Social identity and the inevitability of conflict groups

The topic of this essay is that the Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that prejudice and discrimination against out-group members and, as a result, conflict groups may be inevitable; that all that is needed to trigger in-group favouritism and out-group bias is an awareness that one belongs to a particular social group and that another group, of which one is not a member, exists.

The SIT was conceived by Henri Tajfel and his student John Turner to amend and supplement Campbells' Realistic Group Conflict Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The aim of the SIT was to provide a base level understanding of peoples' social identities apart from their individual identities, that is, how people identify with groups that they belong to, the assimilation of in-group ideals as their own, the positive bias toward those of the same in-group, and negative bias (prejudice) toward those who identify with out-groups. It also explained inter group behaviour and its social context and also social comparison. The SIT suggests that the more extremely a person is associated with an in-group, the more likely they are to treat members of out-groups as objects comprised of traits universal to members of their out-group, rather than individuals comprised of both group and unique traits. It points out that, especially in our culture, intergroup conflict and competition is commonplace and easy to trigger. There is also suggestion that in-group bias is a universal trait affecting all social groups.

The momentum that helped forge this theory comes from Tajfel's own personal history. Born in 1919 as a Polish Jew, Henri was called away from his studies in chemistry to fight with the French against the Nazis. A year later he was captured and survived by not allowing his captors to learn that

he was a Jew (The Nazis most despised out-group). After the war, Henri returned home to find all his close relatives had been killed. After a time of helping the aftermath Henri studied psychology with a focus on social identity and group conflict such as he had seen during the war (Reicher).

The personal life and times of Henri Tajfel shows some insight into social identity and conflict groups. Such as a young Henri heeding the call to fight the Germans with the French even though he was Polish, in the Second World War the Nazi war machine and its subsequent expansion resurfaced a rift between the Nazis and the rest of Europe that was present in the First World War, leading to two main conflict groups, the Nazi's and the Allied Nations. As Tajfel was not a Nazi, He identified with the French (part of his in group) and fought along with them. At the time of his capture, Tajfel had to change a part of his social identity in order to survive. As Nazis were more likely to torture and kill Jews over other captive groups Tajfel had to make sure that his captors never learned that he was a Jew. To do this He had to identify as a non-Jew which to him was an out-group, this however required no alteration physical changes (Providing that he didn't have to expose himself to his captors) and psychologically, he was still himself. Tajfel succeeded and survived until the end of the war. This provides a good example of discrimination based on social grouping rather than individual attributes.

To this many people would say that those were the war days and that violence and emotion ran high, so it was easy to see such discrimination and hostility as commonplace, but times have changed and we are no longer like that. And, to an extent, they are correct. Though even now in Europe, many

still consider the Jews as a powerful, threatening group of social and national outsiders (Werner, 2008), and there is still anti-Semitic violence taking place in this older, wiser world. But still, time has moved on and Western atrocities such as the vast commonplace racism of the early to mid twentieth century has dissipated, though not completely. Much of this is due to changing media portrayals of minorities, with thanks to such trail blazers as Sidney Portier (first black actor to play a lead in a major motion picture), The Cosby Show (first non-stereotyped black sitcom), and even Star Trek (first interracial kiss on U. S. television). By allowing people to identify with minorities in the media without stereotyping, aggression toward minorities reduces (Muller, 2009). However lessened, racial discrepancies and violence still occurs in the western world today. It seems that all our attempts to abolish social discrimination and conflict in the past few decades has come a long way, and if you think of things such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the partite, and the advancement of gay rights, the yes we have. However, if you look at the rise of the Mugabe Regime, the US War on Terror and its subsequent effects on the Muslim population, and even the psudoracism toward the ginger (ging-er) population, then no we really haven't. Also, most attempts to abolish group conflict have at best reduced conflict, not ended it out right so long as both groups remain in existence.

It seems that intergroup conflict is unavoidable, as we put aside our old differences with one group, we just as quickly discover new differences with another group. Even here in New Zealand in-group bias and out-group prejudice is not only tolerated, it is applauded. Take this personal anecdote for example. In 2005 My best friend and I travelled to the city for my

bachelor party. At this time the UK Lions rugby team was touring the country, playing against our All Blacks. Neither my friend nor I were rugby fans of any sort, but when we saw that an English pub was just down the street from where we were staying we decided to don any black clothing we had and go to the English pub to watch the game and give the Lions supporters a hard time. When we arrived we noticed that all the customers inside the pub were dressed in black to support the All Blacks, my friend and I looked around to see if there were any Lions supporters around and indeed we did find them. They had congregated outside in a caged off smokers area on the cold July night, watching a T. V. that was barely audible over the sound of traffic. When we asked them if they wouldn't prefer a table inside they responded that they were quite happy where they were. My friend and I returned to our table near the bar to watch the game. Though when a Lions supporter came in to get a refreshment, they were met by a call to ' go back where they belong' or they were informed precisely how useless their team was. During half time, the smokers in the bar went to the smokers' area occupied by the Lions fans and once again were insulted for their taste in rugby teams, among other things. The Lions lost the game and at full time the smokers returned to the smokers' area to boats their mighty victory to the puny Lions Supporters.

