This paper suggests that self-categories provide the basis for political action, that those who wish to organize political activity do so through the ways in which they construct self-categories, and that political domination may be achieved through reifying social categories and therefore denying alternative ways of social being. Hence, the way in which social psychology approaches the matter of self-categorization provides a touchstone for its politics. To the extent that we too take categories for granted, we are in danger of supporting conservative and undemocratic politics. The only way to eschew tendencies toward reification within social psychology is to add a historical dimension to our own analysis of self-categorical processes.

KEY WORDS: self-categorization, social psychology, identity politics.

Our argument is quite simple. We argue, first, that human social relations are organized through the definition and elaboration of collective self-categories. Second, therefore, it is through the definition and elaboration of collective self-categories that politicians (and others) can organize human social relations. Third, it follows that if categories are taken for granted, then the nature of social relations is frozen. Hence, the reification of social categories is one of the key means through which political actors seek to achieve ideological and practical domination. Fourth, insofar as social categories are reified within psychology, then our discipline also serves to promote the politics of domination rather than promoting an understanding of political action. Fifth, if psychology is to clarify rather than mythologize the bases of political behavior, we must reassess the way
in which social categorization is understood. More specifically, it is necessary to analyze categories in relation to the organization of action: how categories reflect the external constraints on the ways in which we can act, as well as how categories organize action to reconfigure the nature of constraints in our social world. In other words, categories are not only a reflection of our social being but are also part of the process of social becoming (see Hegel, 1991; Heidegger, 1991; Reicher & Hopkins, in press). They orient as much to the future as to the present. Hence, psychology must include history in its analysis (rather than serve to promote the end of history through its analysis). We conclude by envisaging the intellectual as well as the political implications of such a stance.

The logic of our argument may be straightforward, but the claims we are making are radical. They amount to an identification, a diagnosis, and a potential palliative for ideological ills at the core of social psychology. We are claiming that there are tendencies toward conservatism in the discipline (in the precise sense of conserving the status quo), that such conservatism derives from the way in which the categorical underpinnings of social life are taken for granted, and that such conservatism can only be overcome by analyzing categorization in (relation to) action. Such claims may seem sufficiently controversial when viewed in isolation. They may appear yet more controversial given the motivations that led to the development of modern work on human groups and social categories. In the period before the Second World War, research had focused on measuring group differences and thereby did much to legitimize the idea of class, national and, in particular, racial hierarchies (see Billig, 1978; Kamin, 1977; Richards, 1997). The experience of Nazism served to discredit such approaches, and so in the postwar period there was a paradigmatic shift. Research no longer addressed whether groups differ, but rather why people perceive groups to differ and, more particularly, why people view other groups in negative terms. That is, the concern became our prejudice against other groups and not the nature of other groups in themselves. The shift is most clearly marked by the publication of Allport’s hugely influential The Nature of Prejudice in 1954. The concern with how humans categorize themselves and others and how categorization affects judgments and actions was therefore part of a fundamentally progressive concern with how to understand, to challenge, and to eradicate prejudice—most notably, racial prejudice.

How can one accuse a tradition of research that developed in order to contest inequality and oppression of being fundamentally conservative? There are two levels at which to respond. The first is in relation to the research. We do not doubt that the move to perceptualism in social psychology was a necessary step in its time, or that it was a step forward. However, as is so often the case, the very strength that allowed the discipline to move to new terrain became a weakness once on that terrain. Thus, insofar as the principal intellectual interest of “prejudice” research was aimed at showing that group differences were perceived rather than real, little or no intellectual capital was devoted to the question of how the groups are arrived at. For instance, the issue was how “white” people come to see “black” people, and
not how people come to be seen as black and white. The issue of racial prejudice was pursued to the exclusion of the issue of racialization (Reicher, 1986). Equally, the stress that was put on perceived as opposed to actual differences led to a situation in which the complex interrelations between social categories and social reality were all but ignored (with some partial but crucial exceptions; see below). Hence, the fact that we now need to go beyond the “prejudice” perspective and beyond perceptualism more generally is not a mark of its failure. It is a sign of how far it has allowed us to progress.

The second level at which we wish to respond is in relation to the researchers. To argue that the mainstream social psychology of social categorization has conservative consequences is not to argue that the mainstream social psychologists are conservatives. Rather, we assume that nearly all psychologists who are working on issues of prejudice, stereotyping, intergroup discrimination, and all the other phenomena related to social categorical action do so because they want to play some part in challenging inequalities between groups. We can only have confidence that a debate is possible if we believe that we are addressing a community who share common goals and who therefore share a common interest in honing our conceptual tools through the heat of argument. If we are making any personal point at all, it is primarily that ideas may have unintended consequences, but for that reason we need to be all the more careful in the way we formulate our ideas. As we shall see, the notion of unintended consequences is something we often overlook in our theories as well as in our practices.

**Self-Categorization and the Organization of Action**

By now, there is a good quarter-century of research in the social identity tradition (more recently, and more specifically, stemming from self-categorization theory) that illustrates the importance of our collective self-categories for the ways in which we act. Within these traditions (e.g., Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Turner, 1999; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) it is argued that the self is not a unitary construct, but rather a complex system that can be defined at various levels of abstraction. Most notably, we can define ourselves in terms of that which renders us unique as individuals compared to other individuals (“personal identity”) or else in terms of that which renders us unique as members of one group compared to members of other groups (“social identity”). Moreover, we all belong (and see ourselves as belonging) to various social groups, and hence we have a range of social identities appropriate to these different memberships: I am a Catholic, I am French, I am a Conservative, and so on.

