

From a social  
psychological point of  
view



Group behaviour (how the individual affects a group and vice-versa) has been widely studied in social psychology but has been hard to theorise (Brown, 2007). Within social psychology there are many social psychological perspectives that have used different theoretical frameworks to study group behaviour. Although each perspective is in agreement that social categorisation (the way an individual and others are classified part of the same or different social groups) and social identity (the way that being part of a social group can give individuals a sense of self) are important in group membership (Phoenix, 2007), the way they are both treated in each perspective varies. This essay will show this by using the cognitive social perspective (namely the social identity theory-SIT) and the critical discursive perspective and explain their ontological assumptions and different approaches to social categorisation and social identity. This essay will argue that from a social psychological point of view, group membership is not primarily a cognitive matter. It will also argue that social and individual sides of group membership should not be seen as dichotomies but as interactive, dynamic and influenced by power relations.

The cognitive social approach has an ontological assumption that people are information processing individuals (Hollway, 2007) whose thought processes are shaped by and create the world that they live in (The Open University, DVD 1, 2007). There are many different traditions within this approach, although this essay will concentrate on the social identity tradition. The social identity tradition was designed to break away from previous 'cognitive miser' traditions of the approach that assumed that the social was just something that affected the individual (Brown, 2007). Although it shared the

same ontological assumption as the cognitive miser tradition and assumed that individuals had limited and fixed cognitive mechanisms (Dixon, 2007), it also differed from it because it saw individuals as socialised thinkers where group membership played a part in structuring the individuals thoughts (The Open University, DVD 1 2007). The social identity tradition led Tajfel and Turner (1979, cited in Brown, 2007) to develop the social identity theory (SIT).

SIT attempted to use a combined social and cognitive approach to studying inter-group relations; it saw the social as more than just something that affects individuals. It attempted to find out how people identified with groups and how this affected their judgements (Brown, 2007). SIT explained how group membership and inter-group relations are based on self categorisation, social comparison and the construction of a shared self definition (Brown, 2007). SIT is currently one of the leading theories in group processes; although this has led to power relations where group identification is still seen as mostly a cognitive process. The focus on cognitive mechanisms also stresses that group processes are still seen as individualistic and so misses out a lot of the influence that society has on the individual or group.

In contrast to SIT, the critical discursive perspective argues that discourse and social practices are what make up an individual and their social world; individuals are seen as socially constructed, contingent and situated (The Open University, DVD 1, 2007). Unlike SIT that studies how cognitive mechanisms allow an individual to identify with a group; the critical discursive perspective looks at how groups and group identities are created

by the individual through discourse and the different ways that these groups are dynamic, flexible and changeable. Categorisation is therefore seen as an active and 'out there' rather than a process that is internal (Brown, 2007).

Akin to the cognitive social perspective, there are different approaches in the critical discursive perspective, for example, some researchers accept the reality of given categories (Billig, 2002, cited in Brown, 2007) whilst others argue that categories are socially constructed (Potter and Reicher, 1987, cited in Phoenix, 2007). Power relations also blight the critical discursive perspective as discourses can be interpreted differently and each discourse available within each culture is politically and ideologically constructed. But, the critical discursive perspective does go beyond the individual-society dualism to look at how the individual and social come together to construct groups.

SIT and the critical discursive perspective see categorisation and group membership differently. SIT sees categorisation and group membership as distorted and individualistic. It was developed from Tajfel's (1957, cited in Brown, 2007) early coin experiments which led him to conclude that by combining a continuous dimension of judgement (coin value) with a clear-cut category dimension (size difference) would result in a 'cognitive bias' and therefore a faulty judgement within and between the categories. Tajfel (1959, cited in Brown, 2007) saw that this bias could be used to explain how individuals perceive others using 'cognitive' variables, like intelligence, for the continuous dimension of judgement and 'social' variables, like nationality, for the clear-cut category dimension. Like the coin's, Tajfel

(1959, cited in Brown, 2007) hypothesised that individuals would stereotype group members and exaggerate inter-group differences.

Tajfel and Turner (1970, cited in Brown, 2007) undertook some minimal group experiments to test this hypothesis. These experiments were purely cognitive; there was no reason for the groups to dislike or be competitive towards each other and therefore this shows how the cognitive bias and distortion can occur. The groups were formed by dividing participants according to a random preference. Participants were asked to distribute money to one of two participants; they only knew of each others group membership. Like hypothesised, the participants tended to reward people who belong to the same group as themselves at the expense of those who belong to the rival group, even if this was at the expense of maximising their own groups profit.

So, in SIT individuals categorise themselves and others into groups then identify with the groups that heighten their self esteem and then compare their group with other groups by contrasting the good things about their group to the bad things about the other groups (Brown, 2007). Tajfel and Turner (1969, cited in Brown, 2007) argued that if an individual identifies themselves as being part of a category and consider themselves as part of that category then they are part of that category. But, biases are inevitable in SIT because the categories an individual uses serve a purpose (to preserve self esteem). As the categories used in SIT are social, this means that where the individual lives can affect their categorisation mechanisms (Brown, 2007). For example, to heighten the individuals self esteem, the group the individual sees him/herself as having membership to have to select a

relevant out-group to compare itself favourably with. The selection of this out-group depends on what is important to the society that the individual is living in at the time (Brown, 2007). Therefore group membership is created by categorisation, a cognitive mechanism, and the social merely interacts with this mechanism. So therefore SIT emphasises individual, internal processes of group membership and how group membership occurs is primarily a cognitive matter.

