, 2011, may have come as a shock, even to those who participated. But it was no overnight phenomenon – more like the suddenly flowering seeds patiently planted over the preceding decade-plus.”<sup>1</sup> Bolstered by the recent successful revolution in Tunisia and motivated by a popular Facebook page, approximately 15,000 protestors responded to Twitter calls to congregate in Tahrir Square. Unlike many past revolutions and civil wars fought by organized resistance groups, the Arab Spring uprisings against authoritarian rule were marked by limited centralized leadership and loose associations of protagonists. Social media made this possible by connecting like-minded people without regard for group membership, class, or even location. Griff Witte, reporting in *The Washington Post*, captured the decentralized, leaderless quality of the Egyptian protests:

The movement that rose up seemingly out of nowhere last week to pose the greatest challenge yet to the 82-year-old president has no name, no symbols and no formal infrastructure. Although some students and others are involved in

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<sup>1</sup> Ashraf Khalil, *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation*, (New York: St. Martins Press), 2011, 11.

organizing its direction, they deny being its leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Foreign policy, however, demands an “other.” As Nizar Messari notes, “Foreign policy is... an identity-making tool that erects boundaries between the self and the other, defining in the process what are the national interests.”<sup>3</sup> It was very unsettling for nation-states to have an unidentified national resistance movement arise in Egypt, which has great strategic importance due to its central location in the volatile Middle East, its proximity to oil fields, and its key role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The lack of a central figure and a defined vision for what happens should Mubarak step aside may be one reason the United States and other Western governments have shied away from embracing the nascent democracy movement, and have instead spoken only in general terms of advocating an orderly transition of power. Above all else, the United States fears instability in this nation of 80 million that has long played a central role in determining the character of the broader Arab world.<sup>4</sup>

Who were these protestors? What did they want? Much of the scholarship on identity in international relations theory focuses on how agents construct their own identities and how those identities affect interests and actions. I address a different question in this paper. How do agents construct the identity of the “other?” I propose that an agent constructs the identity of the other by interpreting the actions of the other, when those actions can be observed, and by ascribing preferences to the other that are derived from the agent’s own identity and the structure of the situation. Even in situations where empirical observations of the other’s actions may abound, the agent tries to determine what the other “wants” in the context of the situation and that determination, is derived, in part, from its own identity.

By using terms like “construct the identity” and “ascribed preferences” I am dangerously mixing oil and water – for the ontological approach of this research is rooted in rule-based constructivism while the epistemological method is unabashedly based on concepts of rational choice. I have argued elsewhere that interests and preferences are socially constructed out of rules that define historic and cultural practice and that rational choice theory provides a causative theory of action based on those interests and preferences.<sup>5</sup> This approach to rational-choice theory demands that the analyst devote more time to understanding preferences and less time on the formulaic analysis of the strategic interaction itself. It is what Ferejohn calls “thick rationality.”<sup>6</sup> While I embrace rational choice concepts like preferences and utilities, which will surely disturb constructivists, I also explicitly reject rational choice ideas that preferences are stable and exogenous. Rational choice theory is justly criticized for not addressing the socially constructed sources of preferences. Too many theorists hide behind the adage “there’s no

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<sup>2</sup> Griff Witte, “Egyptian opposition calls for massive protest; foreigners flee,” *The Washington Post*, (2011), A01.

<sup>3</sup> Nizar Messari, “Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Islam in U.S. Foreign Policy. Chapter in *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*,” edited by Kubáľková, Vendulka, Armonk, (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 227.

<sup>4</sup> Witte, “Egyptian opposition calls for massive protest,” A01.

<sup>5</sup> James C. Roberts, “The Rational Constitution of Agents and Structures. Chapter in *Constituting International Political Economy*,” edited by Kurt Burch and Robert A. Denmark. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 155-168.

<sup>6</sup> John Ferejohn, “Rationality and Interpretation: Parliamentary Elections in Early Stuart England,” Chapter in *The Economic Approach to Politics*, edited by Kristen Renwick Monroe, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 282.

accounting for tastes” and stipulate that preferences are idiosyncratic. Those theorists that do address the issue often take a cursory approach that merely imposes cultural norms on decision makers or they attempt to derive preferences from observed behavior in “revealed preference theory.”

