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Beyond the State: Social Identity Theory and the Psychological Pathway of Foreign Policy Decision-Makers

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Abstract

Since the introduction of psychology into the study of international relations, Social Identity Theory has been increasingly associated with it. Social Identity Theory posits that an individual strives to elevate the social status in order to achieve higher self-esteem. This theory has been adopted in the study of international relations to examine the processes by which states construct the social identities of supranational communities or the strategies they employ to ameliorate their status in the international society. However, these studies frequently neglect to consider the psychological processes experienced by foreign policy decision makers. The social identity of a foreign policy decision maker is not a given characteristic, and disregarding the analysis of the psychological processes of a foreign policy decision maker is a simplification of the theory. A more appropriate research path would be to analyze the psychological activities of decision makers in order to deduce the strategic choices of the state. It encompasses the identification of the decision maker's psychologically real social identity, the analysis of the social comparison process, and the analysis of how the decision maker chooses the strategy to change the social status. In comparison to the traditional international relations theories, Social Identity Theory places more emphasis on the individual-level analysis, transcends state-centrism, and exhibits greater explanatory power. Social Identity Theory offers a framework for the study of psychological processes among foreign policy decision makers and provides insights for future research on international relations.

Keywords

International Relations; Social Identity Theory; Decision-maker

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Introduction

During the Cold War, the field of psychology began to be applied to the study of international relations. Robert Jervis (1976) famously argued that one cannot explain major events and decisions without examining how decision-makers perceive the world. His integration of psychological perspectives has been instrumental in reorienting the role of human factors in state behavior. This reorientation has been pivotal in compensating for the explanatory limitations of neorealism, a theoretical framework that often overlooks individual-level variables due to its emphasis on structural factors. Recently, Social Identity Theory (SIT), a branch of social psychology, has been employed in empirical studies to investigate the formation of supranational communities and the strategic choices made by states in their development. However, extant literature rarely explores the theoretical application of SIT within the field of international relations.

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Social Identity Theory posits that intergroup behavior is driven by individuals' desire for a positive social identity derived from their membership in an in-group, which is often perceived as superior to relevant out-groups. Although SIT is fundamentally a theory about group dynamics, one Chinese scholar aptly observed that a collective has no brain (Tang, 2018). Since perceptions of social identity reside solely in the minds of individuals, the application of SIT in international relations must consider how decision-makers themselves perceive social identity. However, current studies often rely on the humanization of states or make only cursory references to leaders' views, without systematically analyzing the psychological processes of decision-makers. For instance, one study has used the "Big Five" personality model to discuss the effect of it on foreign policy decision-making under within a qualitative research framework (Gravelle, Reifler and Scotto, 2020). The use of qualitative method indeed offers more cases for explanation, but it falls short in thoroughly understanding the psychological process behind the decision. This article proposes an alternative analytical pathway for the application of SIT in international relations. This pathway is centered on the perceptions of decision-makers and offers a new perspective for the use of SIT in future studies.

Social Identity Theory and Its Applicability to the Study of International Relations

Social Identity Theory originates from the European school of social psychology, which tends to emphasize intergroup relations and collective action. Few scholars have systematically examined how or why this theory can be applied to the field of international relations. SIT emerged as a critique of Realistic Conflict Theory, which posits that when two groups have conflicting interests or goals, they will engage in interaction and competition until one group attains the contested resource or objective (Jackson, 1993). This theory parallels rationalist approaches in international relations, which assume that states make decisions by calculating costs and benefits in pursuit of their interests. While Realistic Conflict Theory is simple and intuitively compelling, it fails to account for the development and maintenance of group identity and the role such identity plays in conflict dynamics (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In other words, Realistic Conflict Theory is materially reductionist, focusing exclusively on material interests as the drivers of behavior while overlooking the influence of ideas and identities.

