Social Identity and Social Conflict:
Recent developments in the social psychology of intergroup behaviour

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Now and again psychologists stumble across the completely unexpected. Some fact that should not be there upsets familiar theories and provokes a train of new ideas. These ideas, in turn, sometimes make sense of data previously forgotten or repressed as unreasonably awkward. This in a nutshell is the recent history of the experimental social psychology of intergroup behaviour.

Our familiar notions were familiar enough to common sense as well as to social psychologists. Some of us at least were never convinced that social conflict merely reflected pent-up frustrations, aggressive impulses, fear of the different, sick personalities and so on. The idea, too, that violence and aggression represented some kind of beneficial catharsis was never very appealing. We held dogmatically to the prejudice that human conduct is relatively rational.

The reasons for intergroup conflict - Freedom, Security, Equality, Privilege, Control of Society etc. - were not well-kept secrets. They expressed, directly or indirectly, the economic and political interests of social groups. Our (theoretically) comfortable opinion was that competition (leading to conflict) or cooperation between national, class or other groupings represented rational strategies for the pursuit of their clashing or complementary goals. Thus Labour and Capital constantly skirmish on the industrial battlefield because wages and profits are inversely related, whilst the Labour and Liberal Parties can form a temporary(?) alliance because they depend on each other for parliamentary survival.

What we ignored or discounted were those intergroup relations which directly refuted this realistic-conflict theory. American Blacks, for example, unable to fulfill the most elementary social and economic aspirations, steadfastly refused until recently to adopt an aggressive, ethnocentric stance towards their oppressors. Instead they
displayed positive attitudes towards and tendencies to identify with the salient out-group, American Whites.\(^{(1)}\) The same has been true of other subordinate groups, such as French Canadians, New Zealand Maoris, South African Bantu, Mexican Americans etc.

In the British context there were instances of sectional disputes and rivalries between workers in the same industry and Trades Union movement, a movement explicitly committed to principles of unity and solidarity against the common enemy. This was illustrative of the whole "Local Derby" syndrome, in which, far from showing hatred of the strange and different, social groups seemed to reject the similar and close. Examples abound: the traditional rivalry between the branches of the armed forces, neighbouring football teams, related departments or professions in government and private institutions, and even the phoney war between the (for most of us) almost indistinguishable Punks and Rockers.

In other words, groups were cooperating when they should have been antagonistic and competing when often they had everything to gain from collaboration.

There perhaps things would have remained but for the results of laboratory research which we, as experimentalists, could not ignore. A series of studies initiated by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues\(^{(2)}\) at Bristol University demonstrated particularly vividly that absurdly unimportant and artificial groups, created under sterile and socially vacuous laboratory conditions, were discriminating against each other for no obvious reason. Apparently one could not make a group sufficiently meaningless (or "minimal" in experimental language) for ethnocentrism to disappear.

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\(^{(1)}\) Studies (5) and (6) - see references - reported in this article were conducted as part of the S.S.R.C. Research Programme into Intergroup Relations at Bristol University, set up under the direction of Henri Tajfel.
Imagine the situation: a subject is told that he is taking part in an investigation into decision-making. Initially, for ostensibly administrative reasons, the experimenter assigns the subject to either the X Group or the Y Group. He does this by tossing a coin — so nothing but chance binds these groups together and they have no other meaning, purpose or distinction. The subject does not know who else is in his group, nor who is in the other group; neither does he expect to meet, talk or do anything in these groups. All the subject has to do is to award sums of money to anonymous members of his ingroup and the outgroup. He cannot give money to himself, he does not benefit from money given to the others; he will receive only the money given to him individually (and anonymously) by others in their decisions. How the subject distributes the money is entirely his own affair — the experimenter is only interested in how he makes decisions.

The sensible thing to do, if there is one, is to give as much of the experimenter’s money away as possible and hope that everybody else does the same. What the subjects do instead is to give more money to ingroup than outgroup members. Moreover, they are very competitive, giving smaller absolute sums to an ingroup member if this ensures a bigger, favourable difference between him and an outgroup member. The mere perception of belonging to one group rather than another seems to cause competitive behaviour.

