

Identity, Intergroup Relations & Group Conflict

The social psychology of intergroup relations

- From individual to intergroup focus in social and political psychology
- Three main theories:
 - Realistic Conflict Theory
 - Social Identity Theory
 - The Contact Hypothesis

Moving from the individual perspective to a more social and socially focused perspective: groups; the relationship between groups and the place of individuals within different groups – more intersubjective way of looking at social and political psychology.

Realistic conflict theory and social identity theory explain why intergroup conflict and prejudice arise and the contact hypothesis explains how we can overcome conflict and/or prejudice between groups.

Realistic Conflict Theory

- Term coined by Donald Campbell (1965)
- Key Arguments:
 - Groups compete for scarce resources, e.g. financial, political, social etc (e.g. see Jackson, 1993)
 - Scarcity can be real or perceived – the length and severity of conflict are related to the degree of scarcity of resources (perceived or real)
 - Zero-sum game → a) resentment and hostility towards competing groups; b) greater cohesiveness within each group
 - Superordinate goals → re-established cooperation

The best way of explaining conflict between groups is by focusing on the scarcity of resources – you put people in a situation in which they have to compete for scarce resources, which could be money, social status, political resources or political support etc. and you will find out that by competing they will gradually develop intergroup prejudice and hostility. The scarcity may be real or perceived; sometimes members of opposing groups may believe that there is a scarcity of resources when the scarcity does not exist – what people believe psychologically, not what is the case objectively. So, a perceived scarcity of resources may also have an effect on people's inclination to be hostile to each other, and between groups. And the length and severity of the conflict is always dependent on the perceived or real scarcity of resources; the degree to which the resources are perceived to be scarce by those engaged in the conflict.

We should look at intergroup conflict as a zero-sum game – if you have two groups competing for resources, only one can get those resources, and so whichever one wins, the other loses; you cannot have a win-win situation when people compete for resources. And what is generated in this process is resentment and hostility to the external group or outgroup, but also greater cohesiveness towards your ingroup – ingroup favouritism: you start to become more attached to members of your group when you are engaged in competition of scarce resources, which also involve an outgroup.

This conflict can somehow be overcome if two or more groups involved are presented with superordinate goals i.e. a shared task – something that can be accomplished together. If you take these groups which are currently fighting over scarce resources, and you give them a task you will see that the conflict will finally decrease and they will start to cooperate, and that will reduce prejudice and so on.

The theory was tested through the Sherif and Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment (1954) – there is a zero-sum element; the fact that only the winners get the prize, and so if you lose you do not get anything, is what really gave a strength to the competitive aspect of the relationship between the two groups. And so the prejudice increased and this was only reduced and overcome partly through the imposition by the

researches of superordinate goals, especially fixing the water tank together, which was a cooperative task for which the two groups had to collaborate – seemed to reduce the prejudice.

Social Identity Theory

- Key problem with realistic conflict theory: competition over scarce resources is not necessary to produce conflict
- '[T]he mere awareness of the presence of an outgroup is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the ingroup' (Tajfel and Turner 2004, p. 281)

Competition over scarce resources are not always necessary to explain conflict between different groups. Social identity theory says you can have competition over scarce resources, but even in the absence of that, you can have prejudice and conflict between groups. And that happens because, according to this theory, just being aware of the presence of another group or outgroup is sufficient to provoke intergroup competition, discriminatory responses and prejudice on the part of the ingroup.

- Our social identity (rather than scarcity of resources) plays a key role in explaining intergroup conflict. But why?

This theory is called social identity theory because it starts from the importance of our social identity for us as individuals. All of us belong to different groups, and so each of us belongs to more than one group depending on which groups we are focusing on – it could be ethnic groups, religious groups, groups of friends, national groups, professional groups etc. Our social identity always matters for us, even in the absence of the scarcity of resources and competition over them, and this plays a role in intergroup conflict.

- Our self-esteem depends on the social group (s) we are members of
- Social groups may be evaluated more or less positively in a society
 - Negative evaluations → low self-esteem
 - Positive evaluations → high self-esteem

It plays a role because our social identity affects our self-esteem – if we are members of a social group, say an ethnic group, religious group or a national group which is the object of very negative evaluations by other people in the society in which we live, that will seriously affect our self-esteem; we will have a lower self-esteem. If you are a member of a group that is marginalised, who is normally considered less intelligent, less able to work hard, or simply inferior for whatever reason, those who criticise or discriminate against the group may think that your self-esteem will be affected. You cannot possibly enjoy high self-esteem in the situation where such low evaluations exist about the group in which you belong. On the contrary, if your group is the object of positive evaluations; if it is considered in high regard in the society in which you live, you will enjoy higher self-esteem.

- We want to be part of the best group: 'Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity' (Tajfel and Turner 2004, p. 284)
- This depends on 'favourable comparisons' (Tajfel and Turner 2004, p. 284) with other relevant groups

Obviously, we all want to be a part of the best group, or at least that is what the theory argues. And so, if you want to be a part of the best group, you want to ensure that the group of which you are a part of enjoys a positive social identity; you do not want to be a part of a group which is viewed very negatively by those in your society. So it is very important that your group is the object of favourable comparisons with other relevant groups.

We are not always comparing any group with any other groups; there are always specific features and characteristics of groups which are more or less important in different contexts.

For example, race is very important in the US. Whether you are white, African-American or Hispanic is very important. Empirical evidence shows that it is the most salient feature. So, intergroup comparisons will often happen along race lines and cleavages.

Whereas in Canada, what is salient is the English-speaking versus French-speaking capacities (more than race).