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## Confluence of Identity and Politics in Today's Globalized World: A Perspective from Political Psychology

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**Abstract:** The subject of identity and its bearing on politics; largely in the form of political behavior has been either neglected wholly or delegated in part to other social sciences'. Identity, as confirmed by psychology, sociology and anthropology is at the heart of politics in the twenty-first century. The issue of identity warrants a renewed research since today in the globalized world, identity has become fragmented. Gone are the days when identity was almost always equated to national identity; the scope of identity has become much more individualistic and therefore complex. Identity means different things to different individuals, some may choose to identify themselves on the basis of religion while others may seek to highlight their ethnic origins over their national identity. This variance in self-identification goes on to show that the outdated and over-simplistic explanations of identity and how it dictates politics need to be over-hauled and replaced. The article establishes the primacy of identity in demarcating social and political behavior and then discusses the various types of identities in today's globalized world. This article contributes in the debate between identity and politics by integrating theoretical perspectives from political psychology: a sub-discipline of political science, and how these theoretical perspectives trump the existing body of work on the subject. In the end, the article will conclude by identifying limitations in its approach towards the subject.

**Keywords:** Identity, Politics, Globalization, Political Psychology.

### 1. Introduction

Identity constitutes as one of the most fundamental issues revolving around the human existence. Man has from the start questioned the about his or her identity. This central question has often been closely linked to the purpose or utility of human existence. Philosophy has been rife with debates and arguments surrounding the very question of identity: is identity a function of consciousness or the idea that one is alive bears witness to one's identity (O'Sears, 2003) . The study, however, is not an exercise in philosophizing; it is a study on how certain aspects of identity influences political behavior. Before a wholesome discussion can be initiated on the various aspects of identity, it is necessary to provide a working definition of identity.

Martha. L. Cottam defines identity as:

*"A deeply held sense of who a person is, where he or she fits in the political and social world".*  
(Cottam, 2007)

The definition provided by Martha. L. Cottam provides a simple definition of identity. However, the very act of 'fitting' in the social or political world is difficult to operationalize. Moreover, it is difficult to understand which characteristics or parts make the process of 'fitting' understandable. It is imperative to look for another definition which would make the identification of variables to be operationalized easier.

It is ironic that the very question of identity has been more closely studied in psychology rather than in political science. Identity has been the subject of close scrutiny by social psychologists throughout the decades of behaviorism, the explosion of cognitive science as a distinct field of study and later on under the integrative lens of

cognitive neuroscience. It is for this purpose that we shall look towards psychology to provide a more holistic definition of identity.

The Oxford Handbook of Psychology has defined identity as:

*“Identity is the characteristics, often having the quality of permanence, attitudes and beliefs that constitutes an individual or a group.”* (O’Sears, 2003)

This definition has properly defined the various aspects of identity which have the quality of withstanding empirical examination. Identity has been therefore defined as having composed of relatively permanent traits, attitudes and beliefs which are either related to an individual or a group. However, satisfying this definition is, if limited to the idea of identity only; it fails to inform us about its correlation with social or political behavior. It is therefore necessary to identify a definition of identity that will link existing or pre-existing attitudes (implicit or explicit), beliefs and traits to social action.

Political psychology therefore remains the only intellectual avenue from which a workable and operationalized definition of identity can be obtained. The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology defines identity as:

*“The collection of stable attitudes, values and beliefs that provide a semblance of uniformity in behavior in the social environment.”* (Houghton, 2009)

This definition links the before mentioned attitudes, values and beliefs to behavior. It also states firmly that identity provides a ‘semblance of uniformity’- which means that it is one of the many factors that inform social or political behavior. It can only inform us to a certain degree of accuracy in prediction of human behavior. There are many other factors which directs social behavior. These factors will be explored in detail in subsequent discussions. The above mentioned definitions also mean that to an extent certain predictions could be made with regards to behavior, if the components of identity are made known.

