



Social identity: The role of self in group processes and intergroup relations

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**Michael A. Hogg,¹ Dominic Abrams,² and Marilynn B. Brewer³**

Abstract

Applications and conceptual developments made in social identity research since the mid-1990s are summarized under eight general headings: types of self and identity, prototype-based differentiation, influence through leadership, social identity motivations, intergroup emotions, intergroup conflict and social harmony, collective behavior and social protest, and resolving social dilemmas. Cautious prognoses for future directions are then suggested—health, e-behavior, population relocation and immigration, culture, language and intergroup communication, societal extremism and populism, social development, and inclusive and diverse social identities.

Keywords

group processes, intergroup relations, social identity theory

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The first issue of *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* was published in 1998. It reflected the state of research on group processes and intergroup relations as it was in the mid-1990s. At that time social identity research had already made a significant impact on social psychology—the original social identity theory of intergroup relations had been published almost 20 years earlier (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the more general and more social cognitive social identity theory of the group, self-categorization theory, had been published 10 years earlier (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Social identity theory had also started to influence the management and organizational sciences (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and sociological social psychology (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995), and the historical gulf between European social

identity research and American social cognition and small groups research had significantly been bridged—Abrams and Hogg were just publishing their edited volume on social identity and social cognition (Abrams & Hogg, 1999), and Moreland et al. had recently published their upbeat prognosis for the study of group processes that attributed a revival primarily to social identity research (Moreland, Hogg, & Hains, 1994).

¹Claremont Graduate University, USA

²University of Kent, UK

³Ohio State University, USA

Corresponding author:

Michael A. Hogg, Department of Psychology, Claremont Graduate University, 123 East Eighth Street, Claremont CA 91711, USA.

Email: michael.hogg@cgu.edu

One consideration in the early 1990s that sponsored the launch of *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* was precisely the need for a journal that brought together in one place the study of both group processes and intergroup relations, from the perspective of social interactive, social cognitive, and self-processes, and reached beyond social psychology to, for example, language and communication science, management and organizational science, and microsociology. Not surprisingly, social identity research has always had a high profile in *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*—many articles have been published and the journal has hosted a number of social-identity-related special issues.

Since the mid-1990s social identity theory has continued to have growing influence in the organizational and management sciences (Haslam, 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2001) and the study of language and communication (Giles & Maass, 2016), and has begun to explore health behavior (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). It has also made a significant impact on how we understand the relationship between people's attitudes and their behavior (Terry & Hogg, 1996, 2000).

In this short article we have had to be selective. We focus on and document just some of what we consider to be the most significant conceptual developments and extensions that have been made, over the past 20 years, to social identity theory broadly defined (also see Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Hogg, 2016). We group these developments under eight general headings: types of self and identity, prototype-based differentiation, influence through leadership, social identity motivations, intergroup emotions, intergroup conflict and social harmony, collective behavior and social protest, and resolving social dilemmas. We conclude with some tentative prognoses for the future.

Types of Self and Identity

Social identity theory originally distinguished between two types of self and identity—self defined and evaluated in terms of attributes shared with other members of a self-inclusive

social category (social identity) and self defined and evaluated in terms of idiosyncratic personal attributes and close personal relationships with specific other people (personal identity). Group phenomena were associated with social not personal identity.

This straightforward binary distinction has now become more textured. Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguished between three forms of self: *individual self*, based on personal traits that differentiate the self from all others; *relational self*, based on connections and role relationships with significant others; and *collective self*, based on group membership that differentiates “us” from “them.”

This taxonomy was subsequently extended to identify four types of identity (Brewer, 2001; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006)—at least partially to incorporate cross-cultural differences in processes and manifestations of self-conception (Brewer & Chen, 2007): *person-based social identities*, reflecting internalization of group properties by individual group members as part of their self-concept; *relational social identities*, defining the self in relation to specific other people with whom one interacts in a group context, corresponding to Brewer and Gardner's (1996) relational identity and to Markus and Kitayama's (1991) “interdependent self”; *group-based social identities*, equivalent to social identity as defined before; and *collective identities*, reflecting collective self-construal that is also manifested in social action aimed at promoting the group's identity.

