

Self-categorization Theory

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Self-categorization theory seeks to explain the assumptions that need to be made about psychological group formation in order to understand social categorization studies on intergroup behavior conducted by Henri Tajfel. To do this, self-categorization theory builds on the concepts of social identity theory and the assumption of an "interpersonal-intergroup continuum" of social behavior. It draws from the ideas of group psychology, individualism, and interactionism to produce a detailed model of social cognition. Due to the overlapping content of self-categorization theory and social identity theory, as well as their related origins, these two theories are sometimes referred to collectively as the social identity approach.

Theory

Self-categorization theory further develops social identity theory by noting that self-conception occurs on multiple levels of inclusiveness. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell suggest that there are at least three levels of self-categorization that serve as important factors in the social self-concept. The superordinate level of the self as human being bases self-categorization on one's identity as a human being with similarities to other humans versus alternate life forms. The intermediate level of ingroup-outgroup categorizations is based on social similarities and differences. This intermediate level focuses on the membership in social groups such as classifying oneself as African-American, male, or working class. The subordinate level of personal self-categorizations is based on differences between the person as a unique individual and other ingroup members.

According to the theory, people self-categorize "depending on whether a social categorization into ingroup and outgroup can meaningfully be applied to the current social context". In one setting, it may be more advantageous for someone to group himself according to race whereas in another setting, benefit may be derived from categorizing himself based on educational experience. People may also categorize themselves within a subset of a larger group in a nested pattern of sorts, choosing to identify with a smaller group to which positive attributes are ascribed, but dissociate from the broader, encompassing group to which negative attributes are attached. The idea is that there is a tendency for one to categorize himself in the group that will provide association with a higher status.

Where there are groups similar to the one in which a person has categorized himself, the theory asserts that the ingroup will seek to distinguish itself from the outgroup by attributing negative distinctions to the outgroup or bolstering the positive aspects of the ingroup. In this way, the member of the ingroup is able to construct a group prototype, defined as "a fuzzy set of features defining and prescribing essential properties of the group". These prototypes are based on the metacontrast principle which contends that people "maximize the ratio of intergroup differences to intragroup differences". By establishing such a ratio of differences, the group is capable of appearing as coherent and distinct with structure and clear boundaries.

In the sense that the group prototypes describe members and their behavior, these prototypes can also stipulate appropriate behavior for ingroup members and outgroup members. This, in turn, aids in group distinctiveness and positive differentiation as a strategy for intergroup comparison. Operating upon group prototypes, members will begin to see and describe themselves in group terms rather than as an individual member. In this way, the group member has formed stereotypes of themselves within the ingroup (self-stereotyping) and stereotypes of the outgroup. This directly corresponds to the claim that self-categorization "depersonalizes perception and conduct such that members, including oneself, are not processed as complex, multidimensional whole persons but rather as embodiments of the contextually salient group prototype."