Minimal group paradigm

The minimal group paradigm introduced by Tajfel et al (1971) is an experimental methodology to investigate the effects of social categorisation on behaviour. The paradigm was set up to challenge the notion of inter-group conflict or in-group favouritism and discover the minimal conditions for inter-group behaviour, that is, those conditions which are both necessary and sufficient for a collection of individuals to be ethnocentric (i. e. evaluate preferences for all aspects of one's own group relative to other groups) and to engage in inter-group competition. The initial experiment involved British school boys participating in what they believed to be a study of decision making. They were assigned to one of two groups on a completely random basis; however the boys thought that they were being assigned to group on the pretext of expressing preference for paintings by the artist Kandinsky or Klee. The individual child only knew which group themselves were assigned to (Kandinsky group or Klee group), with the identity of their fellow in-group and out-group members been kept hidden by the use of code numbers. The children were then asked to distribute money (which in-turn meant points) between pairs of recipients identified only by code number and group membership. This paper-and-pencil task was repeated for a number of different pairs of in-group and out-group members, excluding self, on a series of distribution matrices carefully designed to tease out the sorts of strategies that were being used. The findings of this study indicate that the children strongly favoured their own group - and distributed more money to their own group members. This shows how the children displayed in-group favouritism strategies. This strategy involves maximising in-group profit, together with maximising the difference in scores between the in group and the out-group (e. g. more money distributed to the in-group, means a larger

discrepancies between the points acquired by the in-group and out-group). Considering that the children in the above experiment did not even know the identity of the other members of each group and the fact that there was no self interest involved in the money distribution (as self was not a recipient) - the results of in-group favouritism are quite surprising. Therefore, one may ask why this phenomenon occurred. Further research by Billig and Tajfel (1973) applied the similar techniques but made their experiments increasing minimal to avoid any confounding variables. To eliminate any chances of the participant inferring that people were in the same group were interpersonally similar, they randomly categorised their participants as X or Y group members. Furthermore, Turner (1978) made the task a case of distributing points only and got rid of the link between the points and money. However, the robust findings from scores of minimal group experiments - is that the mere fact of being categorised as a group member is necessary and sufficient to produce ethnocentric and competitive inter-group behaviour. Therefore it is fair to say that social categorisation (i. e. the classification of people as members of different social groups) is the necessary component to influences inter-group behaviour.

Therefore, the minimal groups studies described above demonstrate how notions of social categorisation in inter-group behaviour lead to the development of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The basis of this theory is that social categories (such as a nation or religion) provide members with a social identity or a definition of who one is and a description and evaluation of what this entails. To arrive at this definition - there is an assumption that human beings exist in a hierarchically organised society -

people are structured into different social groups that stand in power and status relations to one another. Therefore, to arrive at a definition on one group, a definition of the 'other' is also required. For example, one can be described as either; man and woman, black or whites in South Africa, Catholics or Protestants in Northern Ireland etc. Therefore, being a member of the social category Catholic, means not only that you as the individual defines and evaluates oneself as Catholic, but that other's evaluate and define you as Catholic also. In addition to this, the individual will also think and behave characteristically of what is to be considered 'Catholic'. Therefore, it may be reasonable to suggest that social identity is the part of the concept of one self that derives from group membership. This is not to be confused with personal identity - which is the part of self-concept that derives from one's personality and social interactions that take place in one's life (Turner, 1982). Social identity is associated with group behaviour; e. g. ethnocentrism, in-group favouritism, inter-group differentiation, conformity to in-group norms and perception of self, out-groupers and fellow in-group members in terms of relevant group stereotypes. Social identity produces these effects because it is associated with social categorisation, which, in turn produces competitive inter-group behaviour. This is supported not only by minimal group studies but also by naturalist investigations carried out by Oakes and Brown (1986). They found that nurses, assumingly caring and self-sacrificing individuals displayed just as much in group favouritism as those in other less self-sacrificing groups. However, as we may see from Oakes and Brown (1986) study, social categorisation often carries with it a sense of stereotyping or labelling for the individuals addressed to this categorisation. In terms of group effects can this be avoided or is

stereotyping an inevitable process of group dynamics and identity? There has been empirical evidence to suggest that social identity has been shown to accentuate perceived stereotypical similarities within groups and differences between in-group and outer-groups. Accentuation is considered to be inevitable and shows how cognitive processes work to serve the important function for people to simplify, in meaningful ways, the differences between groups. Therefore, it seems logical that in-group favouritism would occur - as a simple process of the individual differentiating between their own group members and the other group members.