Associated with these more textured differentiations among types of self and identity, the social identity premise that the overall self-concept is not monolithic, but is compartmentalized, has been unpacked to explore the relationship among social identities within the self-concept. A person's overall social identity can vary in complexity (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). People have a complex social identity if they have multiple discrete social identities that do not share many attributes, and a simple social identity if they have overlapping social identities that share many compatible or congruent attributes.

Another slightly different take on the relationship between identities in the self-concept is



offered by Swann's concept of identity fusion (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009; Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Swann argues that what happens in salient group contexts is that the personal self and associated personal identity becomes "fused" with and undifferentiated from the collective self and associated social identity. When this happens behavior can acquire some of the attributes of extremist groups—becoming highly group-centric to include marked ethnocentrism, conformity to group norms, and intolerance of outgroups and ingroup deviance.

Prototype-Based Differentiation

Social identity theory initially focused mainly on intergroup relations, but with the development of self-categorization theory there has been an increasing focus on intragroup structural differentiation—particularly the way that people vary in their actual or perceived match to the group's prototype (see Hogg, 2005).

A group prototype is a fuzzy set of attributes that capture those perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that define the group and differentiate it from relevant other groups. People cognitively represent groups in terms of prototypes, and the process of identifying with a group through self-categorization transforms self-perception to conform to the prescriptions of the relevant ingroup prototype. Ingroup prototypes define who we are, and prescribe how we should act as group members.

Building on Marques's documentation of the **black sheep effect**, where people with unlikeable characteristics are more unfavorably evaluated and treated if they are ingroup rather than outgroup members (Marques & Páez, 1994), Marques and Abrams developed their **subjective group dynamics model** (Abrams, Marques, Randsley de Moura, Hutchison, & Bown, 2004; Marques, Abrams, Páez, & Hogg, 2001; Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010).

In intergroup comparative contexts ingroup members can deviate from the ingroup's prototype/norm in a direction that displaces them

towards the outgroup and its prototype (antinorm deviance), or can deviate from the ingroup's prototype/norm in a direction that displaces them away from the outgroup and its prototype (pronorm deviance). Largely because antinorm deviance threatens the clarity of the ingroup norm whereas pronorm deviance does the opposite (cf. uncertainty-identity theory; Hogg 2012), groups evaluate and react more negatively towards antinorm deviants than pronorm deviants.

Subjective group dynamics focuses on the effect of a target person's perceived prototypicality (and what that conveys about the clarity of the ingroup's prototype and social identity) on how the group evaluates and reacts to the target. Hornsey adopts a communication-oriented perspective to focus more on what the target actually does, specifically whether someone criticizes the group's identity and associated normative properties and practices (Esposito, Hornsey, & Spoor, 2013; Hornsey, 2005; Hornsey & Imani, 2004). In this situation an outgroup critic is evaluated and reacted to more negatively than an ingroup critic.

The reason for this may be the perceived motivation of the critic, based on the fact that people trust ingroup prototypical members more than nonprototypical ingroup members (see discussion of innovation credit and leadership in what follows). An ingroup critic (relatively ingroup prototypical) may be viewed as legitimately providing constructive criticism in order to clarify the group's prototype and improve its identity, whereas an outgroup critic (relatively noningroup prototypical) is simply being destructive in order to undermine and devalue the group's identity.

Influence Through Leadership

Prototypicality plays a central role in the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012a; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Building on the earlier social identity analysis of influence processes within groups, the social identity theory of leadership argues that where



social identity is salient and central to self-definition people seek reliable and trustworthy information about the group's identity and associated prototype; and this is provided by prototypical leaders or group members whose prototypicality makes them de facto leaders.

Prototypical leaders are typically highly identified with the group and are therefore trusted to be acting in the best interests of the group. Members turn to them as reliable and legitimate sources of information about the group's identity and attributes of membership. This trust allows prototypical leaders to be more normatively innovative than nonprototypical leaders—they are extended innovation credit (Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008). Innovation is an important aspect of effective leadership, so this further confirms prototypical leaders' leadership ability and effectiveness.