Identity, however, is not limited to individuals only. The study treats the subject of identity in terms of a plurality of people or group. Therefore, the above mentioned definition of identity has to be studied under the frame of reference of groups.

The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology defines group as:

*“A collection of people who are perceived to belong together and who are dependent on one another”.* (O’Sears, 2003)

Therefore, the definition of group identity becomes:

*“The collection of people who share similar attitudes, beliefs or traits that collectively inform and guide their action to some degree in the social environment are said to have similar group identity.”* (Houghton, 2009)

This definition provides adequate theoretical footing for studying the correlation between identity and political behavior. The importance of identity as a marker for social behavior needs to be identified before different types of identity and prevalence of identity in the Muslim world can be discussed.

## **2. Identity as the Marker of Social Behavior**

Behavior in the social and political world takes places according to subjective definitions. Consider the modern day examples of Western Liberal Democracies, France in particular; in which the act of wearing a veil or a burqa has been banned. The act of banning becomes an example of political behavior. It informs about what the French people consider lawful or legitimate. More importantly, it describes what French identity means. In this case, it emphasizes Laicite or a strict emphasis on secular values (Roy, 2009). Without going into further detail, it can be inferred that Laicite is central to French identity; it is how they have come to define themselves. The identity therefore informs us

about political action. This is an example of national identity directing political behavior- which is legislating or passing a bill directing the act of wearing a veil as unlawful. In the same example, the women who wear a veil are revealing something about who they are. They are emphasizing that their behavior is motivated by a certain aspect of their religious identity. This is an act of religious identity stirring controversy in a land where modern secular values are ironically at odds with individual freedom of expression. (Roy, 1998)

Absent from this discussion, is the political context in which France chose to ban the Muslim veil. The action took place after 9/11 when there were rising concerns about Islamic fundamentalism and its link to terrorism. Identity therefore along with a confluence of factors explain collective group action in the political environment. The subject of this thesis is to only understand, in an objective manner, the impact of identity on political behavior.

There are many other examples of identity informing social behavior. Women are expected to behave in a different manner than men, particularly in a conservative setting. The discrepancy between both expected behaviors still exist in liberal democracies, which have declared all distinctions related to gender as null and void. However, in United States, even today, women are said to have a “pink-collar job” (Roy, 2010). Their salaries are lower than those of their male counterparts; their representation in the political landscape is much limited in contrast to men. If the focus of this example is shifted to Pakistan, one finds example of honor killing, acid throwing and forced marriages rampant. This social behavior then is a function of gender identity. Men are not subject to honor killing or acid burns. This action is limited to one particular gender; and informs on a much more horrid discipline of gender-related violence. Gender violence then also is an example of social behavior.

In the recent developments of Trump-led administration tightening the controls of immigration laws in US, another important debate has been initiated: do immigrants lose all aspects of their identity when they set foot on foreign land? It is important to question how a British citizen with Pakistani origins and strong religious attitudes and belonging to a marginalized ethnic segment in Pakistan, expected to behave. Here, identity comes into contact with another buzzword of modern social science ‘Globalization’. Due to attractive financial advantages offered by Western countries, individuals are willing to become ‘someone else’- to become a national of some other country. This has led to a reaction in the form of ‘Ultra-Nationalism’ in host countries. Examples include Scandinavian and European countries including Netherlands, France, Hungary and Poland. The re-affirmation of national identity or resurgence of nationalism has cast down the idea of collective European identity expressed in the form of European Union- where UK anxiously parches on the idea of Brexit. (Roy, 2014)

From the many examples cited above in the today’s world, it has become clear that the identity is most relevant to political behaviors and actions. Identity along with a contributing context is at the forefront of factors which direct and guide political behavior in the developed and developing world. The above examples provide examples of different types of identities. It is therefore critical to single out the various types of identities.

### 3. Literature Review

The bulk of literature had been provided by *Rees, Bujra, Littlewood and Newby (1985)*. The above mentioned book describes in great detail the relationship between social identity and politics. Since the book is targeted for a post-industrial society, therefore the focus of identity here is on social and economic class, the locality or constituency and ideology.

