

# Key Theory Description:

## Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory

### Background Information

Henri Tajfel and John Turner devised their *Social Identity Theory (SIT)* in the 1970s to “supplement” Sherif’s *Realistic Conflict Theory*<sup>1</sup> (*RCT*), which was developed in the 1950s and ‘60s. Both of these theories attempt to explain **intergroup behaviour**, and in particular **conflict** between groups. Intergroup behaviour is between two or more individuals and their “...interactions...are fully determined by their respective memberships in various social groups...”<sup>2</sup> This is opposed to **interpersonal behaviour**, whereby one’s interactions with others are determined by personal traits and qualities.

#### Related Topics:

- Origins of violence
- Reducing violence
- Stereotypes

To use an extreme example of intergroup *conflict*, during the holocaust a Nazi officer might have behaved horrendously towards a Jewish person, not because of who that Jewish person was, but simply because they were Jewish (i.e. they belonged to the “out-group”).

One of the main claims of Sherif’s *RCT* is that conflict between groups exists when there is *direct* competition for resources. *SIT* does not contradict this, but goes further to explain how conflict can exist even when there is no direct competition for resources. Through the four interrelated concepts of **social categorization**, **social identity**, **social comparison and positive distinctiveness**, *SIT* attempts to explain why intergroup conflicts can exist even in circumstances with no direct conflict and/or competition between groups.

### Social Categorization

Social Categorization is merely the cognitive process of thinking of groups as in-groups or out-groups. The result of social categorization is three-fold:

- The in-group appears more similar to one-another (“*we’re all the same*”)
- The out-group appears more similar to one-another (“*they’re all the same*”)
- Both groups appear more different from one another (“*we’re completely different to each other*”)

This phenomenon is known as the **category accentuation effect**.<sup>3</sup>

### Social Identity

According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity means “aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which (they) perceive (themselves) as belonging”. In other words, each of us belongs to numerous groups (e.g. social, family, sport, musical, religious, etc.) Our membership in each of these *groups* adds to our understanding of who we are as *individuals*. We form a **personal identity** based on our individual goals, achievements, etc. and we form a **social identity** based on the goals, achievements of groups we belong to. This sense of developing our sense of self<sup>4</sup> through belonging to groups is important to understand and explain *SIT*.

### Social Comparison

Initial research conducted by Tajfel and Turner revealed that the mere presence of an “out-group” can significantly influence the behaviour of individuals within their “in-group”. Social comparison is basically the process of comparing one’s “in-group” with other “out-groups”. *SIT* posits that this occurs through a desire to increase one’s self-esteem. As stated above, part of forming our sense of self, or our “identity” comes through the belonging to particular groups. It is only natural that humans want to improve their self-esteem and so this can happen when we compare our “in-group” favourably to the “out-group”. As a result, “in-group” bias naturally occurs. Moreover, it occurs even when groups have been formed in unnatural settings using arbitrary criteria.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If you haven’t already, you will learn about this during the “Human Relationships” option.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 1, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour”, Tajfel and Turner. Accessed from: web.mit.edu

<sup>3</sup> Pearson Textbook, p110-11

<sup>4</sup> Sense of self basically means our deeper understanding of who we are as people.

<sup>5</sup> This was discovered using the **minimal group paradigm** in experimental research.

Tajfel and Turner base the concepts of social comparison and social identity on three assumptions:

- i. Individual's naturally try to increase their self-esteem and want to develop positive self-images;
- ii. Belonging to particular groups can be viewed as a positive or a negative thing; this means belonging to a group can influence our social identity in either a positive or negative way;
- iii. We evaluate if it's positive or negative by comparing in-groups and out-groups;

Based on this, the theory goes further to posit that:

- i. "Individuals will strive to achieve or maintain their positive social identity,"  
*And...*
- ii. We can base our positive social identity by favorably comparing our in-group with out-groups.

This leads to the final aspect of SIT, which is...

## Positive Distinctiveness

Positive distinctiveness basically means that through the process of social comparison, we attempt to make our in-group distinct<sup>6</sup> from the out-groups. The in-group also attempts to make that difference favorable (i.e. positive) for the in-group. This is essentially in-group bias. Positive distinctiveness can be demonstrated in the minimal group experiments and even in real life examples from field research.

*For more  
information on SIT, see  
pp110-13 of the Pearson  
textbook.*

## Supporting Research

Originally, the researchers hypothesized that they would have to gradually increase the similarities between group members before they would observe in-group bias (e.g. positive distinctiveness). They were surprised to learn that even when groups were formed using complete arbitrary criteria, such as flipping a coin, they demonstrated in-group bias. Even when they were directly informed that the groups were meaningless, they still were biased to their in-group.<sup>7</sup> This initial discovery is what led to further development and elaboration of the SIT; they concluded that the mere existence of an out-group was enough for social comparison and in-group bias to occur.

The **minimal group paradigm**<sup>8</sup> is the typical design used in experiments that inspired and support SIT. The basic idea is that participants (adults and children have been used in studies) are randomly divided into groups. They are then asked to award rewards, prizes or even money to other participants in specially designed booklets<sup>9</sup>. The recipients are anonymous, except for a number and which group they are in (e.g. Member #28, Group X; Member #3, Group Y).

The findings, from numerous studies, show that the in-group will act favorably towards members of their own in-group. Moreover, they will even sacrifice rewards for themselves to increase the difference in rewards given between the in-group members and the out-group members.

## Critical Thinking Questions

- € How can SIT be used to explain intergroup conflict? (**Application**)
- € How can the minimal group experiments be used to support SIT? (**Application**)
- € How are the concepts of SIT interrelated? (**Analysis**)
- € What are the strengths and limitations of SIT? (**Evaluation**)

## References

Turner, John C. Tajfel, Henri. Chapter 1, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour". P7-24. Accessed from: [http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341\\_Readings/Intergroup\\_Conflict/Tajfel\\_&\\_Turner\\_Psych\\_of\\_Intergroup\\_Relations\\_CH1\\_Social\\_Identity\\_Theory.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Intergroup_Conflict/Tajfel_&_Turner_Psych_of_Intergroup_Relations_CH1_Social_Identity_Theory.pdf)

Law, Alan. Et al. *Psychology: Developed Specifically for the IB Diploma*. Pearson Publishing; 2010. pp.110-13

<sup>6</sup> Different; separate

<sup>7</sup> Pearson, p112

<sup>8</sup> Paradigm = pattern or model

<sup>9</sup> Again, see Pearson p112 for an example of the way they were asked to allocate rewards