The critical discursive perspective, however, sees categorisation and group membership as more as something individuals do through language in everyday interaction. This can be seen in the way that social categories are constructed in discourse, for example, Potter and Reicher (1987, cited in Phoenix, 2007) undertook discourse research using communities. They used the social categorisation theory as a basis for their research which argued that if an individual perceived themselves to be part of a group, they behaved as a stereotypical member of the group when with the group; their personality shifted from an individual emphasis to a social emphasis which would be reflected in their discourse.

Potter and Reicher (1987, cited in Phoenix, 2007) analysed discourses of community that circulated after the St Paul's riot in Bristol in the 1980's and saw that and saw that many different discourses were given of the same event; they called these different versions community repertoires. In these different community repertoires they saw that the use of the term community and who was a member of this group was very fluid, inconsistent and flexible. The same account could construct the term 'community' in different ways, for example, the police could be constructed as being part of

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the community (which makes the riot an intra-group conflict) or the police could be seen as outside of the community (which makes the riot an inter-group conflict). The community could also be seen as a reference to things like lifestyle or the local residents or even as another term for the black community (Potter and Reicher, 1987, cited in Phoenix, 2007). This approach sees groups in terms of individual and social relationships which move away from the individual-social dichotomies of the cognitive social approaches. Therefore group membership is created by discourse which is not a cognitive mechanism, so groups are constructed. So therefore the critical discursive perspective emphasises external, individual and societal processes of group membership and so how group membership occurs is not a cognitive matter.

How SIT and the critical discursive perspective study prejudice can expand on how they each view group processes, how they see the individual and society and how they see power relations within group processes. SIT argues that categorisation encourages individuals to see the good in their in-group and compare it to the bad in the out-group which leads people to prejudiced thinking (Dixon, 2007). SIT recognises that there are social aspects of inter-group processes, like assimilation, but at the heart of SIT are the cognitive aspects of group processes (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). SIT suggests that individualistic cognitive mechanisms are the cause of prejudice and inter-group processes. Power relations also occur with SIT as its dominance may have affected how inter-group relations are viewed. The critical discursive perspective, however, argues that how individuals talk about groups and construct group identities is a better way to view the different ways that individuals categorise each day (Brown, 2007; DD307 Course Team, 2007).

The critical discursive perspective takes into account how an individual uses discourses and how society is involved in inter-group processes (DD303 Course Team, 2007). The critical discursive perspective argues that how an individual makes sense of their reality is affected by their culturally available linguistic resources (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, cited in Dixon, 2007). In this approach, individuals can only categorise and form prejudice because their society shares a language which enables them to construct identities and social relations (Dixon, 2007). Power relations are created in this approach depending on the discourses used by individuals and groups to construct a reality that is of best interest to them (Cooper and Kaye, 2007). This approach does not believe that stereotypes are caused by cognitive mechanisms (Hamilton and Troiler, 1986, cited in Dixon, 2007) they believe that collective belief systems causes the conflicts seen between groups (Eidelson and Eidelson, 2003, cited in Dixon, 2007).

Billig (2002, cited in Brown, 2007) moved from SIT to the critical discursive perspective and began to find limitations within SIT. For example, he saw that SIT assumed that categories that individual used to self categorise were fixed, stable and universal, whereas he argued that the categories used in SIT for prejudice were culturally determined, active, flexible, dynamic and constructed through language so cannot be explained in terms of psychological processes. SIT also assumes that the way individuals identify with groups is to help their self esteem when Billig (2002, cited in Brown, 2007) argued that this could not provide an explanation of extreme hate or the motivation for violence, hate or bigotry.



But there have also been criticisms with the critical discursive perspective approach to groups, for example, Dixon (2007) noted that it neglects emotion and cognition in favour of ' language details', this does not make sense to psychology which is about the mind. It would also be difficult to believe that strongly felt emotions are only social constructions through interaction with others via language. The critical social perspective also does not explain how new groups are formed, for example, ' Emo's', nor can they explain social change. There must also be a cognitive process that produces discourse as that is where meaning comes from; it cannot only come from external discourse.

SIT (representing cognitive social psychology) and critical discursive perspective have shown the extent to which group membership can be seen as primarily a cognitive matter from a social psychological point of view. SIT seems to rely on inner cognitive mechanisms for group membership whereas the critical discursive perspective seems to rely on outer constructions. As SIT suggests, the cognitive mechanisms of group membership seem to be important for understanding the world, although like the critical discursive perspective suggests, how categories are constructed using discourse processes are important for this understanding too. So therefore, from a social psychological point of view group membership is not primarily a cognitive matter, but instead group membership can be seen as both a combined cognitive and social matter. This essay has also shown that social and individual sides of group membership should not be seen as dichotomies but as dynamic, interactive and influenced by power relations.

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