The thread that connects this seemingly uncomfortable combination is the role that identity plays in defining interests and preferences. Identity plays a key role in defining preferences by categorizing behaviors into practices that portray the identity. Identities are packages of rules. To be known as a jazz musician, one must follow the rules that constitute jazz as a musical style. Defining jazz is difficult.<sup>7</sup> There is a loose, yet identifiable, collection of styles that constitute jazz. Each of these styles is defined by instruction sense rules (or assertive rules) that inform the performer which actions are likely to create musical forms identified as jazz. That style is defined both contextually (New Orleans vs. Chicago jazz) and in practice (rules regarding syncopation, chord changes, bass line, etc.). A definition of jazz from a popular web site captures the dual nature of the contextual and practical definition of the genre:

Most attempts to define Jazz music have been from points of view outside that of Jazz. An academic definition of Jazz would be: A genre of American music that originated in New Orleans circa 1900 . . . characterized by strong, prominent meter, improvisation, distinctive tone colors & performance techniques, and dotted or syncopated rhythmic patterns. But Jazz is so much more than that.<sup>8</sup>

Humans resort to categories of rules embedded in identities to make decision-making easier.

Kowert explicitly cites this in the context of forming identities:

Individuals are continually confronted with the problem of locating themselves, and others, in a web of social categories that periodically confront them as salient. They have limited cognitive resources to devote to this task and, as a result, must make use of certain simplifying and memory-enhancing strategies. In constructivist terms, ‘rules’ present agents with simpler ways to interpret the world and to make choices.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Concept of Identity – A Review**

After Erik Erikson introduced the concept in developmental psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, identity emerged as a key concept in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s with the development of identity theory in sociology and social identity theory in psychology.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> As Louis Armstrong was reported to say, “Man, if you gotta ask you’ll never know,” yet jazz can be defined because it can be performed and one knows it when one hears it.

<sup>8</sup> “A Passion for Jazz,” 2015, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.apassion4jazz.net/jazz.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Paul A. Kowert, “Agent versus Structure in the Construction of National Identity,” Chapter in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, edited by Vendulka Kubáľková, Nicholas G. Onuf, and Paul A. Kowert, Armonk, (NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 101-122.

<sup>10</sup> Erik H. Erikson, “Childhood and Society,” (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950); Erik H. Erikson, “Childhood and Society,” (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968).

While these two theories approach identity in very different ways, they share some important qualities. First, both theories reject the essentialist approaches to the definition of the actor in terms of essential *a priori* characteristics. Instead, the two theories constitute the actor in terms of its social and cultural histories. Second, both theories recognize that the actor expresses multiple identities embedded in different social practices.<sup>11</sup>

The primary construct of sociology's identity theory is the role identity.<sup>12</sup> Role identities are definitions that the actor applies to itself derived from the social structure and interactions in which it is engaged. An actor can take on multiple roles in different social settings. A university professor, in the span of a day, may play roles of teacher, administrator, academic advisor, parent, and spouse, to name only a few. Role identities prescribe socially appropriate behavior and imply action.<sup>13, 14</sup> As such, from a rational choice perspective, role identities socially constitute preferences upon which an actor acts. The effect of role identities on behavior is affected by the salience and commitment of the role. Salience refers to the importance of the role in determining behavior and is operationalized as "the likelihood that the identity will be invoked in diverse situations."<sup>15</sup> Commitment is defined as the "degree to which the individual's relationships to particular others are dependent on being a given kind of person."<sup>16</sup> Commitment "reflects the extent to which important significant others are judged to want the person to occupy a particular role position."<sup>17</sup> Thus, commitment addresses not only how the actor defines itself, but also how the actor is *defined by* others.

Psychology's social identity theory was developed in the late 1970s to define the actor in terms of its perceived membership in social groups.<sup>18</sup> Social identity theory is based on the idea that individual actors self-identify with particular social groups (political party, church membership, labor union, ethnic association, etc.).