Initially, the social identity tradition was developed in order to address intergroup phenomena. It was proposed that the psychological shift from personal to social identity underlies the behavioral shift from interindividual to intergroup action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Giles, 1981). Moreover, the particular social identity that is salient in a given context will determine who is seen and
treated as similar and who is seen as treated as different, who is embraced as an ally and who is rejected as an alien. Thus, for a hypothetical French Conservative, a French Socialist could be seen either as “one of us” if national categories are salient, or as “one of them” if political categories are to the fore. In short, collective self-categories organize who we should orient to as “self” and who is “other.”

The development of self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982; Turner et al., 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) involved the extension of social identity concepts to deal with group phenomena in general rather than intergroup behavior in particular—although, as discussed below, one of the foundations of self-categorization theory is that all aspects of a group’s behavior are framed by the relations that obtain between it and other groups in context. The starting point for self-categorization theory is that individuals act collectively only to the extent that they identify themselves in terms of a common social identity. Clearly, “objective” factors will act as precursors to self-categorization. The fact that one is seen as a Conservative by others and treated as a Conservative will have an impact on the likelihood of seeing oneself as a Conservative. Nonetheless, it is only at the point where “objective” factors lead one to adopt a “subjective” identity as “Conservative,” and in contexts where that social identity is salient, that one’s behavior will be framed by Conservatism. At that point, one will start to perceive others in terms of whether they are Conservatives or not. One will seek to adapt one’s judgments and behaviors to the values, norms, and understandings that define Conservatism. As Turner (1982) put it, social identity is the psychological process that makes group behavior possible.

Each of these claims can be supported by a considerable weight of empirical evidence. To start with, there is much research showing the importance of social identity processes for auto- and heterostereotyping (for reviews, see Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997). There is also ample research showing that members of a common category both expect to agree and actively seek to reach consensus (e.g., Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Reynolds, 1998). Moreover, recent work on leadership from a self-categorization perspective demonstrates that people will agree with and follow a would-be leader to the extent that the individual is seen as prototypical of the ingroup and acts in terms of ingroup norms (Hains, Hogg, & Duck, 1997; Haslam, 2000; Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998). For the present purposes, however, the most relevant research is that which shows how the nature of the salient social identity affects what people will or will not consider to be appropriate or acceptable behavior. This has also formed a focus of our own ongoing research.

On the one hand, we have conducted a number of experimental studies showing that, when different social identities are made salient, the norms to which people subscribe also differ (Reicher, 1984a; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998) and the importance they ascribe to different
actions and events also changes (Levine & Reicher, 1996; Stapel, Reicher, & Spears, 1994). On the other hand, we have analyzed a number of crowd events in which there is a clear link between the social identity adopted by participants and the limits to the types of action that generalize among crowd members (Reicher, 1984b, 1987, 1996, in press). These latter studies in particular demonstrate a point that was fundamental to the very development of the social identity tradition. That is, the account is intended to apply not only to the small face-to-face groups that have predominated within social psychological research on collective phenomena, but also to mass social phenomena. Once group behavior is seen to depend on an act of self-definition rather than the prior existence of bonds between individuals, one is in a position to deal with those “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983) or “communities without propinquity” (Webber, 1967), such as nation, religion, class, and “race,” that structure our social being. For us, the potential of the social identity and self-categorization perspectives is that they provide a psychological mediation between the ways in which such communities are imagined and the forms of collective action that ensue.

Following self-categorization theory, we suggest that the ways in which the boundaries of category inclusion are defined will determine who will be included in the collective consensus and who will act together, the way in which the category prototype is defined will determine who is in a position to represent the category, and—most pertinently—the way in which the meanings associated with the category are defined will determine what forms of action are deemed acceptable or unacceptable. In a phrase: Category boundaries will determine the extent of collective mobilization, category prototypes will determine the leadership of collective mobilizations, and category content will determine the direction of collective mobilizations.

Directing Collective Action Through Defining Self-Categories

We suggest that, precisely because of the consequences of category definitions, the substantive nature of these definitions will become a terrain of argument and debate. Because the way in which social identities are defined shapes mass mobilizations, those who wish to influence such mobilizations will seek to do so by shaping social identity. Borrowing a term from Besson (1990), we argue that politicians and social movement activists should be seen as “entrepreneurs of identity.” They will define self-categories whereby those that they wish to mobilize form part of a common category with the speaker, and where the category content is so defined as to entail the policies and proposals advanced by the speaker.

Our analyses of category construction have dealt with various contexts of political rhetoric, including anti-abortion debates, industrial disputes, and the Persian Gulf war (Herrera & Reicher, 1998; Hopkins & Reicher, 1992; Hopkins, Reicher, & Saleem, 1996; Reicher, 1991, 1993; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a, 1996b). However, our most sustained analyses have been concerned with the uses of
national identity (Hopkins & Reicher, 1997a, 1997b; Reicher & Hopkins, in press; Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997a, 1997b). In a world where much of our activity is organized along national lines—and where, in particular, parliamentary elections are predominantly organized within national franchises—national identity provides a privileged basis on which to appeal to the entire electorate. Thus, in an analysis of the rhetoric of politicians and activists from all electoral parties in Scotland in the period 1992–1998, we find that the use of Scottish identity is almost ubiquitous. What is more, although Scotland was at the time divided into parties that wanted independence from England, those that wanted devolution to a Scottish parliament within the framework of Great Britain, and those that wanted no change to the union of Scotland and Britain, and although the term “nationalist” tended to be reserved for the sole party supporting independence (the Scottish National Party, SNP), we found that politicians from all parties showed equal vehemence in protesting their national allegiance. Similarly, all justified their policies as the best way of realizing the national interest. In other words, all were equally nationalist, if nationalism is understood as a basis on which support for any political project may be justified rather than used to describe one particular political project.