The social identity theory of leadership has been explicitly applied to organizational contexts, where most traditional leadership research is conducted (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), and has also contributed significantly to a revival of research within social psychology on leadership as a whole (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Hogg, 2010).

A recent new line of research has focused on intergroup leadership (Hogg, 2015; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012b). Most theories of leadership (cf. Yukl, 2013), including the social identity theory of leadership, largely view leadership as a situation where an individual inspires a collection of individuals to internalize and enact their vision of the group. However in many, if not most leadership situations, the leader has to provide leadership across distinct subgroups that not only want to retain their distinct subgroup identity, but also may have competitive or even hostile relations with one another. For example, the U.S. president needs to lead Democrats and Republicans, and national leadership in Iraq needs to lead across the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups.

The challenge of intergroup leadership is to construct a superordinate identity that does not threaten subgroup identity but celebrates subgroup distinctiveness and the constructive

relations between subgroups that partially define the superordinate identity. And, at the same time, secure trust and legitimacy from the subgroups in order to commit them to this superordinate identity and vision.

Social Identity Motivations

In its original focus on intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), social identity theory's motivational emphasis was on intergroup competition over status—groups seek to protect and promote evaluatively positive distinctiveness for their group and its social identity, and thus for its members. This social identity dynamic satisfies an underlying self-enhancement motive and may to some extent be motivated by self-enhancement, or self-esteem, considerations (see Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Self-categorization theory focused on social cognitive processes and structures, primarily social categorization, and remained relatively silent about motivation (Turner et al., 1987).

Subsequently, Brewer suggested an alternative model of social identity motivation—optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010). According to optimal distinctiveness theory, people are driven by two conflicting motives, for inclusion/sameness (satisfied by group membership) and for distinctiveness/uniqueness (satisfied by individuality). Social identity phenomena and group behaviors are impacted by the fact that people try to strike a balance between these two motives to achieve optimal distinctiveness. Where people feel overly distinctive they strive for greater inclusion, where people feel overly wrapped up in the group they strive for greater distinctiveness. One implication of this is that midsize groups may be best suited to optimal distinctiveness: smaller groups oversatisfy the need for distinctiveness, so people strive for greater inclusiveness, while large groups oversatisfy the need for inclusiveness, so people strive for distinctiveness (Abrams, 2009; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

Another motive that may play a key role in social identity processes is a person's need to reduce feelings of uncertainty related to or

directly about their self and identity (Hogg, 2007, 2012). According to **uncertainty-identity theory** feeling uncertain about things that reflect on and matter to one's sense of self and identity in society is aversive and maladaptive because it compromises expectations and hinders effective action. Group identification through self-categorization reduces uncertainty because it causes people to internalize a prototype that describes their identity; prescribes their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors; and makes the behavior of others predictable. It also furnishes consensual validation of one's identity and identity-related attributes.

Groups that have high entitativity (they have sharp boundaries, are clearly structured, and their members share attributes and have a common fate) do a better job at reducing identity uncertainty. This is because highly entitative groups are more distinctive and internally consistent entities that have clearer and less ambiguous prototypes—entitativity moderates the impact of uncertainty on group identification. One implication of this is that more acute or chronic uncertainty, or uncertainty about a very central identity, or where people have few identities to fall back on can lead to “extremism”—which might include hostile ethnocentrism, ideological orthodoxy, xenophobia, populism and support for authoritarian leadership, and intolerance of internal dissent (Hogg, 2014; Hogg & Adelman, 2013).

This focus on the possible role of uncertainty in extremism, or what Kruglanski has called group-centrism (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006) is part of a wider research interest in the relationship between uncertainty and societal extremism (Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013).

Intergroup Emotions

Although recognizing the emotional investment that people have in their social identities and the strong emotions often associated with group and intergroup behaviors, social identity theory did not originally explore emotions. This changed dramatically with the development of intergroup

emotions theory (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; also see Goldenberg, Halperin, van Zomeren, & Gross, 2016; Mackie, Maitner, & Smith, 2009).

