

Identity – Social Psychological Aspects

Rusi Jaspal

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

rjaspal@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract:

The concept of “identity” is most relevant to the domains of “race”, ethnicity and nation, given that these social categories can gain particular social and psychological traction when they are construed as forms of self-definition. This essay provides a brief overview of social psychological approaches to identity, focusing specifically upon the contribution of Identity Process Theory (IPT) to the social psychology of identity. It is argued that an integrative theory such as IPT is necessary for a holistic understanding of the antecedents and consequences of identity in relation to “race”, ethnicity and nationalism.

Main text:

We live in an ever-changing social world, which constantly calls forth changes to our perceptions, identities and actions. Advances in science, technology and medicine, political upheaval and economic development are just some examples of social change that can impact upon how we live our lives, how we view ourselves and each other and how we communicate. Social change can result in the salience and visibility of particular social categories, changes in the assimilation, accommodation and evaluation of these categories and new patterns of self-perception. Nowhere is the concept of identity more relevant than in the domains of “race”, ethnicity and nation. When these categories are transformed into identities, they can dramatically affect our sense of self, potentially forcing us to rethink who we are, our relationships with others and intergroup relations. There is now a great deal of social psychological research into identity, addressing its distinct levels and dimensions, from a variety of philosophical, epistemological and methodological perspectives (see Schwartz, Luyckz and Vignoles, 2011; Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014), some of which focuses upon the specific contexts of “race”, ethnicity and nation (Verkuyten, 2005). This essay considers the contribution of Social Identity Theory and Identity Process Theory to the social psychology of identity.

Much contemporary social psychological research into identity tends to focus upon *social identity*. This form of self-definition encourages the individual to focus primarily upon their identity as a group member, rather than as a unique and distinctive individual. Since the mid-1970s, much social psychological theory and research on identity had come to be dominated by the Social Identity Approach, consisting initially of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) and subsequently of Self-Categorization Theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Both theories have been elaborately discussed elsewhere (Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Pehrson and Reicher, 2014), but two key assumptions are noteworthy. Firstly, individuals are motivated to derive positive distinctiveness through identification with social categories and, secondly, they engage in three strategies – individual mobility, social creativity and social competition - in order to safeguard positive distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Although the Social Identity Approach is often deployed as a theory of identity, Henri Tajfel actually intended to develop a theory of intergroup relations. He intended only to explain one aspect of the self, namely 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, 1978: 63). Accordingly, it goes without saying that the Social Identity Approach has proven a very useful tool for examining identification with racial,

ethnic and national categories, given that these are *social categories*, as well as intergroup relations in these contexts.

Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014) provides a holistic model of (1) the structure of identity, namely its content and value dimensions and the centrality and salience of identity components; (2) the interaction of social and psychological factors in the production of identity content; (3) the interrelations between identity and action. A key assumption of the theory is that, in order to understand the processes that drive identity construction, it is necessary to examine how individuals react when identity is threatened (Breakwell, 2010). IPT has been fruitfully applied to issues of “race”, ethnicity and nation (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2012; Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011; Lyons, 1996; Oren and Bar-Tal, 2014). The theory proposes that the structure of self-identity should be conceptualized in terms of its content and value/affect dimensions and that this structure is regulated by two universal processes, namely *assimilation–accommodation* and *evaluation*. The assimilation–accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. beginning of think of oneself as Scottish) and the identity adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure (e.g. seeing oneself as Scottish and, thus, *not* as British). The evaluation process confers meaning and value on the contents of identity (e.g. viewing one’s Scottishness as a positive and empowering aspect of the self).

Breakwell (1986) originally identified four identity principles which guide these universal processes of identity: (1) continuity across time and situation (*continuity*); (2) uniqueness or distinctiveness from others (*distinctiveness*); (3) feeling confident and in control of one’s life (*self-efficacy*); and (4) feelings of personal worth (*self-esteem*). More recently, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) proposed the psychological coherence principle, which refers to the motivation to establish feelings of compatibility between (interconnected) identities. On the basis of previous empirical research (Vignoles et al., 2006), it is plausible to assume that the more a given social group membership – racial, ethnic, national – serves the identity principles, the stronger one’s identification with that social group will be. For instance, according to the caste system in India, some caste groups are socially stigmatised and considered to be “inferior” in the caste hierarchy, but members of stigmatised caste groups may continue to regard this group membership as *central* to their identity. This may be attributed to the fact that one’s caste group membership (regardless of its position within the caste hierarchy) may provide one with feelings of continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Jaspal, 2011). Thus, IPT provides insight into the potential *motivations* underlying identification.

A core prediction of IPT is that if the universal processes cannot comply with the motivational principles of identity, for whatever reason, identity is threatened and the individual will engage in strategies for coping with the threat. A coping strategy is defined as “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (Breakwell, 1986:78). Coping with identity threat can radically affect the ways in which people engage with other racial, ethnic and national groups.