However, even though all might have invoked Scottish identity equally, it does not necessarily follow that all invoked the same understanding of what it means to be Scottish. Consider the following two quotations, the former from an SNP activist and the latter from a senior Conservative:

The Scot would hate to be wrong. That’s why he sometimes doesn’t offer opinions when asked. In case there is something risible in the opinions. So he keeps his mouth shut and looks at less inhibited people, like the English who will give opinions on any damn thing it seems to him and don’t care whether they’re right or wrong. Now, he wouldn’t expose himself to that sort of thing—he might be laughed at and oh! you can’t have that.

And I think you will find that whereas perhaps unkindly, non-Scots will accuse us of being girners and moaners and groaners, really what I think they are saying is, they are commenting on the Scots’ natural desire to express themselves and to express himself in the knowledge that he may hold a view differing from those held by other people. . . . I think it is a manifestation of a national characteristic that we like to have an opinion and to express it.

For the one, Scots are shy and retiring. For the other, Scots are inveterate complainers. But if these definitions of Scottish characteristics are totally at variance, the relationship between each definition and the political project of the speaker remains constant. Thus, for the SNP, the notion of Scots as silent and downtrodden serves to bolster support for independence as a way for Scottish people to recover their voice. Conversely, the notion of Scots as naturally self-expressive refutes any idea
that the Scots suffer through the Union. Indeed, it serves to suggest that even when they do complain, this should be attributed more to their nature than to the fact that they have anything to complain about.

Such evidence is, of course, far from conclusive. It could be argued that the lack of consensus concerning the loquacity or otherwise of Scots simply reflects the fact that this is a peripheral dimension of identity definition. So consider next a dimension that is often used to characterize the Scots: their sense of caring and of community. At first glance, the next two quotations from political opponents (one from a Labour candidate for election to Parliament, the other from a Conservative candidate) would seem to confirm that centrality and consensus go together. Certainly both reaffirm the communal and caring character of Scottish people:

I think we have a long history in Scotland of saying . . . of not saying “I’m all right jack,” we are far more caring about those that aren’t, for whatever reason are less fortunate, in inverted commas, than ourselves. . . . Robert Burns [the Scottish “national poet”] after all, with many of his poems trying to expand on that about with “a man’s a man for a’ that” etc. And a lot of his works went down very well with socialist, in inverted commas, countries and I think that again epitomizes our attitude towards the corporate community which is Scotland.

I think that we’re more community minded. I think that we care about our neighbors more so than do people particularly in urban England. . . . There’s a, Robert Burns expressed so very many things about Scottish culture with his poetry, “a man’s a man for a’ that”: we may be achievers, we may get here and we may get to the top, but there are these quintessentially human characteristics that the Scot does not lose sight of. . . . My mother lives in a small village in Fife [one of the regions of Scotland]. There’s a fantastic system of informal social support. They care for one another and it’s very much, you know, “do unto others as you would have done to yourself.” And I’ve seen her as a both a giver as well as a recipient of that informal social support which I happen to think is infinitely better than anything that would be provided by the regional council’s social work department.

As well as invoking common characteristics, both speakers invoke the same cultural authority (Robert Burns) and even the same famous lines from one of his poems in order to buttress their description. But that is as far as the agreement goes. Scots may be communal and they may be caring, but for the Labourite that means support for welfare institutions in a corporate state, whereas for the Conservative it means mutual self-help as an alternative to welfare provision. In other words, the apparent agreement hides a profound dissensus concerning the nature of the social relations that characterize Scottish society. To assume a common definition of identity simply because common terms are used would be to remove the terms from
their context of usage and would be profoundly misleading. More important, however, to search for commonality at the level of how identity is defined is to miss the key relationship, which is between differing definitions of identity and the forms of collective mobilization that flow from them.

**Making Categories Into Givens**

If forms of social identity and forms of social action are so necessarily and so tightly interlinked, then those who wish to promote particular forms of social relation above others cannot be content with simply advancing one version of social identity among many. They must ensure that their version is seen as the sole authentic rendering of identity—in other words, that it isn’t a “version” at all. The entrepreneurs of identity must not only be adept at constructing an identity that supports their projects; they must be equally adept at hiding all traces of construction. They must be like magicians who distract your attention while the real trick is going on, such that you cannot help colluding in the illusion they then present before your eyes.

This is not just a theoretical claim. Studies of political rhetoric reveal that speakers devote as much attention to reifying as to describing social identities. What is more, they use many of the techniques of reification as identified by Thompson (1990). The two most prominent techniques are naturalization and eternalization. Naturalization refers to the treating of affairs as the inevitable outcome of natural characteristics. For instance, a spokesperson for Scottish Watch, an extreme separatist organization, claimed:

> We’ve always had a very, probably due to the fact that our environment has been a harsh environment, I think that by and large most Scots are a very cooperative people. We tend not to be as individualistic, if you like, as the English. We tend to hold back much more. We are not as articulate, we tend to hold community values as being important.

By contrast, a Conservative parliamentary candidate used the same environment to draw a very different picture of Scottish identity:

> He’s canny and thrifty, he’s a sensible man, not mean, not either mean-spirited or mean in terms of money but careful, avowedly loyal and hard-working—perhaps that derives something from the rigors of the climate, the rigors of life, and one only needs to look at so many of the great Scottish achievers, they came from a little cottage up a cold glen somewhere, they were probably brought up in considerable privation compared to modern standards and it may be that that was a spur and an incentive to get on and achieve.