*Green, Palmquist and Schikler (2002)* presents the case for how social identities influence political actions in terms of affiliation in a political party. The focus of the book is to explore the American political landscape and determine how social identity in that case influence the course of politics in USA. This publication also provided theoretical anchorage.

*Cottam, Uhler, Masters and Preston (2007)* provided the academic scope under which the proposed research will take place. Political psychology explores the relationship between identity and political behavior and the central theme of the above cited volume is to explore that theme. *Sears, Hurdy and Jervis (eds.) (2003)* also provided

comprehensive account of the influence of social identity on politics specifically political behavior. *Kinnwall and Larking (2012)* also explained the causality of social identity and political actions such as immigration and visa policy. It explored in detail on how social identity influences political choices especially for religious Diasporas. *Houghton, David Patrick (2009)* also explored the effect of social identity on political situations. The book itself provided a comprehensive framework by detailing individual cases of significance where identity influenced the course of politics. *Lakoff, George (2010)* provided relevant support material on how social identity can become critical in determining the outcome of political events. *Jost and Sidanius (2007)* provided another reference material for singling out theoretical content on social identity and politics. *Tibayrene and Ayela (eds.) (2013)* provided interlinkage between politics and concepts rooted in psychology such as identity. The book explored themes such as interpersonal political psychology which discuss the topic of individualism and politics.

*Taylor, Gary & Spencer, Steve (eds.) (2004)* is an important contribution in presenting a holistic picture of the multifaceted phenomenon of identity around the world. The authors have very conveniently fragmented the concept of identity into many categories such as political based identity or nationality, ethnic identity, gender, identity based on sexual identity, cyber identity and so on. The authors who have contributed to this important title are of the view that in the post-industrial society of today, it is important to understand that meta-narratives and collective identities have been divided along individualistic identities. Moreover, the era of supra-national political arrangements is fast coming to an end as ethnic based nationalism and the political right are on the ascendant.

*Anderson, R. Mary (2010)* is strongly of the view that political behavior is representative of community interests. The most important factor according to the author is how the community perceives itself. If it perceives itself to be different than the other social groups then its perceived interests will also be markedly different from other social stakeholders; therefore the political tendencies shown in its behavior will be divergent. The author also explains why certain communities react with violence when it comes to bargaining for political benefits and how it correlates with the community's self-image.

*McDermott, Rose (2007)* evaluates the scope of political psychology in international relations. It also highlights the need for using the identity markers across and within national borders and how has differentiated identity effect relationships with states. The author also correlates democratic performance and economic liberalization to parity based relationships with different ethnic groups. The title is of importance since it is especially relevant to the democratic enterprise of Pakistan and the fickle relationships of different ethnic groups with the strong center and relatively autonomous local governments.

*Aijaz Ashraf Wani (2013)* highlights the regional and sub-regional aspirations of different ethnic groups in Jammu and Kashmir. The author is of the view that regional aspirations are an indicator of specific ethnic identities. These identities are located in specific areas, therefore the regional assertions become a mouthpiece of specific ethnicities. Furthermore, these aspirations can be at times inclusive and universal, galvanizing the whole of body politic and in other cases it can be exclusive a parochial with an increasing inward focus. The determination of violence associated with these aspirations is determined by the history of the ethnicity in question. The demands of various ethnicities remain in a state of arrest due to violent history and political discrimination.

*Fasel et al (2016)* views the social dominance orientation of England during a killing of an English citizen of African-American origin. The views that became popular immediately after the killing and which were collected through survey questionnaires were reflective of an ethnic minority which is at risk from a threatening majority which is singular in terms of ethnicity. The popular views as removed from facts as they were, showed the public perception of minority victimization on the hands of ethnic dominant group which is persuasive as well as coercive.

