Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory: A Historical Review

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Abstract

The social identity approach (comprising social identity theory and self-categorization theory) is a highly influential theory of group processes and intergroup relations, having redefined how we think about numerous group-mediated phenomena. Since its emergence in the early 1970s, the social identity approach has been elaborated, re-interpreted, and occasionally misinterpreted. The goal of this paper is to provide a critical, historical review of how thinking and research within the social identity approach has evolved. The core principles of the theories are reviewed and discussed, and their effect on the field assessed. Strengths and limitations of the approach are discussed, with an eye to future developments.

After World War II, many social psychologists saw it as their brief to understand the psychology of intergroup relations: How could we explain the psychological forces that culminated in the Holocaust, among other horrors? Early attempts to explain this relied heavily on the notion that prejudice was the irrational manifestation of some force that resided in the individual, whether that be frustration (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) or an unresolved conflict with authoritarian parents (Adorno, Fenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). This reflected a broader tendency within social psychology to view intergroup relations as intrapsychic or interpersonal processes writ large. Indeed, for much of the post-war period leading into the 1970s, the 'group' was treated as something of a label of convenience for what happened when interpersonal processes were aggregated.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was robust debate about where social psychological theory and research had taken us (the so-called 'crisis of confidence' in social psychology; Elms, 1975), and nowhere was this crisis more evident than in discussions of group processes and inter-group relations. Many commentators criticized the field for its tendency to overlook 'big picture' constructs such as language, history, and culture in favour of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes (see Hogg & Williams, 2000, for a review). The theories that later became known as the social

identity approach – social identity theory and self-categorization theory – were born in this era of crisis. What emerged was an ambitious and far-reaching cluster of ideas that were pitched as an antidote to the overly individualistic and reductionist tendencies of existing theories of intergroup relations. Initially presented to the world in a series of books, chapters, and monographs intended largely for a European audience, the theories began to attract broader international attention in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] The social identity approach is now one of the most influential theories of group processes and intergroup relations worldwide, having redefined how we think about numerous group-mediated phenomena and having extended its reach well outside the confines of social psychology.[2]

Of course, in this time, the theory has evolved and been refined, but has also gone down the occasional theoretical cul-de-sac. The faster a theory grows in terms of its effect and reach, the greater the capacity for confusion and misinterpretation. At times, it helps to take stock and to review where the theory has been, how it has changed, and where it is heading. This is the goal of the current paper. In tracking the history of the social identity approach, I will briefly review its key elements. It is hoped that this will serve as a platform from which interested readers can pursue more detailed and nuanced descriptions of the theories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Social Identity Theory

Given social identity theory's credentials as a theory with a strong focus on how the social context affects intergroup relations, it seems paradoxical that the ideas were framed by an experimental paradigm in which context was stripped away altogether: the 'minimal group paradigm'. Henri Tajfel and colleagues published a series of studies in the early 1970s in which participants were allocated into groups on the basis of meaningless and arbitrary criteria. In one experiment (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), participants were categorized as 'overestimators' or 'underestimators', ostensibly on the basis of their estimates of the numbers of dots on a page (in reality all participants were allocated to the same group). In another experiment, they were allocated into groups on the basis of the flip of a coin (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). After having been told their group membership, participants then had to allocate points to members of their own group (the 'ingroup') and to members of the other group (the 'outgroup').

From the perspective of a participant, this is an absurd task. The groups had no content, in the sense that they were based on trivial criteria. There was no interaction among group members, and in fact, participants did not know who else within the session was in their group. The groups had no history and no future outside the laboratory. Furthermore, the participants could not benefit or lose in any way from their point allocation strategy.

Sometimes, the points carried value (in terms of being able to be traded for money), but participants were explicitly told that they personally could not benefit from their own point allocation strategy. In other experiments, the points did not carry value at all (Turner, 1978).