Eternalization means the attempt to represent a state of affairs as permanent and unchanging, as stretching back into time immemorial. This is most easily achieved
by using historical events to demonstrate how identity remains the same. This use of history to place identity outside history is particularly common in nationalist rhetoric (perhaps because one of the defining features of national ideology is the notion of a community moving together through time; see Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995). Once again such usage can be illustrated through our analysis of Scottish political rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkins, in press). One central icon of the national history is the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath. This was a diplomatic dispatch to Rome after the victory over England at the Battle of Bannockburn (1314), which rejected English claims on Scotland. The most famous passage in the Declaration reads as follows:

Yet if [the Scottish king] should give up what he has begun, and agree to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King: for as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom—for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

Given their age and their foundational status, these words are frequently invoked to pick out the timeless features of the Scottish identity. On the eve of the 1992 general election, one SNP member of Parliament used them to stress the Scottish love of freedom and their assuredness about their place as a nation. In other words, the Declaration was used to eternalize “independence loving” as a key element of Scottishness. By contrast, a senior Labour activist used the same passage to insist that the Scots had a distinctive approach to power, a rejection of absolute authority, and an intrinsic democratic tradition. Thus, both speakers link the present and the future to the past, but they invoke different forms of community in the attempt to buttress different projects for the future: the one based on the separatist politics of the SNP, the other based on the politics and values of the Labour movement.

It should be clear, even from these brief examples, that the effort devoted to reifying categories does not exclude debate and argumentation but merely provides another domain in which they occur. Moreover, the power of nature and of history as means of reification makes them especially lively as terrains of argument. Our point is simply that it is important for the entrepreneurs of identity to engage on these terrains and that, to the extent that they are able to naturalize or eternalize their versions of identity, they are more likely to mobilize people to their ends and to make their models of society more difficult to challenge or to replace. Another way of saying this, specifically with regard to eternalization, is that rhetorical success in placing identity beyond history will be linked to practical success in bringing about the End of History (in the sense of preventing the progression or succession of social relations).
Before moving on, let us consider one further technique of reification, which could be seen as a special form of naturalization. We shall refer to it as psychologization, although our usage of the term is slightly different from that which is sometimes found elsewhere in social psychology, notably in minority influence theory (see Moscovici, 1981). For us, psychologization involves the claim that there are certain inherent aspects of collective identity that derive from inherent aspects of the human psyche. This rests on a popular and widespread metaphorical linkage between collective entities and individual bodies (Handler, 1994; Jenkins, 1996). At a psychological level, it is often reflected in the notion that social categories have set personalities, just like individuals. Indeed, it is a commonplace of political rhetoric that collectives have a single set character. For instance, throughout our analysis of national rhetoric, we find that speakers of all ideological hues presuppose that it is possible to pin down this character—even if they differ as to what it actually consists of. Often it is a matter of claiming that the nation is defined by certain one-dimensional traits such as those we encountered above: The Scots are shy, the Scots are loquacious, the Scots are communal, and so on. As we also saw, these traits are only meaningful when seen in the context of the forms of social practice that they are used to underpin. Our point in this section is precisely that trait terms naturalize those relations by representing identity in terms of fixed mental structures.

Sometimes, however, the account of character is much more complex and multidimensional. After all, as Taylor (1989) pointed out, in our contemporary era self is often seen as synonymous with depth. More specifically, in these post-Freudian times, depth is generally conceptualized in psychodynamic terms. In our studies (Reicher & Hopkins, in press), the richest use of these terms to political ends was provided by the most colorful of recent politicians: the late Conservative MP, Sir Nicholas Fairbairn. Fairbairn’s sophistication in the deployment of psychological concepts owes much to the fact that his father was W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, a key figure in the development of what came to be known as the “British object-relations” school of psychoanalysis. Sir Nicholas argued that the Scottish psyche is formed by its child-parent relationship with England and the English. The Scots, like any child, both need and resent the protection of the parent, and this renders them as “dependent and impotent as the child to the parent, the little one to the big one.” This complex leads the infant psyche to misperceive the parent, even to construe its support as something negative, and therefore to push the parent away. But such a break can only do more harm. Fairbairn pursued the argument with typical verve:

Mummy smashes your toys like your steel works and your coal industry and your things and she just tells you to shut up. The fact that she throws you sweetsies in the form of vast subsidies which the English don’t get, which mummy doesn’t enjoy, just reinforces the psychological idea that she’s trying to keep you quiet when your resentments are justified. It’s a
very fundamental psychology about that. But, unfortunately psychology does not lead, the resentments of psychology when given their rein do not lead to a solution of the trauma and they create, they will create a new trauma of isolation and loneliness and deprivation. This is what happens when the child breaks away, it has to live in a garret doesn’t it. But the motivation is psychological, the search for separate potency.

Such a construction serves not only to portray certain characteristics of Scottish identity as the necessary outcome of universal processes. It also serves to pathologize the policies of opposition parties as encouraging the “infantile disorder” of the Scots rather than assisting their healthy (psychological) development. A policy of subsidies as pursued by the Labour party would only reinforce the Scottish sense of being spoiled and hence increase Scottish resentment. The separation policy of the SNP would only create “a new trauma of isolation and loneliness and deprivation”—a pretty grim prospect. All in all, the multidimensionality of Fairbairn’s psychological account allows him to perform many political tasks simultaneously. It explains why his party is unpopular, why the opposition is popular and why, despite all this, his party is the only one to facilitate the development of Scottish identity and hence the Scots’ interest.

Of course, if Fairbairn’s account is richer than that of others, it is also further removed from contemporary academic psychology, and social psychology in particular. The use of trait terms may echo to some extent what we find in our textbooks and journals. However, Freudian approaches are all but excluded, and it is almost a mark of honor in university common rooms to decry Freud’s work as unscientific speculation. Certainly, our aim in providing these examples of psychologization is not to mount a case against contemporary social psychology. Rather, our aim has been to show the problems inherent in reifying social categories, whatever the basis for such reification might be. Whether academic social psychology also reifies such categories is a separate matter requiring separate investigation.

