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## Social Identity and Time

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### Introduction

When, in 1979, I first arrived at Bristol as a postgraduate student the little that I knew of Henri Tajfel's work had been gleaned from a lecture on "prejudice" in my undergraduate degree course at Cardiff. At my first supervision session Henri handed me a copy of the then recently-published *Differentiation between social groups* (which, it appears, I never got round to returning) and (somewhat more prudently) a photocopy of his chapter "Experiments in a vacuum" from *The context of social psychology*. I was instructed to "go away and tell me what you think". I duly went away, and stayed away for the next six months. The problem was that, although I scanned the pages of these texts painstakingly and even obsessively (I recall at one stage calculating that I had read Tajfel's chapters in *Differentiation* at least twelve times), I was quite unable to see what Tajfel was saying, much less think anything about it.

Eventually my vision of Tajfel's theory\* of social identity and intergroup relations became clarified through information picked up from other postgraduates and researchers at Bristol. I came to realize that, in order to see what Tajfel was saying, I needed radically to readjust my intellectual focus and expectations. I had to stop searching for the bogus pipelines, reinforcement schedules and overheard snatches of cocktail party conversation which had stood out so solidly in my undergraduate texts. After a lengthy process of acculturation I came to learn about the various things I might expect to find in Tajfel's work: a concern for widespread patterns in human behaviour; a critique of attempts to explain phenomena such as racism or anti-Semitism in terms of reductionist psychologies; a "dynamic" theory which recognized the flexibility and context-dependence of human action; a perspective which recognized human agency and the responsibility of social actors for constructing the world in which they live; a perspective which recognized macrosocial context and the process of social change; a perspective which, while it focused on ideology and (inter)subjectivity, nevertheless did not deny the material aspects of relations between "real life" social groups; a theory which, in so far as it naturalized (and thereby implicitly justified) collective identities and action (especially "minority group" action) provided theoretical and empirical ballast against the existing ("American") social psychological hegemony and its (implicit) ideological support of the status quo.

Many of these themes are not foregrounded explicitly "in" Tajfel's written texts although they are explicated most clearly in Tajfel's personal reflections on his work in *Human groups and social categories*. This perhaps explains why there are now so many different versions of what Tajfel "really meant" which are used to authorize a particular reading of his work. In undertaking to write this chapter, I find myself at something of a rhetorical disadvantage. Throughout most of my time at Bristol I attempted (usually successfully) to avoid any contact with Henri which might risk exposing the depths of my ignorance, the extent of my misunderstanding, the fact that I did not possess the true, subtle insider-knowledge necessary in order to pass as a bona fide social identity theorist. As a consequence, I now do not have any basis for warranting any claims I might wish to make concerning what Tajfel's work might "really" have been about. Instead, I am forced to rely largely on the texts of Tajfel's written work, which I read, if no longer as a complete "outsider", at least without the benefit of daily communication with other social identity theorists who can tell me what to think.

This causes particular problems with respect to the theme that I have (probably unwisely) chosen for this chapter. Given the nature of this Festschrift—a reflection back over Tajfel's career; a consideration of work taking place "today"

\* It is conventional for Tajfel's work on social identity and intergroup relations to be described as a "node" or "nodelet" although it is not clear that his work does, in fact, have the characteristics implied by either of these terms. For the sake of convenience I shall retain the use of these terms when referring to Tajfel's work, although the pedantic readers may, if they prefer, place these terms in imaginary scare quotes.

in the context of this intellectual heritage, a speculation on future "developments" yet to come—it would seem pertinent to address the issues of time and history as they figure in Tajfel's own work. The question of time surfaces repeatedly throughout Tajfel's writing on intergroup relations, although it is not at all clear that Tajfel himself adopted any clear "position" on the issue. Tajfel was, for example, clearly concerned with the issue of historical transformation and "social change" (see Reicher, this volume). Tajfel also recognized and stated a concern for the specificity of the historical and cultural present (see Billig, this volume). In this chapter I shall be focusing on the ways in which Tajfel addressed the issue of time as it pertained to the "dynamic" nature of psychological functioning and to the understanding of social groups as temporal processes. Although Tajfel's work was prescient in so far as he acknowledged these considerations, he did not develop these ideas to any great extent in his written work. In discussing the issue of time as it relates to social identity I shall take Tajfel's work as a point of departure. However, in the process of attempting to follow these ideas through I shall come to explore a number of issues which have not, traditionally, been considered by social identity theorists. These include issues such as the serial character of social life, the significance of technology to the conceptualization and organization of large-scale social collectivities, and the temporal aspects of the subjective self-concept. None of these issues is, I think, incompatible with Tajfel's original interests.

