

# Self-Categorization Theory

AARON CASTELÁN CARGILE

California State University, Long Beach, USA

Before the development of social identity theory, social psychological explanations for behavior were largely individualistic in approach. Social behavior was understood as a function of intra-individual processes and other people were treated as any other environmental stimulus. Alternatively, an interactionist approach held that individual psychology emerged only in the context of group life. Humans are fundamentally social creatures; therefore individual minds must be treated as interdependent with society. Although this interactionist view was developed in other literatures (e.g., sociology) and had been adopted by some social psychologists (e.g., Lewin), it did not come to constitute a predominant metatheory until ascendance of the *social* identity. With this concept, social psychologists began to bridge the gap between individuals and collectives. In particular, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) addressed the connection between social selves and the treatment of social others, while self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) sought to explain how these social selves came to be identified in the first place.

At the heart of a social identity approach is the social identity construct itself, defined as “those aspects of a person’s self-concept based upon their group memberships” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). People thus see themselves in a multifaceted manner—in terms that are both idiosyncratic (i.e., a personal identity), as well as collectively shared (i.e., a social identity). Individual minds become interdependent when social identities are salient and, conversely, collective influence can be diminished when only personal identities are at stake. In this manner, people act as individuals or as group members and self-categorization theory endeavors to explain the circumstances that shift people along this continuum of identification, as well as some of the consequences of these shifts.

According to the theory, people shift their self-conception according to the salience of various (interpersonal, intergroup, or superordinate) categorizations. Salience, in turn, is determined by both the relative accessibility and fit of a given self-category. Accessibility refers to an individual’s readiness to use a self-category based on their personal habits, motivation, and values, whereas fit denotes the relationship between a given category and the presented situational circumstances. It is believed that people test a series of accessible self-categories in relation to the situation until an optimal fit is achieved—one that maximizes between-group differences and within-group similarities (i.e., the meta-contrast ratio). For example, an individual may see herself as a US American (and alternatively not as a unique person, African American, or human) when she perceives a shared similarity with fellow co-nationals and a diverging distance

*The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication.*

Young Yun Kim (General Editor), Kelly L. McKay-Semmler (Associate Editor).

© 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2017 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0173

from individuals of other nationalities (e.g., Germans) with respect to normative and socially meaningful attributes (e.g., formality). Once an individual self-categorizes in this manner then the process of depersonalization begins.

When people consider themselves to be in the same social group as some others, their attitudes and behaviors undergo realignment. Such a shift is described as depersonalization—the process of rendering oneself interchangeable with fellow ingroup members with respect to certain prototypical attributes. Crowd behavior, for example, can be understood in terms of depersonalization. The anonymity that people feel in a crowd typically encourages group self-categorization that, in turn, can lead to group normative behavior. Thus, many individuals who participated in a Black Lives Matter rally in the United States may have otherwise never confronted police or lain down in a public space, but they often did just that as part of such a crowd. It is because participants saw themselves as part of the group that they did what others in the group did. In this way, the process of depersonalization illustrates the social identity approach by specifying how individual minds can come to function collectively.

Because self-categorization theory employs such broad explanatory mechanisms, it has seen wide application across many fields including marketing, political science, sport psychology, religious studies, and criminology. However, one area with particular relevance to communication studies has received the bulk of scholarly attention—social influence. Although the theory was not originally oriented to questions of social influence, its explanation of both the circumstances and consequences of self-categorization has inadvertently led to a better understanding of social influence processes. Consequently, self-categorization theory has spawned a theoretical offshoot aimed at explaining social influence, namely referent informational influence theory.

On top of claims made by self-categorization theory, referent informational influence theory makes additional assertions about the relationship of self-categorization to social influence (see Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Traditional theories of influence contend that social groups sway individual members via pressure to comply or stated reasons to agree with the group's position. In either case, influence is seen as operating externally to the individual. In contrast, referent informational influence theory describes influence as an internal process by which an individual's own self-categorization engenders support for ingroup norms. In this view, intragroup communication is not a vehicle for managing compliance, but rather a medium for establishing and negotiating group norms—norms that are, in turn, used by members to guide their own attitudes and behaviors.

This claim that self-categorization engenders influence via internal, norm-based processes is supported by research on group polarization. In one such study, Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, and Turner (1990, exp. 3) pretested participant attitudes on a host of controversial topics and then engaged them in group discussion regarding five topics with the greatest measured difference of opinion. In the control condition, common group discussions allowed for shared group norms to emerge with respect to these topics. In the experimental condition, however, participants were placed into two subgroups and seated in an alternating arrangement (i.e., A, B, A, etc.). This subgroup categorization resulted in less attitude shifting and convergence among discussion group members compared to those who participated in the uncategorized, control group discussion. In addition to partially supporting

the group polarization hypothesis (i.e., intragroup communication shifts opinions in a direction away from a relevant outgroup), this finding also elucidates the role of self-categorization in this process. When self-categorization as a common group is undercut by self-categorization as a subgroup so too is the potential convergence of norms and opinions. Self-categorization, it seems, is key to unlocking the influence that social groups can have on individuals.

According to referent informational influence theory, self-categorization engenders not only support for ingroup norms, but also particular attention to group prototypes. When self-categorization occurs, members will look more often to those who embody the group prototype and shift their behavior in the direction of that prototype. Prototypicality is highlighted in a social identity approach because prototypes often maximize the meta-contrast ratio and positive distinctiveness between groups. This has informed a developing literature in communication studies that suggests the media's influence may be moderated by both self-categorization and prototypical representation.