Social Psychology and Social Categorization

Sherif’s so-called “boys camp studies” form what is probably the most famous program of research in the postwar social psychology of intergroup relations (Sherif, 1966; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). The 1949 and 1954 studies are well known. Sherif divided the boys into two groups, he set one group against another in competitive games, he even escalated the conflict through a so-called “reconciliation banquet.” One group arrived at this banquet before the other, found half the food to be spoiled, and started eating the unspoiled half. The second group arrived, found the food left to them had been damaged, assumed the first group had done the damage, and turned against them with renewed vigor. Sherif’s studies show how extreme levels of intergroup hostility and derogation
owe nothing to the individual characteristics of the participants and everything to the structural relations between groups.

As Billig (1976) pointed out, it is far less well known that a third study was conducted in 1953 but abandoned before being completed. The reason it was abandoned was that when the “reconciliation banquet” came around, the boys realized that they were being set up by the experimenters and, rather than fighting against themselves, they united against Sherif and his colleagues. This, of course, is of considerable psychological interest. The nature of the relations between the boys and of the social conflict between them depended entirely on how they construed the relevant categories: Were they divided among themselves, or did they form a common category in contrast to the experimenters? However, because Sherif took the division into different groups of boys as a non-negotiable starting point, he ignored the issue of category construction. He ignored any alternative categorical possibilities. He only proceeded where the boys took his definitions as reality.

Sherif’s work is emblematic of a far wider tendency in social psychology. Attention is predominantly focused on the consequences of categorization into groups and of particular relations between groups. The ways in which the divisions come about lie before the starting line and therefore slip from the disciplinary spotlight. We have argued elsewhere that this is particularly true of research into “race,” even where the aim of research is to reduce racial discrimination (Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Hopkins, Reicher, & Levine, 1997; Reicher, 1986). Thus, work on the “contact hypothesis” addresses the conditions under which contact between “black” and “white” people ameliorates the relations between them (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Miller & Brewer, 1984). However, it is generally presupposed that people will see each other in racial terms, and the measures that respondents have to complete impose such racial categories. As a result, much of the research forms part of the racialization of society at the same time as it analyzes the consequences of racialization in society.

Such tendencies are not restricted to matters of “race.” Intergroup relations research presupposes that we know who is confronting whom: black people versus white people, women versus men, Catholics versus Protestants, and so on. Yet, as we have argued elsewhere (Herrera & Reicher, 1998), the nature of the sides is often a matter of dispute, and the differences between the views of the different parties can be a crucial part of the elaboration of the conflict. For instance, during the Gulf conflict of 1990–1991, the Iraqis sought to portray the events as pitting America and its satellites against the Arab world. Israel, being part of the outgroup, formed a legitimate target. By contrast, the Western alliance construed Israel as a neutral non-combatant, and hence the Scud missiles targeted at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem demonstrated the indiscriminate and illegitimate character of Saddam Hussein’s regime (see Hiro, 1992).

Similarly, research on group stereotypes tends to presuppose the categories that are being stereotyped. We study how people rate the target groups that we
highlight for them. We very rarely question whether people view others in terms of those group memberships. Ironically, this is true even of research on stereotype change. These studies examine the effects of stereotype-discrepant information on how we view groups. One particular issue is whether subjects respond by changing their views of the category as a whole or divide the category into subtypes (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Hewstone, Johnston, & Aird, 1992; Johnston, Hewstone, Pendry, & Frankish, 1994; Weber & Crocker, 1983). In the typical methodology, subjects are presented with information about a number of people defined as members of a particular group, some of whom confirm the group stereotype and some of whom do not. They are asked to form an impression of the individuals and of the group, and are then asked a number of questions concerning the extent to which the group shares certain characteristics. Thus, even if subjects use the discrepant information to break the category up—to have feminists and mothers, say, rather than simply women—it is required that the individuals are seen in terms of the given category in the first place and it is assumed that, even if subtypes emerge, they are still subtypes of the original category. Once again, the study of change occurs within strict parameters, which renders the basic choice of categories inviolate.

Most of the time, categories are presupposed without this presupposition having any explicit theoretical underpinnings. It is simply that the focus of research is on what happens given certain categories, and the question of how they come to be given is bracketed off, never to be revisited. It may not be intended to suggest that categories are self-evident, but that is the cumulative effect of always treating them as such. Sometimes, however, one can find explicit theoretical support for the idea that certain forms of category usage are inherent. For instance, the notion that human beings have limited cognitive capacity that can only be allocated sparingly (the “cognitive miser” perspective) is used to suggest that we have a predisposition to use those categories where the dimensions of similarity and difference are at their most apparent. In particular, it is argued that categories such as “race” may be so obvious that their use may be automatic unless we are explicitly motivated to avoid using them (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hamilton & Troiler, 1986; Taylor, 1981).

The point of these examples is not to suggest that all social cognition theorists subscribe to such a view, but merely to say that it can be found and it is important to be wary when we do find it. Moreover, it is important not to oversimplify our account of the social cognition perspective. Indeed, from the 1980s there has been an increasing recognition that people often have reasons to process information in very elaborate and systematic ways. Our cognitive processing relates to what we are doing in the world, what goals we are trying to achieve, and only under momentary conditions do we act as cognitive misers (Fiske, 1992; Fiske & Goodwin, 1996; Higgins, 2000; Ostrom, 1994). Fiske and Goodwin (1996) explicitly mentioned the second edition of the Handbook of Social Cognition (Wyer & Srull, 1994) as placing far more emphasis on goals and motivation than a decade
previously. This is echoed by Ostrom in his introduction to the Handbook, in which he acknowledged a previous neglect of the ways in which cognition is linked to what people are seeking to achieve in their social worlds. Nevertheless, he also argued that there are occasions where the sheer complexity of the information emanating from the world means that we can no longer act in a considered or strategic manner. This is particularly the case in collective settings: “The heavy cognitive demands during face-to-face interaction require that social behavior be guided by automatic rather than controlled processes” (Ostrom, 1994, p. xi). Thus, even if the cognitive miser model has lost its overall predominance, it retains some sway in the domain of collective behavior. Here, some credence is still given to the idea that category usage is automatic and perhaps even the use of particular categories is automatic.