*Hunyh et al (2015)* demonstrates the link between ethnic group behaviors with policy options. The researchers used a survey instrument to determine the core American identity and if it is inextricably linked to discriminating political behaviors directed towards ethnic groups. The researchers found out that most of ethnic Americans were impartial towards their dealings with ethnically disparate groups whereas most European Americans were partial towards ethnic groups and considered it as a central part of American identity.

*McFarland, Sam (2010)* deduces that prejudice and discrimination directed towards ethnic minorities is largely the sum of right wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Right wing authoritarianism implies the rise of political parties which are conservative in nature and look towards ethnic homogenization as a key to national unity. This combined with an established hierarchy of powerful social groups is a powerful mixture which spews prejudice and political violence mostly directed towards ethnic minorities.

*Jean-Francois, Dupre (2016)* is of the view that in democracies which consist of ethnically diverse populations, political parties employ cultural symbols which are not entirely representative of national political identity. These cultural recognition systems provide a choice to their ethnic electorate and this choice is not linked entirely to the national political identity. The author contends that national political identity attained in this way is far from being divisive and rather lends voice to ethnically disparate groups.

*Newman et al (2015)* investigates the variance in the perception of ethnic/linguistic variety and population-wise distribution of the ethnic groups present in USA. The data collected through national census strongly shows that where ethnic groups are in majority, the unemployment and racial discrimination is strongly rampant in the area therefore lending to the conclusion that racial and ethnic diversity is markedly visible in terms of population distribution and important social and economic indicators.

*Peterson, B. Michael (2015)* tries to indicate that perhaps the link in political biases is genetic in nature. The above mentioned study borrows strongly from the emerging field of bio-politics with the view that political biases and discrimination may have a biological disposition. It contributes to the nature versus nurture debate in the context of ethnic polarization in national and international politics.

#### **4. Types of Identity**

##### **A. Gender Identity**

Gender identity can be defined as an individual perception with regards to a particular gender, which may or may not correlate with the sex at birth (Boix, Charles. S. Stokes, 2007). Gender identity has been a hotly debated topic in sociology, political science, psychology and gender studies. Gender identity has been strongly linked to discrimination in political, social and economic behavior. In terms of political behavior, it is startling to discover that political participation of women is in decline if considered in terms of voting behavior. Moreover, the affiliation to a political party is also reduced when the question of female voters or political respondents is considered.

##### **B. Political Identity**

National identity can be defined as the sense of belonging to a cohesive whole, expressed through shared customs, traditions, values, culture, language or historical myths (Ahmad Akbar.S, 2013). National identity has firmly found its expression in the form of nationalism which is arguably an 18<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Nationalism, in its most original form, was first conceived by the West, where racial and lingual homogeneity was present. It was in this racial uniformity that nationalism came to be first defined. Therefore, the German Empire constituted of those who spoke German and France belonged to the French. National identity was not, in its traditional sense, linked to religion. In South Asia, with the inception of Pakistan, nationalism came to embrace the idea of religion as well. Nationalism in its modern sense became embedded with the idea of being a Muslim (Ahmad. Akbar S, 2010) - and therefore came to be called as 'Muslim Nationalism'. National identity is also at the center of the debate surrounding immigration. Nationalism, in its most virulent form, was linked to the horrors of the Second World War in the Twentieth Century. Nazism or Fascism in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy embodied nationalism. More recently, national identity has taken a precedence over collective European identity in the form of Brexit.

##### **C. Ethnic Identity**

There are two basic aspects which are central to the concept of ethnicity or ethnic identity:

- Though often considered to be one and the same, ethnicity is quite distinct from race. Race, according to political sociologists, as a biological concept is hotly contested since scientific evidence does not support the genetic basis of different racial groups. (Cottam, 2007)
- Ethnicity is not to be confined to minority identity only. Identity is ethnic in the sense that every individual has diverse origins, which is closely linked to the perception and treatment by other social groups.

Ethnicity, therefore, can be summed up to be an identity composed of various cultural differences expressed in the form of language, culture, beliefs and values. The most crucial aspect is the cognitive component of individuals being self-aware of having a belonging to a distinct ethnic group.

