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EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY (SIT) IN THE CONTEXT OF INTER-GROUP RELATIONS: HOW CAN EXPLANATIONS OF SIT BE APPLIED TO THE RESOLUTION OF INTRACTABLE INTER-GROUP CONFLICTS?

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TABLE OF CONTENT

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Abstract

Tajfel's social identity and Turner's self categorization theories are complimentary. The aim of this article is try to examine and apply these theoretical explanations to the resolution of inter-group conflicts in different geographical regions all over the world. More specifically, psychological concepts, which are included in these theories, are used to extrapolate a person-centered argument for inter-group conflict's reduction. According to these theories group membership and social identity fulfill some basic psychological human needs such as affiliation with a group, positive self-esteem, and to compare ourselves with others. To have a social identity is an automatic process since there are many default categories such as ethnicity, gender, and religion and we can categorize ourselves in many of them easily. When we categorize ourselves, we perceive our in-group as valuable and we try to differentiate from out-group by making comparisons. Therefore, this social comparison process initiates discrimination and results in inter-group conflict ultimately. Inter-group conflict can be based on a real inequality or injustice but the main factor is subjective perception of the group and it may not reflect the truth. Discrimination and hostility toward other group has been accelerated in prolonged conflicts. Psychological explanations of social identity and social categorization theories imply some basic psychological processes that motivate individual behavior of a group member. The theories emphasize the importance of motivation for positive self esteem, need for affiliation, subjective perceptions, attribution biases, and automatic inferences in the formation of inter-group relation. Inter-group relations might seem as between the groups. However, if we take the SIT into consideration, the exact source of inter-group competition, discrimination, and conflict is psychological processes of individual. Therefore to make individuals aware of these processes which is the creator of conflictual relations might be a unique contribution of SIT to the resolution of conflicts. *(Word count: 298)*

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Introduction

As a result of globalization in today's world, people either pay less attention to inter-group differences or have become less concerned about these differences. However, somehow, people attach themselves to some characteristics that define them in a unique way and want to develop some strong ties to make them feel more secure in social universe. These types of strong ties can be established especially under the national, ethnic, or religious categories. Unfortunately, to label social categories in a different way is almost impossible. Therefore when people define themselves under these rigid categories with strong intra-group ties, it carries some potential risks for inter-group relations. In today's world, conflicts and disagreements among these kinds of groups in different parts of the world have been inherited from generation to generation and thus it threatens the peace for humanity in the future (Bar-Tal, 2007). Researchers have defined these prolonged conflicts, which are especially between small ethnic groups or between inferior and superior groups as, "deep-rooted", "enduring rivalry", "protracted" or "intractable" social conflicts (Rouhana & Bartal, 1998). Inter-group conflicts in Middle East, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kashmir, Cyprus, and Sudan may be given as examples.

The objective of this article is to explore the social identity (SIT)[1] and self categorization theories (SCT) that provide a useful insight into the psychological processes that lie behind

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[1] Turner indicates that "...the term social identity theory is now sometimes used to refer to the intergroup theory (*SIT*), sometimes to refer to both theories and sometimes to the family of ideas shared by social identity researchers" (Hogg & Abrams, 1990, p. xi)

the conflicts among the aforementioned groups, and try to develop an argument regarding how these theoretical explanations can be applied to the resolution of prolonged inter-group conflicts. In other words, the aim of this article is to search for an answer to the research question whether the theory can have a unique contribution to the resolution of these inter-group conflicts.

Background and Orientation of Social Identity Theory

Tajfel[2] puts forward the theoretical structure of social identity and tries to explain the problems in inter-group relations. After his study, his colleague Turner[3] analyzes group processes, inter-group behaviors and stereotypes within the self-categorization theory. Therefore, these two theories are complementary (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The social identity theory which is a socio-psychological theory, tries to explain group membership and inter-group relationships. The theory is both cognitively and socially oriented. It is cognitively oriented because it deals with the behavior of individuals trying to give a meaning to themselves and to others within their social environment. It requires the individual to evaluate his/her relationship with the group that he/she is affiliated with and other groups both emotionally and cognitively (Tajfel, 1982). The theory is socially oriented because it clarifies the contribution of broad social categories (gender, race, profession etc.) to an individual's self concept. An individual determines an important part of his/her own personal identity in his/her own group or via interactions with other groups. Although Tajfel

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[2] Henri Tajfel (1919 - 1982) was a British social psychologist (http://wn.com/Henri_Tajfel, accessible on 20th December 2010)
[3] Professor of Psychology in Australian National University (http://turner.socialpsychology.org/, accessible on 20th December 2010).

(1982) develops his social identity theory on minimal groups, this theory has been verified to a great extent in relations among larger ethnic groups and societies as well (Brown, 2000). Any group membership of individuals under a social category is closely tied to the place where they feel psychologically. Therefore, it may be claimed that the social identity is also psychological according to the theory.

