Kent Academic Repository

Milton, Damian (2010) *A discussion regarding social identity theory and discursive psychology.* **Open University. (Unpublished)**

A discussion regarding social identity theory and discursive psychology.

By Damian E M Milton

As soon as a person is born they are ascribed social groupings in which to belong, from the family to social categories such as gender and religious background. How people act within group contexts has long been a fervent area of debate within social psychological research. A variety of perspectives have analysed both intergroup (between groups) and intragroup (within group) processes. This essay examines two such approaches: the cognitive social model proposed by social identity theory (SIT), (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and the discursive social psychological (DSP) critique of this approach made by Billig (2002). Both perspectives analyse the tendency of individuals to categorise social life and others into 'us' and 'them'. Thus, the role played by social categorisation and how people identify with these categories is highlighted, however, they disagree regarding the foundations of social categories and how they operate. As Brown (2007) states in the title of this essay, SIT can be said to see group membership as primarily related to individual cognitive processes. In contrast, Billig (2002) proposes that groups are sustained and reproduced in everyday talk and constitute discursive practices.

Cognitive social psychologists suggest that social categories and identities are internalised in the minds of individual people, yet they often differ concerning the influence of social processes. Much American experimental research emphasised cognitive processing, where the relationship between the individual and groups was seen in individualistic terms. Brown (2007) however criticises this approach, for placing participants into improbable situations that lack ecological validity. In contrast to the American tradition, the now dominant approach of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) SIT originated within a European tradition that gave greater emphasis to social processes in the formation of identity.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) attempted to depart from the previously dominant 'blood-and-guts' model, that depicted groups as having a negative influence disrupting the rationality of the individual. In the building of their approach, Tajfel and Turner (1979) reference Adorno's et al. (1950, cited in Tajfel and Turner, 1979) work on the 'authoritarian personality' and how individual psychological processes can lead to prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory actions toward others. Tajfel and Turner (1979) contrast this approach to that of Sherif's (1966, cited in Tajfel and Turner, 1979) 'realistic group conflict theory' (RCT), which takes a social approach to group conflict, suggesting that conflict arises between groups over scarce resources. Therefore, 'functional relations' between groups create animosity and antagonism between them, yet also cohesion within groups in times of competition that

promote a heightened sense of integration into and identification with, the group. These approaches only highlight the individual-society dualism in much social psychological theorising however, and although Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that they did not want to supplant RCT, but supplement it, they also drew attention to its weaknesses. For example: not accounting for why individuals identify with a group. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) wished to bridge the macro-level concerns of sociology and political science with the micro-level concerns of psychology, in order to produce a 'mid-range' theory, highlighting the interdependence of the social and the psyche, thus rejecting the dominant American tradition of experimental methodology for lacking ecological validity and references to social factors.

According to SIT, a universal feature of how individuals interact in and between groups is through a psychological process of identification. SIT distinguishes between an individual's personal identity and their social identity (seen as a continuum). In situations of conflict between groups, social identity is brought to the fore, rather than personal motivations. Similarly, Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that interactions between people lie on a continuum between 'interpersonal' and 'intergroup'. Conflicts nearer to the intergroup end of the spectrum that are not reducible to an objective basis are particularly difficult for RCT to explain. It is suggested by SIT that the more an individual believes in the unchanging nature of the groups they belong to, the more likely they are to focus on their social and group identity and that of others. The more an individual moves toward the social identity end of the spectrum, the more they will become 'depersonalised' (and in extremes, 'dehumanised').

