



Encyclopedia of Social Psychology

Self-Categorization Theory

Contributors: John C. Turner

Edited by: Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Social Psychology

Chapter Title: "Self-Categorization Theory"

Pub. Date: 2007

Access Date: February 17, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412916707

Online ISBN: 9781412956253

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412956253.n474>

Print pages: 793-794

©2007 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Self-categorization theory addresses the problem of the psychological group. Are there such things as psychological groups? How do they form? How is a collection of individuals able to act, think, and feel as a group, collectively, as if, in the extreme, the group members shared a common mind? It is taken for granted that human beings are individual persons, that they have unique personalities and differ from other individuals, but it is also known that they belong to social groups and that these social groups can have a psychological reality for their members. People do not just describe others as belonging to groups, they describe themselves as groups (not as if they were groups, but as groups). They talk about “we” and “us” as well as “I” and “me”; they act under the right circumstances in a highly uniform, consensual, unified way as a crowd, a nation, an army, a mob, an audience, and so on; they experience collective emotions and feelings and share similar attitudes, beliefs, and values. Can people be or become a group, psychologically, subjectively, in terms of their identities, perceptions, feelings, beliefs, motives, and so on? Or is it just an illusion because people are really, fundamentally, nothing but individuals?

Self-categorization theory, in contrast to a popular point of view in North American social psychology, asserts that human beings are and are able to act as both individual persons and social groups. The theory assumes that a person might act as a unique personality in one context, but display collective similarities as a group member in another. Human beings are very good at varying the degree to which they act in terms of either individual differences or collective similarities, and the theory tries to explain how such flexibility is possible.

Self-categorization theory explains individuality and group behavior (and the relationship between them) in terms of the way that people define and perceive themselves. Like many other theories, it focuses on what is called the *self-concept*, the collection of identities, definitions, descriptions, categories, concepts, and so on, that people use to define and experience themselves, the self-categories that people use to answer the question, who am I? or who are we? Like other theories, the theory assumes that people define themselves differently in different situations and that the way they categorize themselves will influence how they will react to that situation. For example, you may react very differently to a news story about the criminal behavior of a young child if you think of yourself as a police officer rather than as a parent. Self-categorizing is simply the process whereby a person defines the self in terms of varying kinds of “I,” “me,” “we,” or “us” categories such as “the real me,” or “me as opposed to you,” or “we Australians compared with you Americans” or “us Earth people as opposed to you alien Martians.” Nearly all theories before self-categorization theory tended to assume that the self-concept was basically, primarily, or predominantly about defining the person as a *unique individual being*, that it revolved around ways of defining *I or me*. Self-categorization theory holds that people see themselves at different levels, of which the individual level is only one. In particular, it makes a distinction between personal and social identity.

Think of a “chair.” This is a category we might use to describe four-legged objects we sit on in contrast to a “table.” The same object could also be considered “furniture,” a category we might use to refer to both chairs and tables in contrast to, say, “objects not designed for human use.” It could also be called an “old chair” to distinguish it from a “new chair.” In these three cases the object is put into categories at a *lower (more specific), intermediate or higher (more inclusive) level* as we move from old chair to chair to furniture. With each step, it becomes similar to more objects, which were different from it at more specific levels. The process is just the same with the self the theory states. People can define themselves as “the me as I was in my youth” in contrast to “the me as I am today,” or “I the writer” in contrast to

“you the reader,” or “we English people” as opposed to “you continental Europeans,” or “we Europeans” in contrast to “you Americans,” right up to “we human beings” as opposed to other animals, and beyond. In principle, an endless number of levels of self-categorizing are possible, limited only by reality and one's imagination, and higher levels include more people (are more collective) than lower levels.

The theory describes the individual level (e.g., “I John Smith” as opposed to “you Jane Brown”) as one's personal identity and the various possible group levels (e.g., “we Europeans” versus “you Americans”) as social identity. Every person has many different actual and possible personal and social identities. The theory holds that the way that people define and see themselves in any particular situation moves up and down between these levels and between the different identities at each level and that this is completely normal. It also holds that as self-definition shifts from personal to social identity and people see themselves differently, then psychologically and behaviorally people change from being individuals to being group members, from making responses based on individual personality to making responses based on shared social identity and collective similarities.

