

Social Identity and Social Conflicts

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Abstract

This work provides an analytical discussion for inter-group conflicts within the framework of social identity phenomenon, which is a rather neglected dimension of social conflict. Based on a vast review of social identity literature, the article emphasizes that the perspective of social identity offers a useful tool for understanding and explaining many social-psychological aspects of social conflicts. By itself, however, it may be inadequate to capture the complexity of inter-group relations. It is stressed that research is especially needed on the issue of how and under what conditions in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination manifest themselves in overt conflicts.

Key Words: Social Identity, Social Conflict, Conflict, Ethnocentrism, Inter-group Conflict.

Sosyal Kimlik ve Sosyal Çatışmalar

Özet

Bu çalışma, sosyal kimlik ile sosyal çatışma arasındaki bağa değinen ve sosyal kimlik olgusunu bir gruplar arası çatışma kaynağı olarak değerlendiren analitik bir tartışma sunmaktadır. Bu yönü itibariyle çalışma, sosyal çatışmaların çok irdelenmeyen bir yönüne de dikkat çekmektedir. Sosyal kimlik üzerine detaylı bir literatür araştırmasına dayanan eser, sosyal kimliğin gruplar arası çatışmaların sosyo-psikolojik boyutlarını anlamamıza ve açıklamamıza yardımcı olan önemli bir perspektif olduğu sonucuna ulaşmaktadır. Bununla birlikte bu yaklaşımın gruplar arası uyumsuzlukları tek başına açıklayamayacağı, özellikle hangi koşullar altında grup kayırmacılığının açık çatışmalara yol açığının araştırılması gerektiği ifade edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Kimlik, Sosyal Çatışma, Çatışma, Grup Kayırmacılığı, Gruplar Arası Çatışma.

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Introduction

The relevance of social identity phenomenon in explaining social conflicts has long been subject to severe discussions among most social psychologists and conflict specialists.

To many (e.g., Volkan, 1988; Tajfel, 1970) the pessimists, so to speak, social identity is a root-cause of ethnocentrism and thus, by extension, inter-group conflict. The claim is that in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination inevitably lead to inter-group tensions and this is the ground from which conflict arises, even though no objective condition for conflict exists.

To many others (e.g., Brewer, 2001), on the other hand, social identity is an essential component of the sense of self, but it does not directly correlated with conflict. For conflict to exist, there must be fairly reasonable conditions creating disputes between or among the parties other than social identity itself.

In the face of these two contending views, this study aims to explore the extent to which social identity phenomenon is related to social conflicts and provides a useful framework for understanding inter-group relational dynamics. Starting with the question of defining social identity, the article reviews major literature about the topic in an effort to provide an analytical framework in which group dynamics and conflict are discussed in detail.

Defining Social Identity

Perhaps the most reasonable place to begin our discussion is to try to find a satisfactory answer to the most basic questions: what is identity, and what is social identity?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term identity has a Latin root (*identitas*, from *idem*, 'the same') and two basic meanings. The first is a concept of absolute sameness: this is identical to that. The second is a concept of distinctiveness, which presumes consistency or continuity over time. Approaching the idea of sameness from two different angles, the notion of identity simultaneously establishes two possible relations of comparison between persons or things: *similarity*, on the one hand, and *difference*, on the other.

To explore the matter a bit further, the verb 'to identify' appears to be a necessary component of identity: there is something active about the

world. Identity is not 'just there'; it must be always established. This adds two further meanings to our catalogue: to classify things or persons, and to associate oneself with something or someone else. This feature of identity also implies a degree of flexibility. That is, identity can change. In fact, identity can be best understood as a process, as 'being' or 'becoming'. Not even the death can freeze this picture. There is always the possibility of a *post-mortem* revision of identity.

Overall, individual identity is, in its generic sense, the way in which a person defines himself or herself and is known by others. It is a conception of self in relation to others (Jenkins, 1996: 4). An individual almost always holds more than one identity and generally moves freely among these identities, depending on the situation. For instance, one would be a New Yorker in the US, an American when s/he visits Europe, and a Westerner when s/he meets, let us say, the Chinese in China. Thus, individual identity can be said to be highly situational and relational.