Each of these memberships is represented in the individual member's mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one's attributes as a member of that group—that is, what one should think and feel, and how one should behave. Thus, when a specific social identity becomes the salient basis for self-regulation

<sup>11</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory," (Social Psychology Quarterly, 58:4, December 1995), 255.

<sup>12</sup> Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Importance of Symbolic Interaction Theory for Family Research," Journal of Marriage and the Family 30, (1968), 558-64;

Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Theory: Developments and Extensions," Chapter in Self and Identity, edited by K. Yardley and T. Honess, (New York: Wiley, 1987), 89-104;

Ralph H. Turner, "The Role and the Person," American Journal of Sociology, (1978) 84, 1-23.

<sup>13</sup> Robin W. Simon, "Parental Role Strains, Salience of Parental Identity, and Gender Differences in Psychological Distress," (Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 1992), 33, 25-35.

<sup>14</sup> Peter, Callero, "Role-Identity Salience," Social Psychology Quarterly, (1985), 48, 203-15;

Hogg et al, "A Tale of Two Theories," 257.

<sup>15</sup> Hogg et al, "A Tale of Two Theories," 257.

<sup>16</sup> Stryker, "Symbolic Interaction and Role Theory," 345.

<sup>17</sup> Hogg et al, "A Tale of Two Theories," 258.

<sup>18</sup> Henri Tajfel, "Some Developments In European Social Psychology," European Journal of Social Psychology, 2, (1972), 307-22.

Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," Chapter in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, edited by W.G. Austin and S. Worchel, (Monterey: Brooks-Cole, 1979), 33-47.

in a particular context, self-perception and conduct become in-group stereotypical and normative, perceptions of relevant out-group members become out-group stereotypical, and intergroup behavior acquires competitive and discriminatory properties to varying degrees depending on the nature of relations between the groups.<sup>19</sup>

A key difference between psychology's social identity theory and sociology's identity theory is that social identity theory defines the self (the actor) in terms of group membership. This establishes a sense of in-group versus out-group identification. Again, from a rational choice perspective, the norms and rules of in-group membership constrain and construct behavior by defining the actor's preferences upon which action is based. Psychology's social identity theory places more emphasis on group membership and thus places more emphasis on the need to identify out-group members in a similar way by determining the norms and rule that construct the out-group members' preferences that lead to out-group behavior.

There is a wealth of definitions and categorizations in the literature when scholars speak of identity. Brubaker and Cooper examine five uses of the term in their critique of the overuse of identity in the social sciences.<sup>20</sup> It is used in place of interest as a basis for social or political action. It is used to indicate a "fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category." It is "understood as a core aspect of (individual or collective) "selfhood" or as a fundamental condition of social being." It is used to emphasize the "development of the kind of collective self-understanding, solidarity, or 'groupness' that can make collective action possible." Finally, it is invoked to "highlight the unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented nature of the contemporary self." Abdelal et. al. define the meanings of collective identity along two dimensions of content and contestation.<sup>21</sup> They propose the following four content types for collective identity: constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons with other social categories, and cognitive models. Contestation refers to the degree to which members of the collective agree with the content type of the collective. Fearon analyzes identity in academic writing and ordinary speech and claims that in most cases the term means, "either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and allegedly characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) a socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or, of course, both (a) and (b) at once)."<sup>22</sup>

The lack of definitional clarity in the use of identity in political science prompted Brubaker and Cooper to recommend that the discipline "...go beyond 'identity' - not in the name of an imagined universalism, but in the name of the conceptual clarity required for social analysis and political understanding alike."<sup>23</sup> Their chief complaints are that identity in the social sciences ". . . tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity) and that "stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple - leaves us without a rationale for

<sup>19</sup> Hogg et al, "A Tale of Two Theories," 259-260.

<sup>20</sup> Rogers and Frederick Cooper Brubaker, "Beyond "Identity." Theory and Society, (2000), 29(1), 1-47.

<sup>21</sup> Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," Perspectives on Politics, (2006), 4(4), 695-711.

