

PRIMER ON SOCIAL IDENTITY: UNDERSTANDING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

The way a person conceives of her or himself has a great deal to do with how that person operates in the world and, to the point of our exploration in this course, how that person manages relationships. Our understanding of ourselves is multifaceted, akin to the many faces of an exquisite diamond. Geert Hofstede, the cross-cultural organizational scholar, made sense of these many ways of seeing ourselves in a simple way. He proposed an “identity pyramid” like that depicted in Figure 1, in which multiple conceptions of ourselves are represented. Each of us has a similar makeup of identities. At the top of the pyramid is our sense of ourselves as unique individuals, made up of a variety of personal traits and experiences. At this level, we see ourselves as complex and special, and we resist any tendency to simplify, stereotype, or make generalizations about who we are. At the base of the pyramid, we see ourselves as part of the fabric of humanity, sharing a set of universal characteristics that define us as *homo sapiens*. For example, we all share a biological and genetic makeup that is remarkably common and we all share a range of emotions.

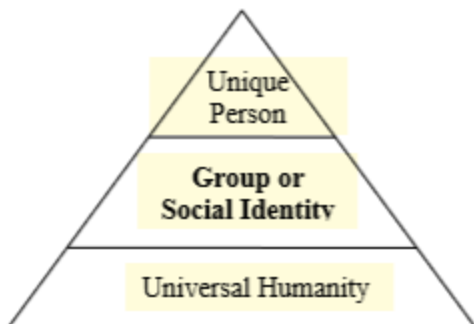


Figure 1

The midsection of the pyramid illustrates the part of our identity that is grounded in our group memberships. We all are part of particular groups that may be defined by such characteristics as gender, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, or race, to name only a few group categories. Although the nature of the group membership may make it more or less salient for us, we nonetheless possess these group memberships. In their collaboration, Henry Tajfel and John Turner articulated a theory that describes our experiences and behaviors as members of groups—Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Social Identity Theory

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort. This social classification serves two functions. First, it segments and orders the social environment, providing the person with a systematic way of defining others. A person is assigned the prototypical characteristics of the category to which he or she is classified. Granted, such assignments are not necessarily reliable—consider damaging and hurtful stereotypes—but we make them anyway as a method of understanding our social world.

The second function of social classification is to enable the individual to locate or define *him- or herself* in the social environment. SIT, like Hofstede, conceptualizes the self-concept as comprised of a *personal* identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., bodily attributes, abilities, psychological traits, interests) and a *social* identity encompassing salient group classifications. Social identification, therefore, is the perception of oneness with, or belongingness to, some human collective. For example, a woman may define herself in terms of the group(s) with which she classifies herself—I am Chinese; I am female; I am a member of the Darden graduating class. She perceives herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group(s), and she perceives the fate of the group(s) as her own. As such, social identification provides a partial answer to the question, “Who am I?”

Note that the definition of others and the self are largely “relational and comparative;” they define oneself relative to individuals in other categories. The category of *young* is meaningful only in relation to the category of *old*. It should be noted, however, that social identification is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Although many social categories are indeed categorical (e.g., Chinese, heterosexual, a member of XYZ Co.), the extent to which the individual identifies with each category is clearly a matter of degree. Further, such identities tend to be viewed positively inasmuch as the individual vests more of his or her sense of self in valued personas. Thus, people working at menial jobs in a bank often distance themselves from their implied identity (e.g., This is only a stopgap job; I’m having to save enough to start my own business).

Social identification appears to derive from the Tolman’s¹ venerable concept of *group identification*. Indeed, I will use social and group identification interchangeably. Writings about group identification suggest three principles that are relevant to *our* discussion. First, identification is viewed as a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states. To identify, an individual need not expend effort toward the group’s goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group. As noted below, this conceptualization distinguishes identification from related concepts such as effort on behalf of the group (behavior) and loyalty (affect).

Second, social/group identification is seen as personally experiencing the successes and failures of the group. Often, identification is maintained in situations involving great loss or suffering, missed potential benefits, task failure and even expected failure.

Finally, social identification is distinguishable from internalization. Whereas identification refers to self in terms of social categories ("I am an X"), internalization refers to the incorporation of values, attitudes, and so forth within the self as guiding principles ("I believe Y"). Although certain values and attitudes typically are associated with members of a given social category, acceptance of the category as a definition of self does not necessarily mean acceptance of those values and attitudes. An individual may define herself in terms of the organization she works for, yet she can disagree with the prevailing values, strategy, system of authority, and so on.