One significant component of individual identity is social identity. The expression refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities (Jenkins, 1996: 4). It is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationship of similarity and difference. Taken together, similarity and difference appear to be the dynamic principles of social identity.

Why Is Social Identity Important?

After defining social identity and related concepts, the second fundamental question arises: What is special about social identity? Why is it significant to the self?

The most basic answer given by cognitive and psychological studies is that that human social life is unimaginable without some sense of who others are and some sense of who we are. As a matter of fact, one of the first things we can do when we meet strangers is to locate them on our social maps, to 'identify' them. And, of course, not always successfully. 'Mistaken identity' is a common feature of human interactions. Someone we thought person A may turn out to be person B, or we may take someone a German, while s/he is actually a French.

If identity is a necessary prerequisite for social life, the reverse is also true. Individual identity- embedded in selfhood- is not so much meaningful in

isolation from the social world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed in the processes of primary and subsequent socialization, and in the ongoing processes of social interaction within which individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives. This view derives from American pragmatism, via the contributions of C. H. Cooley (1962) and G. H. Mead (1934). From their work, an understanding of the 'self' emerges as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others.

Identity formation has its roots in early socialization. Because of that, identities that are established in early life can be said to be more robust and resilient to change in later life. Despite the fact that change and mutability are endemic in all social identities, they are more likely for some identities than others. The primary identifications of selfhood, gender and, under certain circumstances, kinship and ethnicity are definitely embodied and, therefore, more resistant to change (Yilmaz, 2009: 77).

Social Identity and Inter-group Relations

Having struggled with the definition and significance of social identity, we face with the most fundamental question: Does social identity negatively affect inter-group relations in terms of creating a social conflict? If so, to what extent?

We will try to find an answer to this question by reviewing and discussing the formulation process of social identity phenomenon , summarized as follows:

Social Comparisons

A quite significant step was taken towards the formulation of social identity with respect to group formation and inter-group relations when Leon Festinger published his classic paper on a theory of social comparison processes in 1954. The two related propositions that comprise the core of the theory are: (1) Individuals constantly evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing the opinions and abilities of other people. (2) In order to do this, they chose *similar others* with whom to compare.

So Festinger began his theory with the postulate that people have a 'drive' to evaluate their abilities. He sees the origin of this drive in the aim to obtain a positive self-esteem. The second hypothesis he holds is that in the absence of physical realities or standards of comparison, individuals seek to compare their abilities and opinions with the abilities and opinions

of others. Finally, he postulates that people prefer comparison not just with any others but with others whose opinions and abilities are similar. For example, evaluation of our chess playing ability is best served by comparison to others who play around the same level that we do, rather than to grand masters or pre-school children (Festinger, 1954).

Festinger's ideas received many criticisms, though they created a very fertile area for further research. Some critiques were directed to the supposedly-existent drive to enhance self-esteem via social comparisons. Many (e.g., Goethals and Darley, 1986) argued that people make comparisons to increase their sense of security, not to achieve a high level of self-esteem in the first place. By having a fairly accurate idea of their talents and skills, people are able to avoid various physical and social disasters that otherwise might befall them.

Many other critiques questioned whether people always make comparisons to evaluate their abilities and opinions. Specifically, it has been suggested that people have a desire to think well of their abilities, that is, to think that their abilities are high. The same is true for opinions. People want to believe that their opinions are correct. They may wish to objectively evaluate them in some cases, yet more often, they simply wish to establish that they are correct.

Some studies (Brickman and Bulman, 1977) also show that people sometimes prefer to avoid comparison. For instance, in situations in which the possibilities of harming one's self-esteem or losing face are high, people may actively avoid social comparison processes.

