

Social Identity Theory

A Lifespan Framework for Understanding How Group Membership Shapes Identity and Behavior

● Core Theory Principles

- Developed by Henri Tajfel & John Turner at the University of Bristol; formally published 1979
- Group Membership: A significant portion of self-concept is derived from the social groups we belong to
- Positive Distinctiveness: People are motivated to see their own group as favorably different from others
- Self-Esteem Hypothesis: Group status and prestige directly affect personal self-worth

The Three Core Processes

Process 1

Social Categorization

Keyword: SIMPLIFICATION

Automatically sorting people and yourself into social groups. Accentuates group differences and minimizes individuality.

Process 2

Social Identification

Keyword: INTERNALIZATION

Internalizing group norms and values as your own. The group's traits become part of your self-concept and identity.

Process 3

Social Comparison

Keyword: DISTINCTIVENESS

Evaluating your group favorably against others. Drives the push for positive distinctiveness and in-group boosting behavior.

Key Biases & Outcomes

● In-Group Favoritism

Trusting and favoring own group members in trust, attribution, and cooperative behavior.

● Out-Group Homogeneity

Out-group members seen as uniform; in-group perceived as diverse and varied.

● Group-Switching

Leaving a low-status group to protect self-image when group status feels threatened.

● Self-Esteem Link

Group prestige and status directly affect personal self-worth and confidence.

Dynamic Identity

Social and personal identity coexist. People shift between individual and group-based thinking by context.

Social & Cultural Context

Identity is shaped by culture, history, and social structure — not just individual psychology. Collectivist cultures may differ from Western models.

Balance of Evidence

Even trivial labels generate bias. Real-world conflicts involve history, power, and genuine grievances.

Key Contribution: Tajfel & Turner showed that group membership is not merely social — it is deeply psychological, shaping identity, self-esteem, and behavior in ways that help explain prejudice, tribalism, and belonging.