Through his minimal group paradigm experiments, Henri Tajfel (1970) observed a strikingly consistent pattern of discrimination against outgroup members. He argued that such behavior was neither motivated by individual self-interest nor by preexisting hostility toward the outgroup, but rather driven by certain group norms that directly shape intergroup behavior. The results showed that participants tended to maximize the difference between their own ingroup and the outgroup, even when doing so meant sacrificing the ingroup's absolute gains. The minimal group paradigm thus demonstrates that once individuals identify with a group, they are inclined to favor their ingroup and discriminate against the outgroup in order to amplify intergroup differences. This suggests that intergroup conflict does not necessarily require competition over material interests, as mere group categorization can suffice to generate bias and antagonism.

Building on the findings of the minimal group paradigm, scholars began to develop a theory of intergroup behavior grounded in social identity. Social Identity Theory believes that social behavior exists along a continuum, with interpersonal behavior at one end and intergroup behavior at the other. In the context of intergroup interaction, individual behavior is understood to be driven not by personal characteristics or personality traits, but by the social identity derived from group membership. In other words, an individual's identification with the group, rather than individual-level factors, determines behavior in intergroup settings.

Social Identity Theory centers on intergroup behavior. Since states function as groups that frequently interact, this theory provides a useful lens to analyze interstate relations. In this framework, interactions between states are understood as intergroup interactions, where the motivations behind decision-makers' choices are rooted in the social identities associated with their respective groups. As a foundational concept of Social Identity Theory, social identity involves three critical aspects that require further elaboration.

First, what is social identity? Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of their membership in a particular group, accompanied by the emotional and value-based significance that comes with belonging to that group (Abrams 2001). As a collective entity, the state inherently provides its members with a form of social identity. This national identity is communicated and internalized among group members through processes of socialization and interaction. In intergroup interactions, individuals engage in social categorization, which involves the classification of people into meaningful groups based on criteria relevant to the individual. This psychological process assists individuals to organize and simplify their social environment by categorizing themselves and others within the social network (Tajfel, 1974). Social categorization mitigates uncertainty by assigning social identities to both the self and others, allowing interactions to proceed according to expected patterns without the need for constant re-evaluation (Hogg et al., 2004).

Second, how does social identity drive intergroup behavior? Human beings have an inherent drive to elevate their self-esteem. This need suggests that when intergroup comparisons can be made along a dimension with clearly polarized value differences, individuals' desire for positive

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value identification requires their own group to distinguish itself toward the positive pole relative to other groups (Turner 1975). This process of differentiation is known as social comparison. Social comparison produces status, which is the outcome of comparing groups and reflects the relative position of a group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Status can vary in hierarchy, and socially accepted high status indicates that a group is recognized as superior to others along certain value dimensions. Social Identity Theory implies that policymakers in country A may consider whether their decisions can enhance the positive value of the social identity associated with members of country A compared to that of country B. In this manner, the social identity linked to country A can cater to its members' need for self-esteem. As Peter Gries (2005) noted, it is the actions of individual Chinese and Americans that will determine whether our need for a positive view of our nation leads to the disputes between the U.S. and China.

Finally, how do individuals enhance the positive value of their social identity? Strategies for managing the value associated with social identity exist along a continuum, with social mobility at one end and social change at the other. If individuals lean toward social mobility, they believe that changing their social identity is possible by joining another group. Conversely, if they lean toward social change, they believe that improving their social identity requires transforming their current group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Three strategies emerge from this framework to enhance the positivity of one's social identity. The first is individual mobility, in which individuals seek a more positive social identity by joining a new group. The second strategy is social competition, in which groups strive to achieve a more positive social identity by outperforming a group that currently holds a superior position along an existing value dimension. The third strategy is social creativity, in which groups redefine existing value dimensions or create new ones to attain a more positive social identity.

