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The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence

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The distinctive metatheoretical and empirical significance of the social identity concept for social psychology is outlined with special reference to social influence and group polarization. 'Individualism' and 'interactionism' are summarized and contrasted as alternative metatheories of social psychology and it is argued that the social identity concept embodies the latter. A social identity theory of group behaviour (and the individual–group relationship) is introduced and from it are derived further theories of social influence and group polarization. The latter is explained as a special case of normal intragroup influence. It is shown how the social identity theory (theories) of group behaviour, social influence and group polarization explicitly assumes a functional interaction between psychological and social processes, in contrast to individualism, and at the same time generates distinctive, testable, empirical predictions. It is concluded that the social identity concept represents a mechanism of social–psychological interaction and as such demonstrates that social psychology need not be an individualistic science.

This paper has several aims: to argue against an 'individualistic' and for an 'interactionist' metatheory of social psychology; to introduce in summary form three substantive theories (of the individual–group relationship, social influence and group polarization—where each is derivative of and represents a more specific application of the preceding theory); to provide a practical example of interactionism and show its distinctive empirical implications; and thereby to explain with reference to research the metatheoretical significance of the concept of social identity. Only so much can be achieved in one paper and the focus here is on the metatheoretical and predictive empirical significance of certain theoretical ideas, not on a detailed justification of the ideas themselves, nor on supportive data (these are available in other papers).

Individualism, interactionism and the paradox of social psychology

The *raison d'être* of social psychology is to solve scientifically a paradox. The paradox is to integrate two very different orders of phenomena: the *psychological*—to do with the mental properties of the individual—and the *social*—processes, properties and products deriving from the interrelations between individuals. The premises of the paradox are that, on the one hand, psychological processes belong only to individuals and not to any superordinate collective entity and, on the other, that social or even more so societal processes (political, cultural, economic, historical, etc.) have a reality *sui generis*, distinct from and irreducible to that of their elementary components, individuals. The problem is, therefore, how can psychology contribute to the explanation of social life without by definition being reductionist, i.e. denying the specific emergent properties that define being social, and yet, given that there is no collective mental life in the most literal sense, how can the science of the individual mind (psychology) possibly be irrelevant to how individuals behave in relation to each other? The issue is can there be and how can there be a *non-individualistic* science of the individual, a *social* psychology in the fullest sense?

It is well known that much of contemporary social psychology is individualistic in orientation [e.g. see Pepitone's (1981) excellent discussion; also Sampson (1977, 1981); Cartwright (1979); Tajfel (1981*a*)]. But for the development of European social psychology over the last decade or so (Tajfel, 1984), one could with justice have described individualism

as the intellectually dominant metatheory of the mainstream since the 1950s. Individualism in social psychology may be summarized as the usually implicit doctrine that the individual is the sole psychological and/or social reality, that the distinctive reality of the group or society is a fiction or a fallacy, that nothing 'emerges' in social interaction, that, to paraphrase Allport (1924, p. 4), social behaviour is adequately explained by intra-individual mechanisms and that social psychology is merely the application of general (i.e. individual) psychological principles to the more complex stimulus conditions of the social environment, that the psychology of the individual is unchanging from 'non-social' to social contexts, and that the latter are merely another class of stimuli ('people' as opposed to 'things') to which the individual responds on the basis of socially unmediated laws (Asch, 1952).

The best current illustration of this view is the tendency of some researchers to define 'social cognition' implicity as the functioning of biologically based (deriving from universal human evolution) asocial perceptual/cognitive mechanisms in relation to 'social stimuli' (Forgas, 1981; Tajfel, 1981*b*)—expressed, for instance, in a 'major type of model in social cognition research' (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, pp. 11–12) that the 'social thinker' is a 'cognitive miser', whose perception of the social world is determined by cognitive errors, heuristics and biases deriving from 'inherent' limitations in the information-processing capacity of the cognitive system. Fiske & Taylor (1984, pp. 15–17) state in their textbook on social cognition:

> As one reviews research on social cognition, the analogy between the perception of things and the perception of people becomes increasingly clear. The argument is made repeatedly: the principles that describe how people think in general also describe how people think about people. Many theories of social cognition ... undeniably build on fundamental cognitive principles.

It is clear from their book that the latter are the principles of (individual) cognitive psychology. It is taken for granted that the difference between 'cognition' and 'social cognition' is found in the application of the same basic individual psychological principles to different kinds of stimuli (i.e. 'things' and 'people', p. 17)—there is little recognition of the idea of *social processes of perception,* that cognition for human beings is a fundamentally social, inter-individual, as well as a psychological, intra-individual, activity, and that the former is psychologically creative. 'How people think in general' is assumed to be as individuals, not as inherently social beings—an intra-individual psychological process, not an interactive social–psychological process.*

The resurgence of individualism has led many to suppose that social psychology has made little progress in relation to its central task. This we think is false. Individualism is not a plausible doctrine and, in our judgement, has long since been refuted (e.g. Sherif, 1936,

*It is important to forestall several possible misunderstandings here. We do not believe there is any one-to-one correspondence between the validity of a metatheory and the quality of the science based upon it; on the contrary, bad metatheory can produce good research and vice versa. There is only one way to judge scientific work, and that is on its own terms and at its own level in relation to the phenomenon it seeks to describe or explain. To say that much contemporary social psychology is individualistic in orientation is therefore not at all to deny the scientific value of what has been and is being achieved. Nor do we suggest that researchers should not study social cognition as a branch of cognitive psychology, for instance, if their interests lie in this direction, or that much of interest is not being produced by this approach (it will become apparent later that our own work borrows freely from cognitive analyses). The point is (in Tajfel's, 1981*b*, phrase) that the study of individual cognitive processes is necessary but not sufficient for the social–psychological (in the fullest sense) explication of social perception, and that it is useful to identify and criticize individualism as an underlying metatheory in order to understand what current research is *not* trying to do. The point of the latter is simply to make room for and identify what needs to be done to create or stimulate the interactionist social psychology that we see as currently the minor trend in the science.

