

### Social Identity Theory

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Political psychology focuses upon a diverse range of contexts, including leadership, policy making, nationalism, racism, political extremism, war, genocide, voting, group mobilization and many others. Given the centrality of the social political *group* in many of these contexts, theories of intergroup relations have proven to be very useful in political psychology research. In attempting to elucidate the origins and mechanisms of discrimination and ingroup favoritism, the Polish-born British social psychologist Henri Tajfel, in collaboration with John Turner and some other European social psychologists, developed Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the 1970s, which has since become one of the most important theories of intergroup relations in social and political psychology. As a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Tajfel had himself witnessed some of the tragic consequences of social identification, ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. He returned to his hometown after the Second World War to find that most of his family members had been murdered under the Nazi's genocidal extermination program against the Jews. Tajfel had personally experienced the process whereby people cease to be considered in terms of their individuality in favor of their group membership. In the case of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, their categorization as Jews, a highly stigmatized social group membership in the Nazi ideology, resulted in their demonization and mass murder.

The evolution of social identity theory was part of a larger movement in the 1960s and 1970s to establish a European social psychology, distinct from the social psychology of the United States. This was a case of scholars, including Henri Tajfel, Serge Moscovici, and Willem Doise, launching a research movement that was political in intentions: establishing an alternative to what they saw as the 'individualistic' and 'reductionist' social psychology of the United States. In addition to launching the *European Journal of Social Psychology* in 1971, they published a series of books to develop a distinct European social psychology, starting with a kind of manifesto text entitled '*The Context of Social Psychology*' (1972).

Henri Tajfel, John Turner, and their associates set out to develop a theory that could explain the processes that can culminate in these extreme actions. Although the Social Identity Approach is often deployed as a theory of identity, he intended to develop a theory of *intergroup relations*. The theory was 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 [or her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 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. In this entry, key tenets of SIT are outlined and described. An additional aim of the entry is to elucidate the potential contribution of SIT to understanding political psychological phenomena, as well as its limitations.

#### What is social identity?

Much contemporary political psychological research into identity tends to focus upon *social identity*, that is, the group memberships that we have and how they come to define us as individuals. A key tenet of SIT is that the world is composed of various social categories which differ in terms of their status and power. As people come to identify with these social categories, they experience a cognitive re-definition of their sense of self in terms of their group memberships, rather than personality and other individual traits. In short, 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. As one's group memberships become salient, one is motivated to engage *intergroup behavior*. One begins to see oneself and others as members of the *ingroup* or *outgroup* and to behave accordingly.

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Political events provide stark evidence of this process. In 1947, as the Indian state of Punjab was partitioned to create the Muslim-majority independent nation state of Pakistan, this cognitive redefinition of the self in terms of group memberships was seen in the clearest terms. It gave rise to tragic outcomes - friends and neighbors who had formerly perceived themselves and each other as residents of the same village, who spoke the same language and ate the same food, suddenly divided themselves and each other into dichotomous religious categories: Muslim or Hindu/Sikh. Friend became foe because of this cognitive redefinition. Fellow villagers became religious and national outgroups. The communal intergroup violence that accompanied the 1947 Partition resulted in approximately 1,000,000 deaths.

### **Social identity processes**

In seeking to describe and theorize the social and psychological processes that underpin political events and behaviors of this kind, Tajfel and his colleagues developed SIT, which has been elaborately discussed elsewhere (Brown, 2000; Pehrson and Reicher, 2014). However, in outlining the theory, it is useful to point to two key processes: social categorization and social comparison.

*Social categorization* is essentially cognitive process that enables the individual to simplify the social world by slotting social stimuli (including themselves and others) into *categories*. The individual is, thus, able to order the social environment and anticipate patterns of action and behavior in interactions with these stimuli. For instance, in work on antisemitism in Iran, it has been found that in circumstances where Iranian Jews are categorized by Iranian Muslims as fellow Iranians (that is, in terms of their national identity) they perceived a greater sense of belonging, acceptance and inclusion than when their Jewish identity is rendered salient (Jaspal, 2016). This can be attributed to the fact that people attenuate differences between stimuli within the same category (referred to as “accentuation”) and that they accentuate differences between stimuli in different categories (that is “contrast”). Thus, the Iranian Muslim who perceives Iranian Jews first and foremost as fellow Iranians will regard fewer differences between himself and Iranian Jews, whereas the Iranian Muslim who perceives Jewish co-nationals in terms of their Jewish religious identity will perceive Iranian Jews as different from himself.

There are a series of factors that can determine how we categorize social stimuli and indeed other people. Political rhetoric, individual motivations, social representations and ideology are just some of the determinants of this social psychological process. This highlights the important role of social representations, consisting of norms, values, images and ideologies, in social identity formation (Breakwell, 1986). A promising area of research that draws upon SIT specifies some of the ways in which individuals might come to categorize themselves and others in sufficiently inclusive terms so that they can construct a high-level *superordinate identity* – the Common Ingroup Identity Model suggests that higher-level categorization can reduce intergroup tensions (e.g. Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

*Social comparison* enables the individual to evaluate categories that emerge from the social categorization process. Crucially, the knowledge that people derive concerning these categories is socially determined - it is contingent upon the frame of reference one employs. As we begin to categorize ourselves primarily as group members, our own sense of self becomes entwined with, and dependent upon, the fate of our group as a whole. When our group excels, we feel good about ourselves. When it does badly, this has a negative effect on us personally. Typically, the individual is motivated to evaluate their own ingroup more positively than outgroups as this provides feelings of self-esteem. It is, however, acknowledged that self-esteem is not the only motivational force in social comparison (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The downward comparison principle, which is derived from SIT, suggests that individuals compare their ingroup with outgroups on dimensions in which they will perform favorably. For instance, in recent research into caste identity among Indians (Jaspal & Takhar, 2016), it was found that members of traditionally “lower” caste groups often accentuated tenets of their caste group that could differentiate it positively from groups traditionally regarded as being “higher” in the caste hierarchy. In political contexts, human beings are thus motivated to attenuate negative aspects of their ingroup’s history, which has been starkly demonstrated in contexts of national guilt surrounding ingroup atrocities, for instance (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004).

