Enterprise and Innovation

Paying Attention To The Construct Of Salience In Identity-related Literature and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the salience construct, proposing a definition of salience as a phenomenon of connection between a stimulus and a person. Our framing of the salience construct includes its elements, temporality, and several ontological perspectives of salience. In answer to calls for clarity in the use of concepts in the identity-related literature, this framing is applied to Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. We find each theory unclear in its use of salience, the naming of the elements of salience and the ontological perspective of salience. The importance of gaining clarity in defining and using salience is the contribution to answering questions inherent to identity theories, namely 'Is an identity triggered by an object of salience, or does the active identity determine which objects of salience gain attention?' Research propositions based on the proposed definition of salience and the results of the analysis are offered. The implications a precise definition of salience has for identity-related literature and micro-organisational theories, such as leadership and motivation, are briefly outlined.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of salience underpins much of what we know about work, workers, and management. While Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton (2000, p.13) note that identity and identification are 'root constructs' of organisational literature, we believe the construct of salience is even more fundamental. It could be claimed that micro-organisational theories such as organisational identification, leadership, motivation, teamwork and so on, rest on the implicit notion that a person's interpretation of and response to the environment depends on what is salient for that person at a given moment. Here are three quick examples of the supporting role salience plays across micro-organisational literature.

- In the leadership literature, Urch Druskat and Wheeler (2003) found that outstanding leaders might be those that effectively manage salience across team boundaries. Such leaders appear able to successfully manage the salient connections made between information, teams, and individuals across an organisation.
- In the motivation literature, Pratt and Rosa (2003) observed that certain new forms of organisations gain motivation from members by focusing their efforts to build commitment of members on non-work significant others, particularly family. From a salience perspective, this suggests that such organisations have identified stimuli that are salient to their members and used it to gain the benefits of a motivated and committed workforce.
- In the identification literature, Pratt (1998) stated that two central research questions are how and when identification with an organisation occurs. Pratt notes that identity theories fail to explain fully how people choose their targets of comparison and so why certain identities are salient at some times and not at others. Precise use of salience may help explain the nature of the salient connections between people and organisations, defining what a salient stimulus, the target for identification, might be, and when and how an individual's identification with this target might occur.

From each of these examples, scholars and practitioners tend to engage in the topical literature (leadership, identification, etc.) without fully considering the

underlying construct of salience. As these three examples suggest, the construct of salience permeates this literature, but receives little direct attention. This paper is an attempt to develop further the construct, and intends to contribute to making salience's definition and use more explicit and exact.

We begin by providing a fundamental framing of salience. This conceptualisation of salience is applied to two identity-related theories: Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory. The following questions highlight issues related to the use of the salience construct in general, and more specifically, to the use of salience in identity-related theories:

- From the multiplicity of stimuli available to a person, what determines the object of salience that occupies an individual at any given moment?
- From the multiplicity of identities available to a person, what determines the active identity from which an individual operates at any given moment?
- Fundamentally, answering these two questions provides insights regarding the reciprocal question of identity: Is an identity triggered and governed by objects of salience or does the active identity determine which objects of salience gain attention?

We begin with a literature review in three sub-sections. First, we consider 'salience' in depth, developing an ontological framework to depict its use in a range of literatures. Basic reviews of Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory conclude this section. The analysis section provides a point-by-point application of our salience framework to Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. The following discussion identifies three implications of the analysis and a set of propositions stemming from the framework developed. This paper provides new perspectives to the construct of salience, the identity-related literature, and other organisational literatures relying on the construct of salience.

SALIENCE

Our treatment of the construct salience is iterative. We take three passes at the topic, each subsequent treatment providing greater depth. We begin with a look at

definitions and some common meanings implied when using the construct. We then provide our own definition of salience and use the three points of that definition to guide further consideration of the construct. This initial subsection of the literature concludes with a graphic representation of our salience framework — the framework we then employ throughout the remainder of the paper.

COMMON DEFINITION AND MEANING OF SALIENCE

In a recent psychology text, Smith and Mackie (2000) suggest that salience refers to a cue's ability to attract attention in its context. Pryor and Kriss (1977) note that something is salient when it receives a disproportional amount of attention from the observer in relation to its context (p. 39). McArthur (1981) suggests that salience can be used interchangeably with 'figural' and 'attention-drawing' (p. 201). 'Figural' refers to the Gestalt concept where a figure stands out from its context or background in the perception of the observer (Koffka, 1935). McArthur (1981) explains that 'attention-drawing' stimuli stand out from their background due to possessing certain inherent characteristics. Sloman, Love, and Ahn (1998) also emphasis the inherent attention drawing aspects of a salient stimulus as 'the intensity of a feature, the extent to which it presents a high amplitude signal in relation to background noise, in a way that is fairly independent of context' (p. 193). Higgins (1996) defines salience as comprising the natural prominence and comparative distinctiveness that draws attention selectively to a specific object. There 'are relatively invariant natural properties of objects that increase the likelihood that attention will be drawn selectively to them' and 'an object's properties in comparison with the properties of other objects in the immediate situation can also draw attention selectively to that object' (Higgins, 1996 p. 156-157). As these examples illustrate, the few direct definitions of salience that do exist tend to define salience as the capacity of a stimulus to gain a person's attention, particularly in relation to the context.

The limited number of straightforward definitions of salience pales in comparison to 'understood' definitions derived from the term's widespread use. More times than not, when the construct of salience is used, it appears in exchange for another word, thus providing a de facto definition. For instance, Savitsky, Gilovich, Berger, and Husted Medvec (2003) suggest that a person's absence from a group 'may not be especially salient or noteworthy to others' and 'people are very salient

and important in their own eyes' (p. 387). Following their logic, salience appears related to, but perhaps not the same as, noteworthy and important. At other times, writers use parentheses to explain their meaning of salience. For example, Hogg and Terry (2000a) state that one's cognitive structure 'brings into active use (i.e., makes salient) that category rendering the social context and one's place within it subjectively most meaningful' (p.125). Similarly Pratt (1998) states that organisational identification is likely to occur 'where boundaries between one's own organization and other organizations are salient (i.e., categorizations are clear)' (p. 191). In these common phrasings, additional words and explanations are required to make the author's meaning of salience clearer for the reader.

These uses of combinations of synonyms and abbreviated explanations, suggest authors need (or at least need to employ) a more precise understanding of salience. We propose that the treatment of salience is clarified when the uses of the salience, the elements of salience, and the ontological perspectives on salience are made clear. We now turn to deepen our treatment of these three points by examining the uses, elements, and ontological perspectives of salience evident in the literature.

USES OF SALIENCE
Our review suggested three common use of the term salience: salience as a quantity, as a catalyst, and as a connection.

Salience may be used as a quantity that something possesses. For instance, working from the literature on attitudes[1], Scott (1968) uses salience to describe the intensity with which a person holds the focus of an attitude. Similarly, Sargent and Williamson (1958) referred to salience as the amount of intensity with which an attitude is felt. These writers appear to have viewed salience as something that may be quantified according to the amount of attention it garners.

Second, salience can be thought of as a turning point – a catalyst for change. For instance, Berscheid, Graziano, and Monson (1976) used salience to describe the event when one person's attitude toward another person changed. The trigger for attitude change was the moment one person noticed their dependence on another, and so attended to them (Berscheid *et al*., 1976). The contact hypothesis uses

salience in relation to how peoples' attitudes change when they have contact with others (Pettigrew, 1997). If individuals have contact on an interpersonal level with a member of another group, while remaining aware of the salient differences between their groups, they come to make more positive generalisations of the other person's group, changing their attitudes towards the other person and their group (Hewstone, 2003; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). A central point in Taylor and Fiske's (1978) review is that people readily use the salient information in their environment. People respond with little thought to salient stimuli in their environment, quickly changing their attitudes toward others as a result (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). In this perspective, people have salient moments of attitude change.