This fact should very definitely not be there since the experimental situation was deliberately designed to exclude all the conventional causes of intergroup discrimination. Yet it has now been replicated on subjects of varying ages in several different countries. "Social identity theory" is the attempt made at Bristol, initiated by Henri Tajfel, to make sense of these findings. Our initial assumption, based on much evidence, is that people strive for a positive image of themselves. An important means of accomplishing this is through defining ourselves as members of social categories such as, for instance, Englishmen, males, workers, Manchester United supporters and so on. These categories influence how we feel about ourselves: categories with high prestige (in the eyes of the beholder) such as,
perhaps, White, Male, or Democrat increase self-esteem, whereas those with low prestige such as Immigrant, Female, or Unemployed lower self-esteem. Since we cannot measure the prestige of a social category against some physical, non-social criterion, we must compare one category with another in terms of various socially valued characteristics, such as income, political influence, education, abilities and even skin colour to evaluate its relative worth. Our social identity is positive to the degree that the groups to which we belong compare favourably with relevant other groups on important attributes. In other words, we must establish favourable differences between our own and other groups in order to see ourselves positively.

We think that the bias in favour of the ingroup demonstrated in the Bristol studies is just such an attempt to obtain positively valued distinctiveness (P V D) for one's own group.

Some Bristol schoolchildren provided us with the clearest illustration we have to date that P V D and realistic conflict are distinct phenomena. The children (aged 14 - 16) believed that they had been assigned to four separate groups. Half were in the Triangle or Circle group (supposedly because they preferred different shapes in their liking for abstract paintings) and half were in the Dichromatic or Polychromatic Group (according to their preferences for paintings with few or many colours). It was explained that we wanted to compare the artistic abilities of the two groups within each Shape or Colour type, but that no comparisons between Shape and Colour groups were possible.

Before anything actually happened, however, the children decided individually and anonymously how much money each group should receive for taking part in the study. Each child would receive as his or her fee an equal share of all the money awarded to their own group. They made a series of choices about the monies for the Triangle and Circle groups considered together and the Triangle and Dichromatic groups. Since group membership was anonymous, the children did not realize that they had all been assigned to the Triangle group.
The results were striking. All the children had to do to maximize their personal gain was to give as much money as possible to the Triangle group. This was an influential strategy in their choices, but just as important was the desire to increase the favourable differences between ingroup and outgroup outcomes even where this meant that they were deliberately giving less money to themselves than they actually could. The children directly sacrificed their economic self-interest to achieve P V D from relatively insignificant outgroups.

They also tended to be less fair and more discriminating towards the more similar Circle group than the less similar Dichromatic group. As social identity theory predicted, Triangle group members were more concerned to differentiate the ingroup from the more than less comparable outgroup. Here, then, we have the Local Derby syndrome in miniature: groups discriminate against each other, not because they are different but, in reality, because they are too similar.

If social groups will sacrifice their overt interests to achieve P V D, then we have a part-answer as to why they often compete despite compatible goals. Clearly, the obverse may also be true. Perhaps subordinate groups such as American Blacks have not shown much ethnocentrism because they have not made subordinate - dominant group comparisons, despite conflicting interests. Hostility may fail to develop because a lack of intergroup comparisons delays the recognition of an inequitable distribution of resources. Our guess is that the conventional prestige distinctions propagated within class or caste societies impede comparisons across status boundaries and defuse antagonism arising from the objective social structure.

More specifically, the hypothesis we tested in a further laboratory study (6) was that status (prestige) differences between social groups perceived as secure (stable and legitimate) prevent intergroup comparisons and so reduce competitiveness.