1967; Asch, 1952; Fletcher, 1971).* One may go further and suggest that at least at the level of metatheory the problem of the relation of the psychological to the social or the individual to the group, has in broad outline been solved (until such time as theory and data catch up). The solution to the paradox may be termed *faute de mieux* the thesis of social psychological interaction. Despite often wide differences on other matters, contributors to this doctrine who come readily to mind are Durkheim, Cooley and Mead (Fletcher, 1971; Farr, 1981, 1984) and, within social psychology defined more narrowly, McDougall (1927), Sherif (1936, 1967), Lewin (1948), Asch (1952) and more recently Moscovici (1976; Farr & Moscovici, 1984), Doise (1978) and Tajfel (1981*a*).

A full elaboration of the thesis would require a careful outline of the often dense and distinctive arguments of the above. Instead, at the risk of oversimplification and for limited purposes, we briefly present below the most general notions of the metatheory we have drawn from their ideas.

(1) Individuals in their multiplicity cannot be opposed to or in reality distinguished from society: individuals are society and society is the natural form of being of human individuals. The fallacy that the individual may be opposed to society arises from a legitimate but different contrast between a particular individual and others, resulting in the idea of uniqueness or individuality, but individuality itself is a social property of the individual and the terms of such a contrast are both within society. There is no such thing as the pre-social, asocial, purely biological, 'as if isolated' individual except as an analytic, fictional abstraction.

(2) There is a continuous reciprocal (dialectical) interaction and functional interdependence between the psychological processes of individuals and their activity, relations and products as society. Individuals in or as society are psychologically creative in that their social activity produces, makes possible and transforms the distinctively human form of the individual mind, just as the individual mind is socially creative in that psychological processes make possible and mediate the distinctively human form of social behaviour. In this sense, mind and society, individual and group, are mutual preconditions, simultaneous emergent properties (i.e. higher order, distinctive, irreducible) of each other. Such a functional interaction holds both phylogenetically and ontogenetically.

(3) Social psychological and social scientific explanations of social behaviour, therefore, do not represent different levels of phenomena in the sense that one is more or less 'basic' than the other, or that one can be reduced to the other: their phenomena are interactive aspects of the same human process. Social psychological processes are or pertain to the psychological or subjective aspects of society. The task of social psychology as part of psychology (the science of individual mental processes) is *not* to provide social explanations of behaviour (this can be left to sociology, politics, etc.), *nor* to provide 'psychological explanations' of, i.e. 'to psychologize' social behaviour, but *to explain the psychological aspects of society* [what McDougall (1927) meant by but tactically misnamed the 'group mind']. This equates with understanding the structures and processes whereby society is psychologically represented in and mediated by individual minds. Individual minds are not individualistic in the ideological sense of being defined by some pre-social psychological dynamic but contain a 'socially structured field' (Asch, 1952, p. 253)—society is in the individual as much as individuals are in

*We do not mean by this that it does not continue to be an influential doctrine, but rather that intellectually it seems to us that its main ideas have been effectively refuted and that thus far the most authoritative and explicit defence of individualism against these criticisms of which we are aware (i.e. Allport, 1962) does not succeed and indeed in many respects may be regarded as a confession of failure. Few researchers today would openly advocate individualism as a metatheory, even though many of its assumptions are, in our opinion, implicit in their practice.

society. Thus, the 'nothing but' stance of individualism, that society contains nothing but individuals, is refuted and stood on its head by the argument that individuals are more than we had ever supposed, parts which can (psychologically) contain the whole (Asch, 1952, p. 257).

(4) The last and perhaps most difficult point (an amplification of the above) is an assertion of the importance of socially mediated cognition in determining distinctively human social behaviour. The key product of social–psychological interaction is socially mediated cognition, phenomenologically experienced as the perception of a shared, public, objective world. Human social interaction is based upon psychological representations of the interaction, interactors, setting, etc. shared by the interactors. We act in an intersubjective world of shared social meanings.

These ideas, and in particular the central point that individual psychology and society are irreducible emergent properties of each other, provide social psychology with a definite metatheoretical perspective opposed to individualism. The research programme becomes the uncovering of the processes of reciprocal interaction. And yet one cannot help but be aware that that programme, despite the clarity of the above ideas, seems little advanced. It is not that interactionism has not been empirically productive: on the contrary, the research output has been fundamental to modern social psychology. What seems lacking is cumulative theoretical progress in the specification of the precise mechanisms of social–psychological interaction and emergence—theories that would demonstrate empirically and explain conceptually the concrete features of functional interaction. It is in this context that modern interactionist research can make an important contribution to social psychology and in particular that the concept of social identity takes on specific significance. It will be argued that the social identity concept is interactionist, theoretically and empirically distinctive, and permits cumulative advance.