Of course, just as it would be misleading to attribute the claims of some who work within the social cognition approach to all who might consider themselves as social cognition researchers, so it is wrong to attribute the position of social cognition research to social psychology in general. In particular, it is necessary to consider how the social identity perspective views the bases of social categorization, both because of its distinctive stance and because of its influence (which in some parts of the world is as great as, if not greater than, that of social cognition research). Moreover, because we have already mentioned social identity and self-categorization theories as constituting the starting point for our own work, it is incumbent on us to clarify our position in relation to others working in this tradition.

Self-categorization theorists in particular are involved in a sharp debate with social cognition theorists concerning the relationship between categories and social reality. Whereas social cognition assumes that categorical perception is a simplifying distortion of overly rich and complex social realities, self-categorization proposes that the way we see categories of self and other (for which we use the term “social categories”) is determined by the social relations obtaining in context. Categories reflect rather than distort social reality. If we see people as group members, it is only to the extent that they are organized as group members in reality. Moreover, because forms of social organization change, the ways in which we perceive social categories also change. Far from being rigid and contextually insensitive, category perceptions are a sensitive and variable reflection of the changing relations between groups in our social world (Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Turner, 1999).

There is much in common between our position and that of self-categorization theorists. We, like they, see categories as linked to the organization of social reality. We, like they, acknowledge that the categorical structure of social reality will shift from situation to situation and that the categories through which we characterize ourselves and others will shift accordingly. We, like they, emphasize that the nature of human action will therefore be profoundly misunderstood if we presuppose the categories through which people are defined and if we always presuppose the same
person to be defined in terms of the same category. Thus, in their studies of minority
influence, David and Turner (1996) argued that it is wrong to suggest that men and
women will always categorize themselves as such, and that a man will always be
in an outgroup relation to a woman. Certainly that can be true in some contexts,
but if these men and women were all students and if they were arguing with a mixed
group of business people against the existence of university fees, then the “student”
categorization would be expected to gain prominence, and the students would be
expected to relate as ingroup members irrespective of gender.

Our concern, however, is that although the insistence of self-categorization
theorists that categories must be viewed in relation to social reality has arisen out
of their opposition to the social cognition perspective, this opposition has also
limited the ways in which self-categorization research addresses the category-
reality relationship. In order to rebut the charge of distortion, the emphasis has been
laid on the ways in which categories are determined by their fit with the actual
organization of stimuli in context. To put it another way, there has been a one-sided
emphasis on the path from social reality to social categorization; the path from
social categorization to social reality, although acknowledged in theory (e.g.,
Haslam, 2000), has been all but excluded in practice.

Taken to extremes, this emphasis would lead to the suggestion that—even
though categories may vary across contexts and we cannot presuppose the nature
of categories irrespective of context—within any specific setting the nature of the
categories will nonetheless be self-evident. This would lead to problems of both
commission and omission. On the one hand, it would carry the implication that all
category members should always reach consensus around a single position. It
would thereby validate the quest for rhetorical domination, which depends on
precisely the assumption that wherever there is an identity there is one true and
authentic position just waiting to be uncovered. On the other hand, it would exclude
an analysis of exactly how rhetoricians argue over identities even within a specific
context and how they seek to render their own particular version as the sole
authentic identity.

Unless an emphasis on the contextual determination of categories is balanced
by a corresponding stress on the role of agents in creating contexts through the
construction of categories, there is a real danger that the social identity tradi-
tion—which is clearly intended to challenge the notion of categories as fixed
representations—could nevertheless play into the hands of those who wish to reify
these categories. More directly, a one-sided emphasis on the relationship between
social categories and social reality misrepresents the nature of the phenomena we
wish to explain. After all, if our analysis of the Scottish case shows anything, it is
that national identity both derives from the national structure of certain social
practices and is invoked in order to promote new forms of national practice. Indeed,
it is almost a truism that nationalism creates national structures. Certainly in
Scotland, the notion of a distinctive Scottish identity leading to a distinctive
Scottish interest that could not be served by an English-dominated Westminster
Parliament was crucial to the achievement of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999.

Our primary ambition is to elucidate this two-way relationship between categories and social reality. However, this cannot be achieved simply by tacking analyses of how social categories are constructed to create social reality onto analyses of how social reality creates social categories. To accept that categories and context mutually constitute each other has profound implications for how we conceptualize each and the modality through which they interrelate.

**Categories in Action**

The first step is to address what we mean by social categories and, more narrowly, by self-categories or social identities. The conventional way of treating social identities has been as a list of trait terms. However, it may be better to see such an approach as deriving more from methodological convenience than from theoretical commitment. That is, if one wishes to conduct quantitative studies that look at differences in the ways that different identities are defined or differences in the way that the same identity is defined in different contexts, it is easy to count the number of times a particular term is chosen or to measure on a Likert scale how appropriate it is seen to be.

The danger would come if a methodological convenience were to shade into a taken-for-granted assumption about the nature of self- and social categories. As we have shown in our discussion of Scottish identity, the definition of identity as a list of trait terms can be profoundly misleading. The same term can have profoundly different meanings, different terms can have the same meaning, and, crucially, the meaning of any term depends on the wider framework in which it is inserted. This framework is a model of the larger social relations both within the group and between the group and others. Thus, to see oneself in national terms is both to conceive of the world as organized into nations and to occupy a particular place in that world of nations. Alternatively, to see oneself as “working class” is to conceptualize social reality as organized in terms of class relations and to occupy a subordinated position within those relations.