When selecting a strategy, individuals in subordinate positions first assess the permeability of group boundaries (Reicher, 2004). If they perceive high permeability, which means moving between groups is relatively possible, they tend to adopt social mobility strategies by attempting to join a more positively valued group. If permeability is perceived as low, individuals evaluate the legitimacy of current status differences and consider whether they can change the value associated with their social identity. If individuals judge that the status differences resulting from value disparities are illegitimate, but that the value dimension of their social identity is changeable, they are likely to engage in collective action aimed at enhancing the value of their group's social identity (Turner and Brown, 1978). Group-level strategies typically fall into two categories: social competition and social creativity. Groups choose between these strategies based on their capacities. However, their success in altering the value associated with their social identity ultimately depends on the outgroup ' s acceptance of the new value comparisons or dimensions (Reicher, 2004). For instance, overcoming racial discrimination requires overturning the existing race-based value dimension and gaining societal acceptance of the new value framework.

Social Identity Theory outlines the causes and processes underlying intergroup interactions. After social categorization, individuals acquire a social identity. Driven by the need to enhance self-esteem, they then seek to establish a positive social identity for their group. This leads to three strategies: individual mobility, social competition, and social creativity. Since states are also groups, interactions between states can be conceptualized as intergroup interactions. Decision-makers possess the social identity of being members of their state; therefore, Social Identity Theory offers a novel perspective for interpreting state behavior by focusing on decision-makers' desire for a positive valuation of their social identity.

The Application of Social Identity Theory in International Relations

There are two directions in which Social Identity Theory has been applied to the analysis of state behavior. The first focuses on how the concept of social identity helps explain the construction of supranational identities. Scholars have noted that SIT offers useful insights into the dynamics of regional integration in Central Asia. This integration process can be divided into three stages: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. After gaining independence, Central Asian states sought to establish a "Central Asian identity" through social categorization, primarily by creating cooperation mechanisms across various policy domains. However, the integration process has stalled at the stage of social comparison, where states are still attempting to define themselves in contrast to out-groups. This stage is constrained by the difficulty these countries face in aligning their foreign policy goals (Yang and Wang, 2018). Similarly, one researcher has applied SIT to the study of European integration. The theory's emphasis on in-group homogeneity sheds light on the strategies European states have implemented to strengthen unity. These strategies include constructing a shared EU identity, emphasizing key political values, promoting common institutions and norms, and establishing mechanisms for joint action. These efforts all contribute to building a collective social identity based on the European Union (Li, 2009).

On the other hand, the three strategies for managing the value of social identity proposed by Social Identity Theory have been adapted into the strategic choices of states. The strategy of individual mobility has been transformed into social mobility, referring to the attempt by states to emulate the behavior of higher-status states in order to be accepted as members of their group (Larson, 2017). In international society, the G7 or the European Union can be referred to as an "elite club". Joining these clubs can confer positive value upon a state's social identity. Therefore, many states seek to

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join such groups by imitating the behavior of their members (Larson, 2017). Social competition is defined as the effort to surpass higher-status states along specific dimensions of comparison, such as territorial control or military capabilities (Larson, 2017). For instance, during the Cold War, the number of nuclear weapons became a key metric of state status. The Soviet Union's development of nuclear weapons was a direct application of the social competition strategy, because such an action was to surpass the United States in nuclear arsenal size to avoid being placed at a disadvantage. Social creativity refers to a state's effort to construct new international institutions and norms or to redefine existing dimensions of value, thereby enhancing the perceived value of its social identity (Larson, 2017). For example, the leadership of middle powers such as Canada actively promoted the signing of the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines in the 1990s. This can be seen as an attempt to elevate national social identity through the advocacy of a new international norm.

