

Social identity theory and conformity



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Apply Social Identity Theory to ONE contemporary topic in Social Psychology.

“ Self Identity is inextricably bound up with the identity of the surroundings”

Svendsen, A Philosophy of Boredom.

There has been significant impacts within the field of Social Psychology from conformity, because it has brought vast understanding of group pressure.

The term ‘ Conformity’ is often defined as: An action that is the succumbing of a person towards a group of people’, consequently conformity is often explained as a result of group pressure, founded from the feeling of rejection or acceptance; shown within Normative Social identity Theory. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) outlines self-association and identification within a group; both Zimbardo & Asch conducted experiments in support of the theory showing how conformity is influenced.

Tajfel and Turner proposed the Social identity Theory in 1979, and this theory influenced conformity. The SIT was primarily developed to scrutinize and provide understanding to the psychology behind in-group discrimination. The theory looked at how and why people identify themselves as a member of any particular group; stating that to simply study the psychology of an individual at an individual level can be seen as futile, as it is extremely important to have horizons broadened and study any individuals when they identify themselves as part of a group. It is assumed that once the group members have a clear identity with the in-group it enables them to gain a higher level of social identity in which esteem is gained through the affiliation of it. This level of social identity gives motivation to view their in-group as having a higher status within society than the out-groups.

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Emler and Hopkins (1990), and Emler and Reicher (1995) tried to study the evidence of ' Out-group Discrimination' by concentrating on groups of youths partaking in petty crime. The conclusion from this study found that one clear motivation for criminality was that it impressed their in-group peers. Being able to identify with other individuals in the same position, using criminal activity to impress, they find their in-group an alternative source of positive identity.

The SIT holds one main concept; individuals utilize group membership as a mechanism to derive self-esteem, although membership alone is shown not to be sufficient for an adequate level of self-esteem. This then can lead to individuals deceiving themselves into believing they hold a clear place within the right in-group.

SIT can be broken down into four categories; Categorization, Identification, Comparison and Psychological Distinctiveness. Categorisation is the generalised idea that individuals categorise, often sub-consciously, those around them as well as themselves into different groups which aids in perception of their identities and others, placing them within multiple categories. Identification is when individuals identify as being members of a certain in-group, with the out-groups often identified as something foreign, as asylum is sought within the in-group to which individuals associate themselves with. Comparison within SIT is key; when individuals have a place within a group they begin to compare, often favouring their own groups; using positive remarks when being descriptive of their own group. Opposingly, when referring to the out-groups, the use of negative remarks is noticeable; the result of a need to increase self-esteem and encompass a

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need to feel that the correct in-group has been chosen. Finally, psychological distinctiveness is the reason individuals yearn to be entirely unique within and between groups in a social capacity. Individuals also yearn to be positively perceived and seen as held in a more superior position in comparison to others, further aiding the increase of self-esteem.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) Zimbardo (1971), depicts conformity and the SIT. The aim of the experiment was to investigate how readily individuals would conform to the role of either prisoner or guard in a role play that simulated prison life. Zimbardo tried to depict that fact that in order to conform, guards would become engrossed in the situation and all rationalised thoughts would disappear, as the behaviour displayed may have been a misconception of what was required. Ultimately, Zimbardo was aiming to discover whether this brutal behaviour of guards was due to the sadistic personalities, or whether it had more to do with the prison environment.

The experiment took place in the basement of a university, which was converted into a makeshift prison. 24 participants were selected and consisted of mostly white, middle-class males, with an average age of 24 years old. 12 individuals were assigned as guards and given uniforms and sunglasses; which was said to dehumanise them. The 12 remaining individuals were assigned as prisoners, given sack like clothing and given numbers to replace their names. Furthermore, prisoners wore ankle chains as a reminder of their place. The experiment resulted in prisoners being ordered to perform degrading tasks by the guards. The prisoners soon learned that disobedience of the guards instructions would lead to harsh

punishment, and obedience lead to the guards giving ridicule for being too obedient. Two weeks in, the experiment came an abrupt end, as an outsider protested about the harm being inflicted on the prisoners was unethical, and subsequently their mental stability was being harmed.

In conclusion of the experiment, Zimbardo stated that when an individual was given a role to play it became too easy for them to fall into the given character, and forget who they initially were; reacting accordingly to a given situation, not using the process of rationalisation, depicted when those acting as prisoners were introducing themselves by the given number, not their names.

The SIT is strongly supported by the SPE, given that the findings show that in a particular given situation, participants were quick in identifying themselves within a particular group i. e. guards or prisoners, and seen themselves as being more superior or inferior, dependent on the role given. As a direct result of Zimbardos' SPE, the SIT was utilized as a factor of influence within conformity, encompassing both strengths and limitations.

The experiment illustrates Tajfels SIT and provides back up in the form of numerical data; which hold high significance as it allows any future researchers to look at it and follow if trying to study the findings further. It further illustrates SIT as a clear factor that influences conformity, as the behaviours of the participants conform at play. When looking at the four subcategories within SIT; Categorisation, Identification, Comparison and Psychological distinctiveness, these can be clearly observed within the SPE experiment. The individuals categorised themselves as either prisoner or

guards, and subsequently each individual had identified themselves with either group. Comparison was seen when the guards saw themselves to be in a superior status in comparison to that of the prisoners. The guards often compared their in-group with the out-group (prisoners). Lastly, the psychological distinctiveness was found when the guards tried to be unique, concocting various techniques of punishment and torturing the prisoners into obedience.

Whilst the SPE does hold large weight on the SIT, it does also show limitations. The sample group of participants were mostly white, middle class males with an approximate age of 24 years old; this would foresee problems in generalising the outcome. It may differ across various cultures and their members; each culture holds a vast array of varying principles, therefore applying all aspects of the theory may prove difficult. For example, a group of individuals from a collectivist culture, where individuals are largely defined by membership of a group, as a result they may act differently in a given situation, possibly conforming earlier without any torture. This does not state that the SIT does not work in its entirety, but shows that within other societies and cultures that stress collectivism; conformity may occur at a significantly higher rate than in cultures that strive for individualism.