Faced with this curious dilemma, one might expect the points allocation to be either random, or to be made on the basis of a strategy of fairness (equal numbers of points to members of each group). But this was not what was found. Instead, participants tended to give more points to members of their own group than to members of the outgroup. In fact, there was some evidence that participants were prepared to give relatively few points to either group if it allowed them to maximize the extent to which they favored their ingroup. Although stripped of history and context, the experiments were not psychologically empty because participants were obeying a predictable pattern of responding, and one that was difficult to explain according to traditional theories of intergroup relations. Tajfel et al. (1971) initially argued that the participants were obeying a norm of competitive group behaviour. But where did this norm come from? Why competition, and not fairness or some other strategy? The answers to these questions were later formalized in social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).[3]

In articulating the theory, Henri Tajfel (in collaboration with his graduate student John Turner) argued that human interaction ranges on a spectrum from being purely interpersonal on the one hand to purely intergroup on the other. A purely interpersonal interaction (which Tajfel and Turner believed to be rare) involves people relating entirely as individuals, with no awareness of social categories. A purely intergroup interaction is one in which people relate entirely as representatives of their groups, and where one's idiosyncratic, individualizing qualities are overwhelmed by the salience of one's group memberships. It was argued that sliding from the interpersonal to the intergroup end of the spectrum results in shifts in how people see themselves and each other.

Drawing on his own social cognition work (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963), Tajfel argued that the mere process of making salient 'us and them' distinctions changes the way people see each other. When category distinctions are salient, people perceptually enhance similarities within the group ('we're all much the same') and enhance differences among the group ('we're different from them'). Categorization also changes the way people see themselves, in the sense that it activates a different level of one's self–concept. At the interpersonal end of the spectrum, people's self-concept will mostly comprise the attitudes, memories, behaviours, and emotions that define them as idiosyncratic individuals, distinct from other individuals (one's 'personal identity'). At the intergroup end of the spectrum, self-concept will mostly comprise one's 'social identity', defined as those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he/she belongs, as well as the emotional and evaluative consequences of this group membership.

So why do people favor their own group relative to outgroups? Tajfel and Turner argued that the motivating principle underlying competitive intergroup behaviour was a desire for a positive and secure self-concept. If we are to accept that people are motivated to have a positive self-concept, it flows naturally that people should be motivated to think of their groups as good groups. Furthermore, drawing on Festinger's writings on social comparison, it was argued that people evaluate their group with reference to relevant outgroups. Groups are not islands; they become psychologically real only when defined in comparison to other groups. Striving for a positive social identity, group members are motivated to think and act in ways that achieve or maintain a positive distinctiveness between one's own group and relevant outgroups. It was this process that was presumed to underpin real world instances of intergroup differentiation and outgroup derogation.

What happens, though, when people belong to a group that has relatively low status with respect to other groups? Social identity theorists spent a great deal of time outlining how a low status group member can claw back a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Brown, 1978; see also Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Options include leaving the group (either physically or psychologically), making downward intergroup comparisons that are more flattering to the ingroup, focusing only on dimensions that make the ingroup look relatively good, devaluing dimensions that reflect poorly on the ingroup, and engaging in social change to try to overturn the existing status hierarchy. Which strategy will be chosen will depend on a range of circumstances, including the extent to which the boundaries between the group were seen to be permeable, and the extent to which the status differences are perceived to be stable and/or legitimate. In sum, social identity theory was the first social psychological theory to acknowledge that groups occupy different levels of a hierarchy of status and power, and that intergroup behaviour is driven by people's ability to be critical of, and to see alternatives to, the status quo. For Tajfel, social identity theory was at its heart a theory of social change.[4]

Self-categorization Theory

SIT argued that intergroup relations were governed by an interaction of cognitive, motivational, and socio-historical considerations. After Tajfel's death in 1982, Turner and colleagues sought to elaborate and refine the cognitive element of the theory. In so doing, they aimed to move beyond the intergroup focus of SIT and to comment on intragroup processes as well. These elaborations were formalized in the book *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory* (Turner et al., 1987). The authors argued that the ideas in this book comprised a new and separate theory: self-categorization theory (SCT). Having said that, SCT and SIT share most of the same assumptions and methods and emerge from the same ideological and meta-theoretical perspective. In recognition of the similarities between the

theories, many people now refer to the 'social identity perspective' or the 'social identity approach' to refer to both SIT and SCT, but with an acknowledgement that the two traditions have different foci and emphases.