Other authors use salience as a phenomenon of connection. For instance, Fiske and Taylor (1991) considered salience to be the point at which a stimulus captures attention relative to other stimuli in the context and the individual's expectations. Earlier, Krech & Crutchfield (1948) reported research showing how attitudes prominent in a person's cognitive field readily connected with certain salient thoughts and so were more likely to be spontaneously mentioned. Used in this sense, salience represents a moment of connection between the person and a stimulus. Table 1 summarises the uses of salience as a quantity, as a catalyst of change and as a connection.

Uses of salience
Quantity
Salience can be thought of as the amount of attention grabbing relevance possessed by a stimulus.
Catalyst of change
Salience can be thought of as the extent to which a stimulus is capable of causing a moment of change.
Connection
Salience can be thought of as the phenomenon of connection between a stimulus and a person.

Table 1: Uses of Salience

ELEMENTS OF SALIENCE

The uses of salience outlined identify two elements that must be addressed in any application of the salience construct: the stimulus and the person.

For our purposes, a salient stimulus is anything that is salient at a point in time. Salient stimuli range broadly from physical artefacts such as desks to psychological constructs such as memories and thoughts. Salience is something about a stimulus 'that draws attention specifically to a specific object of perception or thought' (Higgins, 1996). While some theorists suggest that there is little difference between perceiving people and inanimate objects (Heider, 1958; McArthur, 1981), Fiske and Taylor (1991) emphasise that people and their behaviour differ from inanimate objects, particularly in the capacity for their actions to impact on other people, and so tend to be salient stimuli. Visual stimuli are likely to be salient stimuli, particularly if novel, bright, complex and moving and in the person's proximity (Berlyne, 1958; McArthur & Ginsberg, 1978; McArthur & Post, 1977; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Salancik and Conway (1975) manipulated the ease with which a person retrieved memories of past behaviours, and found that the person's attitude altered to be consistent with the cognitions that had recently gained attention. McGuire *et al*. (1978) observed that salient aspects of self-concept were those personal features perceived as different from other people in that person's environment. Essentially, whatever gains one's attention, be it an object, person, or cognition is a salient stimulus.

Prior to describing our conception of the person in salience, we need to differentiate the constructs of attention and salience. Uttal (2000) observes that attention is difficult to define, and suggests attention may be best expressed as a mental process or function, which is essentially 'an interpersonally observable property of what is an unobservable intrapersonal mental activity' (p.102). James (1890) noted that 'Focalization, concentration, of consciousness' are the essence of attention (p. 404) and differentiated between the sensory attention driven by the stimuli in our environment and the volitional attention we direct toward stimuli. We suggest that attention refers to a concentration of mental activity leading to or stemming from the moment of salience. A person interacts with a stimulus by either responding passively to a salient stimulus, or directing their attention to the stimulus.

In summary, we suggest that the stimulus element of salience can be either psychological or physical and that the person either directs or responds their connection with the salient stimulus. Figure 1 summarises the elements of salience.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ The elements of salience                                            │
│                                                                     │
│ Physical artefacts              Stimulus      Psychological constructs│
│                                    ▲                                 │
│                                    ▼                                 │
│                                 Connection                           │
│                                                                     │
│                                    ▲                                 │
│                                    ▼                                 │
│ Passive observer                 Person       Directed attender      │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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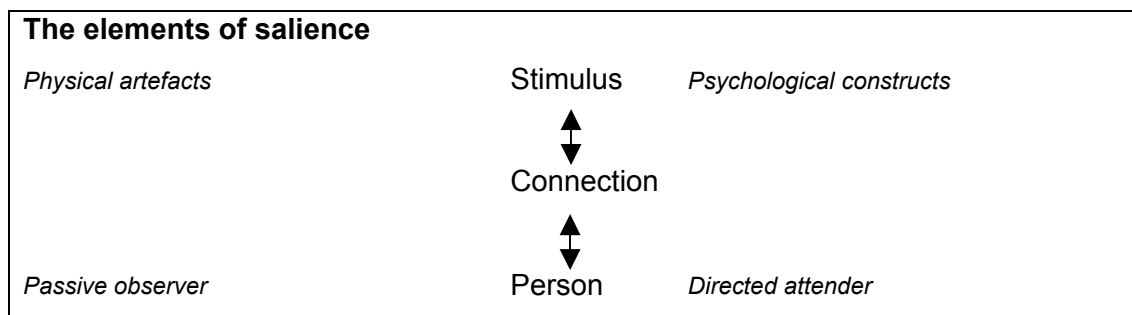
Figure 1: The elements of salience

In the next section, we elaborate an ontological framework of salience.

ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF SALIENCE

The following review of salience-using literature is organised along an objective-subjective continuum of ontological assumptions (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). To maintain clarity, we present the objective and subjective perspectives separately and describe moderate positions between the extremes. Figure 2 provides a graphical overview of our ontological continuum of salience. The overlapping arrows reaching toward opposing positions represent the use of the continuum to explain salience through perceptual, contextual, and stimulus-related elements.

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        Stimulus Salience explained in combination with Contextual and Knowledge Factors
                                                              →              Subjective
   Objective ◆━━━━━━━━━┿━━━━━━┿━━━━━━┿━━━━━━┿━━━━━━◆          Salience
   Salience              ←
                    Perceptual Salience explained in combination with Stimulus and Contextual
                                                                    Factors
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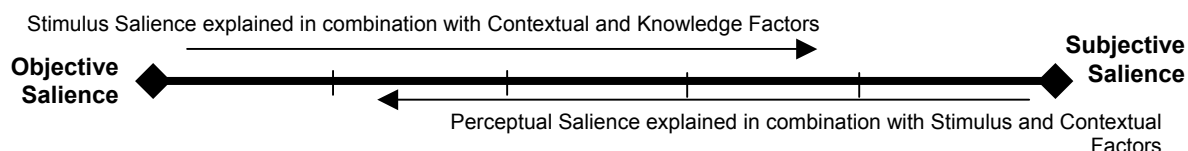
Figure 2: A continuum of salience

OBJECTIVE SALIENCE

Working from the objective pole, we identify *stimulus salience* when a stimulus connects with the person through possessing inherent attention-grabbing characteristics. At the objective extreme, this position assumes that a stimulus has concrete, objective characteristics that gain attention independent of the other stimuli in the contextual field and independent of the person's psychological make-up. The person is at the extreme of being a passive observer. Less extreme objective positions on the continuum suggest that a stimulus possesses objective

characteristics but gains attention in relation to other stimuli in the contextual field and/or in relation to the observer's perception.

Stimulus salience refers to the innate capacity of a stimulus to connect with an individual and gain their attention. For instance, in operant conditioning experiments[2], salience described the inherent property of a stimulus to gain a response from a subject due to possessing a 'degree of conspicuousness or obviousness' (Mackintosh, 1977; Sternberg, 1998, p. 235). More recently, Theeuwes (1994) presented research arguing that visual attention is captured in a stimulus-driven manner. A salient stimulus gains attention, regardless of the attentional set of the person, due to its possession of certain properties, such as colour or an abrupt onset. Salience in this sense refers to the inherent objective characteristics of the stimulus.