Empirical research on China's development has been the focal point for both domestic and international scholars, with particular attention given to the strategies China has adopted in its pursuit of development. Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko (2019) argued that China adopted a strategy of social creativity in the 1980s. This approach emphasized cooperation over confrontation, advocated for cooperation, and reaffirmed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The development of the Soviet Union or Russia constitutes another major theme in empirical research. During the Gorbachev era, the Soviet Union adopted a strategy of social creativity by emphasizing human rights and seeking to redefine its identity as a "moral leader," thereby avoiding direct military competition with the United States (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia continued to aspire to maintain its status as a major power. The Russian government initially adopted a strategy of social mobility, seeking to gain recognition as a great power by joining institutions dominated by leading states, such as the G7, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the International Monetary Fund. Membership in these organizations was seen as a form of acknowledgment of Russia's status by the international community (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019). After the failure of the social mobility strategy, Russia began to shift toward a strategy of social competition during the Kosovo War. The use of force was a strategic move aimed at demonstrating strength and power to the United States However, this approach yielded limited results (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). Entering the 21st century, Russia's military operations in Georgia and Ukraine further demonstrated that the West's refusal to acknowledge Russia's great power status compelled Moscow to increasingly rely on a strategy of social competition to assert its position as a major power (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019).

Some researchers argued that Social Identity Theory is limited in its ability to predict how states will act (Wohlforth, 2009). However, this limitation is not unique to Social Identity Theory, as few international relations theories possess fully accurate predictive capabilities. The function of theory extends beyond prediction to include explanation. Social Identity Theory provides a valuable new perspective for interpreting state behavior and therefore should not be dismissed in the discipline. Moreover, the difficulty in prediction stems from the application of Social Identity Theory to international relations without sufficient attention to the psychological processes of decision-makers. On the one hand, some international relations studies employing Social Identity Theory tend to humanize the state. This approach conceptualizes the state as an entity capable of thought, with needs that include the establishment and pursuit of a positive self-identity and the attainment of recognition (Chen, 2013). However, as a group entity, a state cannot actually possess such cognition. As Richard Lebow (2010) stated that institutions and states have neither minds nor emotions, and it is the individuals who act as wholes or identify with these wholes who possess minds and emotions. The result of humanizing the state is an overemphasis on the cognition of the state itself while neglecting the cognition of individuals. However, as a collective entity, the state does not possess cognitive capacities. Central Asian countries or European Union member states cannot possess a collective identity such as being "Central Asian" or "European Union members" in a cognitive sense; such identities exist only in the minds of individual actors. Therefore, analyses should refocus on the decision-makers as thinking individuals.

On the other hand, some studies, while focusing on decision-makers, treat their social identity as a given during the decision-making process. For example, Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko argued in their study of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev that the theory is applicable to the analysis of state behavior because foreign policy decision-makers define themselves as representatives of the state and act based on the state's interests relative to other states (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003). This description regarding how decision-makers perceive their social identity is simplistic, presuming, ipso facto, that decision-makers consider themselves members of the state when making decisions. However, the problem lies in the inability to ensure that the identities of decision-makers are congruent with their state memberships at the moment of decision-making.

The application of Social Identity Theory in international relations has insufficiently emphasized decision-makers' perceptions of their own social identities and the related psychological processes. This oversight leads to theoretical problems in practice. Beyond the framework of Social Identity Theory, behaviors such as forming supranational communities, imitation, competition, and the creation of new norms are widespread in international relations. Ignoring the psychological processes of decision-makers and directly interpreting state behavior risks explaining causes by means of effects, rather than deducing state strategies from the

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cognitive processes of decision-makers. This non-deductive approach hinders the ability to predict future state behavior.

Psychological Analysis of Decision-Makers in Social Identity Theory

Emphasizing the analysis of decision-makers' psychological processes is important because any individual can hold multiple social identities. For example, a U.S. decision-maker may simultaneously identify as an American as well as a member of the Democratic or Republican Party. However, in any given context, only one social identity is psychologically real, meaning it is the one that is salient and actively influences behavior (Hogg et al., 2004). This implies that when decision-makers formulate foreign policy, they are acting from the perspective of the state group only if they prioritize the social identity of being a state member, which means that this identity is psychologically real. Nevertheless, decision-makers may also adopt other social identities during the decision-making process, such as affiliation with a political party or another group. Thus, their social identity is not a fixed parameter. For example, in 1954, the Prime Minister of France René Mayer stated that his support for the European Defence Community was contingent upon the backing of his chosen negotiators by the French Popular Republican Movement (Milner, 1997). It is difficult to assert that this French politician's psychologically real identity during decision-making was solely "French" without any influence from party affiliation. Assuming that decision-makers always hold the state membership identity in a psychologically real way during the decision-making process is an imprecise approach that risks misjudging their social identity.