In SCT, Turner and colleagues returned to the categorization process that was considered fundamental to SIT. But rather than seeing interpersonal and intergroup dynamics as opposite ends of a bipolar spectrum, the proponents of SCT characterized identity as operating at different levels of inclusiveness. Turner and colleagues nominate three levels of self-categorization that are important to the self-concept: the superordinate category of the self as human being (or *human identity*), the intermediate level of the self as a member of a social ingroup as defined against other groups of humans (*social identity*), and the subordinate level of personal self-categorizations based on interpersonal comparisons (*personal identity*). It was acknowledged that it is possible to uncover finer gradations of the intermediate level of abstraction, a possibility that has since been explored in the work on subgroup identities (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). It is also assumed that there is a 'functional antagonism' between the levels of self-definition, such that as one level becomes more salient the other levels become less so.

Given the large constellation of social identities to which people have access, what determines which particular identity will become the basis for categorization in any one context? According to SCT, categorization (including self-categorization) occurs as a function of both accessibility and fit (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). *Fit* refers to the extent to which the social categories are perceived to reflect social reality; that is, the extent to which they are seen to be diagnostic of real-world differences. Individuals may perceive a high level of fit if the category distinction maximizes perceived intercategory differences and minimizes intracategory differences (*comparative fit*). This principle – referred to as the meta-contrast ratio – clearly owes an intellectual debt to classic work on categorization, in the sense that it argues that categories form in such a way that maximizes intraclass similarities and interclass differences. But SCT extends this argument by making it explicit that this process is dynamic, varying according to the context, and always defined relative to the perceiver. For example, a category distinction is also more likely to have high fit if social behavior and group membership are in line with stereotypical expectations (*normative fit*). Furthermore, categories are more or less likely to be a basis for self-definition if they are more or less accessible in the moment. Categories may be fleetingly accessible if they are primed in the situation, or they may be chronically accessible if frequently activated or if people are motivated to use them.

One of the cornerstones of SCT is the notion of depersonalization. Proponents of SCT argue that people cognitively represent their social groups in terms of prototypes. When a category becomes salient, people come to see themselves and other category members less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype. The

prototype is not an objective reality, but rather a subjective sense of the defining attributes of a social category that fluctuates according to context. The group identity not only describes what it is to be a group member, but also prescribes what kinds of attitudes, emotions and behaviours are appropriate in a given context. The notion of depersonalization was assumed to underpin a range of group processes such as cohesion, influence, conformity, and leadership. As such, SCT heralded a more thorough investigation of intragroup processes than had been possible within the rubric of SIT, which was preoccupied with intergroup relations.

How the Social Identity Approach Has Shed New Light on Old Phenomena

The social identity approach has a strong record of providing fresh perspectives on old phenomena and overturning or qualifying well-worn assumptions about them. Individual differences explanations of group processes have been targeted for special attention (Reynolds & Turner, 2006); social identity principles are leaned on, for example, to argue that social dominance theory has been 'falsified' (Turner & Reynolds, 2003; but see also spirited defences by Sidanius & Pratto, 2003; Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004). Furthermore, self-categorization theorists argued persuasively that the perceptual shifts associated with categorization could explain the phenomenon of group polarization; that is, the tendency for an individual's opinions to shift in the direction already favoured by the group (Mackie, 1986; Turner, 1991; Turner, Wetherell, & Hogg, 1989). SCT also led to a reconceptualization of group solidarity and cohesiveness. In contrast to traditional conceptualizations of cohesiveness as a product of interpersonal attraction, SCT views it in terms of depersonalized liking for ingroup others based on group prototypicality (Hogg & Hardie, 1991). In doing this, SCT reintroduces the emergent *group* properties of cohesiveness.