Other theories identify salience stemming from the properties of a stimulus, but consider that observation of a stimulus as salient is related to the stimulus standing out in its context. Sloman *et al* (1998) for instance, notes that the brightness of a bright light is salient in terms of 'the intensity of a feature, the extent to which it presents a high amplitude signal in relation to background noise, in a way that is fairly independent of context' (Sloman *et al*., 1998, p. 193). Attention-drawing stimuli may stand out due to their colour, brightness, size, movement, novelty, and nearness to the person (Erber & Fiske, 1984; McArthur, 1981; Storms, 1973; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). For instance, the black swan of Tchaikovsky's famous ballet Swan Lake gains attention because every other dancer on stage wears white. There is nothing about the black costume itself that demands attention. Moreover, the naive observer would see little relevance in the black costume in the absence of all the others wearing white.

A person seems to respond to one stimulus rather than another due to a pattern they observe related to the properties of the stimuli itself in its context. Game theory notes that individuals have non-random behaviour because certain characteristics rather than others 'stick out', suggesting themselves (Grant & Quiggin, 1998; Mehta & Starmer, 1994). Heads tend to be more salient in relation to tails when choosing the outcome of a coin toss (Mehta & Starmer, 1994). McArthur (1981) notes that stimuli draw attention due to unit-formation connecting with shared infrequency, for

example, connecting the infrequent appearance of a minority ethnic group with infrequently observed behaviours. These uses of salience are not confined to the inherent properties of a stimulus but are also connected to the contextual field where that stimulus appears.

The objective characteristics of a stimulus may be salient in relation to the observer's psychological structure and content. Cognition theory uses salience to refer to the connection that a stimulus makes with something else in the contextual field the observer knows. For instance, most people quickly connect an apple with their knowledge that apples grow on trees (Sloman *et al.*, 1998). Research in the cognition of language uses salience in this 'connecting' sense. Research in conceptual noun combinations uses salience to refer to features that tend to be interpreted with a similar meaning (Bock & Clifton, 2000). For instance, stripes are a salient feature that is highly defining of the word tiger, so people are likely to interpret a noun combination of tiger mouse as a mouse with stripes (Bock & Clifton, 2000). So, salient stimuli easily access and connect with related stimuli of which a person already has knowledge.

OBJECTIVE SALIENCE AND THE USES AND ELEMENTS OF SALIENCE

Objective salience is used from a perspective of the world as external to the individual, where salient stimuli capture a person's attention in stimulus-driven manner. The attention-grabbing properties of a salient stimulus tend to be seen as an observable, measurable quantity. The person is in a position of passivity - noticing a stimulus' because of its inherent properties. At the less extreme end of this side of the continuum, the person's psychological content and structure make connections between their existing knowledge and the objective properties of the stimulus.

SUBJECTIVE SALIENCE

Working from the subjective pole, we identify *perceptual salience* when a stimulus gains attention through the observer's subjective projection of relevance or connection. At the subjective extreme, the characteristics of salient stimuli exist as perceived by the observer. Less extreme positions toward the subjective end of the continuum allow that the characteristics of a stimulus and a broader contextual field exist but that their meaning and relevance is perceived through the observer's eyes

and influenced, for instance, by his or her attentional tasks, prior knowledge, and expectations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Subjectively salient stimuli have characteristics determined largely in relation to the observer's psychological structure and content. The categories a person holds can determine whether a stimulus is perceived as salient. Salient stimuli may be the focus of deliberate connection due to either contrasting with or being associated with an individual's experience. Bargh (1996) suggests attention can be attracted to salient objects automatically when an event is usual and experienced before and fits the individual's existing mental structures for that event, situation, or person. Hoffman and Singh (1997) show that the shapes of certain objects are salient, not due to any inherent physical characteristic, but due to connecting of the shape with the categories of memories people hold. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) note that memories increase the ease by which a certain stimulus is 'brought to mind' (p. 27). For instance, after having a car accident a person more easily notices news reports of car accidents. Erber and Fiske (1984) note that a salient social stimulus may be the focus of attention due to being relevant to an individual's goals. For instance, a senior manager is widely perceived to have more influence on one's future than a colleague. In the context of managing stakeholder relationships, Agle and Mitchell (1999) note that it is the manager's perception of a stakeholder's attributes rather than the stakeholder's actual attributes that make the stakeholder salient to that manager. Salient stimuli also may contrast with people's prior knowledge and expectations. This form of perceptual salience tends to be extreme, such as people behaving in unexpected ways (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Vaughan & Hogg, 1998).

Salient stimuli can be attention grabbing because such stimuli are relatively distinct, peculiar, and rare in the social context, as suggested by distinctiveness theory. This theory adds that a stimulus is also salient because individuals perceive themselves possessing and sharing the rare, peculiar, and distinct characteristics of the stimulus (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998; Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). When the individual perceives a stimulus as salient, they also perceive the distinctive and rare stimulus as descriptive of themselves.

What an individual notices as distinctive about him or herself changes according to their context. For instance, an African American woman in a group of Caucasian American women may think of herself as black, but when moving to a group of African American men, becomes more conscious of herself as a woman (McGuire *et al*., 1978). According to social cognition theory, salience depends not only on the stimulus' features that capture attention, but also on the perception of the individual of the stimulus' distinctiveness relative to other stimuli in the context (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). A perceptual stimulus that is salient relative to the immediate context is often novel compared to the other stimuli in the context (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). For instance, disabled people in a wheelchair are salient in the context of a group of people who can walk.

SUBJECTIVE SALIENCE AND THE USES AND ELEMENTS OF SALIENCE

The uses and elements of salience from the subjective view emphasise the salience of a stimulus as subjective, existing within the psychological constructs of the person. A salient stimulus may be a psychological construct, such as a memory, that exists in a person's mind, independent of the context. Perceptual salience emphasises the person as deliberate rather than responsive as the salience of a stimulus is based on his or her psychological content and structure.