In the United States, media depictions of ethnic and racial minority groups have long been a subject of interest. Employing a social identity approach, research has begun to study the impact of such depictions in relation to their prototypicality. Results suggest that the greater the match between a minority group depiction and dominant group prototypes, the more favorable the evaluation of the depicted character, other minority group members, and the greater the support for the group as a whole. For example, one study by Mastro and Kopacz (2006) found that as both African American and Latino representations in the media diverged from white norms, white audiences increasingly denigrated both groups and expressed less support for affirmative action policies. Ingroup prototypicality of outgroup members, it seems, may play a critical role in shaping the impact that increasingly diverse media representations have on an audience. In addition to prototypicality, media effects may also depend on self-categorization and source attribution. One study investigating the hostile media effect (i.e., perceiving nonaligned media reports to be biased against one's ingroup) found that such an effect can be mitigated by a salient shared identity and amplified by a partisan one (Reid, 2012). Moreover, an increased partisan identity was linked to a greater reliance on ingroup attributed information. Together, studies in this developing literature point to the importance of self-categorization processes in understanding media influence.

Just as self-categorization theory gave rise to referent informational influence theory to better explain social influence processes, it has also led to the development of uncertainty identity theory (Hogg, 2009) in order to better articulate the function that social identities play in relation to uncertainty reduction. Traditional accounts of both social identity and self-categorization theories emphasize that group membership is motivated by concerns of self-esteem: We identify with social groups both in circumstances and in ways that enhance our self-image. Uncertainty-identity theory argues that in addition to such esteem motivations, social group membership is also motivated by a need to know: We self-categorize because it is a powerful and effective way to reduce

our own uncertainty. Although communication researchers have yet to adopt this theory, the (intercultural) communication literature has long emphasized the importance of uncertainty reduction motivations.

How can uncertainty–identity theory improve understanding of intercultural communication? To begin, the theory’s emphasis on prototypicality in the uncertainty reduction process suggests that individuals will not ally themselves equally with all social groups or fellow ingroup members, but instead with those that provide clear norms and who behave most normatively. Some social groups operate as a loose confederation of individuals, whereas other groups are highly entitative (i.e., very “groupy,” with unambiguous standards and boundaries). Only entitative (and particularly extremist) groups provide the conditions necessary for reducing self-uncertainty, thus individuals may elevate those groups in terms of their salience and self-importance. Such variation in social group alignment will itself vary based on an individual’s dispositional and situational need for uncertainty reduction. Thus, although one’s national identity may be marked and highly salient to others, an individual’s need for uncertainty reduction may result in a near chronic self-identification with a highly entitative political group, for example, resulting in intergroup interactions that are frequently misattributed.

As just described, uncertainty–identity theory spotlights uncertainty reduction as a central component of people’s attraction to fundamentalist groups and the practice of boundary reinforcement. This explains why both dispositional and situational uncertainty have been found to increase both outgroup derogation and discrimination. Consequently, it may be the case that efforts to engender uncertainty tolerance can, in turn, also diminish intergroup antagonisms and improve intergroup communication. Such a hypothesis is illustrative of the interactionist approach realized by social identity theory. Individuals and social groups are inextricably connected, and thus scholars must attend to their dynamic and complex interrelationships. Self-categorization theory helps to guide this necessary consideration so that scholars can carefully study the consequential shifts from “me” to “we” and back again.

SEE ALSO: Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory; Identity and Intercultural Communication; Intergroup Anxiety; Intergroup Communication, Overview; Intergroup Media; Social Identity Theory; Uncertainty–Identity Theory

## References

---

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. (1990). Social identification, self-categorization and social influence. In W. Stroebe & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *European review of social psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 195–228). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Abrams, D., Wetherell, M., Cochrane, S., Hogg, M., & Turner, J. C. (1990). Knowing what to think by knowing who you are: Self-categorization and the nature of norm formation, conformity and group polarization. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 29(2), 97–119. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.1990.tb00892.x
- Hogg, M. A. (2009). Managing self-uncertainty through group identification. *Psychological Inquiry*, 20, 221–224. doi:10.1080/10478400903333452

- Mastro, D. E., & Kopacz, M. A. (2006). Media representations of race, prototypicality, and policy reasoning: An application of self-categorization theory. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(2), 305–322. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem5002\_8
- Reid, S. A. (2012). A self-categorization explanation for the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication*, 62(3), 381–399. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01647.x
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- 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* (pp. 77–122). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Turner, J. C., & Oakes, P. J. (1986). The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 25(3), 237–252. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00732.x

### Further readings

---

- Cargile, A. C., & Bolkan, S. (2013). Mitigating inter- and intra-group ethnocentrism: Comparing the effects of cultural knowledge, exposure, and uncertainty intolerance. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37, 345–353. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.12.002
- Hogg, M. A., & Reid, S. A. (2006). Social identity, self-categorization, and the communication of group norms. *Communication Theory*, 16, 7–30. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00003.x
- Johnson, M. A. (2010). Incorporating self-categorization concepts into ethnic media research. *Communication Theory*, 20, 106–125. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2009.01356.x

**Aaron Castelán Cargile** is a professor of communication studies at California State University, Long Beach, USA. His research examines the roles of language, dialogue, and self-uncertainty processes in intercultural interactions. His recent work in these areas has been published in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *Educational Forum*, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, and in *Race and Social Problems*.