As status differences become insecure (unstable and illegitimate) intergroup comparisons are encouraged and so competitive biases develop. Status differences are stable and legitimate when perceived as both unchangeable and fair and just.
We recruited male undergraduates to work in three-person discussion groups. Each group worked alone to produce a report on the ethics of suicide, which it then compared with the report of another, different, status group on very ambiguous criteria such as the "pure reasoning ability displayed". We wanted to see how far each group tended, unjustifiably, to assert the superiority of its own report over the other.

To simulate types of status hierarchy, we varied the initial instructions to the groups. Some expected to do better on the task than the other group, some worse (High vs Low status); some believed that this anticipated difference in performance was almost a foregone conclusion (stable), some that it was potentially reversible (unstable); similarly, half the groups saw the stable or unstable difference as legitimate and half as illegitimate. The instructions were carefully designed to make these differential perceptions of the situation convincing and important to the students and various checks were carried out to ensure that we had been successful in this respect.

The results (see figure 1) showed that neither high nor low status groups over-valued their reports when the status difference between them was stable and legitimate. Low status subjects display more bias in favour of the ingroup, the more insecure their inferiority is. High status subjects, too, are more biased with increasing insecurity except when an illegitimate superiority is also unstable, at which point their ethnocentrism decreases. Subjects are unwilling to stress an unfair superiority which they are not even sure of being able to keep: rather, as other data show, they prefer to redefine the value of various intellectual skills so that they can see themselves as superior on attributes not measured by the task. The basic status hierarchy we aimed to establish is expressed in the higher, overall ingroup favouritism of the high status groups.

The clear inference is that a subjective stratification of groups into low and high positions does not directly create competitive attitudes towards the outgroup. Indeed, it can have the very opposite effect, especially, paradoxically enough, on the subordinate group members. Mutual ethnocentrism develops as the
inferior position becomes insecure and the high status group perceives a threat to what it regards as a legitimate superiority or contrives to believe that an unjust superiority cannot, nevertheless, be changed.

This is consistent with evidence that widespread beliefs in the feasibility of social change and the illegitimacy of the status quo have influenced the emergence of positive self-images and new militancy amongst groups, such as American Blacks, French Canadians and New Zealand Maoris which previously showed signs of "self-hate". The current example of probably the most usual scenario is South Africa. In response to a challenge from Blacks whose illegitimate inferiority has begun to seem highly unstable (in the light of political changes in neighbouring countries), the ideologically committed section of the dominant group (perceiving its position as legitimate but unstable) discriminates more viciously, whereas the liberal wing (an unstable and illegitimate position) advocates the abandonment of domination more urgently.

Despite, however, the ease with which these data lead one to speculate, we would not wish to extrapolate directly from one experiment to real-life social conflict. The primary, initial intention was to clarify important causal processes under rigorously controlled conditions - the extent to which these processes are operative or yield similar outcomes in the real world must be determined by empirical research in the field. A first step in this direction has been taken by Rupert Brown in investigating intergroup relations in an aerospace factory (7).

Brown interviewed shop stewards representing three groups of skilled workers, the Toolroom (T), Development (D), and Production (P). Historically, T, D and P have been high, intermediate and low status groups respectively, as measured by wage rates and differential levels of skill. These status differences are now extremely unstable: relative wages positions have fluctuated widely in recent years and there is no longer a firm consensus as to the relative skill of each group. At the time of the study (1976) T received only 60p per week more than D, who received a nominal 20p more than P.

If perceive this instability to threaten their legitimate superiority, D perceive their inferiority to T as unjust and their superiority to P as legitimate but in danger,
whilst P, on the other hand, see their inferiority to T and approximate parity with D (the status quo) as fair and proper.

Brown asked the stewards individually to select the wage structure they preferred from a range of realistic alternatives involving different wage relationships between the factory groups. He found, as predicted, that the more insecure was a group's status the more preoccupied were its representatives with increasing differentials as against absolute pay. Toolroom stewards were most concerned with differentials: where they could choose between maximizing absolute pay or their differential, they invariably sacrificed as much as £2.00 per week to maintain a favourable difference over D and P. Development stewards showed some interest in absolute pay but were still willing to take less money to increase their lead over P. Production, on the other hand, tended to opt for parity with D or were even ready to take less than D to increase their absolute pay. In other words, competitiveness towards other groups is not a function being at the bottom of the pile (or, we would argue, at the top) but depends on the degree to which an insecure position encourages comparison with these groups.