Social identity and the analysis of group behaviour

The concept of social identity of interest here was developed by Tajfel (1972, 1978, 1982) and Turner (1975, 1982, 1985; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The term describes those aspects of a person's self-concept based upon their group memberships together with their emotional, evaluative and other psychological correlates. Tajfel and Turner proposed an analysis of intergroup relations and social conflict known as 'social identity theory' (Turner & Giles, 1981; Brewer & Kramer, 1985), the basic hypothesis of which is that people are motivated to seek positive social identity by comparing in-groups favourably with out-groups.

The theory is anti-individualistic in orientation in that it attempts to explain large-scale, shared uniformities in social behaviour, derives social conflict and stability from people's relations as group members—not intra-individual and interpersonal processes—relates psychological processes to cognitive–evaluative representations of social structure and ideological belief systems, and in general assumes a 'dynamic interaction' between psychological processes and the social context (Tajfel, 1979, p. 183). Nevertheless, the significance of the social identity concept in this respect was limited: it linked the hitherto individual need for self-esteem with the social regularities of intergroup behaviour, but did not explicitly address the issue of social psychological interaction.

Later, as the importance of a further assumption made by the theory of a psychological disctinction between interpersonal and intergroup behaviour became recognized, Turner (1982) discussed how social identity could function as the psychological mechanism that 'depersonalized' self-perception and made group behaviour possible. This idea has now led to the formulation of a 'self-categorization theory' (and a related reconceptualization of the concept of social identity), the aim of which is to explain the social psychological basis of

group phenomena, i.e. to identify the mechanisms by which individuals become unified into a psychological group (Turner, 1985; Turner *et al.*, in press). It is the latter self-categorization theory, directed at the general issue of the individual–group relationship—and not the former, which seeks to explain intergroup discrimination in terms of the need for positive social identity/positive distinctiveness—that is the subject of the argument here.

The self-categorization theory explains group phenomena in terms of the structure and functioning of the social self-concept (the system of cognitive representations of self based upon comparisons with other people and relevant to social interaction). The basic ideas are as follows. Cognitive representations of the self take the form (*inter alia*) of 'self-categorizations': a self-categorization is a cognitive grouping of the self as identical (similar, equivalent, interchangeable) to some class of stimuli in contrast to some other class of stimuli. Self-categorizations exist at different levels of abstraction being related by class inclusion (different categories at lower levels of abstraction may form one higher level category, e.g. 'dogs' and 'cats' are 'animals'; 'animals' and 'plants' are members of the category 'life', etc; Rosch, 1978). In the social self-concept there are three important levels of abstraction: self-categorization as a human being (the superordinate category) based on differentiations between species, in-group–out-group categorizations (the self as a social category) based on differentiations between groups of people (class, race, nationality, occupation, etc.) and personal self-categorizations (the subordinate level) based on differentiations between oneself as a unique individual and other (relevant) in-group members. There is a functional antagonism between the different levels of self-categorization in terms of their 'salience' (the degree to which they are functionally pre-potent in determining self-perception) in any given situation. Self-categories form on the basis of appropriately perceived intra-category similarities and inter-category differences, and also accentuate such similarities and differences as they become salient (Tajfel, 1969). The effect of the salience of one level of self-categorization, therefore, is to minimize the intergroup similarities and intragroup differences which provide the perceptual basis of more superordinate and subordinate levels respectively.

An important idea here, and of relevance later, is that self-categories, like other categories, form on the basis of a perceived *meta-contrast* between inter-class differences and intra-class differences (cf. Campbell, 1958; Tajfel, 1972; Rosch, 1978; Tversky & Gati, 1978): that, within any frame of reference (psychologically relevant pool of stimuli), any subset of people is more likely to be 'grouped' as identical to the degree that on relevant dimensions of comparison the ratio of the mean perceived difference between those people and others over the mean perceived difference between those people (i.e. the average intergroup difference divided by the average intragroup difference) increases. Correspondingly, the higher the ratio of the mean perceived difference between any in-group member and out-group members over the mean perceived difference between that person and other in-group members, the more prototypical (representative, exemplary) of the in-group as a whole is that person likely to be perceived.

It is hypothesized from the above ideas (ignoring for simplicity the human level of self-categorization) that there tends to be an inverse relationship between the salience of in-group–out-group and personal self-categorizations such that self-perception varies along a continuum depicted at one pole by the perception of oneself as a unique person (different from in-group members) and at the other pole by perception of the self as the in-group (identical to other in-group members and maximally different from out-group members). It can be assumed that most of the time people perceive themselves as moderately similar to in-group members perceived as moderately different from out-group members, i.e. that both the in-group–out-group and the personal level of self-categorization are salient to some (inverse) degree. Factors which increase the salience of in-group–out-group categorizations

enhance the perceived identity (similarity, equivalence, interchangeability, etc.) between self and in-group members on the stereotypical dimensions which define in-group membership. They lead to the *depersonalization of individual self-perception* (the stereotypical perception of self as an example of some defining social category). It is hypothesized that depersonalization is the basic process underlying group phenomena such as social stereotyping, in-group cohesiveness and ethnocentrism, intragroup cooperation and altruism, emotional empathy and contagion, social influence processes and the emergence of social norms.