However, alongside the tendency to over-compensate for similarity between in-group members and differentiation of out-group members, there is the danger of people perceptually homogenise out-group members more than in-group members - for example, claiming that 'they all look the same, but we are diverse'(Brigham and Malpass, 1985). This can be demonstrated from the findings of Brigham and Barkowitz (1978). They administrated two sets of photographs of white and black faces; the first batch contained 24 photo's the seconded set composed of 72 photos. The participant were asked if the photo's in batch B were replications of any photo's seen in batch A. The findings revealed that participants found it more difficult to recognise out-group faces (of different race than themselves) opposed to in-group faces (of the same race to them self). The general explanation for this display of enhancement to group defining dimensions or what is termed the relative homogeneity effect (Judd and Park 1988) is that we as individuals have more detailed knowledge about these group members, and therefore are better able to differentiate them (Linville et al, 1989). To support this theory, Wilde

1984 reveals that when participant are told minimum information about both groups - there is a lack of detail to identify with or assume that you don't identify with - that equal familiarity with each group is assumed. It has also been suggested that the size of the group may have an impact on the way an in-group or out-group is perceived. To test the idea that relative homogeneity is influenced by the majority/minority status of the in-group, Simon and Brown (1987) conducted a minimal group study in which relative group size was varied - (e. g. minority and majority groups were assigned) and participants were asked to rate the variability of both the in-group and the out-group, in addition to their own identification with the in-group. It was found that those belonging to the majority group rated the out-group as less variable than the in-group; however, minorities did the opposite (i. e. they believed less differentiation existed in the in-group). Therefore, this present's in-group homogeneity effect, which was accompanied by greater group identification. This suggests that self-categorisation and social identity theories hold strong - in that the individual (even from a minority group) does not try to conform to the majority group, but identifies more with the minority and depersonalises their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour to fit with that social category. Therefore the group that you belong to often influences you to express favouritism towards its members.

However, the minimal group paradigm has not gone unchallenged or without criticism. For example, Turner and Bourhis, (1996) dispute whether inter-group favouritism is not more of a reflection of economic self-interest rather than social identity based on group differentiation. For example, to draw on Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, it is assumed that people have

a basic need to obtain, through comparison between themselves and others, a relatively positive evaluation of themselves. In inter-group contexts, when social identity is salient and thus mediating self-evaluation, this need is manifested through securing a relatively positive social identity for the in-group. To demonstrate further, Emler and Reicher (1995) have suggested that delinquent behaviour can be a valid example of this accentuation. For example, they found that delinquency, particularly among boys, is a strategic behaviour designed to establish and maintain a favourable reputation amongst group peers. Its identity conforming function is supported by the fact that most delinquent behaviour occurs in group activities and occurs in public. It is suggested that delinquent boys are often under-achiever at school (and therefore not praised for good academic success), therefore, delinquency offers an alternative source of positive identity. In pursuit of positive social identity, a variety of different behavioural strategies are available and open to the individual or group members to act out. The choice of which strategy to adopt is determined by the individuals beliefs about the nature of the relationships between their own group and other groups (Hogg and Abrams 1988). However, these beliefs may or may not accord with the reality of the inter-group politics or relations, but hinge on whether it is possible to as a individual 'pass' from a lower status group and gain acceptance to a higher status group. This is referred to as a social mobility belief - i. e. a belief that social inter-group boundaries are flexible - thus it is possible for an individual to move out of a lower status group and into a higher status group in order to improve social status. When a social mobility belief system is present within a certain group - it has detrimental effects on the stability of the group and its present

members. Group members with this belief inhibit group action, and instead encourage other group members to disassociate themselves from the group and try to gain access and acceptance in a higher status group. This can be demonstrated in the India, with the Hindu caste system - whereby tribe members try to gain more prestigious titles to move up the caste system. Under these circumstances, positive group identity can only be achieved if the existing status and power hierocracy is perceived to be secure. Therefore, if the social structure of the group is perceived to be stable, legitimate and thus secure, it is difficult for the individual group members to conceive an alternative social structure/group to move into - i. e. they are comfortable and satisfied with their surrounding and identity that is gained from being a member of the present group. Therefore, the notion of social identity can be seen as a measure that acts to regulate individual behaviour by influencing them to feel content with their current status and act in ways to promote the group for its continuation.

