Social Identity Theory

Article · June 2020

DOI: 10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0153

1 author:

Jake Harwood
The University of Arizona
166 PUBLICATIONS **7,646** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Social Identity Theory

Jake Harwood

University of Arizona

jharwood@u.arizona.edu

Cite as: Harwood, J. (2020). Social identity theory. In J. van den Bulck (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of media psychology.* Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0153

Abstract

Social identity theory provides a framework for explaining intergroup behavior and intergroup communication based on the inherent value humans place on social group memberships, and their desire to view their specific social groups in a positive light. This desire can lead to intergroup prejudice and conflict. Within the media sphere, social identity theory can help us understand the links between media ownership and media content, the nature of group portrayals in dominant-group-owned media, group-based selective consumption of specific media messages, and the effects of exposure to that content for dominant and subordinate group members. Newer internet-based media provide new challenges and opportunities for those taking a broad social identity approach to mass communication.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory, Intergroup communication

Social identity theory (SIT) explains relations between large social groups using psychological processes concerning social identity—an individual's sense of belonging to a group and the positive or negative feelings associated with that membership. The theory has become an umbrella term for a set of more specific theories of intergroup behavior.

[A]Summary of Social Identity Theory

The theory originated in studies using the "minimal group paradigm" in the early 1970s (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). These studies demonstrated people's apparently inherent desire to distinguish themselves from others based on group memberships, and their willingness to sacrifice absolute levels of rewards to maintain relative superiority over members of other groups. For example, research participants would accept lower cash payments for their ingroup, so long as an outgroup's payments were even lower. From these studies, Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed SIT, a sophisticated model of how individual identity-related motivations predict individual tendencies to discriminate between groups. The model also describes how those individual identity processes predict both individual and collective responses to societal-level group status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

[B] Why do people engage in intergroup discrimination?

According to SIT, categorization of our social world is a natural and inevitable human instinct, serving to simplify our environment. As we categorize people into groups, we also categorize ourselves into some of those same groups—social identification. Once we "belong" to a group (our "ingroup"), we seek ways to gain positive feelings from that group membership. Viewing the ingroup more positively than other groups ("outgroups") is one way to achieve those positive feelings. Seeking positive distinctiveness for one's ingroup hence becomes an explanation for holding negative beliefs and attitudes about outgroups in our environment, and hence for prejudice and ultimately discrimination. The motivational basis of social identity theory in a desire for positive self-concept (Abrams & Hogg, 1988) has been supplemented in recent years by additional explanations—for example that (self-) categorization and intergroup differentiation is a way to reduce uncertainty (Hogg, 2000). Empirical examinations of social identity theory have shown that ingroup favoritism is not isomorphic with outgroup derogation (Mummendey & Otten, 1998).

[B]How do groups respond to marginalization?

For some social groups, particularly marginalized or minority groups, the ability to perceive positive distinctiveness is constrained by realities of social prejudice and discrimination. SIT suggests that individual and group belief systems will drive the group response in such situations. People may adopt a *social mobility* strategy, essentially "leaving" one ingroup for a different, more socially-valued group. Such behaviour is likely when group members have little sense of identification with their group, when boundaries between groups are permeable (it is relatively easy for a person to "move" from one group to another, unconstrained by visible or other signs of group membership), and when the intergroup hierarchy is viewed as relatively stable and legitimate (i.e., change in the ingroup's marginalized position is unlikely). This behaviour is apparent when individuals "pass" as members of another group, or successfully *become* members of that group (e.g., via achieving citizenship in another more desirable national group).

At the other extreme, people may adopt a *social change* belief system. This set of ideals drives people to act *collectively* to challenge the status quo and raise the position of their ingroup within the social hierarchy. Rather than abandoning their group for a more desirable outgroup, they instead attempt to make their ingroup's position more desirable. People are more likely to endorse social change ideologies when their ingroup identification is high, boundaries between groups are impermeable, and the status quo is perceived to be unstable and illegitimate. Collective movements around group rights exemplify this belief system—the US Civil Rights movement, international movements for women's suffrage, Black South Africans' struggles against Apartheid, and the like. Social change beliefs are also sometimes labelled *social competition.*

Between social mobility and social change ideologies lie middle-ground strategies; Tajfel and Turner (1986) refer to these as forms of *social creativity*. A group might, for instance, find alternative dimensions on which they can compare themselves to an outgroup: "We're not as powerful, but we are more creative." Or they might find alternate outgroups to serve as comparisons—hence SIT explains why marginalized groups may compete against one another rather than the dominant group.

In short, social identities are an important part of the self-concept. The desire to maintain a positive self-concept drives intergroup discrimination and other processes to support the positive distinctiveness of one's ingroups.