A full statement of the theory includes specification of the conditions under which in-group categories form and become salient (Oakes, 1983; Hogg & Turner, 1985*a*, *b*; Oakes & Turner, in press, in preparation) and the links between depersonalization and particular group processes (Turner, 1985; Turner *et al.*, in press). The latter takes the form of a series of 'intermediate' theories of, for example, social attraction, influence and cooperation. Here we shall merely note the central ideas—that the self-concept exists at different levels of abstraction and not merely at the level of one's personal or unique individual identity (as is usually assumed in personality and social psychology*) and that group behaviour is mediated in social psychological terms by a change in the level of abstraction of self-categorization from the personal to the social categorical self—and illustrate how they can provide an interactionist explanation of social influence and thence a new solution to the problem of group polarization. We shall comment on the interactionist character of the explanation as we go along and of the social identity concept in general in concluding. But also the aim in moving ever more specifically from applying the social identity concept to group behaviour to social influence to group polarization is to demonstrate concretely the predictive empirical power of the concept.

Individualism and interactionism in social influence

Social psychologists distinguish between two types of social influence. Employing the terminology of Deutsch & Gerard (1955), there is informational influence which represents acceptance of others' responses (beliefs, opinions, attitudes, etc.) as evidence about reality and which leads to private attitude change, and normative influence defined as conformity to the positive expectations of others based on the desire for social approval and to avoid rejection. The former process reflects dependence on others for the reduction of uncertainty and the latter dependence on others for extrinsic rewards and to avoid costs. Only informational influence is regarded as 'true' influence (i.e. leading to private acceptance, genuine change in attitudes and opinions in order to be correct as opposed to, for example, merely 'going along' with the group without conviction to avoid ridicule or other sanctions); normative influence represents public compliance.

The theory of true or informational influence (the core ideas of Sherif, 1936; Festinger, 1950, 1954; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Thibaut & Strickland, 1956; Jones & Gerard, 1967) may be summarized in terms of three stages:

1. It is assumed that subjective uncertainty (lack of confidence in the objective validity of one's beliefs, opinions, attitudes) is produced by an asocial interaction between the perceptual apparatus of the perceiver and the objective characteristics of the stimulus

*Kihlstrom & Cantor (1984), for example, also make use of Rosch's (1978) ideas of different levels of abstraction of categories and prototypical exemplars in relation to the self-concept, but their analysis remains firmly wedded to the personal self (e.g. 'The self-concept ... may be construed as a set of features that are characteristic of the person and also distinguish him or herself from other individuals', p. 20).

world: the more objectively ambiguous, complex, problematic, unstructured the stimulus field, the greater the individual's uncertainty and need for information to reduce uncertainty;

2. The need to reduce uncertainty in a given situation leads to informational dependence on others (social dependence);
3. Informational dependence leads to the acceptance of influence from others (and so movement towards the others or conformity) to the degree that others' responses are perceived to provide evidence about objective reality.

The experiments of Sherif (1936) on norm formation utilizing the 'autokinetic effect' may be regarded as the classic demonstration of this theory. The subjects are placed in an objectively ambiguous situation in that they must estimate the apparent movement of a point of light (the movement in fact being an optical illusion that varies erratically from person to person and from trial to trial) in a completely darkened room (so that no external 'anchors' or frames of reference are available). In consequence, subjects employ their own and others' responses as sources of information about the movement of the light and converge towards each other as they implicitly exchange information. The modal range of judgements that results (which tends to be at the average of their initial individual ranges) represents an internalized social norm and embryonic group formation. So at least runs the usual interpretation of these and related data.

This theory is individualistic in its implications* (Moscovici, 1976; Reicher, 1982; Wetherell, 1983) in that: (1) the basic distinction between the social/normative/group-related and 'informational' aspects of influence equates the former with uninformative 'group pressure', 'compliance', or 'conformity' (in the slavish sense) and implies a pervasive 'conformity conflict' between the (correct) individual and the (incorrect) group; (2) individual perception is assumed to have sovereign status, to be the primary, normal and most reliable method of achieving 'subjective validity'; the 'physical' reality testing of Festinger (1950), 1954) is in effect individual perceptual testing and perception of the physical world is assumed to produce directly valid data because it is supposedly a directly individual activity; (3) social influence even in the restricted, non-normative form of informational influence is a secondary, substitute process that only comes into play as direct individual testing becomes difficult, and is conceptualized as influence from others who act merely as technical extensions of one's individual sensory apparatus (like a pair of spectacles); (4) such influence is not, therefore, a 'group' process, but at best one of interpersonal 'averaging' in which individuals move towards each other as they exchange their separate, private stocks of wisdom—the whole, the social norm, arises from a summation of the individual parts and is not an emergent property [e.g. 'Social influence, then, is a change in individuals induced by individuals' (Kiesler & Kiesler, 1969, p. 26); the idea is also clear in the contrast made between 'averaging' and polarization effects in group decision making where the former are equated with normal influence processes (Singleton, 1979; Wetherell, 1983; Wetherell *et al.*, 1985] and (5) individuals are assumed to be persuasive by virtue of the (asocial) valid

