

Social Identity Theory

Sherif, and other researchers after him, clearly demonstrated that ethnocentrism and intergroup conflict can simply arise as a consequence of putting groups in a situation of competition. This approach, which Campbell (1965) labelled 'realistic group conflict theory', showed that competition or negative goal interdependence is a sufficient condition for intergroup discrimination to appear. But is competition also a necessary condition?

In one of the summer camps that he organized, Sherif (1966) observed discriminatory behaviours as soon as groups became aware of each other's existence, that is, before they engaged in actual competition. Several studies have replicated this phenomenon. For instance, Ferguson and Kelley (1964) studied the factors influencing the overevaluation of group products in a non-competitive situation. Two groups worked simultaneously in the same room. They performed three different tasks, allegedly because experimenters wanted to observe how efficient and motivated groups work. Ferguson and Kelley were very careful not to give the impression that one group was expected to perform better than the other. Members of the groups were asked to judge the groups' products, but there would be no winner and no prize offered. Before the two groups started a task, one member of each group was to leave the room. Such non-participation would supposedly guarantee the objectivity of the judgments. In fact, the products of all three tasks were rated by both the absent and the active members. As it turns out, people overevaluated ingroup products even if they did not participate in the production. The debriefings, however, revealed that many subjects experienced a strong tendency to compete in spite of the experimental scenario. Apparently, the presence of another group working on the same task was sufficient to drive people to compare group products, to compete in other words. As Ferguson and Kelley concluded: 'It appears that the foundations of intergroup conflict are exceedingly easy to lay' (1964, p. 228).

Still more surprising, from a realistic conflict perspective, this ingroup bias has been observed even when groups were expected to cooperate (Brewer, 1979; R.J. Brown, 1984). Quite clearly, then, negative goal interdependence is not a necessary condition for ingroup bias to occur. Which conditions are necessary? Social identity theory (SIT) gives the most elaborate answer to this intriguing question. According to this theory, symbolic rather than material resources are the keys to conflict. Status,

realistic group conflict theory, than on groups within individuals (Capozza, 1994).

This approach was pioneered by the late Henri Tajfel and his Bristol group. Since Tajfel (1969) first expressed his views, things have become more complex, and

strictly speaking, there are now in fact two social identity theories: the original intergroup theory, which is an analysis of intergroup conflict and social change and focuses on individuals' need to maintain and enhance the positively valued distinctiveness of their ingroups compared to outgroups to achieve a positive social identity (Tajfel, 1972b, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986; Turner, 1975), and the more recent self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982, 1984, 1985; Turner et al., 1987), which represents a general theory of group processes based on the idea that shared social identity de-personalizes individual self-perception and action. [...] The fundamental hypothesis shared by both theories is that individuals define themselves in terms of their social group memberships and that group-defined self-perception produces psychologically distinctive effects in social behaviour. (Turner, 1988, pp. x-xi)

Given the importance of SIT in the field of stereotypes and stereotyping, we will devote this entire chapter to appraise it.

Paradigms in search of a theory

To put into perspective the work conducted by Tajfel or inspired by him, it is necessary to examine the experiments which preceded those of the Bristol group and which were conducted within another framework.

The minimal social situation

Jaap Rabbie conducted the first studies that tried to determine the minimal conditions under which a discrimination between in- and outgroups would arise (Rabbie, 1966; Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969). To introduce them, we cannot resist mentioning an anecdote that illustrates how personal events can influence the quest of a researcher (Rabbie, 1991). As a young Jewish boy, Jaap lived through the dramatic events of the Nazi occupation in the Netherlands. Up to then, he had been more interested in childhood games than in religious matters. However, that changed when the Nazis ordered all Dutch Jews to wear a distinctive sign. The first day people had to wear it, little Jaap went to school like he did every day, only he wore his sign. On his way, he passed an old man. The man did not know Jaap but lifted his hat to salute him. Jaap then realized that the sign he was wearing had been used by the old Dutch man as a means of identification. For the first time, he really identified himself with the Jews and he felt that his lot was highly dependent on that of all other Jews. Many years later, in order to study intergroup relations, Rabbie adopted Lewin's theoretical approach: people form a group when they are aware of the interdependence of their destiny.

