

Social Identity

Authored by
mohammad looti

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A Social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group. As originally formulated by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the 1970s and 80s social identity theory introduced the concept of a social identity as a way in which to explain intergroup behaviour. Since its inception the theory and concept have seen extensive use and development by researchers across the world, both within social psychology and in other academic fields. Despite the ongoing evolution of these ideas, social identity theory may still be described as primarily a theory of when and why individuals identify with, and behave as part of a social entity (small or large group, status).

Evolution of social identity theory

Historical background

Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt is often credited with being the founder of experimental psychology. Wundt believed experimental psychology and social psychology to be two separate entities. He believed social psychology to be the study of mental products created by a community and therefore inexplicably based on the consciousness of the individual, since the reciprocal actions of many are involved. He believed social psychology to entail collective phenomena, such as language, religion, customs, and myths, which could not be interpreted in terms of the psychology of individuals. Experimental psychology to him was thus the psychology of the individual.

Émile Durkheim was influenced by Wundt in the mid-1880s in terms of his idea of collective phenomena, which Durkheim also believed could not be understood in terms of the psychology of the individual. He believed that the study of public knowledge or collective representations was in the realm of the new study of sociology, while the study of private beliefs or individual representations was still in the realm of psychology. Durkheim identified sociology and psychology as two separate domains. Some believe this separation between the two disciplines at such an early stage enabled the development of two different forms of psychology: one as a subcategory of psychology and the other as a subcategory of sociology.

In 1921, William McDougall provided one of the most influential collectivist accounts. As seen in McDougall's book, "The Group Mind", he believed, as the result of the many interactions between individuals, a "group mind" was created. The group mind has a reality and existence different from the isolated individuals making up the group. McDougall, like Wundt and Durkheim, believed that it was not possible to study human interaction by studying the psychology of individuals. McDougall's notion of a group mind received much criticism, as others interpreted it as a free-floating entity beyond psychology (though McDougall had no intentions of referring it as such). As a result of this misinterpretation, McDougall's approach was discredited.

Collectivist approaches to social psychology in the works of Wundt and Durkheim can be directly

traced through to George Herbert Mead, who further developed the perspective around the early 1930s. Instead of trying to separate the mind from society, Mead strove to understand how the two were related. In Mead's opinion, society influences individuals through self-conception. This self-conception is constantly modified through interpersonal interactions. Mead further developed the concept William James introduced in 1890 of distinguishing between "self as a stream of consciousness, I, and self as an object of perception, me." Mead suggested that since we often see ourselves as category representatives, it is more accurately seen as a collective me, or even us. Societal representations of the world are exchanged through symbolic interaction. In order to be done effectively, we need to take the role of the other and therefore see ourselves as others do and ultimately as society does.

By the late 1920s, the collectivist perspective had all but disappeared from mainstream social psychology. However, there were occasional attempts to challenge the dominant individualist approach. During the 1960s, there appeared a widespread confrontation, which, with the help of other developments, produced what we know as the social identity theory. The social identity theory was an attempt to reestablish a more collectivist approach to social psychology of the self and social groups.

Development of Tajfel's theory

Summary of the main concepts discussed in Henri Tajfel's theory of social identity

From his early perceptual research around 1959, Henri Tajfel derived that "the categorization of stimuli produces a perceptual accentuation effect in which intra-category similarities among stimuli and inter-category difference among stimuli are accentuated on dimensions believed to be correlated with the categorization. " When the categories or the correlated dimensions are seen as significant to the perceiver, the effect is further intensified. Tajfel believed this effect is actually represented by both physical and social perception. However, social perception is much stronger because the concept of self is involved since the perceiver usually falls within one of the social categories.

Around 1969, Tajfel's research was focused on exploring the cognitive aspects of prejudice and stereotyping, since he was trying to develop a cognitive theory of stereotyping. Tajfel believed that purely cognitive analysis was an inadequate explanation of stereotyping. In his opinion, social functions of stereotypes, such as justification, causal attribution, and social differentiation, should also be explored in order to obtain a more complete analysis. Tajfel noted that stereotypes were often widely shared images of different social groups. Therefore, any analysis of stereotyping needed to be established in the broader analysis of intergroup relations in order to incorporate the shared characteristic of stereotyping.