### Psychological Flexibility

The Marivaudian being is . . . a pastless futureless man, born anew every instant. The instants are points which organize themselves ~~but~~ a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line.

(Bartheleme, quoted by Lasch, 1979)

During the stock-taking "crisis" of the 1970s, a number of commentators criticized existing social psychological perspectives for presenting an essentially static picture of psychological functioning and of social life (e.g. Gergen, 1973; Moscovici, 1972). Tajfel, similarly, argued against reified models of psychological functioning: "the greatest adaptive advantage of man is his capacity to modify his behaviour as a function of the way in which he perceives and understands a situation" (Tajfel, 1969, p. 81). Tajfel (e.g. 1972, 1978a) in particular took issue with attempts to explain prejudice—and intergroup relations more generally—with recourse to enduring psychological characteristics of particular individuals, or with recourse to supposedly generic (acontextual) psychological processes. In discussing the context-contingent character of human subjectivity Tajfel distinguished two "ideal types" of situation: those in which people act in terms of their unique individuality, and those in which they think, feel and act in terms of a sense of collective self. Tajfel typically used the minimal group studies to illustrate this potential for people to respond flexibly to social context: he suggested that the findings from these studies showed how in some (particular) situations people will perceive the world (and act) in terms of

intergroup distinctions (the implication being that, in other contexts, they would not do so). In his theoretical work Tajfel (e.g. 1980a) argued that social categories should not be treated as "static variables", but as dynamic, continuously changing, relational ways of orienting to the social world. Similarly, he argued that social identifications should be seen to be fluid and variable over time: "the psychological existence of a group for its members is a complex sequence of appearances and disappearances, of looming large and vanishing into thin air" (Tajfel, 1982a, p. 485). In this respect, Tajfel's work may be seen to have prefigured those more recent ("postmodern") developments in social psychology which have promoted the notion of de-centred subjectivity and have stressed the radically context-contingent nature of human subjectivity and social behaviour (e.g. Henriques *et al.*, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

This emphasis on the situated, occasional nature of social and self-perception has not always been followed through in empirical research. In particular, it is interesting to note how research on "real life" intergroup relations has tended to bracket the issue of the flexibility of subjectivity. Instead, researchers seek to examine social identity in "the field" through the application of survey technology; most usually by the application of scales designed to gain an insight into social imagery (e.g. Bourhis and Hill, 1982) or instruments designed to measure (and compare) individuals in terms of the strength of their identification with a given social category (Condor, *et al.*, 1987). The assumption behind these methods is that social perception and identification may be regarded as relatively enduring ("reliable") facets of individual psychology.

The question of the flexibility and context-contingency of subjectivity has, however, been emphasized by researchers adopting Turner's self-categorization approach to group processes (e.g. Turner *et al.*, 1987, 1994) who foreground the question of category salience (see e.g. Hogg and Turner, 1987; Oakes, 1987; Oakes *et al.*, 1991; and see Tajfel, 1982a for an account of the importance of salience to his own theoretical concerns). Self-categorization theory treats self and social perception as radically context-contingent, dependent not only upon the expectations and motives that an individual subject brings to a situation ("perceiver readiness") but also upon the perceived relevance of a particular category to any (perceived) context. The perceived relevance or "fit" of a particular category is, according to self-categorization theory, a function both of the extent to which a particular level of categorization best captures the relative differences between stimuli ("the principle of metacontrast") and of the extent to which the specific characteristics of the stimuli match the perceivers' background knowledge about the categories ("normative fit") [see Oakes *et al.*, 1994; Turner *et al.*, 1994; and see also Tajfel's (1980b) original attempt to utilize Bruner's work on perceiver readiness and fit to explain variations in self and social perception]. This theoretical emphasis on category salience has been accompanied by an empirical project aimed at the elucidation of the context-dependence of social and self-perception in a series of imaginative laboratory experiments. These studies have reliably demonstrated that self-description and

stereotypic perception may be influenced by variations in local context (as illustrated, for example, by the effects of manipulating the specific instructions given to subjects or to variations in the comparative frame of reference provided by the experimenters) as well as events taking place in the "wider social context" (e.g. Haslam *et al.* 1992).

