



SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AS AN EXPLANATION OF PREJUDICE

How Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1970) tries to explain causes of prejudice and discrimination

PREJUDICE

The word **prejudice** derives from 'pre' meaning 'before' and 'judice' meaning 'justice'. The idea of prejudice refers to the judgements made by other people based on their membership to a particular group, rather than their individual nature. **Discrimination** refers to treating others differently according to their group membership due to prejudice.

Prejudice consists of three elements:

1

- The **cognitive element** involved the beliefs held about a certain group
- These beliefs come in the form of **stereotypes**, common but over-simple views of what a particular group of people are like
- Such views may come from something heard or read, rather than first-hand experience

2

- The **affective element** involves the feelings experienced in response to another group
- Stereotyping leads us to develop a **prejudice** (a particular attitude towards the group)
- If we are prejudiced against a group, we may experience anger, fear, hate or disgust when we encounter a member belonging to that group

3

- The **behavioural element** consists of our actions towards the object of prejudice
- Behaving differently towards people based on their membership to a group is **discrimination**
- Our actions towards members of a group against which we hold prejudice can range from avoidance and verbal criticism to mass extermination

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory is one of a number of theories that suggest prejudice can be explained by our tendency to see ourselves as part of a group. We therefore view others as either part or not part of the same group as us. Thus people are judged as being "us" and "them". It is seen as part of human nature to view oneself as part of one or more groups, there are our **in-groups** – this leads us to discriminate against **out-groups** for no logical reason, i.e. there does not have to be any conflict or competition for ill feelings to develop.

Tajfel et al. (1970, 1971) conducted a series of lab experiments called the **minimal group studies** which led **Tajfel and Turner** (1979) to propose that there are three cognitive processes in deciding whether someone is part of the in-group or out-group, leading to the development of prejudice:

- ❖ **Social categorisation** – the process of deciding which group you belong to: you see yourself as part of that group, where any group will do and you see no need for conflict between yours and other groups
- ❖ **Social identification** – identifying yourself with the in-group more overtly, this is when you begin to take on the norms and attitudes of other group members within of the group
- ❖ **Social comparison** – one's self-concept becomes wrapped up with the in-group that self-esteem is enhanced by the perception that the in-group is better than the out-group

For more information on Tajfel's minimal group studies, see [1.9 Tajfel et al. \(1970, 1971\)](#)

According to social identity theory, there are three variables contributing to in-group favouritism:

- 1 the extent to which individuals identify with the in-group
- 2 the extent to which there are grounds for making comparison with the out-group
- 3 the relevance of the comparison group in relation to the in-group

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The ideas of in-group favouritism and out-group prejudices have been confirmed in a number of studies...

- **Tajfel et al. (1970, 1971)** conducted the minimal group studies in which boys of the ages of 14 and 15 were split into groups and had the chance to reward each other by giving them money, or punish them by taking money away from them, even though they didn't win or lose anything themselves in making the decision, in-group favouritism soon became apparent as the boys gave more to their own group members and punished others
- **Lalonde (1992)** studied a hockey team with poor performance and asked them about it, and the players claimed that it was down to other teams using "dirtier" tactics – however, Lalonde observed several of the team's matches and concluded that the opponents' teams were not using "dirtier" tactics, and so he had come across in-group bias from the poor team
- **Reicher and Haslam (2006)** conducted their own variation and improvement on the famous Stanford prison experiment in which the prisoners had a chance to be promoted to guards, and guards were the superior figures in the study – the guards showed a lot more closeness and definitely had in-group favouritism

EVALUATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AS AN EXPLANATION OF PREJUDICE

Strengths

A range of studies have shown support of the idea that people are willing to see their group as better in some way than other groups (as shown in the above examples). Tajfel, for example, replicated his experiment with a variation to prove that his findings were reliable. There is also a practical application, in that the theory helps to explain a wide range of social phenomena.

Weaknesses

Social identity theory doesn't take into account other factors which might be influencing behaviour, for example Dobbs and Crano (2001) have shown that under some circumstances there is much less in-group favouritism than suggested by Tajfel. The theory also doesn't explain why there are individual differences in the level of prejudices shown. There are also other possible explanations of prejudice which might offer a fuller account of prejudice, for example the **realistic conflict theory** which sees social identity theory as only part of the explanation. It suggests that it is not just the creation of two groups that leads to prejudice, but that they need to have a goal in sight for conflict/prejudice to develop.