In 1972, Tajfel introduced the term social identity to move from social and inter-group perceptions to how the self is a system of social categorizations, which create and define an individual's place in society. He defined social identity as the part of an individual's self-perception that arises from "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this membership." Tajfel also stated his theory of social identity is "based on the simple motivation assumption that individuals prefer a positive to a negative self-image."

During Tajfel's early research, he found that by merely assigning participants into groups can result in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. In his initial experimental paradigm, participants are randomly assigned to two different non-overlapping groups. Participants are then asked to make decisions to award two other participants other than themselves some monetary amount. The only information given to the participant is the other members' group membership and their member number. Even though it was not forced upon participants to give in-group members more and out-group members relatively less, the results showed exactly that had happened. Tajfel concluded that mere assignment to different groups results in in-group bias and out-group discrimination. This phenomenon was known as the minimal group paradigm.

Factors affecting social identity

Self-categorization theory

The self-categorization theory is a set of social psychology-related assumptions about the functioning of the social self-concept, which is a concept of self based on the comparison of self to others, which is directly related to social interactions. John Turner and colleagues developed the theory in part to provide a more detailed account of the cognitive processes that underpinned the findings of social identity theory. Self-categorization theory, also known as the social identity theory of the group, rests on basic assumptions in social psychology, such as that the self-concept is the cognitive component of the psychological process of self, that the self-concept comprises many different components, and that the functioning of the self-concept is situation-specific. Social categorization theory assumes that the cognitive representations of self take the form of cognitive groupings of oneself and that self-categorizations can exist as a part of a hierarchical system of classification. Finally it assumes that there are at least three different levels of abstractions of self-categorization that are important in the social self-concept-the superordinate level of the self as a human being, the intermediate level of in-group/out-group categorizations based on perceived differences and similarities in some social characteristics, which might define one as a member of certain social groups but not others, and finally the subordinate level of personal self-categorizations based on "differentiations between oneself as a unique individual and other in-group members that define one as a specific individual person." Self-categorization theory is sometimes considered to be a cousin theory of social identity theory and together they have been

referred to as the social identity approach.

Social identity model of deindividuation effects

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) was developed from further research on the social identity theory and the self-categorization theory, further specifying the effects of situational factors on the functioning of processes proposed by the two theories. The SIDE model uses this framework to explain cognitive effects of visibility and anonymity in intra-group and inter-group contexts. The model is based on the idea that the self-concept is flexible and different in different situations or contexts. The theory consists of a range of different self-categories that define people as unique individuals or in terms of their membership to specific social groups and other, broader social categories based on the context of the situation. The SIDE model proposes that anonymity shifts both the focus of self-awareness from the individual self to the group self and the perceptions of others from being mostly interpersonal to being group-based (stereotyping).

Research done by Martin Lea, Russell Spears, and Daphne de Groot has suggested that visual anonymity not only increases negative behavior towards others, but also can also promote positive social relations. In their study, all volunteers participated individually in group three group discussion based on three different topics. In the visually anonymous condition, all communications between participants were text-based while in the visually identifiable condition, the communication was also supplemented by two-way video cameras. The study resulted in the findings that showed anonymity significantly increased group attraction.

Intergroup emotion theory

Intergroup emotion theory further expands on the concept of personally significant group memberships as posed by social identity and self-categorization theories. This theory is based on the concept that "when individuals categorize themselves as members of a group, they regard themselves as relatively interchangeable exemplars of the group rather than as unique individuals." This causes cognitive representations of the self and the group to become inevitably connected, and therefore the group obtains an emotional significance. This means that individuals not only categorize themselves as members of the in-group but also "react emotionally when situations or events affect the in-group". For example, people often report that their group is being discriminated against, even though they feel that they personally are not subject to that discrimination.