The self-categorization perspective certainly avoids problems of reification and, to some extent, essentialism which often bedevil social psychological accounts of social behaviour. However, in common with many other approaches which emphasize the flexibility of subjectivity and action in microtime, this approach leaves us with the problem of accounting for (or even conceiving of) continuity over time. Is it meaningful to speak of social identities, stereotypes, categories and groups as anything other than fleeting, ephemeral phenomena? Certainly, some recent statements by self-categorization theorists suggest that it is not: "[the] content of a stereotype is not a fixed set of attributes applied in an all-or-none manner, but is shaped selectively by the context of its application" (Oakes *et al.*, 1994, p. 123); "there is no psychologically based stability, continuity, or unity in the self from situation to situation" (Turner *et al.*, 1994, p. 459).\*

Oakes and her colleagues (1994) have recently broached the question of the temporal continuity of social perception and action, albeit in a rather parenthetical manner. They suggest that stability in stereotypic judgement may arise from, amongst other things, "the stability of intergroup relationships"; and from "the higher-order knowledge frameworks used to give coherence to varying instances of group behaviour..." (p. 199). This sort of perspective, which essentially locates "continuity" at the level of macrosocial relations or at the level of intrapsychic processes effectively brackets the question of the temporal linking of local macrosocial "contexts" or episodes. Self-categorization research focuses on documenting the synchronic moment. There is no account of how specific moments can be seen to fit together diachronically. This is due in large part to the fact that, in self-categorization theory, the "social field" or "context" is treated (or at least spoken of) as if it were essentially external to the perceiving subject: a stimulus display which individual subjects view, a set of instructions to which they respond, rather than a process of which they are a part. More generally, we can note how laboratory studies of category salience—in common with most empirical social psychological research—achieve an image of social life as composed of discrete "contexts" and "moments" both through the application of particular technical devices (forms of analysis which bracket any movement or change within the experimental episode; see Antaki *et al.*, in press).

\* As something of an aside, it is worth considering the historical and ideological context in which current theories of the "flexibility" of the human subject are proposed. In addition to Tajfel (1972) several other of the "crisis" authors have pointed to the ways in which academic models of psychological functioning reflect, and possibly ideologically support, the politico-cultural status quo (e.g. Moscovici, 1972; Sampson, 1977). Bearing this in mind, it is tempting to point to the correspondence between emerging social psychological emphases on the "flexibility" of the individual subject, and the requirements of post-Fordist labour markets for "flexible" workforces.

and textually, by reporting the experimental episode as if it were entirely divorced from the prior or subsequent activities of the participants. Through the imposition of an artificial beginning and ending, social psychologists construct a "plot" for their research stories which show how all the elements hang together and "make sense" within the context of the research episode itself (cf. Billig's 1976 account of experimental studies of intergroup relations).

At this stage I should like to point to the first of several tensions which I perceive in social identity theory's attempts to deal with the problem of time. It is clear from Tajfel's work that the issues he sought to address (large-scale social categories, prejudice, intergroup differentiation and conflict, social movements and so forth) need to be seen as relatively enduring (although possibly developing and transforming) *over time*. If we focus on flexibility in microtime at the expense of continuity over macrotime there is a distinct danger that the social problems which "loom large" at the outset of our work, and to which we commonly refer to when justifying an interest in social identity and intergroup processes (racism, anti-Semitism, class relations, international conflict, etc.) may, in effect, "disappear into thin air" the moment we start to interrogate them. Certainly, we should not return to theories which treat human actors as if they were constrained by rigid psychological hardware which prevents them from responding to changes in the social environment. However, if we are at all concerned with large-scale social processes neither can we afford to regard our research subjects as Marivaudian beings.

### Social groups as processes

Structure... is encountered in becoming, and one cannot illustrate it except by pursuing this process of becoming.