<sup>22</sup> James D. Fearon, "What is Identity (As We now Use the Word)?" Unpublished manuscript, (1999), 36, accessed January 8, 2015, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Rogers and Frederick Cooper Brubaker, "Beyond "Identity," Theory and Society, (2000), 29(1), 36.

talking about ‘identities’ at all and ill-equipped to examine the ‘hard’ dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics.”<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the concept of identity has been used widely in international relations since the 1990's – especially in the constructivist program. Identity has had less traction as a defining concept in neoliberal theory and it has generally been rejected in the neorealist program, which should not be surprising since the neorealist program conceptualizes the state as a received, undifferentiated whole. Like psychology’s social identity, identity in international relations is often associated with defining the agent (self) in terms of the relationships with some sense of the “other.”

Whether we are talking of 'the body' or 'the state' or of particular bodies and states, the identity of each is performatively constituted. Moreover, the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an 'inside' from an 'outside,' a 'self' from an 'other,' a 'domestic' from a 'foreign.'<sup>25</sup>

David Campbell’s quotation emphasizes two characteristics of identity that are common to much of the international relations literature. First, identity is performatively constituted. That is, an actor’s identity exists in relationship to the identity of the other. Like psychology and sociology, Campbell’s approach to identity in international relations explicitly rejects essentialism and constitutes identity in interaction born of social, cultural, and political histories.

The consequence of this argument is a fundamental reorientation of our understanding of foreign policy. Foreign policy shifts from a concern of relations between states that take place across ahistorical, frozen, and pre-given boundaries, to a concern with the establishment of the boundaries that constitute, at one and the same time, the 'state' and 'the international system.'<sup>26</sup>

Wendt echoes this constructivist view of identity noting that actors often have multiple identities that vary in importance depending on the situation. These identities “are a key link in the mutual constitution of agent and structure”, embodying the “terms of individuality through which agents relate to each other. These terms lead actors to see situations as calling for taking certain actions and thus for defining their interests in certain ways.”<sup>27, 28</sup> Second, Campbell defines identity in terms of self and other.

Identity is an inescapable dimension of being. Nobody could be without it. Inescapable as it is, identity -- whether personal or collective -- is not fixed by nature, given by god, or planned by intentional behavior. Rather, identity is constituted in relation to difference. But neither is difference fixed by nature,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>25</sup> David Campbell, “Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity,” Revised Edition, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Social Theory of International Relations,” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Wendt “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review*, (1994), 88:2, 385.

given by god, or planned by intentional behavior. Difference is constituted in relation to identity.<sup>29</sup>

This need for differentiation is embedded in language and practice.<sup>30</sup> As noted by Campbell above, it is often associated with establishing boundaries of practice that begin with the contrast between domestic politics and international politics. R.B.J. Walker expresses this well by noting the co-dependence of domestic politics on the existence of an antagonistic external other.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the domestic self is justified by providing a safe haven vis a vis the danger from outside. In this way the domestic self and international other are co-constituted. Lebow, however, rejects the need for the agent to define its identity in terms of an opposing other.<sup>32</sup> He critiques claims of the need for a stereotypical, antagonistic other in the Western philosophy of Kant and Hegel and draws on Greco-Roman literature of Homer to show that the individual identity can be created with positive reference to others. He concludes that;

...there is ample historical evidence that identity construction has often been accompanied by the creation of stereotyped 'others'. However, there is little empirical or laboratory evidence to support the claim that identity or national solidarity requires 'others', let alone their violent exclusion from domestic, regional or international communities.<sup>33</sup>

While Lebow believes that a stereotyped other is not necessary for the creation of an agent's identity, "...national identity and solidarity are fully consistent with, and even sustained by, policies of inclusion and non-stereotyped understanding of "others."<sup>34</sup> So, it is clear that, necessary or not, the construction of the self identity is made in reference to an external other in international relations.