This example has a clear cut in-group and a quite literal out-group, the in-group, through force of numbers had dominance in the situation initially. But why, you may ask, did the in group members have to ridicule the out-group members at every available chance? The answer quite simply is self esteem, just as the school bully will put down the smart kids to make themselves feel

better, social groups will often discriminate out-groups as a means of enhancing self esteem (Lemyre & Smith, 1985).

This is not the only example of socially acceptable, intergroup conflict in this country either. The ever continuing Holden versus Ford debate is ever popular and in this case the group conflict is media driven with multiple televised Holden versus Ford races occurring annually and a seemingly unending supply of supporter gear as well as derogatory supporter gear designed to insult and degrade your particular out-group. Some members of both groups can take extreme measures in this conflict, such as disallowing out-group vehicles to park on their property. Attribution has a role to play in social conflict as well. Say for instance a Holden crashes during the Bathurst 1000 race the Ford supporters will commonly believe the fault to be in the car or one of the many short comings of it's driver (who obviously must not be bright to be driving a Holden in the first place). The Holden supporters, however, would more likely believe that some external cause (or perhaps a stupid Ford driver cutting him off) was to blame. This is due to in-group bias causing people to make similar attributions to in group members as they do to themselves (De Cremer, 2000).

So far all the examples have involves high levels of emotional attachment toward the in-group. So is it fair to say that in-group bias and out-group discrimination are a result of heightened emotional commitment toward the in-group? To answer this, many experiments have been conducted based on arbitrary groups designed solely for the purpose of the experiment and in most cases the participants are randomly assigned to groups so that there is no predetermined affiliation between group members. The group members

are then given simple tasks and the experimenters are looking for signs for in-group bias and out-group discrimination. The results of studies like these has shown that such discrimination does indeed exist, even when the groups are arbitrary and the group assignment is random (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985) (Aviram, 2007). This shows that no emotional bond is requires at all for there to be discrimination between in-group and out-group members. All that is really required for there to be out-group prejudice is the knowledge that one is in a social group and that another group, an out-group, exists.

Summary

To summarize the discussion as it stands. The topic was to discuss the SIT and the notion that discrimination and prejudice toward out-groups and intergroup conflict is inevitable, also, that all that is needed for there to be such discrimination is the knowledge that both an in-group and an out-group exists. The personal history of Henri Tajfel and his life during the Second World War was discussed, pointing out the group conflicts and out-group prejudices present during that time. The discrimination of out-group members based on group affiliation rather than individual traits was pointed out. This historical account also gave some insight as to the motives behind the creation of the SIT. Then the role of media in the lessening of racial discrimination and conflict in recent decades was discussed, though it was pointed out that the amount of prejudice and conflict the media had affected had dissipated, it was never truly abolished. There was some discussion on the recent milestones toward intergroup peace globally and also the new found intergroup prejudice and conflict arising at the same time. The view of

the discussion then moved to a New Zealand perspective starting with a personal anecdote of the national rugby obsession and the ethnocentric discrimination that arises from the organised conflict of the game itself. It was then discussed how the media and commercial marketing can also induce conflict and discrimination between groups with reference to the local Holden Versus Ford conflict. In this it was pointed out how in-group bias and out-group discrimination can influence the locus of attribution in the inference of others behaviour. Finally, experiments involving out-group discrimination in arbitrary groups of randomly assigned members was discussed, the results of which being in support with the notion that all that is required for there to be in-group bias and out-group discrimination is the knowledge that an in-group (to which one belongs) and an out-group (to which one does not belong) exists. The discussion as a whole utilised a combination of empirical research and real life examples to illustrate facts that validate the SIT and support the suggestions that it carries. The SIT provides a good base knowledge of social identity, social discrimination and conflict groups. However this does not make it the be all and end all of knowledge on this subject. With an ever evolving social climate and the development of new experimental techniques, the Sit is rather a solid foundation to which we can build a more profound understanding of the social world.