(Durkheim, 1933, p. 323)

It is clear from Tajfel's writing that, whilst he acknowledged psychological flexibility in microtime, his major concern was to theorize social relations in macrotime. In order to avoid relying on social structures (and hence denying the moment-to-moment variability of human cognition and conduct), Tajfel emphasized how social relations are *realized over time* ("social groups are not 'things'; they are processes" (1982a, p. 485)). Tajfel suggested that even apparently stable systems of social relations rely upon continuous social reproduction over time:

Even in the most rigid caste system... the social distinctions which may appear very stable are related to a continuously dynamic psychological situation in which a superior group can never stop working at the preservation of its distinctiveness.

(1974a, p. 77)

Apart from its apparent voluntarism (a point I have discussed elsewhere, see Condor, 1989, 1990, and see below) this perspective would appear to have much in common with some current sociological and anthropological perspectives which regard the formation of social collectivities as ongoing processes. These include Philip Abrams' (1982) account of "structuring" and

Giddens' (e.g. 1979, 1984) rather better-known analysis of the process of "social structuration". In addition, currently popular "network" approaches in anthropology (Hannerz, 1992) and the social studies of science (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Latour, 1986, 1987) also emphasize the need to regard social life as a temporal trajectory rather than as a static set of positions. These perspectives (and others like them) regard social action as essentially *serial* in character (e.g. Heller, 1982, 1984). The serial character of social action may involve some measure of routine repetition of action over time, as exemplified, for example, in Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of "habitus" and Giddens' discussion of the way in which social institutions are chronically reproduced through the mundane repetition of activity in daily life. Such perspectives do not suggest that individual social actors are locked within rigid, unchangeable "roles", and they do not deny the potential for innovation or creativity. What they do emphasize is the fact that large-scale systems of social relations do not exist (and persist) independently of their reproduction by human subjects in the course of their daily lives. In this, these approaches have some apparent parallels with Tajfel's approach to intergroup relations and Turner's approach to the process of self-categorization (both of which stress the importance of established "shared norms" in regulating social activity).

Where these approaches to social process differ from social identity theory is in stressing the ways in which the social world is constructed through the serial linking of events, and the serial transmission of action and information *between* social actors and local domains. Social identity theory currently lacks what Carr (1991) terms a "relay model" of social life: it does not address the question of how wide-scale (macrosocial) phenomena may be effected through the "chaining" of microsocial episodes (Knorr-Cetina, 1988). This sort of "relay" perspective may be illustrated with reference to the notion of "translation" which is commonly employed in actor network theory (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 1986, 1987). The construct of "translation" refers to the way in which orders, claims, artifacts and so forth come to be spread over time and space through a continuing process of being handed on, and taken up, by different social actors. Each of the social actors\* through whose metaphorical hands these ideas, statements, texts and artifacts pass is regarded as a "multi-conductor" (Latour, 1987, p. 140) who shapes them according to his or her own local projects. Claims, identities, ideas and practices cannot endure over time or spread over space without being taken up by successive social actors. But each of these social actors will effectively "translate" (drop, transfer, corrupt, modify, add to or appropriate) these practices in the course of taking them up and passing them on.

\* In the interests of simplicity of exposition I am, for the time being, bracketing the issue of what or who constitutes a social "actor". It should be noted, however, that actor network theorists do not necessarily assume that an "actor" will be an individual human subject. In actor network theory, the construct of an "actor" is applied to any person or object that functions within a network as a unitary or homogeneous entity. An "actor" may, then, refer to a corporate entity, a machine or a natural phenomenon as well as an individual human being.

This sort of analysis of social process is rather different from the model of social life proposed in either Tajfel's or Turner's approach to the process of social identification. Certainly, remarkably few social identity theorists have considered the ways in which intra- or intergroup processes may unfold and transform over time (for exceptions, see Brown and Ross, 1982; Taylor and McKirnan, 1984; Reicher, 1987). There seem to be two reasons why social identity theorists have generally neglected to analyse social groups as ongoing processes.\* The first is theoretical, and derives from Tajfel's reluctance to adopt reductionist models which analyse "large-scale" intergroup phenomena in terms of the dynamics of "small group" behaviour. The unfortunate consequence is that social identity theorists have largely excluded the macrosocial domain of human activity from their theoretical model *tout court*.† In general, social identity theory posits a direct line of communication between the individual and the macrosocial by effectively cutting out the macrosocial middle-man (see, for example, Turner and Oakes, 1986). Ironically, at the same time that social identity theorists have been arguing for a need to exclude considerations of macrosocial processes from theories of macrosocial relations, elsewhere in the social sciences theorists have been suggesting that macrosocial relations cannot be properly understood without a consideration of macrosocial (small group) activity. In particular it is argued that, in order to appreciate the *processual* character of widescale (macrosocial) relations, it is necessary to consider the process of communication within, and the dynamic and multiple links between, the macrosocial fora in which these processes routinely operate (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981; Giddens, 1984; Knorr-Cetina, 1988).

