

From a social psychological point of view, group membership 'is primarily a cognitive matter' (Brown, 2007, p. 146). A discussion in relation to social identity theory and discursive psychology.

by Patricia Karsten

The suggestion that group membership can be understood as 'primarily a cognitive matter' refers to Tajfel and Turner's work on inter-group conflict (1979; as cited in Brown, 2007), which was grounded in social identity theory. This perspective relies strongly on cognitive processes like categorization to explain group membership, but also makes reference to motivational aspects and is thus not a purely cognitive approach. On the other hand, the discursive perspective also understands group membership on the basis of categorization, but emphasizes that social categories are not fixed, instead they are constructed in ongoing discourse (Brown, 2007). After a brief review of the 'group' concept and the notion of entitativity, it will be shown how the two perspectives differ in their explanations of social categories and categorization as the basis for group membership.

Social psychology has proposed a variety of group types, for example reference groups (based on identification and important for identity), task-oriented membership groups (with minimal involvement outside the task), social category groups (large groups based on social categories like gender or religion), cultural groups (large groups based on a shared cultural identity), or crowds (large groups meeting for a specific purpose) (Phoenix, 2007). The group types are not mutually exclusive, rather the typology reflects different ontological positions about relevant objects of study in different research traditions. The types differ on their attributes, for example size and structure, member characteristics, commitment of members, and inner cohesiveness. But all social groups are said to have 'entitativity', or inner cohesiveness, meaning that they represent a collection of people who are seen by themselves or by others as a group (Stangor 2004; as cited in Phoenix, 2007).

Based on the cognitive approach and the information processing model of the human mind, Social Identity Theory (SIT) sees social categorization at the heart of group membership. In this view, social categorization works along similar principles as categorization in general, applying stereotyped judgements upon the social world to increase cognitive efficiency in information processing about other people (Dixon, 2007). Consequently, group membership, in the sense of membership to a social category, will reflect the workings of more general cognitive processes of categorization and stereotyping. One implication is that social categorization will reflect the 'Accentuation Principle', which maximizes contrast between categories by emphasizing similarity within and difference between categories. Group members will thus emphasize similarities with other members and differences from non-members.

Social Identity theorists have studied the effects of group membership in a type of experiment known as the Minimal Group Paradigm (MGP) (Brown, 2007). In MGP experiments, participants were assigned to different groups based on arbitrary criteria like their preference for certain painters. Participants' task was to distribute rewards to pairs of other participants, knowing to which groups the others belonged, but without any personal contact between participants. The resulting reward distribution showed not only clear preference for members of the own group, but also a tendency to increase the reward difference between groups in favour of the own group, rather than simply trying to maximize absolute gains for the own group (Tajfel and Turner 1979; as cited in Brown, 2007). Tajfel and Turner considered these groups as

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‘entirely cognitive’ or ‘minimal’, because they were constituted by simply informing participants about their membership, without personal contact between group members or other real-world consequences, and thus concluded that ‘group membership, from a social psychological point of view, is primarily a cognitive matter’ (Brown, 2007, p. 146).

But to explain the observed behavioural consequences of group membership consisting in ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination, Tajfel and Turner made assumptions beyond a purely cognitive approach. Based on the core tenet of SIT, that self-concept encompasses both personal and social identity, they understood social identity as those identity aspects resulting from membership to social groups (Brown 2007). Behaviour is then seen as motivated by a desire for positive self-esteem, and self-esteem influenced by membership to groups which are positively or negatively evaluated in comparison to other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; as cited in Brown, 2007). Consequently, group membership effects as in MGP experiments can be understood as attempts to increase self-esteem by increasing the ingroup’s relative standing.

This shows that group membership ‘as such’ may be seen as based on standard cognitive mechanisms, but explanations of behavioural consequences beyond the Accentuation Principle need to draw on motivational assumptions. This has been pointed out by Billig in his analysis of Tajfel’s earlier work on the cognitive origins of prejudiced behaviour between group members (Billig, 2002). Tajfel saw cognitive processes of categorization, assimilation and coherence as basis for prejudice. Categorization leads to the exaggeration of intra-group similarities and inter-group differences, assimilation denotes the process by which the individual uses available social categories to structure the social world, and the search for coherence reflects the desire to understand the world in ways that preserve positive self-image. SIT thus combines individual cognitions and socially oriented motivations so explain inter-group behaviour like prejudice, assuming a profound societal influence through the social categories the individual uses to organize his social perceptions.

SIT made an important contribution to the understanding of conflictual inter-group behaviour by pointing to the cognitive processes it relies on, as opposed to the earlier ‘blood and guts’ model of social conflict. It introduced a notion of rationality against the former view of biologically determined, irrational aggressive instincts and the inevitability of conflict between groups (Billig, 2002). But SIT sees social categories as fixed structures which are assimilated and thus pre-determine how individuals understand the social world. Contrasting to this, the discursive perspective emphasises the variability, inner structure and fuzziness of social categories. In this view, social categorization is not merely perceptual, but an active, ongoing and language-based process which takes place in everyday discourse. Language serves to express understandings about group boundaries, membership and the individual’s position and evaluations in relation to social categories. Analysis of discourses related to social categories reveal the multiple and often contradicting understandings, where members and non-members may draw different group boundaries (Phoenix, 2007).