In the original paper, Festinger spelled out several implications of social comparison theory for group processes as well. He proposed that if there were opinion or ability discrepancies within a group, action would be taken to reduce those discrepancies. These actions include changing one's own ability or opinion, changing those of other people, or ceasing comparison with continually dissimilar others. Changing other people's opinions entails engaging in social influence attempts. Changing one's own ability level or the ability level of others entails competing with others. Therefore, social influence and competition appear to be two major ground-level consequences of social comparison processes. Festinger also suggests what steps people take to bring about similarity and homogeneity within groups. These steps include social influence attempts, competition, rejection, and derogation (Festinger, 1954).

Nonetheless, social comparison, in its original form, is essentially an

interpersonal process, not a group process. The focus of the theory is on the individual engaged in self-evaluation. A systematic approach to self-evaluation that emphasizes across group comparisons is H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner's social identity theory. Now let us turn our attention to this theory.

Social Identity Theory and Inter-Group Comparisons

Social identity theory is concerned with the ways in which individuals maintain a high level of self-esteem through comparison with various other groups, including some usually known as 'out-groups'. Many of its concepts and ideas are similar to those of social comparison theory, but social identity theory makes its unique contributions in considering social comparison on a between-groups or inter-groups basis, rather than on a within-groups or inter-personal basis.

The theory has its origin in early work in Britain by Tajfel on social factors in perception (e.g., Tajfel, 1959), and on cognitive and social belief aspects of racism, prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Tajfel, 1963), but was fully formulated and developed in collaboration with Turner and others in the mid to late 1970s at Bristol University. One of the most significant steps towards the formulation of the theory was Tajfel's minimal group findings in 1970, what became known as the 'minimal group paradigm'. Until that time, it had largely been assumed, following Muzaffer Sherif's work (e.g., 1967), that inter-group hostility, tension, and negative stereotyping were due to real conflict of interests, that is, conflict over scarce resources.

However, Tajfel (1970) showed, through a series of experiments, that the mere introduction of a group distinction, in the absence of history of inter-group conflict, personal interest and even personal contact, was sufficient to produce in-group /out-group differentiation and discrimination against the out-group.

The explanation he developed at that point was basically a normative one. He argued that the regularity across cultures of discrimination against out-groups implied that there was some underlying psychological factors in this behavior- the individual's internalization of specific social norms and expectations. Tajfel suggested that during socialization, children come to locate themselves in the established 'social construction of reality'. The child's categorization of the social environment into groups is overlaid by society's definition of these groups as 'we' and 'they'. Value judgments inevitably come to be associated with the group categorization. In other words, the child internalizes a 'generic' norm of behavior towards out-

groups. And, whenever the child is faced with a situation which contains an explicit group categorization, such as the minimal groups experiment, he or she is likely to behave in a way which is consistent with this generic norm, discriminating, for example, against the out-group, while regulating this behavior in relation to other prevalent norms, such as fairness.

Turning now to the essence of social identity theory, the core idea is that a self-inclusive social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) provides a category-congruent self definition that constitutes an element of the self concept. People have a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self concept. The category is represented in the individual member's mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one's attributes as a group member. When a specific social identity is the salient basis for self-regulation, self-perception and conduct become in-group stereotypical and normative, perceptions of relevant out-group members become out-group stereotypical, and inter-group behavior acquires, to varying degrees depending on the history relations between the groups, competitive and discriminatory properties. Social identities are not only descriptive and prescriptive, but also evaluative. They furnish a relatively consensual evaluation of a social category, and therefore its member, relative to other relevant social categories. Because social identities have significant self-evaluative consequences, groups and their members are motivated to adopt strategies for achieving or maintaining inter-group comparisons that favor the in-group, and thus the self.

To account for social identity phenomena, social identity theory invokes the operation of two underlying processes: (1) *Categorization*, which identifies inter-group boundaries by producing group stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions, and assign people, including the self, to the contextually relevant category. Categorization is a basic cognitive process which operates on social and non-social stimuli alike to highlight and bring into focus those aspects of experience subjectively meaningful in a particular context. (2) *Self-enhancement*, which guides the social categorization process such that in-group norms and stereotypes are largely in-group favoring. It is assumed that people have a very basic need to see themselves in a relatively positive light in relation to relevant others, and that in group contexts, self-enhancement can be achieved through comparing the in-group favorably against out-groups.