In international relations, agents use identity to simplify their choices both by portraying their own identity and by ascribing identities to others. David Campbell discussed, at length, the writing and rewriting of the American identity in foreign policy texts to define the interests and preferences of a nation-state as it grew from colonies of conquest through the superpower of the Cold War.<sup>35</sup> Kowert documented how the British government perceived the changing identity of the Egyptian government in the year that led up to the Suez Crisis of 1956.<sup>36</sup> Messari traced the development of the Islamic "other" in the American foreign policy response to the Bosnia crisis of the early 1990s.<sup>37</sup> In each of these cases, the creation of identity narrowed the action choices available to the agents and prescribed those that would most enhance utility given the perceived or projected identity of the other.

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<sup>29</sup> Campbell, "Writing Security," 9.

<sup>30</sup> Xavier Guillaume, "Foreign Policy and the Politics of Alterity: A Dialogical Understanding of International Relations" *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, (2002), 31(1), 1-26.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, "Inside/Outside."

<sup>32</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, "Identity and International Relations," *International Relations*, (2008), 22:4, 473-492.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, "Writing Security."

<sup>36</sup> Kowert, "Agent versus Structure."

<sup>37</sup> Messari, "Identity and Foreign Policy."

## Constructing the Other

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.<sup>38</sup>

Constructivist understanding of identity has been largely influenced by the work of Alexander Wendt.<sup>39</sup> Wendt defines the identities formed in a first encounter between two fictitious actors, Alter and Ego. The two actors exist in an ideal world with no shared ideas (i.e., no culture) but they bring both material and representational expectations to the encounter in the form of physical needs and a priori ideas about who they are. Wendt characterizes the first encounter as a social act that takes place in four scenes.<sup>40</sup>

In Scene One, Ego engages in some action based on some prior definition of the situation. This creates a signal to Alter about the role that Ego intends to take. It also creates a signal to Alter about what role Ego wants Alter to take. In Scene Two, Alter tries to interpret the meaning of Ego's action in the absence of shared ideas (cultural foundations). Alter uses its own initial definition of the situation as well as any cues contained in Ego's action to update its definition of the situation. Scene Three begins with Alter taking an action in response to Ego's action based on Alter's updated definition of the situation. As in Scene One, Alter's action signals to Ego the role that Alter intends to take and the role that Alter wants Ego to take. Finally, in Scene Four, Ego considers Alter's response and updates its own definition of the situation and prepares a response to Ego's action. This social act is repeated until either actor decides to end it. Each actor develops both a sense of the other actor's identity and a refined sense of the definition of the situation within which the encounter took place.

Wendt's characterization of the first-encounter social act relies heavily on a number of concepts drawn from theories of symbolic interaction of George Mead and Erving Goffman.<sup>41, 42</sup> The definition of the situation was first introduced by William Thomas in 1923 and has become a central concept in symbolic interaction.

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<sup>38</sup>Erving Goffman, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," University of Edinburgh, Social Science Research Centre, Monograph No. 2, (1956), accessed February 2, 2015, [http://monoskop.org/images/1/19/Goffman\\_Erving\\_The\\_Presentation\\_of\\_Self\\_in\\_Everyday\\_Life.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/1/19/Goffman_Erving_The_Presentation_of_Self_in_Everyday_Life.pdf).

<sup>39</sup>Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation," 1;

Wendt, "Social Theory of International Relations."

<sup>40</sup>Wendt, "Social Theory of International Relations," 330-331.

<sup>41</sup> George Herbert Mead, "Mind, Self, and Society, Works of George Herbert Mead," Volume 1, edited by Charles M. Morris. 1962, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

<sup>42</sup>Goffman, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life."

Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation. And actually not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions.<sup>43</sup>

The definition of the situation does much more than simply establish the setting within which a social act takes place. Thomas saw it as a reference to the social structure that defines and constrains the construction of the agent through social rules.

There is therefore always a rivalry between the spontaneous definitions of the situation made by the member of an organized society and the definitions which his society has provided for him. The individual tends to a hedonistic selection of activity, pleasure first; and society to a utilitarian selection, safety first. Society wishes its member to be laborious, dependable, regular, sober, orderly, self-sacrificing; while the individual wishes less of this and more of new experience. And organized society seeks also to regulate the conflict and competition inevitable between its members in the pursuit of their wishes.