As a social identity ethnicity is built on a variety of ideas which might include:

- Sense of common geographic location or topography.
- Practice of unique traditions and customs that constitute a culture. This uniqueness sets apart various ethnicities.
- Shared collective experiences which are crucial to the formation of identity. For example, the trauma of Holocaust had effectively shaped Jews' religious identity into a political cast 'Zionism'. The experience then gave a sense of nationhood with its unique memories. Same can be said of African-Americans living in USA, who have formed a unique identity based on 'Racial Segregation'.
- Religious beliefs and unique rituals that form a new and separate identity.

It is important to mention that ethnic identities may require consistent conservation in the form of festivals, symbolic artefacts or as political psychologists suggest subscription to particular forms of political attitudes which govern political behavior. Wimmer suggests that ethnicities are defined and maintained by establishing a sense of difference (Hoffstaedt, 2011). This difference also sets the norms and values of all expected behavior including political behavior. These boundaries may confer a positive value of belonging to a particular kinship, clan or race or may be negative that is 'subscription to everything which it isn't' such as discrimination political or otherwise. These ethnic reinforcements may also be reinforced by projecting cultural stereotypes. An apt example can be given of Nazi Germany in which the Nazis were likened to "Hawks" symbolizing power, superiority and nobility whereas Jews were likened to "Rats" which symbolized weakness, disgust and disease.

Ethnic identities are consistently in flux. Muslims living in Western Countries before 9/11 had been successfully implanted into the 'multicultural model' of European societies. After 9/11 they were labelled as a threat. The oppositional dimension of ethnic identities therefore asserts that some ethnic groups partly or fully construct their identity in opposition to other identity. This concept however falls short of explaining hybrid ethnic identities. Unique ethnic styles often mix with each other to produce a new and unique ethnic identity. For example, the Pakistani or Indian community living in United Kingdom calls themselves British-born Pakistanis or Britishers with Pakistani or Indian descent. Similarly hybridization may also take place in contemporary forms which undergo constant change and development. This takes place due to two factors: immigration which facilitates the meeting of various ethnic groups and globalization where agencies such as internet open closed identities to various experiences. This goes on to show that influences such as those mentioned above do not impart direct changes rather they instill gradual alteration to an established ethnic identity.

#### **D. Religious Identity**

Religious identity can be defined as a sense of membership or belonging to religion, marked with an increased importance of religious affiliation to one's self-concept (Roy, 2010). Religious identity historically has been an important marker of one's identity. In Europe, religion only took a step back with the implementation of Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, when boundaries were drawn around national cohesive geographic territories, which formerly

comprised the Roman Catholic Empire. Secularization took place resultantly when Church no longer held sway over the direction of political world. Religion was limited to private affairs only. This was not the case in the Muslim world, where religion has often dictated public morality. With the onset of modernization and later globalization, Muslims felt compelled to take shelter from the onslaught of global McDonaldization by taking a more rudimentary approach to Islam, now called as 'Fundamentalism'. The rejection of modernity and strict observance to Islamic rituals classify as the central aspects of Fundamentalism. This behavior was not limited to the Muslim world only; as Muslims living as immigrants in Western countries began adopting the same postures. The notion of personal liberty which guarantees freedom of expression now presents itself as a dilemma where religious observance clashes with central tenets of Western identity.

### **E. Cyber Identity**

In the contemporary world of evolving communication technology, a new form of identity has taken root. With virtual communication becoming a fad, identity has also changed. Virtual identity is the identity which one gives to one self for surfing or browsing through the virtual world of social media. Cyber identity is in complete control of its user and gives power to the individual to become whoever he or she wishes to be. It may or may not be reflective of the real person; it suits the online portfolio of the individual. Cyber identity is becoming the most promising indicator of who an individual is, based on the following on Twitter or likes and comments on Facebook. (Carraro, 2010)

