

## Identification

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### Overview of Issue

There is a large literature on identification, and on several related concepts, such as commitment and loyalty. But much of this work has been guided by two theories, namely social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Social identity theory involves three psychological processes: social categorization, social identity, and social comparison. Social categorization is a way of thinking about the self and others that emphasizes memberships in groups, rather than personal qualities. When people engage in social categorization, social identities become salient. Social identity is that portion of the self-concept that reflects the groups to which one belongs. Just as people want to feel proud of themselves as individuals (personal identity), they also want to feel proud of their groups (social identity). But which groups are “best?” Social comparison provides the answer -- people compare their own group (the ingroup) to any other groups (outgroups) that seem relevant. If such comparisons turn out well, then people are satisfied. But what if they turn out poorly – what can be done if one’s ingroup is worse than relevant outgroups? Tajfel and Turner identified three broad strategies for dealing with a poor social identity. The first is social mobility. A person can leave the ingroup and try to join a better outgroup, or if that is impossible, then the person could try to identify less strongly with the ingroup and focus on other (better) groups to which he or she belongs, or to focus on personal rather than social identity. Social competition is the second strategy. If a person’s ingroup seems inferior, then he or she could try to improve it somehow and/or attack the outgroup in some way. Social competition is thus a major factor in intergroup conflict. The third strategy is social creativity, which includes a variety of mental “tricks” that can help people feel better about their groups. For example, a person could weight more heavily comparison dimensions that make the ingroup seem better (not worse) than relevant outgroups, or a person could try to identify new outgroups that seem worse (not better) than the ingroup.

Self-categorization theory is closely related to social identity theory, but it focuses on social categorization, and emphasizes uncertainty reduction, rather than self-esteem, as a motivational factor. According to the theory, a group “exists” and can thus influence behavior whenever people simultaneously categorize themselves as members of it. This is true even if the people involved are not in direct contact with one another. In fact, they may not even know one another. Categorizing oneself into a particular group depends on both the salience (cognitive accessibility) of that group and the degree to which the categorization clarifies what is happening in a situation (fit). Clarification of a situation depends on the meta-contrast ratio, which reflects an analysis of interpersonal similarities and differences among the people involved. The “best” categorization is one that (a) maximizes the similarities and minimizes the differences among people in the same groups, but also (b) minimizes the similarities and maximizes the differences among people in different groups. An important byproduct of the analyses underlying the meta-contrast ratio is a group prototype, which is a mental image of the kind of person who embodies whatever qualities make members of the ingroup distinctive (in positive ways) from outgroup members. This prototype, which can be found in the mind of every group member, plays a role in all group phenomena. Group cohesion, for example, reflects warm feelings among group members that depend not on their personal qualities, but on their resemblance to the group prototype (Hogg, 1992). The emergence and effectiveness of leaders also depends on their similarity to the group’s prototype (Hogg & Van Knippenberg, 2003).

Social identity and self-categorization theory have generated an enormous amount of research, not only in social psychology, but in other fields as well, such as organizational psychology. Early on, that research focused on inter-group relations, but recently it has spread to many forms of intragroup relations as well.

### Relevance to homeland security

The emphasis of these theories on intergroup conflict, and their ability to explain social behavior in large, diffuse groups whose members may have little direct interaction with one another, make them seem especially appropriate for application to terrorist groups and organizations.

### Recommendations

Researchers who favor these theories are numerous and productive, so the goal should simply be to interest them in studying terrorist groups (a new research target), perhaps through conferences and grant opportunities.

## References

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