It is in this connection that a moral code arises, which is a set of rules or behavior norms, regulating the expression of the wishes, and which is built up by successive definitions of the situation... Morality is thus the generally accepted definition of the situation, whether expressed in public opinion and the unwritten law, in a formal legal code, or in religious commandments and prohibitions.<sup>44</sup>

Stebbins reinforced this connection between the rules of the social structure and the agent's identity and action by noting that the definition of the situation is a combination of objective and subjective elements.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, we shall define the objective situation as the immediate social and physical surroundings and the current physiological and psychological state of the actor. It is as MacIver put it, "the situation as it might appear to some omniscient and disinterested eye, viewing all its complex interdependencies and all its endless contingencies." The subjective situation shall be defined as those components of the objective situation which are seen by the actor to affect any one of his action orientations and therefore must be given meaning before he can act.<sup>46</sup>

Wendt's first-encounter social act also relies on role-taking and altercasting. Both Ego and Alter define their identities through the roles they take on and the roles that are "cast" upon them by the other. Wendt notes that when an agent takes on a role, it chooses "from among the

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<sup>43</sup> William I. Thomas, "The Definition of the Situation," Excerpt from *The Unadjusted Girl*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1923), accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/thomas.php>.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Robert A. Stebbins, "A Theory of the Definition of the Situation," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, (1967), 4, 148-164.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 150.

available representations of the Self how it will be, and thus what interests one intends to pursue, in an interaction.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, by defining identity in terms of roles, identities determine the interests of the agent. Similarly, when an agent “casts” a role the other, it is ascribing the interests that it expects the other to pursue. Although Wendt acknowledges the importance of power relationships in the social act, his discussion of altercasting is relatively benign in his exposition of the first encounter. Weinstein and Deutschberger’s original discussion of altercasting placed it in a somewhat more sinister light when they defined altercasting as “a basic technique of interpersonal control.”<sup>48</sup> Altercasting is explicitly used by the agent to control the interaction with the other to pursue the agent’s goals. Weinstein and Deutschberger’s interpretation of altercasting emphasizes the goal-seeking intentionality of the agent and the other in social interaction - a characteristic of strategic interaction that is certainly familiar to rational choice theorists.

My own approach to constructing the other begins with this intentionality. Agents act for a reason. Donald Davidson states that an agent acts based on “desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economics, prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values insofar as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed towards actions.”<sup>49</sup> In a thin version of rationality, all these public and private goals and values are wrapped up in the amorphous concept of utility, which is taken as a given. In a thick approach to rationality, these motivations must be explored, and in a constructivist approach to rationality, they must be explained as social constructions. I start with a simple socially constructed intentionality argument that becomes more complex as definitions are added.

#### The Intentionality Argument

1. Structures (the definition of the situation) determine roles that define identities
2. Identities define the interests of the agent
3. Interests define the agent’s preferences
4. Preferences determine the agent’s actions
5. Actions identify agents to the social structure (the definition of the situation).

The heart of this argument is that interests define preferences and preferences determine actions. Preferences are, of course, at the center of a rationalist argument about intentionality as well. In rational choice theory, preferences are statements about the expected utility of the outcomes of a choice. Those outcomes with greater expected utility are desired over those with lesser expected utility and are therefore preferred. Formally, an agent is said to be “rational” if the agent’s preferences align with the two conditions of completeness and transitivity. Completeness merely means that the expected utility calculus can be performed using any two outcomes of a choice and the transitivity condition means that three or more outcomes can be rank ordered according to their expected utilities. Formality aside, the intent of the two conditions is to make clear which single outcome the agent should pursue when making a choice. That is, preferences divide up the outcomes of a choice between the single outcome that should be pursued (i.e., choice that is to be made) and those that are not to be pursued.

Nicholas Onuf, in his exposition of rule-based constructivism defines a rule as “a

<sup>47</sup>Wendt, “Social Theory of International Relations,” 329.

<sup>48</sup>Eugene A. Weinstein and Paul Deutschberger, “Some Dimensions of Altercasting,” *Sociometry*, 25(4), (1963), 456.