Rabbie and Horwitz (1969) told teenagers of both sexes that they were

more: that
Rabbie & Horwitz
what do we
do with them?

studying the way people build up first impressions. Upon their arrival at the laboratory, eight subjects were separated for administrative reasons into two groups of four: the 'blues' and the 'greens'. In three experimental conditions, subjects learned that only half of them would be rewarded for their participation. The prize was a radio and, because there were only four radios left, only one group would receive them. In each of these three conditions, there was a different mechanism for selecting the group to be rewarded. The choice was either random, based on an arbitrary decision, or based on the votes of one of the two groups. In a control condition, there was no reward. After the radios were distributed, subjects were asked to give their impressions about the other persons, and they had to choose those persons with whom they would like to work further. In the control condition, sociometric choices and judgement scales revealed no bias at all in favour of the ingroup. In contrast, ingroup bias was found in all the other three conditions for both groups, the frustrated one and the rewarded one. Apparently, the mere fact that people shared the same fate, no matter how this came about, was sufficient to create a bias in favour of one's own group. This conclusion is totally in line with Lewin's views concerning interdependence.

In another experiment, Rabbin and Wilkens (1971) separated high school students into groups of three persons each. Again, the study allegedly concerned first impressions. There were three experimental conditions: groups competed against each other, they worked together but independently, or they worked separately. Subjects in the competition condition learned that the group with the best performance would receive money. In the non-competition condition, people were told that both groups could be awarded the money if the products conformed to certain criteria. On the basis of people's impressions, Rabbin and Wilkens concluded that members of the 'separate' groups displayed less ingroup favouritism than members in the 'competition' or 'non-competition' groups. Contrary to the authors' expectations, these last two conditions did not differ significantly from each other. However, a post-experimental questionnaire revealed that people in these two conditions felt the same amount of competition.

In sum, factors such as shared fate or objective competition can induce ingroup favouritism. Tajfel and colleagues (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971) tried to create an even more minimal social situation than the one imagined by Rabbin and Horwitz (1969). In their plan, this minimal social situation would serve as a base-line against which they could gauge the impact of different variables. This innovation created a famous paradigm which seeded the field for a new theory.

The minimal group paradigm

Here is a sketch of how researchers commonly set up the 'minimal group paradigm'. Subjects are classmates and the experiment takes place in their

Matrix 1 (allows for ingroup favouritism, fairness or altruism)																								
Member 74 of Klee group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Member 44 of Kandinsky group	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1										
Matrix 2 (allows for fairness, maximizes group differentiation or joint profit)																								
Member 12 of Klee group	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25					
Member 50 of Kandinsky group	1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19	21	23	25											

Figure 3.1 Examples of allocation matrices used in the minimal group paradigm

school. They are shown a series of slides of abstract paintings, two at a time, one from Klee and the other from Kandinsky. The names of the painters are not attached to the slides. For each pair of slides, adolescents have to write down on a special sheet which painting they prefer, the one on the right or the one on the left. When all slides have been shown, the experimenter collects the sheets and corrects them with ostentatious zeal. When this is finished, he calls each student, one by one, and whispers in his or her ear: 'You are in the Klee group'. The students are warned that they should not share their secret with their neighbours. When this whispering session is terminated, Tajfel distributes a booklet to each student. It contains matrices of points designed by the French psychologist Claude Flament; the points represent pennies that the students have to distribute to members of their ingroup, Klee, and or to the outgroup, Kandinsky.

Figure 3.1 shows two examples of such matrices. Subjects have to select one of the columns. The rows express the number of points or pennies afforded to either anonymous ingroup or anonymous outgroup members, depending on the instructions delivered with each matrix. Both rows may correspond to allocations for ingroup or outgroup members. The upper row may represent the ingroup and the lower one the outgroup, or the reverse. The adolescents are explicitly told that giving points to their ingroup members does not contribute to what they themselves will receive. Their own reward will depend on the responses of the other participants. The matrices appearing in the booklet and the instructions allocating the different rows are designed so as to investigate the strategies adopted by the subjects. For instance, matrix 1 allows researchers to observe ingroup favouritism, fairness or altruism. Suppose the upper row stands for the ingroup members and the lower one for the outgroupers. Selecting a column in the middle of the matrix means fairness; the gains for both groups are about equal. Choosing a column towards the extreme left is generosity to the outgroup. Choosing the extreme column on the right symbolizes complete ingroup favouritism. For that particular matrix, subjects usually tend to choose a column towards the right, that is, they choose an ingroup favouritism strategy. It is very rare that they pick the

extreme right case because the norm of fairness is also at play, but they clearly do not select the generous columns on the left.