Meanwhile, it is important to note that not all social psychologists -and others- do agree that self enhancement provides the most basic motivation underlying group formation, group identification, and favorable in-group

comparisons against out-groups. M. A. Hogg and D. Abrams, for instance, have suggested that:

People are essentially motivated by a need to reduce subjective uncertainty. Uncertainty is reduced by agreement with others who are categorized as similar to self. On the basis of relevant similarities and differences among people, we actively construct a social categorization that minimizes intracategory differences and maximizes intercategory differences around relevant contrasting in-group and out-group prototypes. Perceived agreement, thus, generates categories with which we identify, and prototypes which we internalize. Internalization of an in-group- and thus self-defining perspective prototype, by definition reduces subjective uncertainty (Hogg and Abrams, 1993: 186).

Some other suggested motivations include self knowledge, in other words, to know the environment (Cofer and Appley, 1964: 787); to construct meaning and avoid confusion (Bartlett, 1932; Reykowski, 1982); to achieve cognitive balance or consistency (Appley, 1991); to achieve self-efficacy (efficacious action is believed to be socially-constructed by the groups to which the individual belongs, and in turn shaped by inter-group relations- Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983); and the need for affiliation (Hogg and Abrams, 1993).

Going now back to social identity theory, it is argued that if one's group compares favorably on a valued dimension with another salient group, then one's own group is valued positively and one possesses a positive social identity. If comparison with out-groups is unfavorable, then the person experiences a negative social identity. Individuals experiencing negative social identity are predicted to leave their groups or attempt to make them better. Making them better frequently involves causing them to engage in competition with other groups. Indeed, Turner (1975) has long argued that competition among groups is motivated as much by the self-evaluation needs of the members as by real conflict of interests. Groups are more likely to compete and discriminate against out-groups that are in some way comparable or salient (Turner and Brown, 1978). When comparisons continue to be unfavorable and social identity is threatened, assuming that there are barriers against individual members abandoning the group, groups may engage in a set of activities facilitating cessation of comparison with high-status other groups. The implication is that, although Tajfel and Turner (1986) do not explicitly say so, they (groups) begin comparing with lower-status out-groups.

Self-Categorization

Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) is an important theoretical development of social identity theory. It elaborates in detail the social-cognitive basis of group membership. In essence, self-categorization theory represents a shift in emphasis from inter-group relations to intra-group processes, and the social cognitive basis of group membership and group phenomena. As such, it is distinct from social identity theory. However, it is closely related in many other aspects- both theories come from the same stable and are part of the same broader theoretical and metatheoretical enterprise (Hogg and McGarty, 1990).

Self-categorization theory elaborates the operation of the categorization process as the cognitive basis of group behavior. Categorization accentuates both similarities among stimuli (physical, social, or aspects of the self) that belong to the same category and differences among stimuli that belong to different categories on dimensions believed to be correlated with the categorization. This process clarifies inter-group discontinuities, and ultimately serves the function of rendering experience of the world subjectively meaningful, and identifies those aspects relevant to action in a particular context.

When people categorize themselves and others in terms of in-group / out-group (defining one's social identity), there is, thus, an accentuation of the perceived group prototypicality, stereotypicality or normativeness of people. The individual is perceptually and behaviorally de-personalized in terms of the relevant in-group prototype. It is this process of de-personalization of the self that underlies group phenomena, such as stereotyping, group cohesion and ethnocentrism, cooperation and altruism, collective behavior, and shared norms and mutual influence process. Nothing negative is implied by the term 'de-personalization'. It contains none of the implications of 'de-humanization', but simply refers to a contextual change in the level of identity.