The social identity approach also heralded a new perspective on stereotyping. Self-categorization theorists critiqued the traditional assumption that stereotypes are fixed mental representations, the content of which is generally resistant to change across context. Rather, it was argued that the content of a stereotype will change depending on the comparative context. For example, an Australian's stereotype of Americans shifts depending on whether Iraq is included as a second comparison group (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992). Proponents of the social identity approach also took issue with the traditional social cognitive view that stereotypes are over-simplifications that emerge as a result of our limited capacity to process social information (the 'cognitive miser' approach). Instead, social identity theorists argued that stereotypes have a social function, in the sense that they help explain the social world and to legitimize the past and current actions of the ingroup. In other words, stereotyping is a meaning-seeking process wrapped up in the sociohistorical

context (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers, & Haslam, 1997; Tajfel, 1981). Possibly reflecting the growing presence of the social identity approach in North America, recent social cognitive approaches to stereotyping are now much more likely to acknowledge that stereotyping occurs in a 'hot' social context. For example, the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) argues that the content of stereotypes is dependent on the structural relationships between groups with respect to status and competition.

Others have used the social identity approach to help explain crowd violence and rioting. For many years, social psychologists have subscribed to the 'deindividuation' notion of aggression (Zimbardo, 1970). The argument was that environmental forces such as anonymity, high cohesiveness, and/or high arousal lead to lower self-awareness, which in turn leads to a cluster of symptoms that promote anti-social behavior: Weakened restraints against impulsive behaviour, increased responsiveness to current emotional states, an inability to monitor or regulate one's own behaviour, less concern about being evaluated by others, and lowered ability to engage in rational planning. Working from the social identity perspective, Reicher, Spears, and Postmes (1995) argued that anonymity weakens the relative contribution of one's personal identity to self-concept and increases the relevance of one's social identities. Deindividuation was interpreted not as a loss of identity, but rather as a shift in identity from the personal to the social level. The consequence of this is that people would become more sensitive and responsive to the norm implied by the context, which may be anti-social *or* pro-social. A meta-analysis and review of the literature showed evidence in favor of this perspective (Postmes & Spears, 1998).

SIT also proved to be influential in our understanding of rioting behavior (Reicher, 1987). A prevailing theory of rioting behavior argued that people came together in crowds in a normative vacuum. The actions of distinctive individuals in the crowd then become an assumed norm for that context, which has a contagious effect on bystanders (Turner & Killian, 1957). Reicher challenged this notion by arguing that (a) crowds gather for a specific purpose and bring with them a clear set of shared norms; (b) crowd violence often has an intergroup component; (c) crowds often behave logically, even when they are violent, with attacks frequently specific to symbolic intergroup targets; and (d) during and after a riot, participants often feel a strong sense of social identity.

Finally, the social identity approach presented a new perspective on social influence, conformity, and power. From a SCT perspective, the norms of relevant ingroups are a crucial source of information about appropriate ways to think, feel, and act. Through the process of depersonalization, highly identified ingroup members internalize the norms of the group and assume that others have as well. Thus, it is argued that the traditional distinction between normative and informational influence is made obsolete because there is an implicit shared expectation of agreement among group

members (Turner, 1991). Public compliance does exist in this formulation, but primarily as a response to the norms and power of outgroups.

From this perspective, people are influential within groups to the extent that they embody the prototypical attitudes, behaviours, and values of the group. Leaders manage their rhetoric to locate themselves within the heart of the group (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996), and to the extent that they succeed in doing this, leaders will be seen to be more legitimate and more influential (Hogg, 2001; Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998). Indeed, Turner (2005) sees the categorization process as the causal driver of power and influence. From this perspective, embodying the prototype of the ingroup is what maximizes influence, influence is the basis of power, and power leads to control over resources. This is a reversal of the traditional approach to power, which suggests that control over valuable resources is what defines power, power allows for influence, and mutual influence leads to the formation of psychological groups.

Empirical Research within the Social Identity Approach

In the 1970s, much of the empirical work surrounding the social identity approach involved establishing the results of the minimal group paradigm and then defending the interpretation of the results from alternative explanations. This was seen to be important because the results of the minimal group paradigm were the lever which distinguished the social identity approach from its main rivals (especially realistic conflict theory; Sherif, 1966). Because of the minimal nature of the groups, it is not possible to explain this behavior in terms of relative deprivation, frustration, or competition for limited resources. Various other explanations were raised and dismantled. Ingroup bias did not appear to be a result of the uncertainty of the experimental procedure (Tajfel & Billig, 1974), nor was it a by-product of the fact that group members assumed high levels of interpersonal similarity with each other (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Suspicions that the results are an artifact of demand characteristics and experimenter effects appear to have been laid to rest (St Claire & Turner, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Post-experimental enquiries tend to find that participants are unaware of the hypotheses, and behaviour does not substantially change even when the hypotheses are presented to them.

