Socail identity theory and the discursive

From a Social Psychological Point of View, Group Membership 'Is Primarily a Cognitive Matter' (Brown, 2007, P 146). Discuss This Statement in Relation to Social Identity Theory and Discursive Psychology. By xanJra From a social psychological point of view, group membership 'is primarily a cognitive matter' (Brown, 2007, p 146). Discuss this statement in relation to social identity theory and discursive psychology. TaJfel (1982) suggests that social psychological understandings of group membership should include the relationships between social, cultural and psychological factors.

This essay attempts to argue that neither social identity theory nor discursive psychology view group membership as an entirely cognitive matter, however, social identity theory incorporates cognitive factors into its explanations of group membership toa greater extent than discursive psychology. This essay will begin by describing social identity theory and its core assumptions, in order to illuminate the extent to which social identity theory views group membership as being a cognitive matter.

Discursive psychological criticisms of the social identity theory will then be iscussed. The essay will then describe discursive psychology, what its underlying theory is and how it applies it to the topic of group membership. The essay will discuss of the possibility of combining social identity theory with discursive psychology to provide a more comprehensive account of group membership. This essay will conclude by stating that group membership should be viewed as a cognitive and social matter.

The social identity theory was proposed by social psychologist Henri TaJfel, and his student John Turner, in 1979 to challenge the (then dominant) idea

that group ynamics are biologically based (TaJfel, 1982). TaJfel stressed the importance of developing theories that illuminated the relationship between social, cultural and psychological factors (Brown, 2007). TaJfel (1982) states that social identity theory is designed to explain how individuals develop a sense of membership in particular groups and how intergroup behaviour is affected by group membership.

In the 1950s and 1960s, TaJfel took the first step in developing social identity theory when he found that participants displayed a cognitive bias, in exaggerating imilarities within and differences between groups, when making Judgements on two dimensions (Brown, 2007). Originally using coins, with the first dimension being a continuous scale (monetary value) and the second being a categorical variable (the size ot coin), TaJtel (1969, cited in Brown, 2007) applied this to making Judgements ot people. The continuous scale of character traits and the second dimension as social categories (e. g. ace or gender), in which the cognitive bias could cause prejudice and stereotypes. This aspect of group membership is obviously 'primarily a cognitive atter'. Social identity theory states that knowledge of group membership, and the value and emotional significance of a particular group membership, forms an important part of our identity (TaJfel, 1982). Brown (2007) suggests that this idea is based on three key assumptions. Firstly, that maintaining positive self-esteem is a basic human motivation. Secondly, that self-esteem is based on the positive or negative values ascribed toa particular group membership.

Thirdly, these values are developed by comparing the in-group with appropriate out-groups. It can be argued that the first ssumption is

biologically based, whereas the second and third are based primarily on cognitive factors. TaJfel began conducting a series of experiments known as minimal group paradigm (MGP) experiments. These experiments were designed to test whether intergroup discrimination would occur when group membership was assigned using minimal (arbitrary or meaningless) conditions, for example using a coin toss to allocate groups (Billig and TaJfel, 1973, cited in TaJfel, 1982).

TaJfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament (1971) began a series of MGP experiments to argue that in-group bias occurs even when here is no conflict or competition between the groups. TaJfel et al (1971) stated that results show that even when individual benefit was unaffected, participants chose to maximise differences between the groups (in favour of the in-group) rather than choosing either maximum benefit for both groups or maximum benefit for the in- group. TaJfel et al (1971) suggest that this occurs to preserve or achieve positive group distinctiveness.

This idea is supported by other research, including a field study conducted by Brown (1978, cited by TaJfel, 1982). TaJfel et al (1971) discuss ognitive factors and briefly mention the influences of social factors especially that of 'social norms of group membership', and TaJfel repeatedly stresses the importance of uniting cognitive and social explanations when exploring group membership (TaJfel, 1982). However the MGP experiments only investigate cognitive, not social, processes and TaJfel et al (1971) do not elaborate on the specific relationship between cognitive and social factors nor do they explain how the social factors operate.

Michael Billig, a student of TaJfel and fellow researcher in the MGP experiments, has ince become interested in the study of discourse and rhetoric in explaining group membership, and his work has been cited as one of the influences in the development of discursive psychology (Weatherall, 2002). Discursive psychologists' main criticism of this theory is that in reducing group membership to the level of cognitive processes, social identity theory neglects the historical and socio-cultural structures that shape what it means to be part of a group (Williams, 1992, cited in Hansen and Liu, 1997).

Billig (2002, cited in Brown, 2007) suggests that although it as Taffel's intention to incorporate social factors into the social identity theory he did not achieve it in his work and Billig argues that the majority ot contemporary researchers of social identity theory have ignored this aim. Discursive psychology refers to discourse analysis that investigates psychological themes. This approach was originally developed during the 1990s by Potter and Edwards, who drew on previous work from a variety of disciplines, including work on rhetoric conducted by Taffel's former student, Michael Billig.

Weatherall (2002) states hat discursive psychology views language not as a window to cognition but instead suggests that language actually constructs and negotiates social psychological phenomena. Discursive psychological studies of group membership stress the dynamic nature of social identities; suggesting that group membership categories are produced and negotiated continually during social interaction. Discursive psychology also emphasizes the multiplicity of group membership categories by investigating the

repertoires of social identities that are taken up and discarded for different purposes throughout discourse (Hansen and Liu, 1997).

Weatherall (2002) states that discursive psychological accounts mostly focus on large-scale socio- cultural groups, such as gender or ethnicity, and many studies are designed to investigate social inequalities in minority group memberships. This aspect of discursive psychology could be criticised for being too focused on achieving social change and therefore ignoring group membership processes in majority groups. Weatherall (2002) discusses the two foremost perspectives used in discursive psychological research on social identity and group membership.

The first approach raws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis; and mainly studies how identities, as social categories, are constructed and managed in discourse. The second approach uses a Foucauldian post-structural perspective; and researches the variety of social categories that are available in discourse. Hansen and Liu (1997) state that cognitive social psychologists have criticised discursive psychology for ignoring individual cognitive processes and in response to this many discursive psychologists have incorporated aspects of social identity theory into their research (while still focusing on discourse analysis).

TaJfel (1982) argued that to fully appreciate social identity theory the cognitive processes must be considered in conjunction with socio-cultural concepts. Hansen and Liu (1997) describe an example of how discursive psychology can be based on social identity theory. TaJfel and Turner (1979, cited in Brown, 2007) propose that individuals aim to achieve positive group

distinctiveness in comparison with a relevant out-group. They describe several strategies for coping with low subjective status; individual social mobility, social competition and social creativity.

Social creativity can include changing the trait of comparison, changing the value of the trait or changing the out-group used for comparison. Discursive psychologists agree that individuals desire positive group distinctiveness and they describe similar strategies for increasing the perceived value of a particular group identity (Hansen and Liu, 1997). The individual may try to minimise distinguishing group characteristics, such as hiding their accent or changing their tamily name. ollection of individuals may reinvent a particular category through language by ntroducing a new interpretative repertoire, such as the phrase 'black is beautiful'. Individuals may also choose to emphasise a particular sub-group (or meta-category), for example defining themselves not Just as 'English' but as 'Northern' or 'Southern'. This can be done even with seemingly inflexible (or biologically determined) categories such as gender, for example the words woman, female, girl and lady all have different connotations and the individual can choose which image they wish to foreground at particular points during interaction.