According to self-categorization theory, people cognitively represent social groups in terms of prototypes. A prototype is a subjective representation of the defining attributes (beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, etc.) of a social category, which is actively constructed and is context dependent. Since common group members generally find themselves relatively similarly placed within the same social field, their prototypes will usually be similar. Prototypes are normally unlikely to be checklists of attributes; rather, they are fuzzy-sets which capture the context dependent features of group membership, often in the form of exemplary members (actual group

members who best embody the group) or ideal types (an abstraction of group features). People are able to assess the prototypicality of real group members, including the self- that is, the extent to which a member is perceived to be close or similar to the group prototype.

The cognitive system, in seeking to maximize meaning in a specific context, engages whatever categorization best accounts for the similarities and differences among stimuli. This categorization seeks balance between minimization of perceived intra-category differences and maximization of perceived inter-category differences, with regard to relevant prototypes, within the social frame of reference. Once formed on the basis of perceived similarities and differences among stimuli, categories are consequently used as a basis for the perceptual accentuation of these similarities and differences, thereby maximizing separateness and clarity. Self-categorization research has been especially evident in areas of social perception, including the study of stereotyping (Oakes et al., 1994), group solidarity and cohesiveness (e.g., Hogg, 1993).

Social Cognition and Cognitive Dissonance

The social cognition perspective is part of a larger inter-disciplinary effort known as *cognitive science*. Cognitive science draws from philosophy, linguistics, social psychology, and cognitive psychology to understand better how people come to comprehend their physical and social environments. Taken together with *cognitive dissonance theory*, which will be touched upon below, this perspective might increase our understanding of some aspects of social identity phenomenon with respect to inter-personal attitudes and inter-group relations.

Social cognition theory proposes that humans are active information processors. Our sense organs are receptive to a wide variety of physical stimulation. It is, however, impossible for the brain to retain every detail of this stimulation. So we have to be selective in processing information. The two criteria considered particularly significant when information is selected are: *processing objectives*, and *schematic structure*. Processing objectives refer to the immediate goals of the social perceiver in using social information. Some examples of such objectives include memorizing information about an object, a person, or a group, empathizing with a person, judging the relevance of information for the self, and so on. Schematic structure, on the other hand, refers to a 'cognitive map' in the individual's mind which is rooted in his or her socialization. Such a map enables the individual to cope with daily information flow. It determines what is important and relevant to the self and what is not. In short,

schematic expectations frequently guide the thoughts and behaviors of the person in such a way so as to create evidence consistent with the expectations (Pryor and Ostrom, 1987).

The implication of schematic structure for inter-personal and inter-group behavior is that information regarding others is processed and interpreted to fit the schema. In other words, people receive what they want to receive and ignore what they wish to ignore, very much unconsciously. This may explain, at least in part, why individual and group stereotypes are so persistent and resistant to change. M. Synder (1981) has proposed that schematic expectations often serve as hypothesis when people gather information about others. Instead of gathering information in a more objective fashion, as scientists presumably do, the social perceiver engages in what Synder calls a *confirmatory hypothesis-testing strategy*-that is, selecting and categorizing information in accordance with prior expectations. Gordon Allport (1954) proposed that the leap from categorizing to stereotyping is a small one. Simple categorization may lead to a minimization of within-group differences and a maximization of between-group differences.

One significant question to ask, in this respect, is: why can't people cognitively flexible very much? In other words, why are schemata rather resistant to change?

Part of the answer to this question is given by *cognitive dissonance theory* (Festinger, 1957). Briefly, this theory proposes that an individual strives to maintain consistency or consonance among his or her cognitions. Inconsistent or dissonant cognition leads to psychological discomfort, which motivates activity aimed at restoring consonance. Usually, the first reaction of the individual experiencing cognitive dissonance is to reject or deny information inconsistent with his or her beliefs, namely, his or her schematic structure, since resolving dissonance by means of schematic change is more effortful and psychologically costly, albeit not impossible. Another course of action involves seeking social support from within or from outside of the group.