<sup>49</sup>Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 60:23, (1963), 686.

statement that tells people *what we should do*.”<sup>50</sup>

Rules offer agents the simplest kind of choices. Agents may choose to follow a given rule, or to break it. Compared to most situations in which agents make choices, the choice of following a rule or not following it involves consequences that are easy to calculate. While unintended consequences are always possible, rules give agents the opportunity to make rational choices – choices dictated by reference to goals – with some assurance that they are making the best choices available to them.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Onuf’s constructivist rule is similar to the rationalist’s conception of a preference. Both divide choices into those that should be performed and those that should not, and imply that performing the choice will benefit the interests of the agent. A preference, therefore, is a type of decision rule about which action to perform in a given situation.

In rational choice theory, preferences are derived from the abstraction of utility but in constructivism, rules are grounded in social relationships. Preferences are the decision rules that operationalize socially constructed interests. Wendt discusses three elements of the process that turns interests into preferences.<sup>52</sup> The primary element is desire but desire is tempered by beliefs about the nature of the world and by deliberation regarding which actions may be appropriate in the given definition of the situation. Norm-based constructivists see this deliberation as an interchange between a logic of consequences (desires) and a logic of appropriateness that establishes which actions are socially acceptable in the given social structure.<sup>53</sup> A restatement of the definition of a preference would then be a decision rule about which action to perform in a given situation derived from the agent’s interests through desires, beliefs, and deliberation.

An identity is formed by its relationship with others. This process is deeper than merely identifying the agent as an actor within the international system. Campbell proposes that identity vis a vis another external actor serves to solidify the identity of a state among its own inhabitants by establishing a “them” which requires an “us” to address.<sup>54</sup> This process is accelerated when the “them” is portrayed as a threat or danger to “us”. Identities do more than merely distinguish and differentiate different agents. An identity attaches interest and preferences.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas G. Onuf, “Constructivism: A User’s Manual,” Chapter in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, edited by Vendulaka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 59.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Wendt, “Social Theory of International Relations,” 118-130.

<sup>53</sup> James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “Rediscovering Institutions,” (New York: Free Press, 1989); James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The Logic of Appropriateness,” ARENA Working Paper WP/04/09, Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, (2004), accessed January 30, 2015, [https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arena-publications/workingpapers/workingpapers2004/wp04\\_9.pdf](https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arena-publications/workingpapers/workingpapers2004/wp04_9.pdf),

Thomas Risse, “Let’s Argue!: Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization*, 54(1), (2000), 1-39;

Ole J. Sending, “Constitution, Choice and Change: Problems with the ‘Logic of Appropriateness’ and its Use in Constructivist Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations*, (2002), Vol. 8(4): 443–470;

K. M. Fierke, “Constructivism,” Chapter in Tim Dunne, et al. Editors, *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, Third Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 187-204.

<sup>54</sup> Campbell, “Writing Security.”

to the agent. In her overview and critique of constructivist approaches to identity, Vendulka Kubálková notes that, "In simple terms, states create each other as enemies, rivals, or partners and proceed to share their interpretations of their respective identities. They also act in accordance with each other's expectations of them."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, an agent is identified by its actions. "To explain a piece of behavior is to show that it derives from an intention of the individual exhibiting it. A successful intentional explanation establishes the behavior as an *action* and the performer as an *agent*."<sup>56</sup> As I have stated elsewhere, "the constitution of the agent . . . is deeper than a mere empirical observation. The agent is constituted as a set of processes embedded in preferences and cognitions."<sup>57</sup> The agent *is* its preferences.

The constitution of the other, then, is a process in which the agent comes to identify the other through its actions and preferences. Central to this process in a first encounter (and in many later encounters as well), is the fact that the agent may have limited information about the actual preferences and actions of the other but still must be able to create and respond to an identity of the other. Unlike Wendt's image of the first encounter, which is largely based on interpretation of empirical observations of actions, my image of the first encounter is characterized by uncertain perceptions of the interests of the other drawn from the agent's own interests and interpretations of the social structure. Rather than altercasting desired identities and interests upon the other, the agent ascribes identities, interests, and preferences to the other that represent its understanding of the definition of the situation and social structure. Thus, the identity that the agent sees in the other is a combination of whatever actions it observes in the other and whatever actions it may expect from the other, given the preferences that it has ascribed to the other. In the absence of observed actions (or perhaps in addition to observed actions) the agent identifies the other by identifying what the other wants. The agent must ascribe preferences (decision rules that it expects the other to follow) based on its own interpretation of the definition of the situation derived from its sense of its own identity and its own interests.