SUMMARY

Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the elements of salience and the subjective and objective views of reality. The contrasts and continuums between objective salience and subjective salience and responsiveness and deliberateness are pictured with the explanations of salience mapped according to their intersection with each continuum. At the objective extreme, a stimulus is salient through possessing attention-gaining characteristics. At the subjective extreme, salient stimuli exist as perceived through the connection the perceiver makes between subjectively perceived stimuli and their psychological structure and content. The interrelationship between subjective and objective salience is shown in the less extreme positions where interaction exists between the person, the stimuli, and the context.
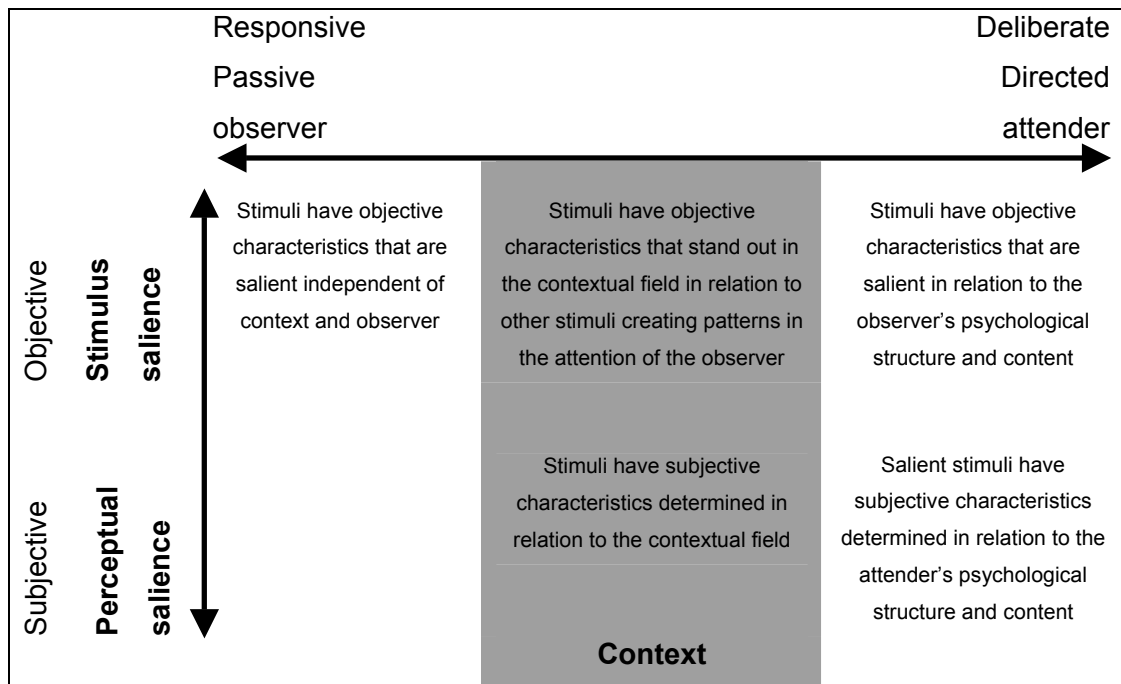
Figure 3: Continuums of salience

Distinguishing between the less extreme positions on the continuums, where the objective or subjective salience of a stimulus exists in relation to the contextual field helps identify where lack of clarity about salience exists in the literature. The central difference is that one explanation views the stimulus as objective, that is, as having inherent attention grabbing properties that connect with the person. The other explanation views the stimulus as subjective, perceived through the person's psychological content and structure. The similarity between both explanations is the function of the context in providing a field for comparison and contrast. The next step in bringing clarity is to propose a definition of salience. Aspects of this definition have been inferred in the previous review. Following the proposed definition, we provide more detail of the components of the definition, and the uses, elements and ontological perspective of salience. It is proposed that:

> *salience can be defined as a connection between a stimulus and a*
> *person that exists at a moment of time.*

This definition includes the significant elements of salience, takes a position on the temporal quality of salience, and accommodates a range of ontological positions of salience. First, the definition simply includes the two primary elements of stimulus

and person. While the 'context' of a salient moment is important, the context needs to be considered subsequent to the connecting of the primary elements of stimulus and person.

Second, the definition introduces a temporal quality to salience, emphasising salience as a phenomenon that exists at a specific moment of time. It can be argued that this limits the construct of salience to one-off moments. But, taken to the extreme, this conceptualisation suggests that people live in a series of salient moments where a 'moment' might be no more than a split second. In this sense, taking an explicit position on the momentary nature of salience provides both clarity and an empowering foundation for understanding micro-behavioural processes (i.e. interpretation, motivation, leadership, etc.) as they unfold moment-to-moment.

Finally, this definition is capable of encompassing a continuum of objective to subjective explanations of salience. From a concrete objective view of reality, the inherent characteristics of a physical stimulus gain connection. At the other extreme, the stimulus subjectively connects in relation to the person's psychological structure and content.

In summary, our definition proposes a construct of salience as:

- a connection between a stimulus and a person
- a phenomenon existing at a moment of time and from moment to moment
- a phenomenon existing on a continuum from objective to subjective views of reality

This framework and definition is a step towards bringing clarity to the construct of salience, providing a means of analysing the use of the salience in identity-related literature. We have already suggested that two well-known identity theories, Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory, appear to fail to explain clearly their treatment of salience and the processes of determining an active identity. The elements of each theory are introduced to complete the literature review.

IDENTITY THEORY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Comparisons of Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory are becoming commonplace and are usually accompanied by suggestions for or rejections of integrating the two theories (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). In application of our framework of salience, we extend the comparison in a new direction. We believe that better understanding of how each theory treats salience could enhance the use of each theory. On the other hand, a more precise understanding of the construct of salience may present an alternative approach to possible integration of the theories.

Restating the questions raised in the introduction serves to remind us of the relevance of salience to identity theories. We began by asking whether an identity was triggered and governed by objects of salience or does the active identity determine which objects of salience gain attention? Salience is key in how each theory explains what identity a person may be in at a point of time, with that active identity framing the perceptions and actions of that person. Following are brief introductions to Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. An analytical discussion follows, evaluating each theory's use of salience in light of the analytical framework of salience described in the first half of the paper and summarised in Figure 3.

IDENTITY THEORY

Identity Theory (IT), a microsociological theory with origins in symbolic interactionism and role theory, describes how people exist connected to the multiple and complex networks of relationships that comprise society (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Hogg & Ridgeway, 2003; Hogg *et al.*, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Stratham, 1985; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). The theory comes from the perspective that society is stable and organised, as people occupy positions in their own network of relationships, with each position attached to a role that has its own set of socially expected behaviours (Callero, 1985; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Reflecting the interdependent but differentiated nature of society, a person's self is composed of multiple identities – the internalised expectations of a person's roles (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Stratham, 1985; Turner, 1978).

In Identity Theory, a person's social reality is negotiated and developed as he or she interacts with others (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Through socialisation, people learn the role behaviours expected of them from others' behaviours toward them, coming to internalise, that is, define their 'self', according others' responses to them (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Burke & Tully, 1977; Charon, 1992; Stryker, 1959). Stryker (1959, p. 116) sets this out:

We come to know what we are through other's responses to us. Others supply us with a name, and they provide the meaning attached to that symbol. They categorise us in particular ways — as an infant, as a boy, et cetera. On the basis of such categorization, they expect particular behaviours from us; on the basis of these expectations, they act toward us. The manner in which they act toward us defines our "self," we come to categorize ourselves as they categorize us, and we act in ways appropriate to their expectations

In the course of social interaction, people become able to communicate with each other in a society using the shared symbolic meanings of words or gestures (Stryker, 1959; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). As individuals share the meaning of symbols, they become able to take on the perspective of other people (Mead, 1934). The self is able to consider performing a behaviour, imagine others' response to that behaviour, and then behave according the reactions they expect from others. Mead (1934) called the self who does the experiencing and thinking and acting the 'I', and the self who takes the perspective of others, the 'me'. 'I' and 'me' are views of one's self, that is, who I am in my own eyes and who I am in other's eyes (Thoits & Virshup, 1997).

An identity salience hierarchy and commitment to identities are used by identity theory to explain how a person manages the numerous identities stemming from the many social networks to which he or she might be connected. Each individual holds a hierarchy of identities of varying salience, with the identities that have the most salience being those with a higher probability of enactment across a wider variety of situations or with a higher probability of enactment in a certain situation (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Commitment refers to the extent an individual's relationships with others in their social network depend on their possession of a

certain identity and the performance of the behaviours of the associated role (Callero, 1985; Hogg *et al*., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Identities with more commitment are more prominent in an individual's salience hierarchy.