A common method used in SIT is that of the 'minimal group' experiment.   In these experiments, participants are randomly assigned one of two groups that have no objective or material difference. These experiments showed how all that is needed for in-group favouritism and discrimination to outsiders is being placed within a social category with the presence of an out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that 'minimal' groups are only of a cognitive nature and show the falsity of claiming group conflict must have a material social basis as RCT argues. Social categorisation is seen by SIT as a cognitive 'tool', used to classify the social world, enabling the individual to undertake social actions. Categories not only classify the world, yet orient people toward action and define an individual's place within a wider social nexus. SIT suggests that there is a connection between group membership and an individual's self-esteem and how they judge outsiders, due to cognitive biases produced by identification with a group. An individual is thus seen by SIT to derive their social identity and self-image from the groups to which they belong. Positive and negative attributions are made by people depending on their group membership that can be internalised by the individual in the formation of their self-image.

This largely 'cognitive' approach is supplemented in SIT by an account of societal and cultural processes that can shape intergroup relations. Evaluations of in-groups are made in comparison to 'relevant' out-groups. For Tajfel and Turner (1979) selection of out-groups for comparison are due to social factors such as 'proximity' and 'situational salience', yet are

internalised within cognitive processes through the personal need to highlight the distinctiveness of the in-group in order to support a positive self-image.

For Tajfel and Turner (1979) there are a number of strategies that an individual can employ when they are socially classified as members of groups with a low status. Firstly: 'social mobility', which involves a disassociation from an in-group in order to try and pass from the low status group to one of a higher social status, although this strategy was likely to lead to a loosening of social ties within the subordinate group. Indeed, it could be suggested that a low level of 'social mobility' or the appearance of such, helps the dominant classes in society to undermine working class solidarity. It can also be noted that many social categories are socially ascribed from birth, often with little chance for change (for example: gender or the Caste system of stratification). A second strategy used is that of 'social creativity', where an in-group redefine the comparisons made with others, reinterpreting negative connotations as positive attributes (for example: the civil-rights slogan 'Black is beautiful'). Comparisons made to high-status groups may wither in favour of competition with other groups of a similar status, due to a cognitive need to build 'secure' comparisons and not damage self-esteem. Tajfel and Turner (1979) note that conflict between subordinate groups are often more intense than conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups (having important ramifications for those wishing to raise a revolutionary consciousness amongst subordinate members of society, such as Marxists and Feminists). A third strategy is that of 'social competition', involving a direct struggle for resources or change in the structure of society. This strategy is the most openly political and is often found in 'fixed' situations (such as gender – feminism). Unfortunately however, this approach was not discussed in depth by Tajfel and Turner (1979). From this theorising, they agreed with many social thinkers before them, that a level of social conflict was an inevitable feature of human life; yet instead of suggesting this was irrational behaviour, intergroup conflict arose out of a very rational human need for a positive self-image and the attainment of social resources and status.

Despite Tajfel and Turner (1979) emphasising social factors influencing group membership, much SIT research since has largely been based on experimental research (Brown, 2007). Minimal group experiments lack ecological validity and do not resemble the way group membership is an active process saturated by social meanings. Defenders of this method however would point out that it is useful for isolating the variable of 'minimal' categorisation. Although Tajfel and Turner (1979) wished to transcend traditional dualisms between theories looking at the individual as a main focus or society, SIT seems to have focused largely on individual cognitive processes and taken for granted the objective existence of social categories. It could also be suggested that some social groups do not often have serious concerns of competition over resources and status, for example: a book club or a knitting circle.

Billig (2002) offers a critique of SIT and suggests that a DSP approach is more able to account for the fluidity and complexity of social categories. For Billig (2002), social categories are social constructions that gain social reality through the everyday talk of social actors, derived from discursive resources available in wider culture. Billig (2002) agrees with Tajfel (1981, cited in Billig, 2002) in criticising the 'blood-and-guts' model of group relations and that such