This paper will propose a pathway for analyzing the psychological processes of decision-makers. First, it is necessary to identify the individual's psychologically real social identity, which can be achieved through the process of self-categorization. The process of self-categorization is contingent upon accessibility, which is defined as the degree to which a pre-existing social identity is relevant, useful, and recognized in the prevailing context (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, et al., 1987). When making decisions related to national interests, decision-makers may categorize themselves as members of the state because the state membership identity already exists and is relevant, useful, and recognized within the decision-making context. However, other accessible and relevant identities, such as political party affiliation, may also be present during the decision-making process. The formulation of U.S. foreign policy is often characterized by partisan struggles, with party interests taking precedence over national interests.

Therefore, it is also necessary to consider the concept of fit. The concept of "fit" encompasses two distinct aspects. Comparative fit is defined as the degree to which discrepancies within a given group are less pronounced than those that exist between groups (Turner et al., 1987). The state membership identity satisfies comparative fit, as the differences among Chinese individuals are generally smaller than those between Chinese and Americans. However, an alternative argument posits that the disparities among U.S. Republicans are less pronounced compared to those observed between U.S. Republicans and Chinese individuals. This observation redirects the emphasis towards the concept of normative fit. Normative fit is defined as the alignment of an individual's behavior with the typical behaviors associated with the social identity they are about to adopt. These typical behaviors are the product of normative beliefs (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, et al., 1987). In different social contexts, social norms require individuals to exhibit corresponding behaviors. If a decision-maker's behavior aligns with the expectations embedded in normative beliefs, then their behavior satisfies normative fit. This indicates that the decision-maker is acting in accordance with the demands of a specific social identity. By jointly considering accessibility, comparative fit, and normative fit, the decision-maker's psychologically real social identity can be identified.

A notable question is how to measure a decision-maker's accessibility, comparative fit, and normative fit. In reality, the researchers are incapable of travelling back to the past to conduct an interview with the decision-maker to ask about his or her psychological process. Thus, the researchers should rely on the primary sources that can provide hints for the analysis. One useful source is the diary, as it may record writer's thoughts and actions concerning specific decisions. Another important source is the historical documents, such as the meeting minutes and memorandum. These documents may record the behavior of the decision-maker, so that the researchers can, to some extent, infer his or her psychological process. The book *Groupthink* by the American psychologist Irving Janis (1982) offers an example of how to analyze the psychological process of the decision-makers when making foreign affairs decisions by using a large number of historical documents.

Second, it is necessary to analyze the decision-maker's social comparison process. The individual's need for self-esteem motivates the pursuit of positive value for their social identity. Some scholars applying Social Identity Theory have argued that states prefer to enhance the status associated with their social identity (Lee, 2016). The state's status claims are, in essence, a product of humanizing the state, as the state is treated as an individual seeking a positive social identity. It is assumed that the state engages in social comparison with other states, resulting in status differentials. However, within Social Identity Theory, status is the outcome of individuals comparing their social identities. In the field of international relations, status refers to the hierarchical ranking that individuals assign after comparing the social identity associated with being a member of their own state to that of another state. Groups themselves do not possess the consciousness to engage in

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social comparison, so Social Identity Theory should return to the emphasis on decision-makers' own status aspirations. In practice, decision-makers ascribe considerable importance to the status derived from their national identity. For example, U.S. President Donald Trump frequently invoked the slogan "Make America Great Again," reflecting his emphasis on the status of his identity as an American.