In summary, Identity Theory views identities as developing through social interaction. Through social interaction, people develop shared interpretations of the behaviours associated with a position or a role that exists in a social network. This shared interpretation of behaviours provides the capacity to evaluate one's intended and actual behaviour from the point of view of others. Identities are the internalisation of the expectations of a person's role-related behaviour that stem from this evaluation of one's self.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

In comparison with Identity Theory's stable, organised view of society, Social Identity Theory (SIT) originates from a conflict-based perspective where people are seen as capable of pursuing social change through actively seeking group memberships that provide personal advantage (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deaux & Martin, 2003; Hogg *et al*., 1995; Tajfel, 1978a; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Similarly, the 'self' is seen as variable and dynamic. In fact, Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty (1994) doubt that 'the idea of self as a relatively fixed mental structure is meaningful or necessary' (p. 458) and defines the self as a conduit mediating between the environment, a person's psychological constructs, and their behaviour. Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) is an extension of Social Identity Theory that details the cognitive and motivational bases people use to perceive their membership of certain groups (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Hogg *et al*., 1995; Hogg & Williams, 2000).

Social Identity Theory

The primary insight of SIT is explaining how people come to view themselves as members of a group rather than individuals (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). SIT suggests that people have intrinsic needs to maintain a positive view of themselves, so they make intergroup comparisons and engage in strategies to maintain a positive evaluation of their group memberships.

A social identity is the individual's perception that they belong to a distinct category or group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A social identity is more than an individual's cognition that they are a group member but is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978b, p.63). Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) reiterate these three components of social identity as cognitive (one's awareness or knowledge of group membership), emotional (one's sense of emotional involvement with a group) and evaluative (the value connoted by group membership). Accordingly, a social identity is when a person knows they are a member of a group, feels like a member of the group, and values their membership of that group.

Evaluation involves comparing the in-group a person perceives they belong to, with out-groups that they perceive have different characteristics from their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Belonging occurs as people perceive themselves as sharing certain similar characteristics with their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner *et al*., 1994). Out-groups are salient, gaining the individual's attention, when perceived by the individual as contrasting with their in-group, due to having characteristics that are different and distinct from the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Intergroup social comparison are underpinned by an individual's motivation to maintain a positive view of themselves (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Turner, 1975, 1982). Motivations related to evaluating group membership include the need to reduce uncertainty about one's place in society, and the need to promote self esteem by belonging to a group that is both distinct from and evaluated positively in comparison to other groups (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Hogg & Terry, 2000b; Kramer, 1991; Tajfel, 1978b; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If a group fails to meet such needs, individuals engage in various strategies such as altering their perception of their membership of the group or disassociating themselves from the group (Ellemers *et al*., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The expanded model of social identity similarly suggests individuals actively promote a positive self-concept by disidentifying or maintaining ambivalent identification with a group (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner, 2002; Pratt, 2000, 2001).

In summary, social identity is integrally related to individuals' needs to improve their social position through seeking to identify with, that is, perceive membership of, positively evaluated groups.

Self-categorisation theory

Self-categorisation theory developed to address the cognitive details of how an individual actually perceives himself or herself as a member of a certain group or category (Hogg *et al*., 1995; Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Reicher, & Wertherell, 1987; Turner *et al*., 1994). Self-categorisation is the cognitive process that occurs as the external category of the group is transformed into internal definitions of the self (Turner, 1982; Turner *et al*., 1994). The category of a group is presented as a prototype, a set of characteristics stereotypic of a typical group member, that defines and prescribes the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that characterize one group and distinguish it from other groups. Through a process of self-stereotyping, where the individual compares him or herself to the group prototype, the individual depersonalises, defining him or herself less in terms of individual attributes and more in terms of the shared prototypical group characteristics (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997; Turner *et al*., 1987; Turner *et al*., 1994). The term salience is used in SCT to describe the likelihood of the individual assigning the characteristics of the group prototype to themselves (Oakes, 1987).

SCT proposes the salience of group membership is an outcome of the interaction of motives, accessibility, and fit that predict when people define themselves in terms of a group prototype (Oakes, 1987; Turner *et al*., 1997). Motives include those connected to social categorisation, particularly self-esteem promotion and uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Terry, 2000b; Hogg & Williams, 2000). Accessibility includes contextual accessibility, that is, the availability of the group in the proximate perceptual field, and the ease of accessing certain social categories in memory (Oakes, 1987). Fit refers to how well the characteristics of the group account for the person's existing knowledge of similarities or differences between groups of people, as well as explaining the actual behaviour of the people observed (Oakes, 1987). Interestingly, Hogg *et al*. (1995) note the attempt to explain inter-group as well as intra-group processes places SIT and SCT nearer sociological theories.

In summary, SCT details the process by which an individual comes to define himself or herself as a member of a certain social group. Salience is used to explain how a combination of factors works together to influence the moment of depersonalisation.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK TO IDENTITY THEORY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

We now apply the framework of salience to Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory are compared according to each theory's use of salience, their approach to the elements of salience and their ontological assumptions toward salience.

Uses of salience in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

To recap, three uses of salience were identified in the literature: a quantity something possess, a catalyst for change, and a connection. Connection takes either an objective perspective, where a stimulus' inherent attention grabbing properties gain a response from a passive observer, or a subjective perspective, where a person's psychological content and structure make a deliberate connection with a stimulus.

Uses of Salience in Identity Theory

Identity Theory literature mainly uses salience as a quantity, with lesser emphasis on salience as a catalyst for change. Quantity is used in at least three ways to explain the salience of identities. First, an identity more prominent in the identity salience hierarchy has a greater probability of being invoked and its role-related behaviours enacted. Identity Theory researchers measure the salience of an identity using the frequency with which role behaviours are observed (Callero, 1985; Caste & Burke, 2002). Secondly, identities more prominent in the hierarchy have a greater quantity of 'something' that increases the probability of that identity being enacted. Commitment is proffered as that 'something' identities possess and is quantified using the proximity, number, and importance of the relationships connected with an identity (Callero, 1985; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Stryker and Burke (2000) state that 'commitment is measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others, should the identity be foregone' (p. 286). Commitment provides the quantity of salience, and the quantity of commitment prioritises identities (Stryker and Burke,

2000). The third way Identity Theory uses salience as quantity is by suggesting identities have varying quantities of salience, may be simultaneously active. A person may be acting according to an identity high in the salience hierarchy, but at the same time a lesser identity might be activated by stimuli in the environment (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth *et al*., 2000).

This points to how Identity theorists also use salience in terms of a catalyst for change to explain how one switches between identities (Ashforth *et al*., 2000). However, Stryker (1968) acknowledges that the 'invocation of an identity' (p. 560) triggered by a stimulus is a rare event. Stets and Burke (2000) employ the catalyst use of salience to explain the activation of identities less prominent in the salience hierarchy as a supplemental explanation to the use of salience as quantity (as measured by commitment). In summary, Identity Theory emphasises salience as a quantity allocated to an identity. There is less use of salience as a catalyst, and these uses appear to emphasise the person as responsive, with situational stimuli invoking the connection.

Uses of Salience in Social Identity Theory.
Social Identity Theory emphasises salience as a connection, with use of salience as a catalyst of change. Salience as connection corresponds with SIT's use of inter-group comparison. Tajfel and Turner (1979) originally suggested that a group was salient when an individual evaluated the group as attractive and sought to perceive themselves as members of this group. As a person makes comparisons between the groups in their environment, they make salient connections of membership with the groups they seek to belong to (Turner *et al*, 1994). Depersonalisation combines salience as connection and a catalyst of change. On perceiving of prototype of the group as salient, a person ceases considering himself or herself as an individual and perceives him or herself as fitting the prototypical characteristics of the salient target group (Oakes, 1987; Turner *et al*., 1994).