A sterner challenge to the social identity interpretation of the minimal group paradigm came from Rabbie and colleagues, who argued that participants in minimal groups infer interdependence between their points allocations and the points they would receive from others. Thus, ingroup bias in allocations occurs because participants expect that the outgroup will discriminate against them, and/or because they think that it will enhance the benefits that they receive from other ingroup members. Evidence for this was inconsistent: Diehl (1990) found that the pattern of ingroup bias occurs even when participants are told that the outgroup is treating

them fairly, but Rabbie and colleagues showed that participants favour the outgroup when they believe their own outcomes are controlled by the allocations of outgroup members (Rabbie, Schot, & Visser, 1989). Furthermore, work by Yamagishi suggests that assumptions about independence are critical to social exchange, and that when participants in a minimal groups study are told explicitly that their outcomes are independent of the allocation decisions of others, evidence for ingroup bias disappears (Karp, Jin, Yamagishi, & Shinotsuka, 1993).

Rabbie and colleagues (e.g., Rabbie & Horwitz, 1988) went on to argue that social identity theory fails to adequately distinguish between social categories and social groups as dynamic entities. They propose an alternative model (behavioural interaction model; Rabbie & Lodewijkx, 1996) that explores how individuals – through interdependence of goals, outcomes, and needs – grow to develop a sense of 'groupness' or 'entitativity' with others. Rather than being in competition, however, many theorists now see the behavioural interaction model as being a more fine-grained analysis of a process already accounted for by social identity theory. Perceptions of interdependence are clearly of central importance in group behaviour, but can be seen as part of a wider social identity mechanism where people use information such as interdependence to construct social categories (see Gagnon & Bourhis, 1996; Perreault & Bourhis, 1998; Rabbie & Lodewijkx, 1996; Turner, 1999; Turner & Bourhis, 1996, for instalments in this debate).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was growing realization that the integrity of the social identity approach did not rest on the integrity of the minimal group paradigm. Rather than being used a *raison d'etre* for the theory, the paradigm instead became a tool for testing the specific hypotheses proposed by the theory. When one reviews the literature on intergroup relations prior to the 1970s, it is striking how little experimental work was actually done on intergroup relations. One reason for this is that the existing paradigms were seen to be ill-suited to capturing the complexity of intergroup dynamics, and attempts to do so (e.g., Sherif's camp studies) were epic and expensive field studies. In the context of this, the minimal group paradigm was a revelation because it allowed people to examine intergroup behaviour in a highly controlled (and cheap) way.

What followed was a plethora of lab-based research using participants in either minimal or ad hoc groups. The goal of much of this research was to test Tajfel's arguments about the so-called 'socio-structural' variables; the notion that intergroup behavior was largely determined by people's subjective impressions of where they lie in the status/power hierarchy, and their impressions of the permeability, stability, and legitimacy of that hierarchy. The results of these studies were in line with the theory. Upon examining permutations of status, power, legitimacy, permeability, and stability, one could make reasonably strong predictions as to how much intergroup bias they would show, and how they rationalized or managed

their place within the hierarchy. Furthermore, the pattern of responses was moderated by the extent to which group members identified with that group, precisely in the way assumed by the theory (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999, for a review).

Although this process was illuminating, the heavy reliance on minimal groups was not without its critics (e.g., Bornstein et al., 1983; Schiffman & Wicklund, 1992). There was a general feeling that there was a mismatch between the big claims made in the theory and the methods being used to test them, as though high-level intergroup conflict could be explained one minimal group at a time. Researchers within the social identity tradition countered that, if the results could be captured in the passionless environment of the minimal group paradigm, they would be stronger again in the 'real world' where people are more strongly identified and emotionally invested in their groups. But anxiety remained about whether the minimal group research was meaningful or generalizable.