This is illustrated by Potter and Reicher in their discourse analytic approach to the social category ‘community’ in the context of the 1980 St. Paul riot (1987; as cited in Phoenix, 2007). Potter and Reicher analysed a broad variety of written and verbal discourses, like newspaper articles, media reports and personal interviews, about the violent encounters between locals and the police which happened in a small district of Bristol called St. Paul. In the analysed materials, the concept of ‘community’ was generally positively evaluated and revealed inner coherence beyond mere physical presence of people in the area, reflecting the principle of entitativity. But there was no unanimity as to the actual existence of the community, with accounts seeing it as

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having seized to exist due to the riot, or possibly existing in the future if money would be spent appropriately. Furthermore, the accounts reflected different ideas about group membership, for example whether it was a black, West Indian or multiracial community, and also whether the Police was included or not. Importantly, different notions about group membership yielded different ideas what should be done to prevent future escalations of conflict.

For example, accounts including the police in the community saw the conflict as an intra-group relations problem which could be remedied by developing mutual trust and understanding between locals and police. If on the other hand the police was excluded, the event was constructed as an inter-group conflict and solutions seen in modifying power relations, like imposing limits to police intervention. Potter and Reicher thus showed the rich inner structure of community as a social category, and how different understandings about its boundaries had different implications for social action. This suggests that group membership is not a deterministic consequence of predefined social categories, but can be understood as a situational phenomenon, depending on the specific intentions pursued in discourse. Furthermore, group membership can be very complicated and far from being a yes/no phenomenon, as evidence from a discourse analytic study of the social category 'single women' suggests (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

The accounts of 30 single women accentuated negative repertoires of personal deficit and social exclusion, but also positive repertoires of independence and freedom of choice, and self-actualization and achievement. These highly contradicting repertoires led to difficulties in defining self in relation to the category, that is, in dealing with group membership. Reynolds and Wetherell observed a discursive strategy of single women to distance themselves from the category, for example by constructing themselves as an atypical member to whom negative attributes related to personal deficit and social exclusion don't apply. The contrasting strategy of constructing oneself as a 'happy member', emphasizing the positive aspects of independence and self-actualization, faced the dilemma of explaining desire to be in a relationship in other terms than personal deficit and social exclusion. In light of a dominant societal model of women being in a long-term heterosexual relationship centred about raising a family, questioning one's membership to the category 'single woman' and constructing layers of membership may reflect the difficulties of membership to a group that is subjected to devaluing discourses.

The discursive perspective on group membership thus points to the dynamic, flexible and multi-layered nature of categorization processes. Social categories are seen as shared resources that are used and shaped according to situational purposes, with the intention of conveying specific views about the self and the social world. This is in sharp contrast to SIT, which sees social categories as given and clear-cut, and group membership as a simple consequence of applying these categories to other people and self. For SIT, the social acts as a structural constraint to the interpretation of the social world by supplying fixed categories. With respect to the agency-structure dichotomy in social psychological explanations, the two perspectives thus represent rather different positions on group membership: SIT emphasizes structural constraints, and gives not much consideration to possible inconsistencies and contradictions in group boundaries. The discursive perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes agency, understood as the individual's power to convey his understanding of social categories, and to define group boundaries and consequently, group membership, according to specific purposes.

To summarize, SIT views group membership as based on quasi automatic, perceptual categorization processes. As these cognitive processes are subject to biases which exaggerate intra-group similarities and inter-group differences, individuals perceive clear group boundaries.

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SIT thus understands group membership as primarily a cognitive matter, but to explain behavioural consequences like ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination, it draws on additional assumptions. These go beyond a purely cognitive approach, for example motivational explanations like the desire to maintain positive self-esteem by improving the ingroup's relative position compared to an outgroup. Contrasting to this, the discursive perspective sees group membership as a very complex phenomenon, based on social categorization which is understood as a dynamic process by which categories are constructed and used to serve specific purposes. Group membership is thus explained as result of an ongoing, constructive and purposeful social process involving language and interaction. The discursive approach suggests that social categories have inner structure and group membership is not a simple yes/no phenomenon, as individuals can take up very conflictual positions towards social categories and group membership.

SIT and discursive psychology also take on rather different positions with respect to agency vs structure, when it comes to how the actual content of social categories is determined. SIT posits that the individual assimilates social categories which are 'already there', emphasizing the structural constraint. The discursive approach points out that the individual uses social categories as flexible and dynamic resources which can be shaped according to specific purposes, emphasizing agency. The difference has important implications for the perceived flexibility of group boundaries and thus for understanding group membership. But the social psychological implications suggested by the two different approaches are yet not as contradictory as might have been expected. SIT predicts behavioural strategies that focus on improving self-esteem resulting from group membership, like improving the ingroup's relative standing or resource allocation. Emphasizing the complexity of social categorization processes, the discursive perspective posits that behavioural consequences will depend on where group boundaries are drawn and shows how different subject positions related to group membership are expressed in discourse. The two perspectives thus provide mutually enriching understandings of social categorization and group membership.

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