a model cannot explain the 'waxing and waning' of social conflict (or aggressive tendencies within individuals). In order to explain war, Billig (2002) suggests that one must go beyond explanations of an aggressive biologically derived instinct and take account of social and historical conditions, involving the analysis of ideology and the wielding of social power. For Billig (2002), SIT is incapable of explaining 'extreme' prejudice (despite Tajfel himself having been a prisoner of war). Billig (2002) suggests that to understand 'extreme' prejudice requires studying emotional (including unconscious) and ideological aspects of group identification that can lead to an 'emotional investment' in extremism. For Billig (2002), bigots will emotionally invest in the categories they use. In extremes this can involve a projection of 'forbidden thoughts' onto the actions of others and even an enjoyment in the denigration of the other. A good example of this phenomenon would be 'disability hate crime', where low-status groups can become denigrated and dehumanised in the 'talk' of others. This could involve a projection/rejection of the 'other' who occupies a subordinate 'disordered' and 'deficient' subject position. Billig (2002) argues that Tajfel (1969, cited in Billig, 2002) simply cannot account for irrational and 'wilfully perverse' forms of prejudice. Not all discursive psychologists agree however. Potter and Reicher (1987) question whether emotional 'talk' is representative of an unconscious mental state; whilst Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest emotions can be viewed as constructed in social discourse.

Billig (2002) suggests that Tajfel (1969, cited in Billig, 2002) was mistaken in seeing categorisation as a cognitive constraint. Contrastingly, from a discursive perspective, categorisation is seen as something that is achieved actively through the use of language in social interactions. For Billig (2002), DSP offers a way to move beyond the individual-society dualism and account for how micro-level interactions are situated within wider social processes, without discounting cognitive and unconscious processes. Social actors are seen by DSP to use categories flexibly, as speakers categorise and particularise meanings, as well as talking critically of the categories that they use. Social categories used in interactions are also challenged by others and are evolving through this process (a dynamism unaccounted for in SIT). Using DSP, 'depersonalisation' is not regarded as a cognitive process or restricted to the self, instead, speakers 'depersonalise' the other in interactions.

Brown (2007) argues that Tajfel and Turner (1979) see group membership as primarily a cognitive matter, as people are viewed as trying to maintain self-esteem rationally, by relating positive and negative attributions to group membership. SIT suggests that self-image is derived from social categories to which someone perceives they belong, whilst the selection of out-groups depends on social factors (not just material and objective differences). In contrast, Billig (2002) using a discursive approach suggests that ideology and social categories are collectively produced and reproduced in interaction and are not an individual cognitive matter. Prejudice is thus located within wider social relations of power.

As Billig (2002) suggests, the cognitive focus of SIT is overly universalising and does not account for historical and social context. Much like RCT, SIT cannot fully account for the 'waxing and waning' of prejudice or the extremes of bigotry. It could be argued however, that the discursive approach highlights social aspects of the debate at the expense of the inner world of emotion and cognition. Billig (2002) however, attempts to combine elements

of SIT, with DSP and psychoanalytic concerns of emotion and the unconscious. When trying to pick and choose elements of different theories to discuss a social phenomenon, it is important not to blindly follow an epistemologically bereft contradictory 'cul-de-sac', of a 'pragmatic' approach of 'whatever works best' (influenced by situational biases). Billig (2002) however, shows the importance of how theories can complement each other and also critiques previously made (and dubious) claims. It is clear from this critique of SIT, that group membership is not primarily a cognitive matter, but a discursive one. It is still debatable however, to what extent prejudice, especially in extreme forms, is influenced by rational cognitive and/or unconscious motivations within the individual.

References

Billig, M. (2002) 'Henri Tajfel's "Cognitive aspects of prejudice" and the psychology of bigotry'. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology.* Milton Keynes: Open University.

Brown, S. (2007) Intergroup processes: social identity theory. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology.* Milton Keynes: Open University.

Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. (1979) An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology.* Milton Keynes: Open University.

Potter, J. and Reicher, S. (1987) 'Discourses of community and conflict: the organisation of social categories in accounts of a "riot"'. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology.* Milton Keynes: Open University.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) 'Unfolding discourse analysis'. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology.* Milton Keynes: Open University.