Matrix 2 is designed to test two other strategies besides fairness. This time, the matrix is not symmetrical like the preceding one and the total of the various columns is no longer identical. Subjects are actually using the strategy 'Maximum Joint Profit' if they choose a column towards the right. The middle section represents fairness and the more they move left from it, the more they elect to use a 'Maximal Group Difference' strategy. As you might have already guessed, subjects do not follow a Maximum Joint Profit strategy but a Maximal Group Difference, in favour of the ingroup, rather. In other words, they prefer to give, for example, 9 points rather than 17 points to their ingroupers because, choosing 9 puts them 4 points ahead of the outgroup's 5 points, whereas choosing 17 puts them 4 points behind the outgroup's 21. Again, because the norm of fairness is present, the subjects tend not to choose the extreme cells. When both rows are devoted to ingroup members, subjects will take more extreme right columns than when both rows are devoted to the outgroup. This difference shows ingroup favouritism.

These are just two examples of matrices. The calculation of the different strategies is quite sophisticated (for a review, see Bounhis, Sachdev & Gagnon, 1994). Also, the matrices designed by Claude Flament may not be ideal, according to some authors (for a discussion, see Bornstein 1983; Turner, 1983). However, results obtained with this paradigm in various countries, with different populations and experimenters using modified operationalizations, have proven to be very reliable. More important, these results seem protected from artifacts and demand characteristics, and they tell a lot about spontaneous human reactions. Do not forget that these adolescents belonged to the same classroom for quite a long time. They probably did not know Klee and Kandinsky and couldn't care less about abstract paintings. Nevertheless, telling them explicitly: 'You are in the Klee group' and implying: 'There are Kandinsky members, even though you do not know who they are' is sufficient to create discriminatory behaviour. Remember also that Tajfel and his team did not expect such a result. The situation was supposed to create a base-line condition where no discrimination would occur and to which other variables could be added to obtain the desired differentiation. Therefore, the experimenters' expectancy does little to explain the results.

The minimal group paradigm reminds one of the 'in the eye of the storm' experiment. In a third grade American school, the teacher divided her pupils according to whether they had 'brown' or 'blue' eyes. On the first day of the experiment, the blue eyes are given a higher status than the brown eyes; the reverse occurs on the second day. The same experiment was later conducted with adults, and the same results ensued. Although these children and adults knew each other for quite some time, making an arbitrary division in terms of biological factors was sufficient to produce and legitimize strong discriminatory behaviours.

First explanations: norms of 'groupness' and 'fairness'

Simply placing people in a category on an arbitrary basis appears to cause discrimination against the other category, even despite a total lack of objective competition. Rabbie explained these data as resulting from an interdependence that reminded subjects of a group's norms. Tajfel's first explanation (1972b; Tajfel et al., 1971) also refers to norms, or, more precisely, to a compromise between two norms. On the one hand, a generic norm of 'groupness' tells subjects that it is right for them to favour their ingroup members. On the other hand, if ingroup favouritism is not absolute, it is because of a 'fairness' norm which reminds people to be fair towards every person present. The finding that levels of discrimination observed in minimal groups vary whether children are Europeans, Samoans or Maoris supports this explanation (Wetherell, 1982). All these groups displayed ingroup favouritism, but it was especially the case for the European kids.

Variations in cultural norms may partially account for these differences even though every culture tested showed ingroup favouritism. Data from a study by St Claire and Turner (1982) also bring into question the role of norms as the only determining factor. These authors found that schoolgirls who were not themselves categorized but simply had to guess the responses of categorized subjects did not show ingroup favouritism. If norms are at work in the minimal group paradigm, they do not seem to apply to predictions made by observers. In that same experiment, post-experimental interviews asked categorized subjects whether they had followed a particular rule and to describe that rule. Most subjects declared that they had no rule in mind during the experiment; some thought they had simply tried to be fair. A small minority acknowledged that they relied on ingroup favouritism. In fact, ingroup favouritism was present for all subjects. In a third condition, researchers presented the study to the subjects as an investigation about prejudice. Subjects in this condition said that the strategy to be used was an unfair one. Nevertheless, they didn't discriminate more than the subjects of the control condition.

Given the apparent insufficiency of norms as an explanation for ingroup favouritism, Tajfel's data were still in search of a theory. He solved this problem by linking the minimal group paradigm to his previous research on perception and stereotypes. The result was the social identity theory (SIT). In the next paragraphs, we summarize Tajfel's early work, sketch the main proposals of SIT and of its descendant, self-categorization theory (SCT), propose some current challenges to SIT and SCT, and link the preceding arguments with the field of stereotypes.

The basic concepts of SIT

Henri Tajfel (1972a) first enunciated SIT in his contribution to a French handbook of social psychology edited by his friend Serge Moscovici. Very