*Which is not to say that these were intended by its originators or that they would be explicitly endorsed by individual researchers (in the case of Sherif, for example, they would most definitely be rejected), or to undervalue the scientific importance of the ideas and the research the theory generated (on the contrary, we believe that this tradition of social influence work is one of social psychology's major achievements and that the self-categorization theory of influence is a direct development of it). We are talking here not of the ideas of any individual theorist but of the theory which exists or has come to exist as part of the consensual subculture of the science and which, like it or not, plays a role in the development of the science. It is a moot point whether the theory need have developed in this direction.

information they possess (e.g. majorities, leaders, experts, etc.) and recently, especially in polarization research, the validity of information is assumed to be an intrinsic property of informational content as it matches the perceiver's cognitive structures—even the social element of informational influence has been reduced to an intra-individual cognitive process. Throughout, individual perception is assumed to be primary, valid and normal, whereas social influence is secondary, unreliable, indirect, abnormal and coercive and is useful only in default and insofar as it functions as an extension of individual perception.

It takes little effort to realize that such a one-sided picture of the social basis of cognition and subjective validity is implausible; there are major empirical problems too. It must suffice to note the failure of the individualistic conception (1) to deal with the facts of minority influence (Moscovici, 1976; Mugny, 1982), (2) to provide an elegant, heuristic explanation of group polarization (a refutation of the interpersonal averaging theory of norm formation), (3) to make sense of the distinctive features of social influence in crowds (Reicher, 1982, 1984), and (4) to account for the classic data from the Sherif (1936) and Asch (1952) conformity paradigms. With respect to the latter, Moscovici (1976) has argued that the Asch study refutes the hypothesis that subjective uncertainty reflects objective stimulus ambiguity and demonstrates that such uncertainty arises as a social product of disagreement between people. Turner (1985) concludes from an extensive discussion of this issue that, whereas the individualistic theory is that stimulus ambiguity produces uncertainty, which leads to dependence on others for information, mutual influence and the formation of shared norms, and that social influence and the emergence of norms represent embryonic group formation, the classic data imply that uncertainty is a social product of disagreement with people categorized as identical to self. The perception of others as an appropriate reference group for social comparison creates the shared expectations of agreement necessary for the arousal of uncertainty and mutual influence (cf. Alexander *et al.*, 1970). The psychological group, therefore, seems to be at the beginning, not the end, of the influence process; it is its precondition and not its product.

In contrast to the individualistic conception, the self-categorization theory of social influence specifies that the very possibility of influence depends upon the shared, social categorical nature of the self (psychological group formation) and that individual perception and consensual validation are functionally interdependent processes.

The link between the depersonalization process and social influence is the idea that it is the social (or human) identity perceived between self and in-group members which both leads people to tend to agree and also to expect to agree in their reactions to or judgement of the same stimulus situation. If, as in the well-known formula, behaviour is a function of an interaction between the person and the situation, then it also follows, in a collective version of the formula, that identical or similar people in an identical or similar situation should tend to display the same behaviour (social consensus, agreement, uniformity). It is assumed that people have implicit 'practical' knowledge of this 'collectivized' formula, in the sense that they would perceive as cognitively inconsistent disagreement between themselves and others perceived as *identical in respects relevant to the making of the judgement* about some identical or shared stimulus situation.

A second idea—taken from Kelley (1967) but also expressed by others including Asch (1952) and implicit in Festinger (1950)—is that social consensus or agreement leads to the external attribution of the shared response, i.e. a shared response is perceived to reflect some external, public invariance in the situation: it is perceived as *objectively* required, correct, valid, demanded, appropriate, etc. (there is a plethora of terms for describing the property of a response of providing 'evidence about objective reality'). From this perspective social influence is seen to originate in the need of people to reach agreement with others perceived as 'interchangeable' in respect of relevant attributes (psychological in-group members in the

given situation) about the same stimulus situation in order to validate their responses as correct, appropriate and desirable (reflecting the requirements of the objective situation rather than subjective biases and errors).

The theory can be summarized by five hypotheses:

1. that subjective validity (Festinger, 1950; Kelley, 1967)—one's confidence in the objective validity of one's opinions, attitudes, beliefs, etc. (also termed subjective certainty, competence, correctness, etc.)—is a direct function of the extent to which similar people (in relevant respects) in the same stimulus situation are perceived, expected or believed to agree with one's own response;
2. that, conversely, subjective uncertainty is a direct function of the extent to which similar others are not perceived, expected or believed to respond similarly to oneself in the same stimulus situation;
3. that uncertainty reduction may be accomplished by: (*a*) the attribution of the disagreement to perceived relevant differences between self and others, and/or (*b*) the attribution of the disagreement to perceived relevant differences in the shared stimulus situation, and/or (*c*) mutual social influence to produce agreement;
4. that the magnitude of the mutual pressures for uniformity between people is a product of (*a*) the degree of relevant similarity mutually perceived between them, (*b*) the degree to which the shared stimulus situation is perceived to be similar, (*c*) the extent of perceived, expected or believed disagreement about that stimulus situation (subjective uncertainty) and (*d*) the importance of subjective validity to the group (i.e. the extent to which being right is perceived to matter in this instance);
5. that the direction of effective influence within the group (who successfully influences whom) is a function of the relative persuasiveness of the members, which is determined (primarily) by the extent to which their response (they, their attributes, experience, etc.) is perceived as prototypical of the initial distribution of responses of the group as a whole, i.e. the degree of relative consensual support.

