Zayed University

ZU Scholars

3-1-2000

Social Identity: International Perspectives

James Piecowye
Zayed University

Follow this and additional works at: https://zuscholars.zu.ac.ae/works

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

Social Identity: International Perspectives

Stephen Worchel

J. Francisco Morales

Dario Páez

Jean-Claude Deschamps

This book revisits the well of academic interest in the issue of identity. Identity, and more specifically its formation, was recognized by Walter Lippmann in his seminal text, *Public Opinion*, published first in 1922, as something that was subject to modification. The issue that *Social Identity International Perspectives* is attempting to address is yet another elaboration of Lippmann, seeking to understand how people exist in diverse interrelational societies, where identical perspectives on identity are not being brought to the conceptual table of conventional thought. More precisely, what is very clear when the issue of identity is examined in this text, is that the meaning of anything can and does vary from individual to individual and from group to group. The issue we are confronted with, and which this book tries to shed light on, is interpretive variation and its impact on identity formation.

This book has been written from a socio-psychological perspective and is unfortunately biased towards an audience with a background in psychology. This book, if nothing else, can be seen as a vehicle through which the social identity theory of H. Tajfel and its reformulation by John Turner as self-categorization theory can be celebrated.

Social Identity International Perspectives, from a purely organizational perspective, is divided into four parts: part 1, "Representations of Self and Group"; part 2, "Establishment of Group Identity"; part 3, "Identity and Group/intergroup Process"; and part 4, "Impact of Culture on Identity and Categorization". While, as I have already suggested, this book might have more resonance with an audience whose primary concern is with psychology, this is not to suggest that there are no merits to be found in this book for a reader whose concerns might find their grounding in other disciplines. As Robert W. McChesney has suggested in numerous forums, the field of communication studies must strive to be multidimensional, addressing the broader social structure of society, which this text goes a long way towards doing.

While this text cannot be faulted for the sheer variety of views it is presenting, at times it does become laden with psychology-specific jargon and seems to elude concision, leaving the reader wondering what the point is. The book is loosely based around a survey of the influence of Tajfel and Turner's research into identity theory and categorization theory on the field of socio-psychology. Chapter 1 sets out the basis of social identity theory as developed by Tajfel:

> social identity is conceptualized as being connected to the individual's knowledge of belonging to a certain social group and to the emotional and evaluative signification that results from this group membership. Thus, it is through their belonging to different groups that individuals acquire a social identity defining their specific positions in society. (p. 5)

John Turner takes Tajfel's theory one step further, as the text suggests early on, and tries to explain the opposition between the psychological and sociological aspects of identity. Turner's self categorizing theory suggests that three levels of self definition exist:

1. supra-order-self compared to others of the same species;

2. intermediate level-social identity based on intergroup comparisons; and

3. subordinate level-self is defined as unique.

From this foundation, the text attempts, with varying degrees of success, to show how the ideas of Tajfel and Turner have maintained their vitality as they have been used and expanded upon by a variety of researchers. Where this text seems to stumble is in the contextual relationship between the contributed articles that make up the whole. At times, the basic concepts are repeated with too much time spent explaining what has already been established and far too little time spent developing the nuance of the ideas. Case in point is the third chapter that deals with the social representations in personal identity. The author concludes that, "[d]epending on situations, various relationships become salient and give rise to different identity dynamics" (p. 23). Is this anything that we do not know from our common sense?

What becomes clear, very quickly, is that most of the contributors to this text are concerned solely with psychology-oriented examples. This discipline-specific approach to identity creates a blinder effect as relevant research from other disciplines such as pieces written by Walker Connor, Charles Taylor, Graham Murdock, and David Morely, to name but a few, are completely ignored.

From the perspective of communication research into cultural policy, contributions to part 2, "Establishing Group Identity," and part 4, "Impact of Culture on Identity and Categorization," seemed the most useful. José Miguel Salazar, in chapter 8, "Social Identity and National Identity," makes an earnest attempt to break out of the confines of psychology and address the confusing issues of nationalism and national sentiment. Salazar makes the observation that the interrelation between different countries in the world has always existed; what has changed are the technologies that allow us to peer into these other worlds and the speed with which this now takes place. Unfortunately, as is the case with most of this book, the door to a multidisciplinary approach to identity is opened but never quite walked through.

The book concludes with a chapter that deals with the practical construction of social identity, which nicely draws the diverse material of the book together pointing in the direction of the not surprising need for further research. What becomes clear is that the relationship between individualism, as a set of values and cultural practices through which we come to recognize ourselves as a part of a group, is at odds with collectivism. As the final chapter points out, collectivism is a cultural syndrome associated with an emotional dependence on a group while individualistic cultures stress that the individual is a separate, autonomous unit. The issue thus becomes how the individual identity we all have comes to regulate our social perceptions and collective behaviour.

Tajfel and Turner have made an undisputed contribution to the discipline of social psychology through social identity theory and self categorization theory. This text goes a step further to show how these basic theories have become far more prominent as a tool of explanation of social behaviour over the last 20 years. The downfall of the text is in the fact that it has been written in a manner that makes it inaccessible to those who are not studying in the field of psychology. If one is looking for a text that may help to explain some of the subtleties of identity, this may be a useful book. If one is looking for a text which easily crosses over between disciplines showing how the psychology of identity relates to the practice of identity in an increasingly mediated world, this text will be disappointing.