In sum, people define themselves in terms of social identities as well as personal identities; under certain circumstances, social identities become more important or influential than personal identities in the perception of oneself, and behavior changes from individual to group as people act more in terms of social than personal identity. Much research has looked at how and when people define themselves in terms of personal or social identity, how and why this makes people's behavior and psychology more collective and less personal, and how these basic ideas can be used to explain the whole variety of phenomena related to group psychology.

Particular social identities become salient as a result of both psychological factors having to do with the perceiver such as his or her experience, habits, motives, beliefs and knowledge, and the nature of the social relationships perceived in a given social situation. One important finding is that people are much more likely to see themselves as individuals in settings where only people from their own group are present than where members of other groups are present. Social identity comes to the fore more in the presence of outgroup than ingroup members. For example, research shows that a woman who is asked to judge herself against other women will define herself in terms of her personal identity, how she differs from other women as an individual, but one asked to judge herself against other men is likely to emphasize her social identity and see herself as much more like other women and different from men. In the former situation, she may see herself and be faster to rate herself as more masculine (different from the typical woman) but in the latter she may see herself and be faster to rate herself as more feminine (similar to the typical woman and different from men). She can see herself as having completely opposite traits depending on whether her personal or social identity is salient. Another strongly supported finding consistent with this idea is that social identity tends to be especially strong and powerful in situations of social conflict between groups. Americans may see themselves as very individualistic, but if attacked as a group by an enemy, they may pull together behind their leaders and conform strongly to group attitudes in their reactions.

Why do people become more group-oriented when social identity is salient? One reason is that social identities tend to have the same meaning for people because they arise in the same culture and are used in the same situation. Australians asked to say what Australians are like, for example, will agree about a lot of things. Because social categories have similar meanings for the people who use them, people will see themselves as more similar and

actually become more similar when they define themselves in terms of the same group. If one asks a group of Australians to discuss their individual views about what Americans are like, one will find that they happily disagree on many points, but if one asks them to think about their views “as Australians,” one will now find a very high degree of uniformity in their views of Americans, just as one will in their views of Australians. Thus, a social identity that is shared by people makes people more similar in their self-described traits, goals, attitudes, beliefs, definition of the situation and behavior when it is made salient in a specific situation.  This leads their behavior to become more consensual and unitary; they act alike. It also leads them to expect to be similar and encourages them to influence each other to produce agreement even when it was not originally present.

Also, people who define each other in terms of the same social category share an inclusive self that shapes their self-interest and emotions. If the self becomes a “we” instead of an “I,” then people can cooperate and be altruistic because helping an ingroup member is helping oneself. Similarly, people can feel the experiences of others because what happens to others is also happening to themselves if they see themselves as members of the same inclusive self-category. If a police officer beats Rodney King, then any African American or any American who identifies with King can react as if he or she were the victim. He or she can feel empathy and sympathy. A person can have collective emotions that go beyond the experience of the individual person.

Research backs up the idea that people's self-perception, behavior, and psychology change qualitatively as psychological or situational factors make social identity more salient and personal identity less salient. Under these conditions, people see themselves as more similar to ingroup members (and different from outgroup members); they feel closer and more attracted to ingroup members; they are more influenced by ingroup members and agree with them more; they are more likely to cooperate and pursue joint interests, to obey and comply with ingroup members' authority; they feel ingroup members' emotions and are motivated by their needs and goals. Self-categorization theory explains how and why people are much more than merely unique persons, and why they are capable of a collective as well as an individual psychology, without any unscientific assumptions about a group mind.

John C. Turner

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412956253.n474>

See also

- [Collective Self](#)
- [Intergroup Relations](#)
- [Self](#)
- [Self-Concept](#)

Further Readings

Onorato, R. S., Turner, J. C. Fluidity in the self-concept: The shift from personal to social identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34:257–278(2004). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.195>

Turner, J. C. (1985). Social categorization and the self-concept: A social cognitive theory of group behaviour. In E. J. Lawler (Ed.), *Advances in Group Processes* (Vol. 2, pp. 77–122) Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Turner, J. C. Explaining the nature of power: A three-process theory. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35:1–22(2005). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.244>-->

Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., McGarty, C. A. Self and collective: Cognition and

social context. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 20:454–463(1994).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167294205002>