## Conclusion

As Cairo's Tahrir Square began filling daily with tens of thousands of protestors in early 2011, U.S. foreign policy analysts were faced with a dilemma. Who was in charge of the movement to bring down their long-term ally, Hosni Mubarak? What was the identity of the group that would likely step up to take the reins of power in a post Mubarak Egypt? What actions would this new entity likely take? Ultimately, what did they want in their relationships with the United States and with the region? How can international actors acquire enough information about the protestors to ascribe preferences to create an identity when the protestors have no clear leadership and no official spokesperson?

<sup>55</sup>Vendulka Kubálková, "Foreign Policy, International Politics, and Constructivism," Chapter in *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*, edited by Vendulka Kubálková, Armon, (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 34.

<sup>56</sup>Jon Elster, "The Nature and Scope of Rational-Choice Explanation," Chapter in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, edited by Ernest Lepore and Brian McLaughlin, (New York: Basil Blackwell, (1985), 60.

<sup>57</sup>Roberts, "The Rational Constitution of Agents and Structures," (1997),162-163.

<sup>58</sup> Philip N. Howard et al, "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, University of Washington,(2011), 25, Retrieved from <http://collectiondevelopment.library.cornell.edu/mideast/Role%20of%20Social%20Media%20During%20the%20Arab%20Spring.pdf> on March 25, 2012

The lack of an official spokesperson did not prevent information about the protests from getting out. The Project on Information Technology and Political Islam of the University of Washington analyzed 2,363,139 tweets with the #egypt hashtag between January 14 and March 24, 2011.<sup>58</sup> In the week before Mubarak's resignation, the daily rate of tweets from Egypt grew from 2,300 per day to 230,000 per day. Yet this flurry of information did little to provide the US decision-makers with a way to identify the interests and preferences of a potentially new regime. When Mubarak resigned and the group known as the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the new power in Egyptian politics, the US tried to identify its interests and preferences. As one *New York Times* report noted,

Its size and diversity, and the legal ban that has kept it from genuine political power for decades, make it hard to characterize simply. As the Roman Catholic Church includes both those who practice leftist liberation theology and conservative anti-abortion advocates, so the Brotherhood includes both practical reformers and firebrand ideologues. Which of those tendencies might rise to dominance in a new Egypt is under intense discussion inside the Obama administration.<sup>59</sup>

In absence of other information and actions, the US had to identify the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood based on its own identities as a power broker in the Middle East; an ally of the Mubarak regime that for years oppressed the political ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood; an ally of Israel, which the US believed the Brotherhood opposed; and a victim of the Islamic terrorism of 9/11, which was not attributed to the Brotherhood, but which defined the situation for any contact between an Islamist organization and the United States.

Identity matters. It creates an image of the agent that is used by the agent as a shortcut for deciding what to do. The image is also used by others to decide how to respond to the actions of the agent. In doing so, the image becomes the agent - it constitutes the agent. Whether through first encounters or long-lasting relationships, agents are constantly creating images of the other. In a socially constructed world, those images – identities – are the synthesis of the agent's own identities and interests and the agent's understanding of the definition of the social structure that constructs and constrains the interaction. In a rule-based world, the image of the other is created by the decision rules that the agent expects the other to follow. These ascribed preferences construct the identity of the other in the interests of the agent. They form the basis for strategic and symbolic interactions between the agent and the other that constitute what we know as international relations.

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<sup>59</sup>Scott Shane, "As Islamist Group Rises, Its Intentions Are Unclear," Article in the February 3, 2011 edition of the *New York Times*, (2011), accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/world/middleeast/04brotherhood.html>.

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