In the 1990s, researchers responded to this by creating new and creative ways of manipulating the same variables using real social categories. The result is a new generation of research where internal validity has been preserved, with fewer question marks about external validity. The result of this process is that Tajfel and Turner's original hypotheses about the socio-structural variables have been consolidated, refined, and extended. Today, it is difficult to think of intergroup relations without reflecting in some way on power, status, legitimacy, and stability.

Since the mid-1980s, a separate tradition of research has been dedicated to testing the predictions specific to SCT, particularly with regard to the notion of depersonalization. Again, the emphasis has largely been on controlled, experimental paradigms, sometimes with minimal groups and sometimes with real-world social categories (but see Reicher and colleagues' discourse work for a notable exception). Researchers used two initiatives to test the specific processes proposed by the social identity approach. First, there was a tradition of research that manipulated the salience of the identity, either by priming the identity in question or manipulating awareness of the intergroup context. Second, there was a tendency to measure levels of identification and to examine this as a moderating factor. As expected, high salience and/or identification results in increased self-stereotyping and perceptions of ingroup homogeneity, as would be predicted by the notion of depersonalization. It was also shown that – as predicted – the effects of prototypicality and norms on social influence emerged only under conditions of high salience and/or identification.

In this busy period of lending empirical support to the theory, it could be argued that researchers went down the occasional dead end. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, a number of researchers showed that there was only a weak and inconsistent correlation between ingroup identification and ingroup bias. This was interpreted as being inconsistent with SIT, resulting in attempts to formulate revisions of the theory (Hinkle &

Brown, 1990). Other commentators, however, deny that the theory ever predicted a simple causal link between identification and bias (Turner, 1999). A careful reading of the theory makes it clear that high identifiers are not automata, blindly expressing ingroup favouritism regardless of the context. Rather, the expression of bias is likely to be shaped by socio-historical circumstance, reality constraints, and the content of the group norms. Today, the field appears to have accepted that simple correlations between identification and bias – although potentially interesting in their own right – are not diagnostic of the integrity of SIT.

Another flurry of research surrounded the role of self-esteem in the expression of bias. Hogg and Abrams (1990) extrapolated two predictions from the original SIT theorizing: (i) lower self-esteem should promote greater ingroup bias, and (ii) displaying ingroup bias should raise self-esteem. A meta-analysis revealed more support for the latter hypothesis than the first (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). But this approach has been criticized by some researchers on both methodological and theoretical grounds. The critique centers on the fact that people typically measured self-esteem at the personal level and expected this to predict a collective outcome (discrimination). Some view this as contrary to the spirit of the original argument, which spoke of the need to maintain a positive self-concept as something that happens at the group rather than the individual level. Furthermore, discrimination is seen as one of a number of ways (and not necessarily the most direct way) of restoring positive distinctiveness. Finally, it is a simplification of the theory to argue for a straightforward relationship between the two variables, given that the expression of bias is heavily influenced by the socio-structural variables. Central to SIT is the notion that groups are more likely to 'lash out' at other groups to the extent that their place on the hierarchy of status and power is illegitimate and/or unstable (Hornsey, Spears, Cremers, & Hogg, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Brown, 1978). Indeed, the security and legitimacy of a group's social position is considered to be a more proximal predictor of bias than the level of one's personal self-esteem.

Since the late 1990s, work on the 'self-esteem hypotheses' has fallen out of fashion, creating what can be a confusing state of affairs for newcomers to the theory. One of the most intuitively appealing, well-recognized and impactful aspects of SIT is the role of self-esteem in promoting ingroup-favouring biases. People who come into the theory with this understanding can be surprised to find that many of the original architects of the social identity approach have recently fallen silent on this topic. It should be noted, though, that self-esteem has not been written out of the theory. The need for a positive self-concept is still fundamental to SIT, but it is questionable that this principle can be reduced to simple, testable prescriptions such as those that have preoccupied researchers on the self-esteem hypothesis. According to SIT, biases – in behaviours, attributions, stereotypes, and memories – are part of an

ongoing process to achieve, maintain, *and protect* a positive self-concept (broadly defined). It is unclear from this argument that one should expect low self-esteem people to display more bias, or that an act of bias would result in a spike in self-esteem. Turner never embraced the notion that there should be a literal and short-term correspondence between bias and self-esteem and in fact has actively distanced SIT from the self-esteem hypothesis (Turner, 1999).