There are suggestions of salience as quantity emerging in recent applications of Social Identity Theory. For instance, Hogg (2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000a) suggests that a group is more or less salient according to the degree members conform to the group prototype. Previously Ashforth and Mael (1989) had suggested that conflict

between identities is resolved by compartmentalising one identity from another. Turner *et al* (1994) described self-categorisation as a continuum of competition between multiple personal and social identities with one identity emerging as dominant. The suggestion of depersonalisation as a matter of degree rather than as a change seems to depart from the original tenets of the theory, and may reflect an imprecise use of salience. In summary, Social Identity Theory primarily uses salience as a catalyst and as connection, to explain intergroup comparison and the moment when an individual depersonalises.

SUMMARY.

Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory both use salience as a force underlying the activation of an identity. Yet, they approach the use of salience quite differently. Identity Theory primarily uses salience as a quantity allocated to identities prioritised in an identity hierarchy, while Social Identity Theory's core concepts of social comparison and depersonalisation emphasises salience as connection to explain how a person comes to perceive that they are member of a certain group.

Elements of salience in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

We identified two elements of salience: a stimulus and a person. A person's connection with stimuli can range paying attention to stimuli possessing inherent attention capturing features to stimuli that are perceptually salient due to the connection made with categories, schema, and memories.

Elements of Salience in Identity Theory.

Identity Theory uses the self and self-representing behaviour as salient stimuli. People can 'step outside' of themselves, direct their attention at their own self and evaluate their behaviours (Burke, 1980; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1959). People reflect on their behaviour as 'the feedback to the self of the consequences of the processes that are the self' (Burke, 1980p. 20). The theory's behavioural feedback model suggests people monitor and compare feedback on their behaviour according to their perception of their identity standard, that is, their definition of the appropriate role-related behaviours for a certain situation (Burke, 1980; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Cast & Burke, 2002). Other people's responses to one's role related behaviour is

environmental stimuli that may also be salient, particularly if from people closely linked with one's social network (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Callero, 1985; Cast & Burke, 2002).

Identity Theory tends to acknowledge that stimuli are deliberately connected with the individual using their psychological content and structure. Stryker and Serpe (1994) suggest that identities act as 'cognitive bases for arriving at definitions of situations in which persons find themselves' (p. 18). Burke and Reitzes (1991) also see individuals as actively attempting to perceive that the feedback on their behaviour is consistent with the identity standards to which they are committed. People are seen as engaging in deliberateness, interpreting a stimulus according to the prioritising of their identities (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). However, as noted above, to the degree that a stimulus is capable of cuing the identities that are enacted (Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1968), Identity Theory accommodates elements of responsiveness where the person is a passive observer to the change in active identity.

In summary, Identity Theory has a mixed use of the elements of salience. A person may interpret the salient stimuli of one's own behaviour and other's behaviour but also certain objective stimuli in the environment can override this interpretation, catalysing a change in active identity.

Elements of Salience in Social Identity Theory
In contrast to Identity Theory's focus on the salience of behaviour, salient stimuli, as used in Social Identity Theory, can be understood in terms of categories. Social categories are the groupings of people that a person perceives share similar characteristics (Tajfel, 1978a; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Categories reflect the tendency people have to divide and organise their world according to the cognitive representations they already hold (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Lin & Murphy, 1997). Similarly, in self-categorisation theory, Turner *et al* (1994) describe the connection between the person's psychological constructs and their perception of categories in their environment as 'social contextual definitions of the perceiver, definitions of the individual in terms of his or her contextual properties' (p. 458). In each line of thinking, the person is a directed attender to stimuli in the form of categories.

Although there is this emphasis on a person's subjective perception of stimuli, Social Identity Theory fluctuates on whether the salience of stimuli originates from the context or the individual's perceptions. Turner (1982) suggested that an individual's context might cue an identity. Self-categorisation then seemed to stress that stimuli are not salient in themselves, but are subjectively perceived as salient due to connecting with a person's psychological content and structure (Oakes, 1987; Turner *et al*, 1994). While this connection may give the appearance of situational variability, Turner *et al*. (1994) explains that the ability of a person to change the category they connect with varies dynamically with their personal perceptions of stimuli. In other words, the person engages in a 'flexible, constructive process of judgement and meaningful inference in which varying self-categories are created to fit the perceiver's relationship to social reality' (Turner *et al*.,1994, p. 458). The capacity of individuals to dynamically change their conception of their self in relation to their comparative context is supported in research cited by Turner *et al* (1994), Kawakami and Dion (1995) and Spears *et al*. (1997). Recently Hogg (2001) and Hogg and Terry (2000a) note that social identities are responsive to immediate social contexts. One of Oakes' (1987) components of salience, accessibility, suggests categories are salient if they are both accessible through being proximate and visible in the individual's context and if they are in the individual's memory. The theory notes interplay between a person's psychological constructs and their response to an objective environment. Thus, there are suggestions of responsiveness and the person as a passive observer.

Summary

There are both similarities and differences in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. The primary difference lies in what stimuli receive attention. Identity Theory suggests salient stimuli tend to be behavioural feedback from one's self and others whereas Social Identity Theory suggests salient stimuli take the form of categories. The primary similarity, and it is substantial, lies in the role of the person. Both theories tend to view the connection as deliberate, suggesting the person directs their attention to the salient stimuli. Finally, both theories maintain a degree of ambiguity regarding the responsiveness of the person, particularly in relation to a stimulus cuing a shift in identity.

Ontological perspectives in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

We suggested that explanations of salience are arranged along a continuum of objective to subjective ontological assumptions. The continuum indicates that explaining salience involves a web of perceptual, contextual and stimulus factors. Stimulus salience sits with the concrete, objective view of reality, while perceptual salience reflects a view of the world as subjectively perceived. Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory appear to both be positioned more subjective side of the continuum, but the exact ontological perspective of salience in each theory is not always clear.

We begin by outlining how each theory appears to view social reality to help reveal the underpinnings of the approach to salience. Identity Theory takes a view of society as stable, structured, and organised (Stryker & Stratham, 1985; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). While role theory, a root theory of identity theory, is criticised for an objective inert view of society, symbolic interactionism tends to be placed at the juncture between objective and subjective views of reality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The theory views the social world as a relatively concrete reality that may be identified, studied, and measured, while at the same time acknowledging that the world is open to change through the interpretations and actions of individuals (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

Social Identity Theory is located further to the subjective side of the continuum, reflecting the theory's more dynamic view of society and its origins in explaining inter-group competition (Hogg & Ridgeway, 2003; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). The theory appears to originate from a tradition that examines the interaction between the individual's subjective evaluation of their place in society and the wider structures that exist in society (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Turner et al. (1994) express how people dynamically construct and reconstruct their self in relation to their social context. Similarly, the social constructivist perspective describes a subjective reality where the 'social world is a continuous process, created afresh in each encounter of everyday life as individuals impose themselves on their world' (Morgan & Smircich, 1980, p. 494). More recently, Gergen (2003, p.

153) notes that we continuously move through life, facing new challenges and contexts and in each new location or context a 'reformation of self but for different purpose' occurs.

Ontological position of salience in Identity Theory
Identity Theory's treatment of salience reflects the theory's spanning of subjective and objective views of reality. Writers using Identity Theory express both objective and subjective views of salience, which could contribute to lack of clarity in the theory's use and explanation of salience.