In this factory intergroup comparisons had led to divisive rivalries. For example, the stewards were asked how they would react if management declared a 10% factory-wide redundancy. Since all sections were affected and every active Trades Unionist knows that unity is strength, the question invited a collaborative response. Yet a mere 20% of stewards spontaneously advocated getting all sections together - most seemed concerned only to resist redundancies in their own group. One steward pointed out the likely consequences of such disunity: ..."at the moment, I've got to admit it's "us and them" (i.e. Development and Production!) ... if we then tried to do it in our separate areas; Christ! We'd be lost ... you'd have not only men fighting the firm for a job, you'd have men fighting men for a job ...".

The stewards were aware as workers and Trades Unionists that they shared superordinate, cooperative goals and that their disunity worked against them. That it persisted, nevertheless, argues that the search for PVD is not found only in the rarified atmosphere of the laboratory. It also illustrates the Local Derby syndrome at its most vivid: social groups with similar values, common goals, in close physical proximity
still find cause to dislike each other.

Our explanation for both this and the other puzzle for realistic-conflict theory mentioned at the outset should now be clear: social conditions facilitating or impeding intergroup comparisons in terms of valued attributes of one's social identity determine whether intergroup relations will be harmonious with the objectively given structure of political and economic interests. Under certain circumstances, similarities between groups enhance comparison processes and so the competition for PVD. Less obviously, we suspect that the very pursuit of collaborative goals can make similarities in values and attributes more apparent and so can sometimes create a force for competition in the midst of and as a direct by-product of the cooperative enterprise.

Likewise, political discrimination against and economic deprivation of a subordinate group may paradoxically eliminate rather than intensify its ethnocentrism, through restricting the range of meaningful comparisons it can make. This picture will change as "cognitive alternatives" to the status quo emerge which make status differences focal points for intergroup comparison instead of darkened windows shutting them off.

Our conclusion is not that PVD is another "bête noire" for intergroup relations, having only detrimental consequences. We do not believe, for instance, that wage differentials are necessarily unhealthy or divisive for Trades Unionism. The problem is often not so much PVD as the lack of it. Our research indicates that evaluative differences between social groups are perfectly compatible with cooperative relations, providing that a secure consensus exists as to the positively valued difference of one group from another. In general, such a consensus probably demands complementary differences which contribute to the achievement of superordinate goals or at least do not hinder movement towards separate goals. In this sense, PVD is no magic, psychological formula for smoothing over and blurring objective conflicts of interest and neither would we want it to be: peace is sometimes as problematic and spurious as social conflict.
Competitive or collaborative goals are neither necessary nor sufficient for competitive or cooperative intergroup behaviour, but in the long term they are likely to be decisive.

The social comparison process explains why that term is often longer than perhaps it ought to be. Our social-psychological advice (not political, historical, or economic) to those who feel themselves to be victims of detrimental intergroup relations can only be to work for a redefinition of their group's self-image so as to put its realistic interests and the social values which further them at the core of its social identity. Whether this will lead to peace or war is another matter.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: Status differences and the search for PVD

Favouritism towards the Ingroup

\[ \begin{align*} &+3 \\ &+2 \\ &+1 \\ &0 \\ &-1 \\ &-2 \\ &-3 \end{align*} \]

\text{IN} \text{GROUP} \text{ BIAS}

Stable Unstable Stable Unstable

\text{Legitimate Legitimate Illegitimate Illegitimate}

\begin{align*} &\times \quad \times \quad \text{High Status groups} \\ &\circ \quad \circ \quad \text{Low Status groups} \end{align*}

Favouritism towards the Outgroup

Increasing insecurity of status differences between the groups