The debate regarding self-esteem provides a case study of the advantages and challenges associated with the ambitious scope of the social identity approach. The writings of Tajfel and colleagues touch on a huge number of issues relevant to group processes and intergroup relations, ranging from the political to the perceptual to the motivational. As such, it is frequently described as a 'meta-theory', a broad framework from which more specific theories can be inferred. When framing these more specific predictions, some researchers differ in their assumptions and interpretations, and sometimes parallel versions of the theory seem to co-exist. This can result in tension, and can provide ammunition to those who argue that the theory is unfalsifiable. But this tension also means that the theory is constantly evolving and embracing new challenges. Some of these evolutions are discussed below.

Social Identity Approach: Recent, Current, and Future Directions

In recent years, researchers in the field of social identity have made progress both internally (in terms of clarifying and elaborating the theory) and externally (in terms of using the theory to apply to new domains). An example of the internal evolution of the theory is the renewed attention given to its motivational basis. Although SCT offered no explicit motivational analysis to account for intergroup behaviour, cognitive contrasting of ingroups and outgroups is implicitly understood to be a strategy designed to promote separateness, perceptual clarity, and social meaning. In recent years, the motivation for distinctiveness and self-definition has replaced self-esteem as the most researched motive for group behaviour. The emphasis on group distinctiveness as a motivating force has resulted in qualifications of the similarity–attraction hypothesis of intergroup relations (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004), new ways of thinking about deviance (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000), and rejections of both assimilationist (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000) and 'color-blind' (Brown & Hewstone, 2005) approaches to intergroup contact. Furthermore, Hogg (2000) has elaborated on the role of group distinctiveness in providing social meaning, arguing that many group processes – including identification, assimilation to norms, and intergroup bias – are partially underpinned by a need to reduce one's subjective uncertainty about what to say, do, think, or feel.

Another point of evolution concerns the relationship between the individual and the group. Social identity theorists worked hard to distinguish themselves from individualistic and reductionist approaches to group processes. A consequence of this was an implicit assumption that the collective self was a primary basis for self-definition, and a suspicion of analyses that assumed individual-based motives for group behaviour. Recently, theorists have been playing 'catch-up' trying to articulate in a more nuanced way the intimate interconnections between desires for *individual* distinctiveness, group belonging, and self-enhancement, and how the expression of these desires are shaped through culture (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). One consequence of this is a subtle withdrawal from the notion that the relationship between the personal and collective self is 'antagonistic'. There is also a growing awareness that individuals and groups mutually influence each other; individuals are shaped and influenced by group norms, but group norms are actively contested, discussed, and shaped by individuals (Hornsey, 2006; Postmes & Jetten, 2006; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005).

In terms of the external evolution of the theory, social identity research has seen expansion both in its choice of dependent measures and in its domains of influence. In terms of its dependent measures, there has been a strong emphasis in recent years on applying social identity principles to group-based emotions, and to track how these emotions predict intergroup behaviour (Smith, 1993). Emotions that have proved particularly fertile grounds for research include shame (Ellemers, Doosje, & Spears, 2004), collective guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998), and intergroup schadenfreude (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). There is also a growing emphasis on the relationship between social identity and memory for (Sahdra & Ross, 2007), and forgiveness of (Hewstone et al., 2004), historical atrocities. The work on intergroup forgiveness includes the first forays into examining the psychological meaning of the most inclusive level of identity proposed by SCT: the human identity (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005).