The key idea here is a simple extension of research on individual emotion, where appraisals of personal harm or benefit generate negative or positive emotions and associated action tendencies. In intergroup contexts the ingroup and nature of the intergroup context defines self and so these appraisals are group-level appraisals—harm or benefit to the group is harm or benefit to self and thus generates negative outgroup-directed emotions and positive ingroup-directed emotions (typically harm emanates from the outgroup, and benefit from the ingroup).

Subsequent research has explored the role played by intergroup beliefs and wider explanatory ideologies on the specific emotions elicited, such as guilt or shame, and on what groups do as a consequence, such as make apologies or pursue reconciliation (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006; Iyer & Leach, 2008; Nadler & Shnabel, 2015).

Intergroup Conflict and Social Harmony

Social identity theory was originally primarily a theory of conflict and cooperation between groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It attributed how groups view and behave towards one another to the possibilities available to a group and its members to protect and promote the group's positive distinctiveness. These possibilities rest on, not necessarily accurate, beliefs about the stability and legitimacy of intergroup status differences, the permeability of intergroup boundaries and prospect of successful individual mobility, and the existence of creative and indirect, or more directly confrontational, paths to change or status quo maintenance (see Ellemers, 1993).

Underlying the nature of intergroup relations is a general principle—groups typically react protectively if they feel their cherished and distinctive social identity's existence is being threatened. One consequence of this is that although attempts to encourage different groups to view

themselves as having an overarching common ingroup identity can sometimes help improve relations (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), this can often backfire—it can be seen as a contrived attempt to paper over real differences and dissolve meaningful subgroup identities.

What seems to work better is to sustain or even celebrate group distinctiveness, while simultaneously drawing attention to other nonidentity-threatening shared attributes or category memberships (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007) and encouraging greater positive contact between groups (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014). Overall, a carefully managed strategy of “cultural” pluralism within an overarching entity can be very effective in managing relations between distinct subgroups (Hogg, 2015; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Verkuyten, 2006).

Collective Behavior and Social Protest

An important feature of social identity theory, particularly its more general theory of the group, self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987), was Reicher's (e.g., 2001) reconceptualization of collective behavior. Accepted wisdom about collective behavior, particularly crowd behavior, was that people in crowds were deindividuated—a state of diminished personal responsibility associated with regression to a primitive state that released impulsive instincts and generated antisocial behavior.

Reicher argued, to the contrary, that crowd events are regulated by the social identity represented by those present at the event—people identify strongly with the identity and conform, through self-categorization, to its situationally nuanced prototype (Reicher, 2001). This idea was developed into a social identity model of deindividuation phenomena (SIDE; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), which also maintained that most crowd events are actually an instance of strategic collective action in the service of social protest to create social change (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; see also Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Reicher & Stott, 2011).

The social protest aspect of SIDE has been extended and elaborated to underpin contemporary social-identity-based analyses of social protest and collective action (e.g., Stürmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). One obstacle to social protest is that individual costs (e.g., time, money, injury, arrest) are often involved in participating in a protest, so sympathizers typically let others bear the costs and do the protesting while they, so to speak, stand on the sidelines and benefit from the outcomes (see discussion of social dilemmas in what follows). The social identity analysis argues that strong identification with a cause whose norms prescribe social protest overcomes this attitude–behavior disjunction and translates sympathetic attitudes into identity-promotive collective action. Recent work has returned to the central role of social change beliefs (a core concept in social identity theory) as a crucial mediator between collective identity and relative deprivation on the one hand and collective action and protest on the other (e.g., Abrams & Grant, 2012).

Resolving Social Dilemmas

Social dilemmas are crises of trust that lie at the core of many of the world's most pressing problems. People are unprepared to commit resources to or preserve resources for a collective because they do not trust others to do likewise and do not want to be taken advantage of and made to appear to be a “sucker” (van Lange, Balliet, Parks, & van Vugt, 2014).

The promise of shared social identity in helping overcome distrust and resolve social dilemmas was recognized quite early by Brewer and Kramer (1986; Brewer & Schneider, 1990; Kramer & Brewer, 1984, 1986). When people categorize themselves as sharing a salient social identity, their goals are transformed from self-serving to group serving (De Cremer & van Vugt, 1999). This builds trust based upon mutual knowledge of shared group membership (Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009; van Vugt & Hart, 2004) and people cooperate with each other and are prepared as individuals to engage in behavior that benefits the group rather than self.