Identity Theory seems to use salience in terms of the more central locations on the continuum where salience exists in relation to stimuli that have characteristics that stand out in the contextual field. The salience of stimuli is noted as subjectively determined in relation to a person's context, interpreted by the organisation and content of the individual's identities (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Cast and Burke's (2002) recent version of Identity Theory's behavioural feedback model shows that the salient stimuli of behaviour are perceived in the environment according to the individual's psychological constructs. The information the individual receives from their behavioural interaction with others leads them to adapt their behaviours, adjusting their definition of their identity standard and their expectations of their own and other's behaviour. On the other hand, stimuli in the environment are seen as also having characteristics that activate a response a, invoking an identity and the acting out of role behaviour appropriate to the situation (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Stryker, 1968).

Accordingly, we see a mixture of subjective and objective views of salience in Identity Theory. The view that the salience of behavioural stimuli in the person's context is interpreted subjectively according to that person's psychological content and expectations exists alongside the view that environmental stimuli can also activate an identity.

Ontological position of salience in Social Identity Theory
Unlike Identity Theory, where there is a mixture of objective and subjective ontological assumptions of salience, Social Identity Theory appears more on the

subjective side of the continuum, ranging between moderate and extreme subjective views of salience. However, recent uses of Social Identity Theory appear to be bringing an objective aspect to the theory's use of salience.

At the less extreme subjective end of the continuum, Social Identity Theory uses salience to refer to stimuli that have subjective characteristics in relation to the individual's contextual field. Individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a certain group in their context when they subjectively perceive that they share characteristics with a certain group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Depersonalisation reflects how a moment of salient connection contributes to the individual subjectively defining themselves according to the prototype of a certain group (Turner *et al*., 1987; Turner *et al*., 1994). Hogg and Terry (2001) describe how an individual's cognitive system, motivated to reduce uncertainty and enhance self-esteem, 'matches social categories to properties of the social context and brings into active use (i.e. makes salient) that category which renders the social context and one's place within it subjectively most meaningful' (p. 7). Salience is explained in terms of the comparisons individuals make between the groups in their context, subjectively perceiving similarities and differences between groups that make a group a salient stimulus with which the individual connects.

There are suggestions of a more extreme subjective view in Social Identity Theory – where salient stimuli have subjective characteristics determined in relation to an individual's psychological structure and content rather than in comparison with their contextual field. In other words, social categories are subjectively perceived as salient according to the individual's imaginative projection of their reality. This view also emphasises a person's 'deliberateness' in managing their connection with stimuli. Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe how people appear to engage in social creativity strategies if they perceive themselves as unable to move from a less desirable to a more desirable group. Such perceptual strategies may include creating different dimensions for comparing groups and changing their perception of the value of group members' common characteristics. Ellemers *et al*. (2002) note that creative perceptual coping responses include perceiving a context of individual heterogeneity rather then group similarity.

In contrast with Social Identity Theory's emphasis on a subjective view of salience, recent work using this theory appears to use salience in a more object manner. For instance, Hogg and Terry (2000a) suggest that changes in members of organisations may come about by manipulating the presence of the groups used for comparison in the organisational context. Stimuli in the context seem to be seen as having objective characteristics that can be changed to manipulate the salient connection with organisational members. Organisational identity-related literature may be taking an objective view of salience.

In summary, Social Identity Theory appears to have a subjective view of salience, showing that salient stimuli are either subjectively perceived in relation to the context or in relation to the person's psychological content and structure.

Table 2 compares the uses, elements, and ontological assumptions of salience in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. The table presents a brief, although perhaps oversimplified, summary of each theory's view of salience, highlighting differences between the theories. The table also suggests a tool for analysing other theories' use of salience.

	Identity Theory	Social Identity Theory
Uses of salience	▪ Central use of salience in terms of 'quantity' such that the position an identity holds in a hierarchy of identities determines the probability that the particular identity is activated. ▪ Secondary use of salience as a 'catalyst' such that a salient stimulus can activate an identity lower in the hierarchy of identities.	▪ Central use of salience in terms of 'connection' such that people engage in social comparison. ▪ Central use of salience in terms of 'catalyst' as through depersonalisation an individual perceives membership of the target group. ▪ Secondary use of salience in terms of 'quantity' as depersonalisation is considered a degree of conformity to the target group.
Elements of salience	▪ The focal stimuli are roles and self-representing behaviours. ▪ The person is a directed attender, actively seeing cues with relevance to self. ▪ The person may also be a passive observer in light of stimuli capable of evoking another identity.	▪ The focal stimuli are the categories that used to organise the world. ▪ The person is a directed attender, deriving categories and understanding through his or her framework of categories. ▪ The person may also be a passive observer, responsive to his or her immediate social context
Ontological position of salience	▪ Mixed representation of objective and subjective views of salience in the literature.	▪ Predominantly a subjective view of salience in the literature marked by recent movement toward an objective position.

Table 2: Salience in Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory

DISCUSSION

We suggest that both Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory lack clarity and consistency in their conceptualisation of salience. Further, because the theories seem to have unclear explanations and inconsistently use salience, recent theorising has become 'fuzzy' in its use of salience. We draw on two examples to illustrate — Hogg's (2001) application of Social Identity Theory to leadership and Ashforth's (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth *et al*., 2000) use of Identity Theory to explain the appearance of simultaneous identities and shifts between identities. Finally, we suggest that precisely defining salience as a moment-by-moment phenomenon of connection between a person and a stimulus distinguishes salience itself from precursors and outcomes of salience.

The analysis highlights areas where Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory lack consistency and clarity in their use of salience according to the ontological framework. To evaluate the results of the analysis we consider how well each theory answers our initial questions regarding the nature of identity, particularly whether an identity is triggered and governed by objects of salience or whether the active identity determines which stimulus is salient. Lack of clarity and consistency appear in at least three related areas: 1) the naming of salient stimuli and the use of the term 'salience'; 2) the use of salient stimuli as either subjective or objective and 3) whether the person-stimulus connection is one of 'responsiveness' or 'deliberateness'.

Each theory appears to have an unclear approach to naming salient stimuli. Our analysis suggests that Identity Theory uses the behaviour of oneself and of others as the salient stimuli. The behavioural feedback model developed Burke is the clearest presentation of behaviour as a salient stimulus (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Cast & Burke, 2002). As the person is connected with the behaviour of their self and others, they adapt their active identity and its associated role related behaviours. However, writers in the theory do not seem to name the behaviour as the salient stimulus. Rather, salience is seen as the potential or probability of enacting the behaviours related to an identity. Identity Theory seems to be quantifying a potentially salient stimulus, rather than naming salience itself. The identity that is acted out tends to be named the salient identity, but it is the behaviour, rather than the identity itself, that is the salient stimulus.

Social Identity Theory, on the other hand, seems clearer in that categories are the salient stimuli, but it is the overuse of the words salient and salience that clouds the construct's use. Social Identity Theory has two uses of salience - salience as connection and a catalyst of change. Social Identity Theory names the connections that occur when an individual makes intergroup comparisons as salience. An in-group or an out-group may be salient when the person is making a connection with a group as they evaluate and compare groups. A person's social identity is also salient when it connects and changes through depersonalisation with a certain group

prototype through the self-stereotyping process. This use of salience as a catalyst of change does not tend to be named salience in the theory, but rather the heuristic of salient identity is used. In addition, salience is used to refer to the potentiality of a group to be a salient stimulus, that is, the capacity of the group to invoke depersonalisation. Oakes (1987) defines this potentiality of salience as the combination of motives, accessibility and fit. Resulting from these multiple uses of salient and salience in the theory, each time the construct appears in social identity literature, one needs to consider whether salience is referring to the change that is the outcome of depersonalisation, the capacity of categories to invoke depersonalisation, or the connection a person is making with in-groups and out-groups.