Finally, the last decade has seen the social identity approach inform and transform fields that intersect or lie outside traditional social psychological analyses of group processes. For example, by sharpening our understanding of norms, the social identity approach has revised how we predict attitudes and behaviours, insights that have had a tremendous impact on a range of applied domains (Terry, Hogg, & White, 2000). Social identity ideas are also beginning to leave an imprint on our understanding of communication (Hogg & Reid, 2006), justice (Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996), and political psychology (Brewer, 2001). But nowhere has the impact of the social identity approach been more dramatic than in the field of organizational psychology (see, for example, Haslam, 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2000). At the time of writing, Ashforth and Mael's (1989) discussion of social identity in organizations

has been cited over 590 times, a number that seems to be growing exponentially.

The Social Identity Approach: Strengths and Limitations

Despite its broad influence, the social identity approach has not been without its critics. At a time when there is growing attention given to subgroup identities, cross-cutting identities, relational identities, outgroup identification, and the complex intersection of personal and collective identity, the model of functional antagonism and salience proposed in the original SCT text can appear rigid and over-simplified (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). It is also possible that the emphasis on uncertainty reduction and depersonalization has obscured the extent to which ingroup members tolerate and embrace heterogeneity and dissent within the group (Hornsey, 2006). Some argue that the theory has become so broad and powerful that it ceases to be falsifiable, as virtually any experimental outcome can be interpreted within its overarching framework (Hogg & Williams, 2000). Other criticisms are that, with its focus on individual processes and social cognition, the theory suffers from some of the flaws it points out in others; namely being too reductionist and individualistic (Farr, 1996). Finally, there are repeated claims that the social identity approach is more comfortable explaining ingroup favouritism than outgroup derogation and genuine intergroup hostility (Brewer, 1979; Brown, 1995).

I will not seek to defend the social identity approach against these criticisms, preferring to leave that to others (e.g., Turner, 1999). Suffice to say that it is almost impossible to think or write about group processes and intergroup relations today without reflecting on core con-structs within the theory, such as categorization, identity, status, and legitimacy. Many of the meta-theoretical and ideological wars that were waged by social identity theorists have been largely won: Few people would now contest that it is important to look at group-level motives for group phenomena, or that group behaviour can only be examined in light of the social context. Its emergence has played a critical role in the resuscitation of interest in group processes both within and outside social psychology, and (somewhat unusually for a theory that is over 30 years old) interest in the theory seems to be only accelerating with time. At a time when theories are becoming increasingly 'micro' in their scope, the social identity approach is a rare beast, a meta-theory that is ambitious in scope but ultimately rests on simple, elegant, testable, and usable principles.

Acknowledgements

Short Biography

Matthew Hornsey completed his PhD in 1999 at the University of Queensland, Australia, and is currently a senior lecturer at the University of Queensland. His work – which is published in journals such as *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* – examines topics related to group processes and intergroup relations, much of it from a social identity perspective. His early research comprised an empirical rebuttal of assimilationist theories of intergroup relations that had dominated the literature in the 1990s. Recently, the focus of his research has been on examining the conditions under which group members are willing to challenge the status quo, and the conditions that affect the likelihood of such efforts succeeding. This research includes a systematic attempt to test and theorise about how identity issues influence responses to internal and external criticism of groups.

Endnotes

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[1] It should be noted that Marilynn Brewer was a pivotal figure in focusing North American interest on social identity theory. Her *Psychological Bulletin* (1979) article examining the cognitive and motivational bases for intergroup bias has been the entry point for many North American researchers interested in social identity theory. At the time of writing, it has been cited over 780 times (according to ISI).

[2] As a crude demonstration of the exponential growth in impact of the social identity approach, I searched PsycInfo to see how many times the terms 'social identity theory' or 'self-categorization theory' appeared in each of three years: 1986, 1996, 2006. The numbers I cite here refer to the number of publications *in that particular year* (it is not a cumulative figure). In 1986, 11 publications made reference to one or both of the theories. In 1996, this had increased to 47, and by 2006 it had jumped to 568.

[3] Researchers in the field did not rally around the label 'social identity theory' until the early 1980s; in earlier work, there was a reluctance to give a label to the ideas. Where reference was made to the constellation of ideas as a single entity, it was referred to variously as 'identity theory', 'social identity/social comparison theory', or 'a theory of social identity'.

[4] This emphasis on social change partly reflected the influence of Marxist philosophy on British academia in the 1960s and 1970s.

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