These hypotheses are solutions to the major problems of social influence (posed here from a 'conformity' perspective) derived from a unified theory. The debts owed to earlier theorists are readily apparent in, for example, the role of consensual validation (Festinger, 1950), external attribution (Kelley, 1967), the interchangeability of perceivers (Asch, 1952), and the idea of uncertainty as a social product of disagreement rather than as a simple reflection of stimulus ambiguity (Moscovici, 1976). However, the debt to previous work should not disguise just how different from other theories these ideas are.

Thus in contradistinction to individualism, Festinger's (1950) distinction between physical and social reality testing and indeed that between the non-social and social environment (Allport, 1924) of individual action are rejected. It is assumed that *all* subjective validity rests upon a perpetual interaction between the data of individual perception (which whether of 'things' or people reflect a socially mediated cognition) and a social process of coordinating, checking, matching and negotiating a shared, publicly invariant and hence veridical picture of the world. The 'facts' of individual perception and judgement—that the earth is a globe, that an elephant is larger than a mouse, that one line is longer than another as measured by a ruler—are themselves social norms, based on the prior or current, explicit or implicit, agreements of appropriate reference groups. The lone individual checking or extending his or her senses with some technological device is not asocial but employing at all times internalized norms, and the device is merely a condensed, material expression or symbol of some prior consensus (Moscovici, 1976). This does not deny the independent informational value of individual cognition or imply that social norms are arbitrary and infinitely

malleable—to say that individual perception of the world is socially mediated is not to say that the world is socially constructed (except in this particular sense). A materialist perspective is adopted here that the external world exists independently of individual perception, that the function of consensual validation is to validate the objective, veridical character of one's perceptions and that it has such a power because of and not in opposition to the soundness of judgement of the individuals comprising the consensual group (Allen, 1975). The point is simply that the agreement of several reliable individuals is self-evidently more likely to reflect an objective, public feature of the external world, whereas for any single individual, however reliable, their individual personality provides an alternative explanation of their judgement. The individual activity of 'seeing' and the social process of validation need to be kept analytically distinct (people may be certain of what they see but uncertain of whether what they see is 'correct' or, alternatively, certain that they are correct in seeing a stimulus as perceptually ambiguous) at the same time that we understand that they are mutual preconditions and functionally interactive for human beings.

Likewise the distinction between normative and informational influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) is rejected. Social influence (not power, coercion, compliance) is based upon the social normative processes that validate the informational content of others' responses: information is not self-validating. The theory explains the 'informational value' of a response (not the direct informational content but the degree to which that content is perceived to provide evidence about or is attributed to reality) as a direct reflection of the degree to which it is prototypical of an in-group consensus (i.e. a norm) and the subjectively 'normative' aspect of a response, the feeling that one *ought* to so act, as deriving from its perceived correctness. 'Compliance' or 'group pressure' is assumed to reflect not 'normative' influence from an in-group but 'counter-normative' influence from a psychological out-group, i.e. people with whom one would not expect to agree. Social norms are the basis as well as the product of influence: a response is persuasive to the degree that it represents and participates in some shared, consensual reaction stereotypically associated with an in-group self-category and hence is perceived as valid, correct and competent (i.e. having informational value), which in turn leads to its perception as appropriate, desirable, expected and something one ought to believe or do (i.e. normative in the subjectively prescriptive sense).

The theory, therefore, unifies the normative and informational aspects of influence and also integrates private acceptance and public compliance as reactions to the in-group or out-group membership of others. There is insufficient space to discuss here how the theory reinterprets and explains the major empirical generalizations in the conformity area. Instead, we shall demonstrate how it also unifies the phenomena of social conformity and group polarization.

The explanation of group polarization

Several reviews of the group polarization phenomenon are available (e.g. Lamm & Myers, 1978). To simplify, polarization is the tendency of the average response of group members on some dimension to become more extreme towards the initially preferred pole after group discussion (or some related manipulation) than the average of their initial individual responses. The problem is that traditional conformity theories of intragroup influence (Allport, 1924; Sherif, 1936) expect that in forming a group consensus or group norm members should tend to converge on the average of their initial, individually held judgements. Theories of polarization, therefore, have tended to look for some process other than social conformity to explain the effect. The alternative approach (which has been developed collaboratively by John Turner and Margaret Wetherell: Wetherell *et al.*, 1985; Turner *et al.*, in press) is to reconceptualize social conformity (social influence) to show how it embraces both convergence on and polarization of the mean under different conditions

('conformity' has no implications here of slavish compliance, but indicates the process by which people shift towards some shared social norm).

Only the bare bones of the argument can be presented here and in particular details of operationalizations and data must be omitted (Wetherell *et al.*, 1985; Turner *et al.*, in press). The theoretical perspective above indicates that people tend to conform to the social norms which define their salient in-group category and that any response stereotypically associated with such a category (consensually shared by members) with respect to some situation tends to be perceived as normative/informationally valid. Further, the more representative (prototypical) of the in-group consensus, the better some individual (or argument or response) expresses the agreement of in-group members, the more correct, valued and persuasive will that particular person be. It may be assumed that in intragroup discussion members perceiving themselves to be less correct shift towards the more correct, but that there is no opposite tendency for the more correct to feel persuaded by the less correct. Hence it is hypothesized that relative influence is mediated by the perceived relative prototypicality of members and that pressures for mutual agreement within a group lead to convergence upon the most prototypical member.