In the same way that Balibar (1991) argued that “race” is not simply a category but a theory of social relations and Billig (1995) argued the same about nations, so we argue that all self-categories are theories of how the world works and how one can be in such a world (see Reicher & Hopkins, in press). More formally, we view social identities as models of one’s place in a system of social relations along with the forms of action that are possible and proper given that place. That is, as Charles Taylor (1989) suggested of the self, they have a moral as well as a practical dimension. Viewed in this way, social identities are at a level where they can be meaningfully related to social practice—something that is very difficult when abstracted terms such as traits are used to characterize identity. Indeed, we would go one step further and argue that practice (in the sense of action that is organized
in order to bring about certain transformations of the social world) would be impossible without social identity. On the one hand, it provides the values against which we can determine what sort of ends we seek to bring about. On the other hand, it provides a model by which we can determine what sort of actions are best suited to achieving those ends. Altogether, social identity is fundamental to both the ends and the means according to which human collective action is organized.

Our impetus for such a view may have derived from studying the ways in which self-categories are used to mobilize people in order to (re)structure the nature of the social world. However, such a viewpoint is no less significant in terms of conceptualizing how categories derive from the structure of the social world. That is, our models relate to our possibilities of action in the real world, and the categories that we use will reflect the constraints on how we are able to act. Viewed in this way, it then follows that the balance between context determining categories and categories determining context is the balance between our ability to impose our practices irrespective of contextual constraints and our practices being constrained by the constraints that exist in context (Reicher, in press; Reicher & Hopkins, in press).

This leads us to the second step, which is to clarify what is meant by context and contextual constraint. The point that we wish to stress is that context should not be seen as some passive ground on which human actors operate. Equally, although contextual constraints may be external to our own particular consciousness, they are not separate from human consciousness in general. That is, the forces that constrain us may not be our own, but they are not of a different kind to our own. To be more specific, we suggest that the context in which we act and the constraints imposed on us are either constituted or mediated by the practices of others (Drury & Reicher, in press; Reicher, in press). When I (in the sense of either the individual or the collective self) seek to shape the world in one way, I am confronted by other people seeking to shape the world in different ways, and my attempt to mold them is confronted by their attempts to mold me. Thus, even if “context” is external to my subjectivity, it is not independent of subjectivity itself because it is at least partially made through the subjectivity of others. In other words, the relationship between self and context is not between different orders of reality, but is rather the dynamic relationship between different subjectivities and the practices deriving from them as distributed over time and space. Thus, my self-categories shape actions that constitute the context within which others act and then subsequently shape the context within which I act.

The basis on which context and categorization mutually constitute each other is that they are separate moments in a single developing process of interaction. That is, the context-category relationship can only be understood by including a historical dimension in the analysis. If one ignores such a dimension and takes one moment in isolation, one will inevitably privilege one side of the relationship over another. So, in experimental studies where the researcher sets rigid contextual limits and then further constrains the responses such that they cannot restructure
the context, one can find clear determination of categories by context, but that is
all. Equally, in studies where people talk about categories and category relations
but never have a chance to try to enact their understandings, one can never see how
their categorical accounts fare in relation to such attempts; all one can see is how
categorization serves to shape action. Different research traditions that take differ-
ent moments out of the temporal flow lead to a counterposition of different aspects
of the category-context relationship, and hence they stand in the way of an
integrated understanding. The problem is that such studies all too literally have no
history. The third step toward a two-sided understanding of social categorization
is therefore the adoption of a historical dimension in theory and in research practice.

Lest all this seem excessively abstract and rather abstruse, let us provide some
concrete illustrations. Many of the ideas we are discussing have developed out of
our studies of crowd action, precisely because crowds show clear evidence of both
social determination and social change (see Reicher, 1987). Moreover, in crowds
it is often rather obvious that the categorical understandings of one group drive
actions that form the context for the other: The perception by police that a group
of students form a homogeneous and dangerous outgroup leads them to first
confront them with a cordon and then charge them on horseback (Reicher,
1996)—and it would be hard to think of a much more material context for students
than that!

Equally, one can often see clearly how, in the course of an interaction, each of
the terms of that interaction can undergo change. This happens characteristically
when there is an asymmetry between the ways different parties (say, police and
protesters) see themselves and others, such that actions undertaken with one
intention have unintended consequences. Thus we have found a number of
events, including student demonstrations, environmentalist campaigns, and anti-
tax protests, where all participants—including those who see themselves as non-
confrontational and as exercising a democratic right of protest—are seen and
treated as dangerous by the police (Drury & Reicher, 1999, in press; Reicher, 1996;
Stott & Drury, 2000). Given their organizational and technological resources, the
police are able to treat crowd members in terms of this understanding. That in turn
leads all crowd members to begin to see themselves as a common category.
Moreover, especially for the erstwhile moderates, the fact that their social relation-
ship to the police has changed leads them to change their understanding of how the
world is organized and hence of who they are. Being treated as oppositional, they
come to see themselves as oppositionalists.

To reiterate our major point, then, it should be clear from these analyses that
the forms and shifts in categorization can only be understood if analyzed in terms
of a historical and interactive process between social actors. Whether our under-
standings of the world stay constant or change will not depend on us alone; it will
depend on how our practices are understood and reacted to by others. As the crowd
example shows, there will be times where we act in terms of one understanding of
our social position and, as a consequence, find ourselves in an entirely new social
position due to our treatment by the police. Where that is true, the historical interactions produce changes in our categories. But, equally, the lack of change should not be taken as indicating stasis. The reproduction of our social categories is dependent on others acting in ways that reproduce our social relations with them. Our world and our categories are involved in a continuous process of construction, and if even actors themselves cannot know whether that process will lead to reproduction or to rupture, then it is even less tenable for analysts to presuppose categories once they are put into practice.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper we have sought to demonstrate the dangers of taking categories for granted. In this regard, we have argued that the perceptualist turn in social psychology, which served us so well in the past, now threatens to hold us back. If we are to understand the nature of the categorization process, we must shift our focus from perception to practice. Categories, we suggest, do not derive from passive contemplation of a world that is separate from us. Rather, they are bound up with our struggles to make and to move in the world. Somewhat like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, categories may seem to face toward the past, but they are driven and drive us on toward the future. By shifting from a focus on perception to a focus on practice, we thereby introduce a temporal extension to our analysis, and by introducing temporality we necessarily introduce multiplicity. Unlike the singular present, there are always multiple possibilities for the future. Although it might make sense to think of a single category solution as the perfect (or at least the best) fit to what is, it makes no sense to insist on a single solution for what might be. In short, once categorization is transferred from the domain of perception to that of practice, the danger of taking categories for granted is all but removed.