Optimal distinctiveness

According to the theory of optimal distinctiveness, "an individual's sense of self is shaped by

opposing needs to assimilation and differentiation between the self and others." Assimilation is the inclusion of the self and others in social categories based on similarities. Differentiation is the exclusion of others from based on what defines the self. The model is based on the assumption that differentiation and assimilation are opposing processes. As an individual moves towards excessively increased deindividuation of the self, the opposing process of individuation becomes activated. This is similar for excessively increased individuation, since as it will activate the process of deindividuation. Optimal distinctiveness is achieved when the exact amount of assimilation is achieved with a perfect complementary amount of differentiation. In other words, optimal distinctiveness is "achieved through identification with social categories at that level of inclusiveness where the degree of satisfaction of the need for differentiation and the need for assimilation is exactly equal."

The self-esteem hypothesis

The self-esteem hypothesis is one of the most studied explanations for in-group bias. Social identity theory proposes that people are motivated to achieve and maintain positive concepts of themselves. Since people's social identities are component of their personal identities and self concepts, having a positive social identity will result in a more positive self-esteem. When one's in-group does well, the members of the in-group feel good about themselves and their self-esteems become more positive. Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams believe that self-esteem affects in-group bias in three ways: demonstrating the in-group's success or superiority will increase positive social identity. which in turn increases positive self-esteem, engaging in inter-group bias can raise self-esteem, and people defend their self-esteem through inter-group bias when people's self-esteem is threatened.

Competition

Competition is a contest between individuals for limited resources, such as water and land. Under social identity theory, competition has been presented as an explanation for what causes people to perceive others as members of their own or other groups; those that compete rather than cooperate are more likely to be viewed as different from the in-group. Additionally, competition has been presented as a way for groups to maintain positive social identity and as a way to improve status in the social hierarchy.

Consequences

Prejudice

Prejudice is drawing (typically) negative assumptions about someone or something before having

enough information to guarantee accuracy of those judgments. In respect to social identity, the integrated threat theory of prejudice states that four types of perceived threats felt from an out-group act as triggers for inter-group prejudice: realistic threats (those to body and possessions, for example), symbolic threats (those to ways of life), inter-group anxiety, and negative stereotypes. In studies of cultural prejudice, not all four types of threats need to be involved for prejudice to be observed. Additional research in cultural prejudice discovered that realistic threats have larger impacts on prejudice displayed by people who highly identify with the in-group, symbolic threats and negative stereotypes have no significant effect differences between high and low identifiers, and inter-group anxiety plays a more significant role for low identifiers.

Additionally, social identity influences the perception of a person being prejudiced. In-group members tend to give each other the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous situations, attributing events to external rather than internal causes. As such, research shows that people who share in-group status with the potential targets of potentially prejudicial behavior, as well as people who display moral credentials, are less likely to be judged as prejudiced by in-group members than by out-group members.

In-group bias

In-group bias is the tendency for people to give preferential treatment to others when they are perceived to be in similar groups. This includes both separation into groups by arbitrary distinctions (such as a coin toss splitting groups into 'heads' and 'tails') and non-arbitrary distinctions (such as dividing between cultures, genders, and first languages) distinctions. Studies have shown that out-group members are more likely to be discriminated against than in-group members, due to favoritism displayed towards in-group members. Additional research has shown that in-group bias is stronger when social identity is salient.

Out-group homogeneity effect

In-group members view themselves as more varied than they do members of out-groups. Some theories attribute these differences to a simple difference in the volume of information known about in-group members versus out-group members. In others, this difference is attributed to differences in how people store or process in-group versus out-group information. However, this concept has been challenged due to some cases in which in-groups view themselves as homogeneous. Researchers have postulated that such an effect is present when viewing a group as homogenous helps to promote in-group solidarity. Experiments on the topic found that in-group homogeneity is displayed when people who highly identify with a group are presented with stereotypical information about that group. Further criticisms mention that Turner's concept of depersonalization of the self results in relatively similar homogeneity evaluations of in-groups and out-groups when

performing intra-group comparisons.