[B]Extensions of social identity theory

Self-categorization theory has clarified the processes by which individuals focus on specific group memberships in specific contexts. It explains why one person might be focused on maintaining a positive gender identity in a particular situation, while another is focused on the status of their religious group, for instance (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2016) and ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson, 1987) have both provided insights into the linguistic manifestations of social identity processes, explaining why individuals might emphasize their accent, dialect, or language, or alternatively why they might switch into an outgroup communication style. Ethnolinguistic vitality theory provides a framework for understanding the relative status and strength of different groups in any given context (Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994).

[A]Social Identity Theory and the Media

Perspectives extending SIT to the study of media are organized here in terms of a traditional "who, says what, to whom, with what effect" model (Lasswell, 1948). The role of media channels, with a focus on new media, is considered last.

[B]Who makes the media?

Understanding the media from a SIT perspective requires considering institutional processes as well as individual psychological and communicative activity. Media embody and represent the social hierarchy of group status, thus phenomena like media ownership (who owns TV stations and networks, newspapers, social media) are non-trivial factors in understanding how individuals relate to the media in intergroup terms (Harwood & Roy, 2005). Minority-owned media are more likely to include portrayals of minority group members, feature news and other content of interest to minority group members, and hence to support the social identities of those group members. Merely the presence of minority group members in media ownership, production, and green-lighting roles enhances the vitality of those groups (Erigha, 2018).

[B]How are groups portrayed in the media?

A massive body of research has documented portrayals of various social groups across media types (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Broadly, groups that are marginalized in other ways in society are also marginalized in the media. Marginalization has typically been operationalized in two ways: underrepresentation and negative representation. Some groups (e.g., Native Americans in US television) are present in substantially smaller numbers than their numbers in the actual population. Negative representations (for groups where some critical mass of portrayals can be identified) are examined in terms of generally derogatory portrayals, and specifically stereotypical representations (e.g., Dixon, 2017). Social identity explains such representations as a function of intergroup distinctiveness processes.

[B]How do group processes drive media selection?

Individuals actively seek content that meets their needs and matches their interests. Some of this active seeking is driven by social identity motives (Harwood, 1999; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). People typically prefer content featuring ingroup members, seek it out actively, and receive identity-related gratifications from doing so (Slater, 2015). Hence, the media (assuming positive ingroup representations are available) can serve as a support system for marginalized identities, but can also be selectively consumed by dominant group members in ways that reduce exposure to portrayals of marginalized groups.

[B]What are social identity-related media effects?

As noted above, for members of marginalized communities, media can support their identities by providing positive models of the ingroup. Beyond positive portrayals, media can also model group activism, thus building support for a *social change* belief system (see earlier section on marginalized groups' responses; Reid, Giles, & Abrams, 2004).

For members of dominant groups, exposure to positive portrayals of marginalized outgroup members in the media can reduce prejudice—such exposure is a mediated form of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954). Such mediated contact effects are apparent in exposure to multiple types of media and for a diverse array of outgroups (Harwood, 2018).

However, as noted above, marginalized groups are typically underrepresented or negatively represented. Such portrayals have negative consequences for both marginalized and dominant group members. For dominant groups, such portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and encourage negative attitudes or reinforce the perceived irrelevance of outgroups (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). For minority group members, such portrayals (or their absence) can reinforce a sense that their ingroup is devalued (Ortiz & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). To the extent that media can elicit higher level identifications (e.g., with all humanity), there is promise for them to overcome some dimensions of prejudice (Oliver et al., 2015).

Trepte (2006) presents a social identity model of media selection *and* effects. The model describes how identity processes (e.g., striving for positive identity) drive media selection (e.g., selecting media presenting the ingroup positively and the outgroup negatively). The model also specifies how the salience of ingroup and outgroup memberships and the nature of portrayals can influence subsequent intergroup processes (e.g., viewing negative outgroup portrayals influencing subsequent outgroup discrimination).

[B] New media

Many of the media processes described here also occur in the internet world, but often in new, complex, or amplified ways. The internet provides massively increased ability to find content supportive of social identities—inexpensive production and distribution costs relative to traditional media make such content easier for marginalized groups to create. Such content can facilitate collective action by groups (Chan, 2017). Of course, the same processes, when combined with the relatively unregulated nature of internet content, make it easy to disseminate hate speech and encourage intergroup violence. White supremacist websites, violent misogynistic pornography, anti-Semitic discussion boards, and the like are easily accessible on the web, reflecting the worst forms of seeking positive intergroup distinctiveness. People who commit heinous intergroup violence find places online where they are not ostracized for their beliefs and may find support for their acts (Roose, 2018).

The internet blurs some of the lines between mediated and interpersonal communication. Perspectives such as the social identity model of deindividuation (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007), and models of online intergroup contact (Amichai-Hamburger, 2012; Walther, 2009) demonstrate the promise (and some potential problems) for online interpersonal media to bridge boundaries between groups—particularly physically segregated groups.