In addition to self-esteem, the need for intergroup distinctiveness is an important principle of SIT. Studies have shown that people engage in intergroup behaviour in order to establish a sense of positive distinctiveness within the context of their intergroup comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In SIT, it is often suggested that the need for distinctiveness is entwined with the drive for self-esteem

since it is *positive* distinctiveness that one seeks. Research into the distinctiveness principle has recognized that it can be construed on both individual and group levels (Vignoles, Chrysochoou & Breakwell, 2000). In collectivist societies, in particular, distinctiveness may be derived from perceived difference and separateness on the basis of one's group membership (that is, in opposition to outgroups). It is also true that one's group membership(s) can contribute to the individual's sense of personal distinctiveness vis-à-vis other individuals who may not share these particular group memberships. For instance, the Jewish theological belief that Jews were chosen to be in a covenant with God may plausibly contribute to the perception that this "special" group membership provides a sense of distinctiveness.

The two processes interact to create social identification and, thus, intergroup behavior. Categorization is conducive to the perception of oneself and others in terms of group-level stereotypes, while comparison enables individuals to derive positive distinctiveness by accentuating differences between our ingroup and relevant outgroups. Intergroup behavior varies in accordance with time and context, as *change* is inevitable and inherent to every socio-political system.

### **Social identity and socio-political change**

Theories of intergroup behavior, including SIT, often acknowledge that groups are not all evaluated in equal terms. Some are regarded as "high-status" while others are relegated to lower positions in the social hierarchy. Caste constitutes an excellent example of how groups within a social system differ in terms of their social status. Given the motivation that individuals have to feel good about their groups and, thus, themselves, it is logical that they should wish to create an improvement in the *status quo*. SIT elaborates its explanation of how individuals seek to cope with low group status by focusing on the belief systems that are held and indeed promoted ideologically. More specifically, the theory refers to the *social mobility belief system* and the *social creativity belief system*.

In some cases, individuals perceive group boundaries to be permeable, that is, they believe that their group membership is not fixed and can therefore be abandoned. Consequently, members of low-status groups may decide to leave their group and to join a higher-status one, thereby obviating the need to personalize to the individual self the poor status of the group. Indeed, this is observable in cases of social class mobility – a working-class individual may decide to go to university, secure professional employment, move to an affluent area, and begin to self-identify as middle class. Moreover, he or she may actively disidentify with former ingroup members, that is, other working class individuals. Similarly, in social psychological research into the identities of British Muslim gay men (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) it has been found that some men may face immeasurable conflict from their Muslim ingroup and animosity from other gay men due to the perceived incompatibility of Islam and gay identity. In such cases, the individual may simply abandon his Muslim identity to reduce conflict and to escape the social stigma of religiosity in a context that is deemed important, that is, among other (secular) gay men.

However, some groups are simply not perceived to be permeable at all and exit is therefore not an option. We are often led to believe that "race" is a fixed, biological category that cannot be changed, and that we cannot go from being Black to White, for instance. In the contexts of impermeable group boundaries, members of low-status groups may decide to re-construe the social meanings of their group membership. Earlier in this entry, the example of downward comparison was outlined in relation to the Indian caste system – some individuals will simply compare their groups to outgroups that are even more disadvantaged than their own, or focus on dimensions on which their ingroup outperforms an outgroup regardless of their overall social status. Moreover, some individuals will challenge the status quo in a form of "negativism", that is, they may decide to actively oppose social norms and ideologies. A classic example of this is the "Black is Beautiful" movement that emerged in the 1960s as a means of re-defining Black identity in the US as something to be proud of, rather than ashamed of. Similarly, Philogène (2001) has described how the category "African American" has facilitated a re-definition of the meanings of being Black in the US in that the group membership is less racialized and *culturally* defined. Moreover, the political mobilization of traditionally lower-caste groups in India has, in some cases, resulted in a re-definition of their caste identity as a symbol of political power, rather than subjugation.

### **Concluding thoughts**

SIT has made an immensely important contribution to the social psychology of intergroup relations and remains the basis for several theories of intergroup relations that have followed, such as self-

categorization theory. SIT remains the only modern European theory to have had wide impact on social psychology in North America. The theory elegantly describes the social psychological processes that lead us to view ourselves and others primarily in terms of group membership. However, SIT is often erroneously regarded as a theory of identity. It constitutes a useful theoretical tool for examining group processes in political psychology but it provides less insight into the complex interactions between individual, interpersonal and intergroup levels of analysis which contribute to human identity in political contexts (Breakwell, 1986). One of the greatest promises of SIT is in understanding social and political change, which are also key concerns for the political psychologist. While this tenet of SIT has led to some fruitful and stimulating debates about social change and intergroup relations (de la Sablonnière & Osborne, 2014), it remains unclear in SIT how social identity itself can act as a catalyst for social and political change. A more explicit integration of SIT with other theories of identity and indeed of group power would be fruitful for the field of political psychology.

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