The second reason why social identity theorists have, by and large, neglected to consider the ways in which intergroup processes come to be constituted over time pertains to issues of methodology. Although Tajfel himself remained a champion of laboratory experimentation (e.g. 1972, 1980a) he did acknowledge that this technology was limited in its ability to illuminate diachronic process, especially processes taking place over a long period of time. The problem here (as Tajfel, 1972 suggested) is not so much with the technique of experimentation *per se* as with the ways in which experimentation is routinely conceived and practised within social psychology. Laboratory experimentation, and, in particular, the way in which "findings" are constituted by particular technologies of data gathering, statistical analysis and report writing, tends to result in reified representations which, as I have already argued, are accomplished by the bracketing of the "movement" of phenomena under investigation within the

\* There is, of course, much talk in the literature about "social identity processes", "intergroup processes", the "process of differentiation", and so forth. It seems that, in general, such discussions are confined to an explication of intrapsychic processes (the way in which an individual "reacts" to a dynamic social field) rather than to the dynamics of the social field itself.

† The question of "small group" behaviour re-emerges when attempts are made to explain macrosocial activity in terms of the sorts of social identity processes which are used to explain the individual's relationship to large-scale, abstract, social categories (see, for example, Hogg, 1992; Turner *et al.*, 1987).

experimental setting (Antaki *et al.*, in press, and see Bourdieu, 1977, for an account of how the treatment of time in research contexts leads to the reification of social scientific constructs). In addition, the practices associated with experimental research exclude any analysis of the *distal* precursors to, and consequences of, activity taking place within particular macrosocial episodes.\* Unlike Bruno Latour (1987), social psychologists rarely follow either the researchers or their subjects into and out of the specific research episode in order to construct an open-ended account which charts the trajectory of actions over time and through the social body.

### Unintended consequences of serial social action

[Decisions] in a board room impinge on the life situation of an aboriginal population without that board's or its corporation's having any place in the cognized world of the population so-affected or, indeed, probably vice versa.

(Barth, 1992, p. 20).

In this section I shall turn to consider one particular consequence which stems from this neglect to consider the ways in which social action may be successively "translated" by various social actors. When they test their theories in the laboratory, social identity theorists typically attempt to explain social activity in terms of *local* cause-and-effect sequences, which often entail a consideration of the motives of social actors. When they turn to consider distal (large-scale, macrosocial) social constructs, social identity theorists often attempt to explain these, too, with recourse to the intentions of social actors. In particular, intergroup theorists often imply that the stability or disruption of systems of social relations represent a direct consequence of activities designed expressly to "maintain stability" or to "institute change". This is particularly the case in those analyses which have attempted to use Tajfel's (e.g. 1975a, 1978b) account of minority group "strategies" in order to explain the occurrence of actual historical change in the relations between social groups (e.g. Williams and Giles, cf. Condor, 1989). A similar problem may also be identified in Tajfel's (1981b) own treatment of the "social functions" of stereotypes, in which he tends to conflate the actual social outcomes of particular social representations with the (conscious or unconscious) intentions of the people who formulate and use these representations (see Condor, 1990). In this, social identity theorists often come close to espousing voluntaristic and teleological models of history and social change which neglect the ironic character of human social activity: the fact that, in the ongoing process of translation over time and dispersal over space, our actions may come to have (or at least, contribute to) consequences that we never anticipated.

If we appreciate the ways in which texts, arguments and artifacts become dispersed over space and translated over time through the linking of

\* In fact, the logic of "ethical" experimentation assumes that there need be no distal consequences of the research episode (see Condor, 1991).