This shared social identity-based transformation of motives and behavior does not necessarily happen spontaneously. It often needs to be inspired by and orchestrated through effective leadership (De Cremer & van Vugt, 2002; van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999).

Future Prospects

By the mid-1990s, when the idea of *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* was being germinated, social identity theory was already well-established and attracting growing attention around the world and outside its home turf of the social psychology of intergroup relations. The past 20 years have witnessed exponential growth and an array of very significant applications, extensions, and conceptual developments; positioning social identity theory as perhaps the preeminent social psychological framework for understanding the human group and the behavior of people as group members.

In this short article we have documented, under eight headings, some of those developments we consider most significant. The question now is: What might we witness over the next 20 years? It would of course be rash to try to answer this too specifically. However, it is possible to speculate about some general directions. Developments in social identity theory have addressed internal scientific agenda, and will continue to do so, but they have also been driven by wider sociopolitical trends in the world in which we as scientists live.

One obvious trend is the virtually global obesity crisis as a reflection of unhealthy lifestyles related to lack of physical exercise and sugar-heavy diets—both related to social identity processes (Jetten et al., 2012). Another obvious trend is the domination of computer-mediated communication and the Internet over our lives—social media, virtual meetings, Internet-sourced information, and so forth. How are social identities constructed and sustained, and how do social identity processes of influence work in this brave new e-world (see Spears, Lea, Postmes, & Wolbert, 2011)?

Associated with global Internet-mediated accessibility of social comparative information is

heightened awareness of group- and identity-based social and economic inequality within and between countries and areas of the world. This is at least partially responsible for unprecedented levels of population movement, and an associated “refugee crisis” that can only be expected to increase and can generate extreme ethnocentrism and intergroup animosity. How does immigration affect, and how is it affected by, social identity processes (see Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001)?

The problem of immigration, whether sponsored by economic concerns, conflict, or effects of climate change, is often ultimately one of perceived identity and cultural threat. This suggests that another future growth area for social identity research is the study of culture and cultural difference as they relate to social identity (see Brewer & Chen, 2007; Feitosa, Salas, & Salazar, 2012), and closely related to this the role of language and intergroup communication (see Giles & Maass, 2016).

Contemporary societal extremism is a blight on humanity that seems to show little sign of abating. Social identity processes may play a fundamental role that needs to be further explored—with perhaps a focus on motivations, dynamics of radicalization, and dynamics of identity contingent morality (see Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013; Hogg, 2014; van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2016). Associated with extremism is populism, which has recently taken the Western world by storm—and has not yet been systematically studied from a social identity perspective.

One final, more specific direction that relates to many of those suggested before, is continued research on how ethnocentrism and outgroup hostility can be reduced by changing people’s understanding of who is “us”—creating more inclusive groups with less salient boundaries between “us” and “not-us.” This would build on at least **three things we already know**: intergroup contact not only reduces negative affect toward outgroups but reduces the salience of ingroup–outgroup distinctions through a process of “deprovincialization” (Pettigrew, 1997); recategorization or cross-categorization redefines



group boundaries to create more inclusive ingroups; and complex or multiple social identities weaken ingroup–outgroup distinctions and create shared identity at a broad level of inclusiveness (Brewer, 2010).

In addition, the growing complexity of intergroup connections and conflicts has spurred research on the social-developmental aspects of social identity theory (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Nesdale & Flessler, 2001; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). This research asks how children and adolescents make sense of complex intergroup relationships, and how interventions based on self-categorization and social identity can help to build rather than inhibit social inclusion across group boundaries (Abrams & Killen, 2014; Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011).

At an intriguing extreme, these ideas suggest that creating conditions that elicit identification with the global community has the potential for extending ingroup-based trust and sympathy to all humanity (McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012). Like other superordinate identities, global identity does not inevitably sacrifice more local, distinct social identities, but can recognize that the self and others can be categorized in terms of multiple shared identities, including common humanity (Albarello & Rubini, 2012). In times of consequential decision making this would harness the potential for ingroup love in the service of collective welfare in the broadest possible terms.

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