The explanation of polarization is then (1) that both polarization and conformity to the mean embody the same process of convergence upon the most prototypical in-group member; (2) that either polarization, depolarization or conformity will occur depending simply on whether the prototypical member is more or less extreme or coincides with the initial mean; and (3) that the match or mismatch between the mean and the prototypical member can be predicted and quantified systematically from the relationship between the in-group's initial distribution of opinions and the psychologically salient pool of opinions that comprise the social frame of reference—namely that the prototypical position will tend to coincide with the initial pre-test mean of the in-group responses where that mean tends to coincide with the psychological mid-point of the salient judgemental or reference dimension, but will tend to be more extreme than the mean in the same direction the more that the mean differs from that mid-point.

To explain the latter hypothesis it should be noted that the response dimension (of whatever kind) employed in polarization research is a dimension of social comparison, a relative ordering of the responses of different people to the same stimulus: it is, in fact, a symbolic representation or operationalization of the psychologically salient social frame of reference for a given behaviour. It specifies (or tends to define) the varying responses of the (culturally or situationally appropriate) pool of others with whom both subject and researchers will compare the subject's responses. Thus the reference dimension provides information about the responses of comparable others and, indeed, to the degree that the reference dimension and the initial distribution of in-group responses are not identical, directly specifies the responses of out-group members (scale values not endorsed by in-group members). It becomes possible, therefore, to use the relationship of the in-group responses to the reference dimension as a heuristic operationalization of the intragroup and intergroup differences perceived by subjects (in-group members) or which they may have been induced to perceive by the provided frame of reference.

Making the simplifying assumption that approximately equal numbers of people are perceived at each scale value (others are possible and in certain conditions may be more appropriate), we can now calculate the perceived relative prototypicality of in-group members directly from their scale positions. For example, on the following seven-point scale, where A, B and C indicate in-group responses, the remaining four scale values may be construed by definition as out-group responses (O):

O	O	A	B	C	O	O
−3	−2	−1	0	+1	+2	+3

Using the formula above, B is plainly the most prototypical member since the metacontrast ratios are 2·5/1 = 2·5 for B (i.e. the mean difference between B and out-group members/the mean difference between B and in-group members), but only 2·5/1·5 = 1·67 for A and C.

Now the average difference between any scale value and the remaining values must increase as the distance between that value and the mid-point of the scale increases. It can be shown in consequence that, for any initial distribution of in-group responses, as the mean deviates from the mid-point of the scale towards one pole then the difference in perceived prototypicality of members closer to or further from that pole will increase (in favour of the more extreme members). For example, in the distribution of responses (or people) above where the mean equals the scale mid-point, A and C are equally prototypical—by symmetry the average intra- and intergroup difference is the same for both. However, if A, B and C are moved towards one pole as follows:

O	O	O	A	B	C	O
−3	−2	−1	0	+1	+2	+3

then, by definition, the average intragroup difference (1·5) is still the same for A and C, but the average intergroup difference of C is greater than that of A (the ratios are now 2·25/1·5 = 1·5 for A, 2·75/1 = 2·75 for B and 3·25/1·5 = 2·17 for C). The response of B on the group mean is still the most prototypical position, but the important point is that more extreme responses now tend to be perceived as more prototypical than moderate ones. As the difference between the initial mean and the psychological mid-point of the scale increases, so the more extreme responses will gain in relative prototypicality over the less extreme and the more likely it is that the most prototypical response will be more extreme than the mean. In practice the most prototypical response will differ from the mean where no in-group member holds the mean position or where the distribution of in-group responses is asymmetrical. In effect, the probabilistic relationship is that, as the mean–mid-point discrepancy increases, the greater the relative prototypicality of extreme over moderate responses and the more likely that in-group responses will be distributed asymmetrically and that the most prototypical response will differ from the mean. It needs to be stressed that the general psychological principle proposed is independent of the specific numerical assumption that the reference dimension reflects a flat distribution of people across the scale; it is equally compatible with normal or bimodal distributions of responses comprising the frame of reference.

In summary, the perceived relationship between the initial distribution of in-group responses and the total pool of responses employed as the salient frame of reference determines whether the in-group mean or some more extreme response (more different from the out-group) will be perceived as the most prototypical and hence the most persuasive position; convergence on the mean ('conformity') or polarization will occur in either case respectively. This analysis explains why the most normative position is sometimes polarized beyond the mean, but since the fundamental process producing shifts is social influence, other aspects of the wider theory such as the degree of in-group identification are relevant to concrete predictions.

