Social Identity Theory: Overview

Tajfel and Turner (1979): how group memberships shape the self

The Core Idea

Part of your self-concept comes from the groups you belong to, and people are motivated to see those groups as positively distinct from other groups.

Four Building Blocks

1. Social Categorization

Sorting people, yourself included, into groups. It exaggerates differences between groups and shrinks differences within them.

2. Social Identification

Taking on the group's identity, values and norms as part of how you see yourself.

3. Social Comparison

Comparing your group with other groups, with the aim of a favorable result.

4. Positive Distinctiveness

The drive for your group to be not only good, but better than the groups it is compared with.

Responses to Low Group Status

Individual Mobility

Leave or distance yourself from the group when boundaries are permeable.

Social Creativity

Change the comparison when the hierarchy feels stable and legitimate.

Social Competition

Challenge the higher-status group when the gap feels unstable or unfair.

Key Evidence

In the minimal group paradigm, boys assigned to groups by trivial labels favored their own group, and many accepted less for it as long as the gap between groups was bigger (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Interpersonal to Intergroup

On this continuum, the theory applies most as behavior moves toward the intergroup end.

Self-Esteem Hypothesis

A common exam answer, but research support is mixed.

Which Year to Cite

1979 is the original chapter; 1986 is the revised version.

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