Finally, the analysis turns to how decision-makers choose among the three strategies of social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. Decision-makers first consider permeability to calculate whether the value of their social identity can be enhanced by emulating the behaviors of the "elite clubs." If social mobility is unattainable and the state is excluded from these elite groups, decision-makers then assess their country's material capabilities to decide between employing social competition or social creativity. Social competition typically manifests in territorial disputes and arms races, thus requiring the state to possess substantial hard power. For states lacking such hard power, decision-makers are more likely to pursue strategies of social creativity. Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė actively engaged in the Ukraine issue through diplomatic channels, framing Russia as a "threat" towards the European Union and positioning Lithuania as a defender of EU values. Through this strategy of social creativity, she secured recognition from other Western countries (Park and Jakstaite-Confortola, 2021). It is important to acknowledge that in actuality, states possess a broad array of available courses of action, enabling decision-makers to implement multiple strategies at the same time. Decision-makers may enhance the value of their state's social identity through various means, such as economic development, strengthening military capabilities, and advancing scientific research. Therefore, decision-makers can adopt different strategies across different value dimensions.

The Advantages of Social Identity Theory in International Relations Research

Approaching from the perspective of analyzing individual psychological processes, Social Identity Theory offers new insights to the study of international relations and addresses gaps in existing theories. First, when discussing the formation of communities, constructivism and Social Identity Theory both emphasize the role of identity, but their focuses are different. Constructivism highlights the interaction between states as selves and others, as well as the influence of social structures on identity formation. However, it tends to overlook the role of individuals within states in the process of identity construction. Constructivism humanizes the state, treating it as an individual, yet the actual individuals who constitute the state are often left unconsidered. For example, in studies of European Union identity formation, constructivism recognizes the need for the EU to distinguish between self and other and to foster a sense of shared destiny among member states (Li, 2003), but these analyses are conducted primarily at the state level. Whether in the case of European integration or the integration processes in Central and even East Asia, the role of individuals within states is indispensable. As previously mentioned, the European Union has constructed a shared identity by establishing commonalities, which represents one facet of identity formation.

However, from another perspective, individuals must differentiate between ingroups and outgroups to form a cohesive group. From the standpoint of Social Identity Theory, integration also requires minimizing the ratio of differences within the ingroup relative to those between groups. The theory's emphasis on the individual level indicates that, beyond fostering a sense of similarity among individuals participating in integration, it is equally important to cultivate their perception of distinction from relevant outgroups. The success of European integration depends on Europeans perceiving themselves as distinct from Americans, Australians, and Indians. Furthermore, Social Identity Theory posits that individuals aspire to possess a social identity with positive value. Therefore, the formation of a community requires that the community offers attributes that attract individuals by conferring positive value. If a community lacks elements that its members can take pride in, its members are likely to leave in search of more positively valued social identities. The appeal of the European Union can be attributed to the economic, political, and institutional values embedded in the EU identity. These positive values motivate individuals within the EU to identify as members, providing the foundation for community formation. This is a consideration that constructivism tends to overlook at the individual level.

Secondly, realism often plays a significant role when discussing the development of great powers. Realism accentuates the importance of power and relative gains, so the states aspiring to become great powers must surpass their rivals in material capabilities. Regarding specific measures, Robert Gilpin (1981) pointed out that states often resort to hegemonic wars to alter the international political order and secure a dominant position in the distribution of power. However, historical evidence demonstrates that the emergence of rising powers does not inevitably lead to conflict with established powers (Allison, 2017). Some realist perspectives carry a deterministic tone, whereas Social Identity Theory, by analyzing the psychology of decision-makers, offers multiple possibilities for state behavior. Social Identity Theory shares commonalities with realism. Both emphasize relative rather than absolute gains in intergroup relations and incorporate a mechanism whereby one side always seeks to be stronger than the other. Yet decision-makers within Social Identity Theory do not regard violence as the sole means to achieve these goals. Despite the fact that the social competition strategy in Social Identity Theory involves elements of conflict, it does not necessarily imply military confrontation. Social competition typically refers to rivalry in territorial and military dimensions, but such competition is not equivalent to

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military conflict. Decision-makers may simply develop military capabilities as a signaling tool rather than as an instrument of aggression. Moreover, decision-makers have the option to select social mobility or social creativity strategies, both of which are inherently non-conflictual. Compared with realism, Social Identity Theory's focus on the psychological processes of decision-makers provides greater variability in the strategic choices available to states.