References

Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *18*, 317– 334. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420180403

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2012). Reducing intergroup conflict in the digital age. In H. Giles (Ed.), *The handbook of intergroup communication* (pp. 181-195). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chan, M. (2017). Media use and the social identity model of collective action: Examining the roles of online alternative news and social media news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *94*(3), 663-681. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077699016638837

Dixon, T. L. (2017). Good guys are still always in white? Positive change and continued misrepresentation of race and crime on local television news. *Communication Research*, *44*(6), 775-792. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215579223

Erigha, M. (2018). On the margins: black directors and the persistence of racial inequality in twenty-first century Hollywood. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *41*(7), 1217-1234. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1281984

Giles, H. (Ed.). (2016). *Communication accommodation theory: Negotiating personal and social identities across contexts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Giles, H., & Johnson, P. (1987). Ethnolinguistic identity theory: A social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *68*, 69–99.

Harwood, J. (1999). Age identification, social identity gratifications, and television viewing. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 43,* 123-136. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838159909364479

Harwood, J. (2018). Indirect and mediated intergroup contact. In Y. Y. Kim & K. McKay-Semmler (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (Vol. 2, pp. 912-920). New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0161

Harwood, J., Giles, H., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1994). The genesis of vitality theory: Historical patterns and discoursal dimensions. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 108,* 167-206. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1994.108.167

Harwood, J., & Roy, A. (2005). Social identity theory and mass communication research. In J. Harwood & H. Giles (Eds.), *Intergroup communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 189-212). New York: Peter Lang.

Hogg, M. A. (2000). Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization: A motivational theory of social identity processes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *11*, 223– 255. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792772043000040

Klein, O., Spears, R., & Reicher, S. (2007). Social identity performance: Extending the strategic side of SIDE. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*(1), 28-45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868306294588

Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Hastall, M. R. (2010). Please your self: Social identity effects on selective exposure to news about in-and out-groups. *Journal of Communication*, *60*, 515-535. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01495.x

Lasswell, H. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson, (Ed.) *The communication of ideas* (pp. 37-51). New York, NY: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.

Mastro, D., Lapinski, M. K., Kopacz, M. A., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2009). The influence of exposure to depictions of race and crime in TV news on viewer's social judgments. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *53*, 615-635. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150903310534

Mummendey, A., & Otten, S. (1998). Positive–negative asymmetry in social discrimination. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *9*(1), 107-143. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779843000063

Oliver, M. B., Kim, K., Hoewe, J., Chung, M. Y., Ash, E., Woolley, J. K., & Shade, D. D. (2015). Media-induced elevation as a means of enhancing feelings of intergroup connectedness. *Journal of Social Issues*, *71*, 106-122. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12099

Ortiz, M., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2015). Latinos' perceptions of intergroup relations in the United States: The cultivation of group-based attitudes and beliefs from English-and Spanish-language television. *Journal of Social Issues*, *71*(1), 90-105. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12098

Reid, S. A., Giles, H., & Abrams, J. (2004). A social identity model of media effects. *Zeitschrift für Medienpsychologie, 16,* 17-25. https://doi.org/10.1026/1617-6383.16.1.17

Roose, K. (2018, October 28). On Gab, an extremist-friendly site, Pittsburgh shooting suspect aired his hatred in full. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com

Slater, M. D. (2015). Reinforcing spirals model: Conceptualizing the relationship between media content exposure and the development and maintenance of attitudes. *Media Psychology*, *18*(3), 370-395. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2014.897236

Tajfel, H., Billig, M. G., Bundy, R. P., & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behavior. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *1*, 149-178.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks / Cole.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Chicago, IL: Nelson.

Trepte, S. (2006). Social identity theory. In J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment* (pp. 255–271). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M. (2015). Documenting portrayals of race/ethnicity on primetime television over a 20-year span and their association with national-level racial/ethnic attitudes. *Journal of Social Issues*, *71*, 17-38. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12094

Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.

Walther, J. B. (2009). Computer-mediated communication and virtual groups: Applications to interethnic conflict. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *37*, 225-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903025937

Further Reading/Resources

Giles, H., & Harwood, J. (Eds.) (2018). *The Oxford encyclopedia of intergroup communication* (Volumes 1 and 2). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mastro, D., & Tukachinsky, R. (Ed.) (2015). Media representations of race and ethnicity: Implications for identity, intergroup relations, and public policy [Special issue]. *Journal of Social Issues, 71*(1).

Contributor Bio

Jake Harwood (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1994) is Professor of Communication at the University of Arizona. He is author of *Communication and Music in Social Interaction* (2018) and *Understanding Communication and Aging* (2018), and co-editor of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Intergroup Communication* (2018). He is the (co-) author of about 150 articles and chapters on intergenerational communication, intergroup communication, and communication and music. His research focuses on the communicative implications of music for relationships between individuals and large social groups.