The second and third areas lacking clarity and consistency are related. Each theory seems inconsistent on whether salient stimuli are on the objective or subjective side of the continuum. In Identity Theory, a person perceives and interprets subjectively salient stimuli (behaviour) in their context using their psychological constructs (called identity standards (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Cast & Burke, 2002) or identity schemas (Stryker & Serpe, 1994)). Also, objective stimuli in the context may at times invoke an identity and so role behaviours, in response. However, while Identity Theory's mix of objective and subjective salient stimuli reflects the theory's origins, the suggestion that identities may be simultaneously active due to one being perceptually salient and the other activated by objective stimuli conflicts with the proposed definition of salience as connection between a person and a salient stimuli that exists at a certain moment.

As Social Identity Theory is more firmly located on the subjective side of the continuum, the lack of clarity over explaining the connection with stimuli as a passive response or as a deliberate perceptual connection is more inconsistent. The theory emphasises subjective aspects of salience, for instance, a group category is salient when a person subjectively perceives a connection with that category. Turner *et al* (1994) asserts that depersonalisation with categories changes with the context, with categories being the individual's perceptions of 'social contextual definitions of the perceiver' (p. 458). In other words, using our framework, the person perceives the salient stimuli of categories according to their subjective perception of their broader

contextual field. However, recently the theory has been used to support suggestions that people respond to objective stimuli in their context and that altering the stimuli used for social comparison can cause people to change the groups they perceive as salient (Hogg & Terry, 2000a).

In summary, we could suggest that the theories are not always clear or consistent in explaining the nature of the connection between a person and a stimulus, particularly whether a person responds to a salient stimulus or whether a person subjectively determines the stimuli they subjectively connected.

An illustration

Reflecting this unclearness, recent use of salience seems to have become 'fuzzy'. Two recent articles provide illustration. Hogg (2001) proposes a Social Identity Theory of leadership as a group process arising from depersonalisation and social categorisation. Hogg suggests groups become more or less salient according to the extent group members conform to and are influenced by the group prototype. In other words, salience appears used as a variable quantity, rather than a connection or catalyst of change. The use of salience as 'more or less' departs from the categorising basis of SCT, where the person changes at some point to a social identity where they perceive similarities between their group as greater than differences between their group and other people at a certain point of time. Although Ashforth and Johnson (2001) claim to use SIT, SCT and IT, their approach reflects Identity Theory's hierarchy of identities. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) dispute that only one identity at a time is activated and suggest identities might be simultaneously salient or some identities even constantly salient. They propose two forms of identities – those that are subjectively important, that is, highly relevant to one's values and goals, and situationally relevant, that is, socially appropriate to a given situation. The subjectively important identity may be almost continuously present although not always active. The situationally relevant identity is used in the appropriate situation.

Building on our analysis of IT and SIT in relation to salience we might suggest that these articles are examples of using salience in indeterminate ways. Hogg (2001) emphasises self-stereotyping processes and the change of depersonalisation

as subjective perceptual processes, but then refers to salience as a quantity that there can be more or less of. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) suggest that salience varies in quantity, can be distributed amongst identities, and is activated either objectively as required by a situation or subjectively according to the individual's psychological constructs and their perceptions of their context. Ashforth and Johnson seem to be trying to explain how people seem to display simultaneous identities. We suggest that the phenomenon they might be attempting to take account of, but in too coarser terms, is the moment-by-moment changes in connections between an aspect of one's self, or an identity, and salient stimuli.

DISTINGUISHING THE PHENOMENON OF SALIENCE – IMPLICATIONS OF A SALIENCE FRAMEWORK

Finally, we suggest that precisely defining salience as a moment-by-moment connection between person and stimulus distinguishes the phenomenon of salience from its precursors and outcomes. Some of the variety observed in the use of salience, may be due to the phenomenon itself being 'mixed up' with factors that might lead to a certain salient connection and the outcomes of this connection. For example, Identity Theory defined salience as the probability of identities being activated – this suggests a view of salience as a precursor to a salient connection. In Social Identity Theory, salience as the combination of motives and accessibility and fit detailed by SCT refers to the combination of conditions that might lead to a salient connection with a certain category or group, not the moment of connection itself. In summary, there are several implications of this analysis of salience in relation to Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory.

A first implication

One obvious implication is that writers can use the framework to question, re-assess, and make clear their position(s) regarding salience. Specifically, writers need to consider whether they are treating salience as something that can be quantified, something that invokes a change, or something that is a connection. Writers also need to make clear what is the stimulus and what is the nature of the connection between the stimulus and a person – is it deliberate, shaped by the person's psychological constructs, or has the person's attention been captured by objectively

salient stimuli. Finally, writers need to consider and make clear their ontological stance toward salience, endeavouring to gain consistency.

A second implication

This last point provides us with our second implication – questioning and re-examining the treatment of salience could contribute to clarification and/or integration of Identity and Social Identity Theory. Both theories could be advanced if scholars engage in explanations that address inconsistencies of the subjective projection of reality accompanied by the imposition of objective realities. Engaging in points of inconsistency will advance understandings.

A third implication

Implicit in our creation of this paper is an implication that, as scholars of organisational phenomena, we need to better understand the salience construct. We believe salience is a central idea in both SIT and IT, addressing questions such as whether an identity is triggered by objects of salience or if the active identity determines which objects of salience gain attention. Moreover, if identity and identification are truly 'root' constructs, it follows that salience is a central idea for most every line of literature in micro-organisational theory.

In this paper, we have provided an initial framework for understanding and applying the salience construct. We urge scholars to engage the construct of salience. As a start, what follows is a set of propositions stemming from our framework that can be improved through further analytical review and empirical testing.

Proposition 1: Salience is the existence of a connection between a stimulus and a person

Proposition 2: The form of salient connection is iterative (that is, connections between stimuli and person change from moment to moment)

Proposition 3: The moment of the salient connection between a stimulus and a person is singular to that stimulus and that person (that is, two salient connections cannot occur at the exact same moment of time)

Proposition 4:   The nature of the salient connection varies according to whether a subjective or objective point of view is taken

CONCLUSION

Salience has been used in unclear, inconsistent, and undefined ways in identity-related literature. To begin a process of clarification, we propose a starting definition of salience that encompasses its temporal nature, the phenomenon of salience as a connection and the possible objective to subjective perspectives toward salience. Drawing on a range of literatures, we identified uses and elements of salience and developed an ontological framework to assist with analysing the use of salience in literature and theory. Use of the framework showed that Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory used salience in unclear and inconsistent ways. Although each theory has an underlying understanding of salience as connection, this can be lost amongst their imprecise use and overuse of the construct. We urge precision in the use of salience and suggest its use is accompanied by defining the elements of salience and considering the ontological perspective taken.

This paper proposes a fresh analytical perspective for examining how people interact with the stimuli in their world. The proposed definition and framework are only a starting point, and the research propositions suggest directions for testing, developing and advancing our understanding of the phenomenon of salience. Such an advance holds promise for the identity-related literature and beyond.

EndNotes

1. To draw out the differences in these three perspectives, we thought it useful to use examples from just one literature.

2. [1]Unlike the previous set of examples, in this set we decided to employ a wide range of literatures, thus providing a broad review across literatures that, often implicitly, rely upon the salience construct.

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