Finally, Social Identity Theory possesses a broader explanatory power. Traditional international relations theories primarily focus on the power games among major powers and tend to neglect small-sized or peripheral states. However, despite the challenges these states may encounter in navigating the power dynamics dominated by major powers, they continue to play a significant role in international relations. Furthermore, the decision-makers of these states are also motivated to enhance the value of their respective social identities. Within Social Identity Theory, all states can be central subjects of study, and disparities in material capabilities between states do not diminish their decision-makers' pursuit of positive value. For instance, some scholars use Norway as a case to demonstrate how small and medium-sized states employ social creativity strategies by engaging in peacekeeping and other peace-promoting actions to seek positive value in the moral dimension, thereby establishing themselves as "good states" (Wohlforth, de Carvalho, Leira, et al., 2017). The feasibility of studying every state enriches our understanding of international politics. Social Identity Theory can also be applied to explain why states join international mechanisms or organizations. For instance, the signing of an international treaty might not, from a realist perspective, be expected to bring tangible power or security benefits to states. Yet why do decision-makers choose to ratify such treaties? Social Identity Theory offers an explanation by highlighting how these treaties enable states to cultivate positive value in the moral dimension of their social identity. The theory can also extend to non-state actors as well. For example, members of extremist groups may describe their actions as "sacred," which fundamentally reflects an effort to imbue their social identity with a form of positive meaning.

Conclusion

To move beyond the entrenched debate between paradigms in international relations, some scholars have argued that the field should shift away from knowledge production centered on divisions and oppositions between paradigms. One promising approach is to incorporate concepts and frameworks from other disciplines in order to revitalize and enrich the study of international relations (Liu, 2019). Social Identity Theory, originating from social psychology to explain intergroup behavior, offers a valuable framework for understanding the actions of states as groups. This interdisciplinary application provides academia with fresh perspectives. Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of their membership in a group along with a desire for a positive social identity. The primary strategies individuals use to enhance the value of their social identity include social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. In international relations, since the state functions as a group, decision-makers as members of the state also seek to promote the positive value of the social identity associated with their nation. Current applications of Social Identity Theory in international relations often overlook the psychological processes at the decision-maker level. However, analyzing the psychological engagement of decision-makers with their social identities and deriving state behavior from this analysis better reflects the theoretical significance of Social Identity Theory.

Overall, Social Identity Theory represents a progressive framework. It provides a framework for understanding the formation of communities, enhances our comprehension of state behavior, and facilitates the interpretation of actions by a broader range of actors. However, no international relations theory can offer a universal explanation of state behaviour, and Social Identity Theory is no exception. In the context of interstate interactions, Social Identity Theory tends to focus on dyads. For example, research on China often examines the China–United States dyad, while research on Russia centers on the Russia–United States dyad. Yet international relations are not always structured around binary relationships. The real-world scenario is much more complicated than simply the dyad between two states, so analyzing the dyad alone is insufficient to demonstrate the explanatory power of the theory. In the context of a trilateral relationship, Social Identity Theory can be used to interpret how the Philippines interacts with China and the United States. The Philippines is a member state of the ASEAN and an ally of the United States. The leader of the Philippines can have various social identities, including being a member of the ASEAN or a friend to the United States. The leader may consider himself or herself as a close friend to Washington and prioritize alignment with Washington over maintaining neutrality between Washington and Beijing, as they believe that this can elevate the social status. Alternatively, the leader may emphasize the ASEAN identity because of the values embedded in this regional organization, like the pursuit of regional peace and stability. In this case, the leader would tread a fine line between Washington and Beijing in order to remain consistent with ASEAN's preference for not picking a side between the great powers. This scenario can illustrate how Social Identity Theory can be effectively applied in multilateral contexts as well.

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