Out-group homogeneity has also been implicated in stereotypes.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating is the process of blaming or even punishing an innocent out-group for the misfortunes of one's in-group. For example, one of the most infamous cases of scapegoating occurred when the Nazis blamed the Jewish for causing all the economic and social problems happening in Germany during that time. The frustration-aggression-displacement theory was one of the first theories attempting to explain scapegoating. This theory states that frustration causes aggression. The obvious preferred target of the aggression is the cause of the frustration. However, when the original cause is not readily targeted, the aggression will then be place on a more available target.

Relative deprivation

The theory of relative deprivation is based on the concepts that deprivation is not absolute, but relative. Individuals feel different degrees of deprivation based on relative comparisons. The theory of relative deprivation is based on the fact that people become dissatisfied with the outcomes of their situations when they compare them to relative comparisons, either to their own past, similar situations or to other people who have resources they believe they deserve. If they believe they are getting less than their perceived standards, they feel deprived of what they believe is theirs. Individuals can also feel deprived if they see that others have something they do not have and desire it. If these individuals believe they are deprived as the result of another group, then hatred towards that group is developed.

Leadership

According to social identity theory, leadership is a function of the group instead of the individual. Individuals who are leaders in their groups tend to be closer to the prototypical group member than are followers. Additionally, they tend to be more socially attractive, which makes it easier for group members to accept their authority and comply with their decisions. Finally, leaders tend to be viewed by others as the leader. In this final distinction, group members attribute leadership traits to the person and not the situation, furthering the distinction between the leader and others in the group by viewing him or her as special. Consistent with this view of leadership, researchers have found that individuals can manipulate their own leadership status in groups by portraying themselves as prototypical to the group.

Hate group membership

Ku Klux Klan hate group membership

Membership to groups like the Ku Klux Klan are often the result of feelings of deprivation believed to be caused by out-groups.

Hate groups are organizations "whose central principles include hostility toward racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups" and "represent an extreme form of social identity." Most hate groups are based on White racial supremacy and the support of the segregation or deportation, sometimes even the annihilation, of minorities. People often join hate groups because they are in search of answers and solutions to life's questions and problems, because they feel the need to rebel, because they are attracted to the violent images of hate groups, or some combination of the three. Hate group members usually strongly associate themselves with their groups. They base their actions on what they believe the principles and goals of the group are.

In economics

In the sphere of economics, two separate papers and a book by Akerlof and Kranton incorporate social identity as a factor in the principal-agent model. The main conclusion is that when agents consider themselves insiders, they will maximize their identity utility by exerting greater effort compared to the prescription behavior. On the other hand, if they consider themselves outsiders, they will require a higher wage to compensate their loss for behavior difference with prescribed behaviors.

Modern developments

Since Tajfel's introduction of the social identity concept, researchers have explored how it fits in with other social psychological theories, helping to address concerns of problems falsifying the theory by further understanding the relationship between social identity and other socially oriented theories that influence group and individual behaviors, along with looking at how various aspects of social interactions fit in with it. Modern researchers are attempting to address the broad criticisms of the theory.

Criticisms

Social identity theory attempted to return to collectivist views of groups from the more individualistic approaches of the time. Many critics of the theory find issue with individualism being overridden by salient social identity. Others criticize it for being overextended in its present form, making the theory difficult to falsify. This difficulty has been further shown by studies that seem to challenge

social identity's self esteem hypothesis and plausible ties between group identification and in-group bias, to name a few. These discoveries "against" social identity theory have been dismissed by John Turner, as they are focused on topics non-explicitly stated within the theory.

In criticisms unaddressed by Tajfel and Turner, additional challenges arise for researchers to address in the context of social identity. For example, in-group bias is one often-touted component of social identity; groups can feel better about themselves by rewarding themselves more than out-groups. Research has indicated that the opposite does not hold. In what has been dubbed the Positive-Negative Asymmetry Phenomenon, researchers have shown that punishing the in-group less benefits esteem less than does rewarding the in-group more. Further challenges have arisen in studies of inter-group similarity, with some studies counterintuitively finding that groups that perceive themselves as similar to other groups show increased levels of inter-group attraction and decreased levels of in-group bias. Social identity would suggest that these groups should have increased motivation to differentiate themselves.