Equally, if we presume that categories relate only to the present moment in time, then categories may be seen as distortions. However, the distortion lies in our own view of the categorization process that is then projected onto those we study. What might seem simply wrong when taken as an account of what is acquires sense when seen as a move toward what could be or should be. At the very least, then, an ahistorical approach undermines our ability, on an intellectual plane, to understand social categories. We have suggested that the costs do not finish there. There may be political costs as well.

If you get people to presuppose who is self and who is other, you have determined the possible worlds in which they live. If you take a singular definition of self-categories for granted, or even suggest that we should be looking for such a singular definition, then you may be facilitating the removal of choice over the conditions under which people can live, and you may be impeding their capacity to imagine—and hence achieve—alternative worlds. A psychology that serves to facilitate and legitimate such presuppositions thereby also acts as a prop to the status quo.
What is more, if those in subordinated positions should challenge the status quo, a psychology that takes categorical perception as distortion and the action that flows from it as necessarily irrational serves to discredit that challenge. We are not suggesting here that all collective action is progressive. Lynch mobs and jingoistic masses, and others besides, do much to maintain the hegemony of the powerful. However, insofar as those who are already powerful have many resources at their disposition while those who are powerless only gain strength through their combination, a psychology that pathologizes collective action is ultimately one that does a disservice to those in subordinated positions. Hence, on the political plane, an ahistorical understanding of social categorization is a particularly powerful tool that simultaneously protects existing social relations and attacks any move toward alternative social relations.

However, it is always easier to identify the problems of others than to provide one’s own solutions. Indeed, as was said during the French Revolution, it profits us little to tear things down unless we are in a position to erect something better in their place. Having spent so much time pointing to the danger that existing models of categorization might sustain a conservative political practice, it is perhaps incumbent on us to conclude by clarifying how our own position might be linked to a more emancipatory practice. There are two principal elements that we wish to emphasize.

The first and most obvious has to do with a critique of category reification. Rather than being used to take particular category definitions for granted, a psychology of category construction can be used in support of challenging any such attempts. Where the choice of categories is presupposed, it is important to alert people to the ways in which this may be achieved such that they become adept at identifying the categorical basis of any claim. Equally, where techniques are used to presuppose the boundaries or the substantive content of categories—and hence to try and hide the parameters of collective action from challenge—psychology can serve to highlight these techniques rather than serve as one of them. In this way, people not only can be included rather than excluded from debates about the bases of social action, but also can be given the tools to participate in these debates on equal terms.

It should be stressed that this is not an argument against people acting in terms of category memberships. Our objection is against monolithic approaches to categorization rather than against categorization per se. It is against mystifying the bases of categorical action rather than against categorical action. As we have already suggested, subordinated groups need to act collectively to change their situation. But where this happens, their use of social categories is a response to practices that subordinate them on the basis of that category membership, rather than because of any timeless essence to the category. To take but one example, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), in their manifesto *Black Power*, which is often taken as a call to separatism, actually argued that group solidarity is a response to
exclusion on the basis of “race” and a means of challenging these structures of exclusion so as to participate fully in the larger society. They wrote:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society. (p. 44, emphasis in the original)

What Carmichael and Hamilton recognized is that any effective political movement must be willing to change its forms of organization, and hence the categorical bases of action, in response to the new circumstances that its own action produces. If nothing else, then, an understanding of categories as based on practice allows for effective and flexible political strategies of social transformation. But of course there is quite a lot else. The approach we are suggesting also promotes a critique of ideological domination and also underpins democratic participation in collective decision-making processes. We are concerned to promote active and inclusive collective participation. We certainly do not want to add to that chorus which cries that groups are bad for you (see Brown, 1988).

The second element of our approach further underlines and extends this point. There are many ways in which it is claimed that the group is bad for you and people are counseled to be sturdy individualists who resist group influence. The approach we advocate provides a means of challenging some of the strongest bastions of anti-collectivism. It serves to stress that groups are not necessarily hostile to others, but that their actions depend on the specific constructions of self and of other—which reflect cultural realities rather than inherent frailties of the human psyche. It also stresses that where group members do value their own group over others, this is not a reflection of distorting ingroup bias, but rather an attempt to create difference and to claim symbolic or material resources. In short, by showing how group understandings make sense in terms of group practices, our work militates against a general moral imperative that would have individuals self-police their exclusion from the collective.

Clearly, these two elements do not constitute an emancipatory practice in and of themselves. At most they are necessary elements. They clearly are not sufficient elements. Most obviously, our arguments presuppose some sort of practical involvement with emancipatory social movements so as to put any insights we might have at their service. They therefore require us to consider the nexus of relationships that determine which questions we ask, what research gets done, what is taught, and how ideas are spread. Without that, an understanding of category construction could be used by others to facilitate rather than to challenge reification and domination. However, all this is to extend rather than deny the argument that understanding and practice go together. If we are to use psychology as ideology-critique against the use of psychology as ideology, there is much more to be done.
However, as a starting point, our approach to self-categories provides a telling indication of both our intellectual and our political worth.

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