Coping strategies can function at three levels – intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup. *Compartmentalism* is an intra-psychic strategy which entails the cognitive separation of identity elements in the individual’s mind. For instance, it has been observed that, given the perceived incompatibility of their ethnic and sexual identities, non-heterosexual individuals of Indian descent may compartmentalize these identities in order to avoid having to take a stance on the compatibility of these identities and thereby minimise threats to the psychological coherence principle of identity (Jaspal, 2012). *Passing* is an interpersonal strategy, whereby individuals

succeed in “gaining exit from the threatening position through deceit” and enter “a new interpersonal network” on false premises (Breakwell, 1986: 116). For instance, given the stigma appended to black identity, which resulted in threats to multiple principles of identity, some African Americans concealed their black identity and passed themselves off as white as a means of minimizing identity threat. Group action is an intergroup coping strategy, which involves the mobilization of group members in a collective bid to curtail threats to identity. For instance, in the years leading to the independence of Bangladesh, East Pakistanis clearly perceived threats to the distinctiveness and continuity of their Bengali ethnic identity and to their self-esteem and self-efficacy on the basis of out-group stigma attributed to their ethnic identity, which led to widespread ethnic mobilization in the form of the Bengali nationalist movement.

Social psychological approaches to identity have tended to focus upon distinct dimensions – group versus individual; social versus psychological; cognitive versus rhetorical; consequences versus antecedents. Each of these approaches has made fruitful contributions to our understanding of the social psychology of identity, but none provides a holistic explanation of identity, which is particularly necessary in complex and multifaceted areas of study, such as that of “race”, ethnicity and nation. Conversely, Identity Process Theory seeks to integrate the various dimensions that are clearly central to identity and provides an elaborate explanation of what motivates identification with social categories, such as “race”, ethnicity and nation and what can happen – socially and psychologically – when identification with valued social categories is somehow disrupted by changes in one’s social and psychological environment.

References:

- Breakwell, G.M. 1986. *Coping with threatened identities*. London: Methuen.
- Breakwell, G.M. 2010. “Resisting representations and identity processes.” *Papers on Social Representations* 19: 6.1-6.11.
- Brown, R. 2000. “Social identity theory: past achievements, current problems and future challenges.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30: 745-778.
- Hornsey, M. J. 2008. “Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: a historical review.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2(1): 204-222.
- Jaspal, R. 2011. “Caste, social stigma and identity processes.” *Psychology and Developing Societies* 23(2): 27-62.
- Jaspal, R. 2012. “‘I never faced up to being gay’: Sexual, religious and ethnic identities among British South Asian gay men.” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 14(7): 767-80.
- Jaspal, R., and G.M. Breakwell, eds. 2014. *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jaspal, R., and M. Cinnirella. 2010. “Coping with potentially incompatible identities: accounts of religious, ethnic and sexual identities from British Pakistani men who identify as Muslim and gay.” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49(4): 849-870.
- Jaspal, R., and M. Cinnirella. 2012. “The construction of ethnic identity: insights from identity process theory.” *Ethnicities* 12(5): 503-30.
- Jaspal, R., and M. Yampolsky. 2011. “Social representations of the Holocaust and Jewish Israeli identity construction: insights from identity process theory.” *Social Identities* 17(2): 201-224.
- Lyons, E. 1996. “Coping with social change: processes of social memory in the reconstruction of identities.” In *Changing European Identities: socio-psychological analyses of social change*, edited by G.M. Breakwell and E. Lyons, 31-40. Oxford: Butterworth- Heinemann.

- Oren, N., and D. Bar-Tal. 2014. "Collective identity and intractable conflict." In *Identity process theory: identity, social action and social change*, edited by R. Jaspal and G.M. Breakwell, 222-252. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pehrson, S., and S. Reicher. 2014. "On the meaning, validity and importance of the distinction between personal and social identity: a social identity perspective on Identity Process Theory." In *Identity process theory: identity, social action and social change*, edited by R. Jaspal and G.M. Breakwell, 97-117. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schwartz, S.J, K. Luyckx, and V.L. Vignoles, eds. 2011. *Handbook of identity theory and research*. New York: Springer.
- Tajfel, H., ed. 1978. *Differentiation between social groups: studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. London: Academic Press.
- Tajfel, H., and J. C. Turner. 1979. "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict." In *Social psychology of intergroup relations*, edited by W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, 33-48. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Turner, J. C., M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher, and M. S. Wetherell. 1987. *Rediscovering the social group: a self-categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Verkuyten, M. 2005. *The social psychology of ethnic identity*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Vignoles, V. L., C. Regalia, C. Manzi, J. Gollidge, and E. Scabini. 2006. "Beyond self-esteem: influence of multiple motives on identity construction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 308-333.