### **5. Identity in the Contemporary Muslim World**

In the modern world, nationality has become the most important form of identity. Normative analysis of the Muslim world would show that these countries have nothing peculiar to offer. However, when fissures in outward institutional structures are shown, it becomes clear that nationality is not the only criterion by which Muslims of today have chosen to identify themselves (Ahmad. Akbar S, 2009). Tribalism, ethnic violence, sectarianism, religious extremism and gender-related violence seem to suggest that nationality is not the collective whole which a nominal understanding of the Muslim world suggests. For example in Libya, tribal based divisions have ruptured law and order completely. Nationalism has failed Libya, as it has done in Iraq. Similarly, an Islamic 'theo-democracy' (Roy, 2009) has been in power in Iran. The state however is more Persian in nationality than Shia in Religion. In Saudi Arabia, tribal identity is the sole guarantor of perks and privilege. The same model of absolute monarchy resting on a primordial hierarchy of identity is in practice in most Gulf countries. Ever since the secularization campaign of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk was set in motion in Turkey since 1924, gradual Islamization has been again reintroduced by Justice and Development Party. At the same time, Kurds have been waging an ethnic war against the Turks based on their demand for a separate Kurdish homeland. Pakistan came into being on the basis of Islam- however, little in practice was done to furnish Islamic credentials in letter and spirit ever since. The state has been fighting a war against terrorists groups who claim to impose the Sharia and consider the government as Kafirs or Western Puppets (Kinnvall, 2011). Even more dramatic was the Arab Spring of 2011 which was instigated on Twitter and which caused wide scale civilian upheavals in the Middle East. Disappointing as it was, the Arab Spring failed to throw off the authoritarian regimes; the countries which did manage to punish their dictators now find themselves in a more uncertain fate.

All of these examples show that identity has been fragmented in the Muslim world. Various forms of identity take precedence in different parts of the Muslim World. This in turn sets different types of political behavior in motion. It is important therefore to present a homogenous theoretical framework which can explain and predict political behavior especially in the context of ethnic identity.

### **6. Politics and Identity: A View from Political Psychology**

As discussed above, politics and identity have not been adequately explained by traditional political scientists. The task fell upon the emerging field of political psychology to explain the impact of identity, specifically ethnic identity on politics in general and political behavior in particular. The most relevant theory is that of 'Social Dominance

Theory'. Social dominance theory presents a social dominance orientation measure that differentiates those who prefer social group relations to be equal or hierarchical, and the extent to which the people want their in-group to dominate out-groups (Huynh, 2015). It basically measures the degree to which a person prefers an unequal, hierarchical, dominance- oriented relationship among groups. The results measured by Social Dominance Measure correlate strongly with authoritarianism measures.

Social Dominance theory outshines Social Identity theory which could not explain out-group favoritism. This is explained by a likeness for higher social status. The theory identifies three broad categories of hierarchies in societies: gender where males dominate females, age where adults rule over children and elderly citizens and socially constructed groups such as race, ethnicity, class, clan or nationality. The mechanism and procedures through which the hierarchies are established are political ideologies and political values (Cottam, 2007). Those individuals or agents who support and promote such ideologies are at the top of the group hierarchy. Inferiority is accepted because people are socialized to do so and where it is not, governments use coercion to ensure acceptance.

The above mentioned theory explains how hierarchies justify and retain their supremacy at the top. This theory will form the basic framework which explains the individual and structural factors which dictate political discrimination and resultantly inform political behavior. Further research needs to be done in order to accommodate changes in the theoretical framework resulting from study of indigenous or local culture.

## 7. Limitations

- i. Social Dominance Theory presumes that individual identity is crystallized completely; it ignores the fact that identity continues to evolve through the course of one's life.
- ii. Only longitudinal approach will reinforce the how and why different identity markers change and how does this influence politics.
- iii. Social Dominance Theory presupposes the homogenous development of industrial societies. The theory fails to explain the complex dynamics of identity when a society is in transition between agrarian and industrial modes of production as evidenced in Pakistan.

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