Alternatively, social identity can be seen as a measure that encourages behaviour of the individual to strive for different group membership. This underlying process is called self-categorisation (Turner et al, 1987). The underlying process of group behaviour is self categorisation. This produces in-group normative behaviour (conformity to group norms) and self-stereotyping (a set schema that represents a given image or behaviour that is appropriate to act on in its given context). It is believed that the process of self-categorisation depersonalises the perception and behaviour of people, including ourselves, so that we perceive and behave not as unique individuals but as group members. This implies that our self-concept is

reliant on group membership. However, it is difficult to assess when a particular self-categorisation becomes salient as the basis of one's self-concept. It is useful to bear in mind that stereotyping and social categories are not static notions rather that they are highly responsive to social context and socially structured individual motives. Social categories that are chronically accessible to us (e. g. in memory) - and make good sense of people's attitudes and behaviour - i. e. they neatly fit reality - persist and come into operation as the basis of self-categorisation. Therefore, salience is a fundamental interaction between chronic accessibility and situational accessibility, on the one hand, and structural fit and normative fit on the other. This pattern of cognitive thoughts are often motivated by the individuals need to reduce uncertainty concerning their sense of identity. In addition to social uncertainty (Hogg and Mullin, 1998), stereotypes can also serve as a mechanism to clarify social roles (Eagly, 1995) which also serve as a provision for creating a sense of self and identity. If an individual is dissatisfied or uncertain of their identity, they will look to group identities to provide a prototype (set of defining features that represent that particular group) that describes the typical behaviour or beliefs of the group members. The individual will then behaviour accordingly to these characteristics. There is mixed findings of whether it is self-esteem that motivates inter-group behaviour - (i. e. the wanting to conform and belong) or whether being part of a given group influences you to produce stereotypical behaviour. It would be reasonable to suggest from the evidence presented above, that the mechanisms of minimal group paradigm serve to influence a degree of power differentiation (Fiske 1993) - i. e. the group as differentiated different from the 'other' group. It is also fair to say that the minimal group paradigm

may contribute to inter-group conflicts (Robinson et al 1995) - i. e. caused by different members possessing a social-mobility belief - which attempts to influence group behaviour to steer away from the status quo. Similarly, minimal group effects can also contribute to a positive sense of in-group identity (Hogg and Adams, 1988).

Although not a criticism of the minimal group paradigm, Mummendey et al (1992) have challenged its position and believe that a positive-negative asymmetry exists in the effects. Following a similar experiment to Tajfel et al (19--), altering the rewards of points to the subtraction of resources, shows that the minimal group paradigm is much weaker - i. e. individual group members do not classify their group with much favouritism. Therefore this relates back to the individual members assigning any type of reward or praise is associated with positivism and personal gain. This personal gain often represents a positive sense of self - as a consequence of belonging to a group. Therefore if the group is not gaining positive outcomes - this is bound to have an individual affect on the group members - as well as on the group as a whole. It has been suggested that groups go through five stages of development; from the initial forming stage through to the adjourning stage (Tuckman, 1965). In between the formation and adjournment of a group - there is the storming process - which is often characterised by conflicts and debate. This conflict is often a result of the group not having any clear roles or collective goals, thus people within the group vie for positions of control. Within this stage the group does start to take on some structure -and the group will then moves into the third stage of development, where people are organised into certain roles - for a group to succeed there is often a

hierarchal form to that structure - for example, leaders, diplomatics, ideas people and action people. The group is then driven by collective aims to perform (stage 4) and succeed in achieving their goals. However, with all goal-driven behaviour, it must come to an end - i. e. when the goal is completed. Tuckman (1965) believes this brings an end to the group formation and adjournment takes place - and members digress into different groups. Which different group they choose will depend on how the individual self-categorises themselves and finds a group to fulfil their needs and sense of belonging (social identity). However, minimal group paradigm effects would influence the departure not to happen - as the individuals within that group should feel content with the group dynamics, its achievements and their place within the group. To prevent individual group members from seeking alternatives, many groups tend to adopt social creativity strategies to provide incentives to the group members to remain in the group. This may involve the engagement of inter-group comparisons on novel or unorthodox dimensions, which tend to favour the original (and often subordinate) group. For example, the group can attempt to change the consensual value attached to the in-group characteristics - e. g. 'Fat is Fab' making it more appealing then alternative group formations - e. g. Slim is Smashing. Another tactic is for the group to emphasis the positives that they have achieved, and not focus on the things that they were unable to fulfil. This affect can be demonstrated by Lemaine (1974) who had children engage in an inter-group competition to build the best hut. Lemaine (1964) found that groups which were provided with poor building materials (meaning less prospects of winning the tasks) went on to emphasis how good the garden was that they had made. Thus attention was brought back to the positives that the group