Group members, meanwhile, have a viable avenue of dissonance reduction not available to individuals acting alone. They have an opportunity to diffuse responsibility for the group's behavior and its aversive consequences to the other group members. Research (e.g., Mann, 1981) shows that people do things in a group that they would not normally do alone; that is, most of the counter-attitudinal behaviors occur in group settings.

Conclusion

As the above discussions attest, the present social psychological literature on social identity has contributed enormously to our understanding of inter-group relations despite many ongoing debates and difficult problems, such as the motivational components of group processes. The contributions also reveal a challenge to the common knowledge of inter-group conflicts that often ties them to resource competition, class struggle, imperfect human nature and that kind of classical explanation.

Yet in this article, it is addressed that without a real conflict of interest, social identity itself almost inevitably involves cognitive discrimination, stereotyping and down-grading of out-groups, which breed overt or covert inter-group conflicts. To give some examples at the macro level, throughout the Cold War, the Soviet leadership perceived the United States as an “imperial enemy”. The Chinese leaders have at times stereotyped others as “barbarians”. Iran, since Ayatollah Khomeini, has often described western leaders as “degenerates”. Likewise, the United States saw the Soviet Union during the Cold War as an “evil” and governments in Eastern Europe as mere puppets of the Soviet Union. Arabs tend to see Israel as an extension of either Western colonialism or American imperialism. Many other examples could be cited. Even if there exists a certain degree of truth in such group stereotypes, they are, nonetheless, mostly products of belief systems rather than reality and well-embedded within larger social identity.

Another relevance of social identity approach to inter-group conflicts, as addressed in this article, is that because the sense of self and in-group(s) are interconnected, group members are motivated to defend their group unity and perceived group superiority against external threats. External threats would involve unwanted influences of out-group norms, as well as domination by out-groups. Depending on the real or perceived scope of external threats, the motive to defend in-group unity may take the form of violent intolerance. There were numerous widely-publicized examples in past years. The bombing of the New York Trade Center by Islamic militants, even the September 11, 2001 attacks, the massacre by a Jewish zealot of two dozens Muslim worshippers in Hebron, the explicit blessing of violence by both Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic Christians in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and the attacks by Iraqi guerillas against coalition forces, namely US forces and their supporters. In all these examples groups, or nations, were largely believed that they were doing the right and large-scale violence was obligatory to meet the “great

threat” posed by their enemy.

Finally, social identity approach reveals that as in the interpersonal context, social comparisons also occur within the group context. In order to evaluate their positions, groups make comparisons to similar other groups. If comparisons are favorable, group members obtain a positive social identity, thus, a positive self-esteem. If not, they experience a negative social identity, thus, a low level of self-esteem. Group members experiencing negative social identity usually become conflict-prone against out-groups that are in better positions. This can especially be observed in most ethnically-driven conflicts of the post-Cold War era. Obvious inequalities in status and well-being cause deep grievances for underprivileged ethnic groups in multi-ethnic states. Even if there is no legal restriction for upward social mobility, minority people are mostly entrapped in underprivileged conditions and very few can actually get ahead in the system. The discontent regarding their disadvantages in comparison with privileged groups often become the motive for political mobilization. Many minority groups’ protests and even rebellion of some in Europe, the hidden tension between White and non-White Americans, between the Black and White in South Africa do not seem to be independent of this kind of structural discrimination. The perception of limited possibilities for upward social mobility tends to anger and motivate minority groups to utilize conflict as a means to obtain what the privileged groups have.

There remain some unclear or unanswered points, however, with respect to the specific application of social identity perspective to the phenomenon of conflict. Perhaps the most problematic issue still lies in the correlation between cognitive biases and social conflict. Specifically, while social identity perspective may offer a useful framework in explaining the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism, negative stereotyping, as well as in-group / out-group competition, it is still unclear *how* and *under what conditions* these dynamics or processes lead to overt social conflicts. If additional variables need to be taken into account to reach a more comprehensive explanation, what would they be? Finding satisfactory answers to such fundamental questions certainly begs for further research.

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