The major distinctive predictions of this analysis are:

1. that shared identification with a group being a precondition for mutual influence, it is also a precondition for polarization (relatedly, the extent and direction of polarization will depend upon factors determining the formation and salience of relevant in-group–out-group categorizations);
2. that polarization is not merely a sample effect but is an effect of influence within the specific group and represents conformity to a polarized in-group norm;

3. that 'conformity' in the sense of convergence on the pre-test mean and polarization express the same process of conformity to the in-group norm, and which will occur is not determined by whether judgements are 'factual', 'physical' or 'evaluative', but simply by the relationship of the in-group's initial distribution of responses to the social frame of reference;
4. that in principle the degree of polarization may be directly predicted for a specific group from a quantitative analysis of the degree of discrepancy between its pre-test mean and the most prototypical position (in practice there are problems of ceiling effects, measurement error and lack of experimental control).

Theoretically the explanation exemplifies the interactionist character of the proposed theory of social influence in its analysis of social norms and values as 'emergent' properties of group formation. The most prototypical (normative, valued) position is not the sum or mean of in-group responses, nor an individual property of the member holding it, but is a higher-order category property, reflecting the views of all members and, indeed, the similarities between them and differences in relation to others: the prototypical member's persuasiveness, perceived competence, leadership, etc., are mediated by and based on his or her membership in the 'whole'. The most prototypical position is a product of social relations in interaction with the psychological processes (of categorization, comparison, etc.) which represent them.

Social identity as an interactionist concept

The main aim so far has been to show using social influence as an example that the social identity concept can produce empirically precise and distinctive predictions of an interactionist character. In concluding we shall seek to indicate how the general ideas of the self-categorization theory—that there are different levels of abstraction of self-categorization and that group phenomena reflect self-perception and action in terms of the shared social categorical self—embody the thesis of social–psychological interaction.

Firstly, the theory recognizes in terms of the different levels of self-perception that human individuals are subjectively and in action both individual persons and society. The social–categorical self or social identity is in form (the level of abstraction), content (the defining stereotypical attributes) and social extent (the sociological or situational limits within which it is shared by people) precisely individuals in their societal aspect, and depersonalization is the process whereby people cease to be unique individuals and become *subjectively* the exemplars or representatives of society or some part of it—the living, self-aware embodiments of the historical, cultural and politico-ideological forces and movements which formed them. (Indeed, psychologically speaking, they do not 'represent', they 'are': they become self-conscious society, as McDougall would have put it). The personal self, too, reflecting one's individuality is assumed to be socially mediated, being based on intragroup comparisons and differentiations in terms of one's higher-order group memberships (Turner, 1985).

Secondly, the social–categorical self is a medium or channel for social–psychological interaction and a mechanism for the mutual emergence of irreducible social and psychological forms. The psychological process of the increase in the level of abstraction of self-categorization (and depersonalization) makes possible and induces social uniformities of action and attitudes as one responds in terms more of the stereotypical identity defining one's shared in-group membership than one's distinctive personality. The *social form* of group action, its social unity and coherence, derives from the shared subjectivity of the identical in-group self and the processes of social influence, consensual validation, norm formation and

the like that follow from the psychological interchangeability of self and others. The psychological process of depersonalization is socially creative in making possible social processes of influence and unification (and social attraction and cooperation, Turner, 1985) that would otherwise be unavailable. The impact of psychological principles on the emergent social form of behaviour is demonstrated in the polarization of social norms as a function of the cognitive meta-contrasts which define the prototypical characteristics of (social) categories.

But, in addition, the group relations produced by social identity are *psychologically creative* in being the preconditions for the emergence of the social level of abstraction in the categorization of self and others and the specific behavioural and normative content of social categories. The individual psychological processes of comparison and categorization can only produce the social–psychological process of depersonalization because of the objective social reality of sociological identity between people and the facts of the collective form of their life. In-group–out-group categorizations more or less directly reflect social relations—the perceived social similarities and differences between people on the dimensions and in terms of the values deemed as relevant and important by society—and they become salient in perception as explanatory cognitive representations of the social invariances, regularities or 'dispositions' of individual behaviour (Oakes, 1983; Oakes & Turner, in preparation). The very fact of a continuum of self-perception varying from personal to in-group self-categories is made possible by and reflects the distinctive capacity of human social behaviour to vary *objectively* in the level of abstraction or degree of inclusiveness of the behaving unit: that we can and do act as both social groups and distinct individual persons. The shared, consensual nature of particular in-group categories, which we have taken for granted throughout, also indicates that they are products of social reality and influence.

Thirdly, social identity is, therefore, a 'socially structured field' within the individual mind and an important element of the psychological or subjective processes of society. It is a mechanism whereby society forms the psychology of its members to pursue its goals and conflicts as with the examples 'citizens', 'Americans', 'Irish republicans', 'conservatives', 'socialists', or 'Catholics'. Fourthly, its functioning provides group members with a shared psychological field, shared cognitive representations of themselves, their own identity, and the objective world in the form of shared social norms of fact and value and hence makes meaningful the simplest communications and emotions of a public intersubjective life (Asch, 1952; Farr & Moscovici, 1984).

Asch (1952) long ago pointed out that the essential feat of human beings which explained social–psychological interaction was that they were parts (individuals) which could contain or recapitulate (psychologically) the whole (the group), and hence could regulate and coordinate their behaviour in terms of the idea of the whole to bring the whole into objective existence. The social identity concept is a specification of that 'psychological representation of the whole' and the self-categorization theory offers a detailed predictive explanation of just how the feat is accomplished, how individual psychological processes can produce more than just individual behaviour and how a science of the individual need not be individualistic.

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