Concepts of Social Identity and Self Categorization

According to the social identity theory[4], individuals, along with their personal identities, develop different social identities as members of different groups that they belong in. As an individual questions his or her place in a society or in the world, he/she starts developing social identities. While an individual's personal identity emerges based on the characteristics that separate that individual from others, social identity defines individuality on the basis of shared similarities with other members of the group (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). It may be suggested that the development of social identities is, in a sense, inevitable, because social categories such as political, religious, vocational etc. are inevitable. For instance, a university student can identify himself as a university student, musician, man, and liberal. An individual's development of social identities depends on the individual's past, personality, status, and opportunities. Social identity is a social-cognitive schema that involves an individual's information on being a member of a certain group, attributed meaning and feelings of that membership. This schema includes cognitions, values and norms that determine the behaviors of an individual as a member of a group (Korte, 2007).

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[4] Social identity defined by Tajfel as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 7)

Self-categorization[5] is based on two fundamental processes: First is to what extent an individual perceives him/herself as similar or identical with other members of the category and the second one is acquisition and demonstration of behaviors consistent with the category (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). People tend to classify objects, themselves, and others under various categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, the social identity theory is focused on the results of self-categorization rather than on the causes. These results are accentuation effect and in-group bias that stems from the individual's need to keep his/her self-esteem high. The formation of social identity and the self-categorization processes can be summarized in three stages. First of all there should be a category and individual should feel himself as a member of that category, for instance, being a European, being a police officer, supporting a football club etc. The second stage is the identification stage. When we pick a category to classify ourselves, we accept that category at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels. For instance, if an individual classifies himself/herself as a "Green Peace" member, then that person identifies himself or herself with this environmentalist organization. Social identity is gained at this stage. Similarities among group members are exaggerated by individuals in terms of the dimensions that define the category. The final stage is the social comparison stage. An individual compares his or her group with other groups and this comparison generally involves positive in-group bias according to the theory. It means that an individual evaluates his/her own group in a more positive way (Halldorson, 2009; Tajfel, 1982).

Social Identity and Inter-group Relations

In this section, the theories of social identity and self-categorization are examined in the context of inter-group relations, and a unique contribution of the theory to the resolution of

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[5] "Self categorization is the process which transforms individuals into groups" (Hogg & Abrams, 1990, p. 21)

inter-group conflicts is revealed. Moreover, an answer is tried to be found for the research question.

In-group bias

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the behavior of individuals with their social identity instead of their personal identity is enough for a comparison to emerge. In his experiments, Tajfel shows that groups can be formed by eye color, favorite painter and even by tossing heads or tails. These kinds of groups that are formed in laboratories by simple criteria are called minimal groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). In one of these kinds of experiments, stimulus pairs are presented to subjects and they are requested to pick one of them as a first task. After that, subjects are taken to separate cubicles and are told that they are divided into two groups with respect to their choices in the previous task. Then, a second task is given. In this new task, subjects are requested to distribute reward points to two people beside themselves. These two people are presented in three different combinations as two people from their group, two people from other group and one person from each group. Subjects give more points to their own groups (in-group), they try to maximize the differences between groups, even when it is possible for them to distribute rewards in a way that maximizes the interest for both groups optimally, they lessened their benefits in the name of maximizing the difference between groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Smith & Mackie, 2000). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), even in experiments that have been performed by minimal group paradigm, individuals never see or interact with other group members, they were still able to decide in favor of their own groups and discriminate others. The results of these findings imply some consequences for our research question. First, the "us" perception of an individual is a natural result of mental categorization process that is based on similarities. Second, even the existence of a category that is found valuable is sufficient for the

development of social identity and sense of belonging. These feelings can easily create a distinction as "us" and "them". Third, since group membership fulfills our need for belonging, relatedness and self esteem, being a member of a group is indispensable for us. And the last point is that the sole presence of an out-group can make the social identity of individual salient.

Categorization, Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes[6] are proposed as one of the significant sources of inter-group conflicts in social identity and self categorization theories (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). In general, since all group members behave in order to increase their self-esteem, they easily arrive to a consensus about category related values and characteristics which define the group (Tajfel, 1982). These are called **stereotypes**. Stereotypes may reflect the psychological or physical characteristics of an in-group or out-group and they may be positive or negative. In social identity theory, not only the cognitive aspect of stereotypes but also its motivational basis is emphasized and the objective and function of stereotypes are also clarified. Stereotypes are used to verify behaviors that are directed to out-group and to explain the complicated incidents that threaten the in-group with simple reasons (Tajfel, 1982). When stereotypes are strict, extreme, and negative, they are defined as **prejudice** (Tajfel, 1981). Limitation of our social cognition generally leads to biased reasoning about other groups creating stereotypes and prejudices. These biased judgments increase the inter-group conflict and in turn groups in conflict make more biased attributions about the other group. Groups frequently attribute their success or good behaviors to the internal, and their failures or negative behaviors to the external causes and vice versa for out-groups. This attribution bias also plays a role in increasing conflicts between the groups and increasing conflicts fire the inter-group discrimination (Hogg &