had achieved - and not what they had not succeeded to achieve. Therefore in relation to the Fit is Fab group example, this is important to take note of, as many groups face inter-group conflict, because some members feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled. This in turn affects the individual's self-esteem - which can either result in them wanting to find an alternative group to refer to, or results in them contributing negatives elements into the current group.

When considering social identity and sense achievement it is important to have an understanding of how these attributions are made. The minimal group paradigm suggests that inter-group attributions are an extension of the self-serving bias - i. e. the perception of the situation is dependent on what will protect or enhance one's self-esteem and/or self concept. Therefore, the success of one's own team is attributed to the internal stabilities (i. e. strong social identity) rather than the efforts, luck or task difficulty. For example, this means that group activities are perceived as socially desirable and positive behaviours are internally attributed to the group's disposition. In contrast, negative in-group activities or results are externally attributed to situational factors. This can be demonstrated by the findings of Hewstone and Ward (1985), who conducted an experiment with Malaysian and Chinese participants living in Malaysia and Singapore. The participants were asked to assess the fiction behaviour of Malays or Chinese people. In Malay participants showed a clear ethnocentric attribution bias; i. e. they attributed a positive act by a Malay more to internal factors, than a similar act by a Chinese person. Furthermore, a negative act by a Malaysian was perceived more too external factors, than a similar act performed by a Chinese character. The in-group enhancement effect was much stronger

than the out-group derogation effect. In contrast, the Chinese participants showed no ethnocentric bias. However, the Chinese participants showed a lack of ethnocentrisms - and made the same attributions as the Malays did. The results in Hewstone and Ward (1985) at face value appear to suggest that their findings go against the claim that one who identities with a group will always speak of that group favourably? However, an explanation of the political climate is useful in interpretation these results. At the time of their research, both Malays and Chinese cultures generally shared an unfavourable stereotype of the Chinese and a favourable view of Malays. Therefore, the implication of this research highlights the fact that inter-group favouritism and ethnocentric attributions are not universal, but rather reflect inter-group dynamics in a socio-historical context. Therefore, the notion of minimal group paradigm does not always run straight-forward. For example, the above findings illustrate that as a consequence of direct social competition (i. e. inter-group conflict surrounding political views of the Chinese) - has had an impact on the perceptions made by Chinese people themselves. Therefore, this suggests that when social or political change is associated with an appreciation that the status quo is unstable and insecure - cognitive alternatives (e. g. mental representations of ones self and one's self identity) become available and obtainable. Therefore, one's social identity is thrown into question - as one looks for alternative solutions to fulfil their sense of identity.

In conclusion, the purpose of the minimal group paradigm provides us with an interpretation why individual group members may perceive the group that they belong to in more favourable terms than another group that they

do not belong to. The evidence discussed above suggests that this effect is a consequence of the individual seeking confirmation and positive feedback about themselves as individuals. Therefore, belonging to a group that is perceived favourably is important in the formation and maintenance of one's self-esteem and perception of self and how others see them. Therefore, to belong in a group - is a large factor influencing self and social identification. Group membership aids to provide this social identity, however, the individual knows that this state of equilibrium is not guaranteed, therefore, one must take steps to secure its existence. This is done through a process of over-familiarising with the group one belongs to and disassociating with the opposing group that one doesn't belong to. However, this black and white notion of events is too simplistic for reality to actually perform too. Therefore if self-esteem is reliant on group membership, the necessity for positive evaluation of that group is necessary. Otherwise, inter-group conflict will emerge and the individual will assess the situation in regards to their own personal gain. Therefore, social identity is about how the individual is perceived in relation to other people. Group formations create a background for the individual to be able to do so. To maintain this comfortable status quo, the individual will most likely react in ways to promote the positive and avoid the negative by accentuating the group's achievement and individual fulfilment within the group.

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