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[6] According to Tajfel "stereotypes are oversimplified mental images of some category of person which is shared by a large number of people" (Worchel & Cooper, 1983, p. 358)

Abrams, 1990). Out-group hostility might be motivated by the desire to protect and promote the in-group or it might develop as a result of prejudice with accompanying negative emotions towards the out-group. Theoretical explanations mentioned above indicate some psychological mechanisms for our research question. For instance stereotypes that are formed as a result of in-group favoritism can easily disrupt and worsen inter-group relations. It seems that stereotypes are rather arbitrary, depend on the context and are therefore variable. In addition, inter-group conflicts start with inter-group comparison, which is a simple and natural process. During comparison, members of each group process the information about each other in a biased way because of their basic needs and motivations. These biases during information processing may contribute to the disruption of inter-group relations.

Social Structure and Inter-group Conflict

In social identity theory, social structure is essential to understand the inter-group relations. This macro social approach emphasizes the relation between human behavior and social structural processes (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Social structure consists of large scale social classes (race, gender, and profession) which incorporate power, status, and prestige relations among them. Tajfel and Turner (1979) identify the inter-group relations in terms of bipolar dimensions. One of them is "interpersonal versus inter-group continuum" for social behavior, and the other is "social mobility versus social change" dimension for societal beliefs. Theorists explain the functions of these two dimensions both together and separately. For example, if there is some consensus on social status[7] of the groups and the allocation of resources is legitimate and institutionalized, then the inter-group relations might be perceived as secure (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The results of inter-group comparisons are subjective and if an individual perceives his/her identity as negative and aims to change it in a positive

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[7] "By social status we mean a ranking or hierarcy of perceived prestige" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979 p. 37)

direction, that person uses the societal belief system. In social mobility belief system, transitions among the casts or groups are easy, and an individual can pass to a higher status by working hard and using his/her talents and opportunities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In social change belief system, hierarchical structure is remarkable and stable. There is less permeability between the groups. Therefore an individual's effort is not functional in accessing the desired high status group. When the borders are prominent between inferior and superior or minor and major groups, political movement of a group is much more possible. For example, if there is an inter-group conflict of interest, and the social comparison leads to perception of inequality, societal change beliefs of the group will be heightened, because the group knows the impossibility of passing to a higher status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In such an insecure social structure, when the group begins to question the legitimacy of inter-group relations, competition with the other group will become an inevitable strategy to heighten the group's status (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When the inter-group relations are perceived subjectively to be legitimate and stable (secure) even if it is negative, the group uses social creativity strategies. Social creativity strategies include some psychological processes. One of them is to create a new dimension which facilitates the positive identity development of the group. Secondly, group members may redefine the value attached to their characteristics in order to change their perceptions from negative to positive. In the third strategy, group members may prefer to compare themselves with more inferior groups.

Based on the theory's social structure explanations we can formulate some implications for our research question. First, the interdependency between the dimensions of societal beliefs and social behaviors can be restructured to facilitate the movement of the group members to a

higher status. Second, even if the inter-group competition and conflict is based on a genuine inequality or injustice, it might not be perceived as such, therefore the determining factor is the subjective perception of the group members and it may not reflect the truth. Lastly, if the same physical reality can be interpreted differently, then it is possible to alter the members' subjective perceptions and interpretations.

The Development of Inter-group Conflict and Competition

Exploration of SIT discloses a series of successive processes that trigger each other, and these processes reveal conflict and competition in inter-group relations. Social categorization leads to in-group bias, in-group bias create inter-group comparison and a competition process, and under specific insecure conditions, social competition eventually leads to discrimination towards other groups that ends in conflict between those groups. This chain of processes keeps repeating in prolonged conflicts through multiple generations (Brewer, 2001, 2007).

The role of some cognitive biases in intractable intergroup conflicts was revealed by Bar-Tal. According to Bar-Tal (2007) group members in a prolonged conflict choose the information that is consistent with their positive social identity, values, and beliefs and ignore the inconsistent information or interpret new information to verify their beliefs. Another bias is to render new values and beliefs consistent with old ones in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. All these psychological biases lead to the lack of empathy and double standards and consequently, inhibit the resolution of conflicts.

Application of Social Identity Theory to Reducing of Prolonged Inter-group Conflicts

Inter-group conflict resolution strategies have been used by experts with the intention of reducing and resolving the unsettled intergroup conflicts all over the world. For instance, strategies such as increasing contact among groups, providing cooperation, creating interdependency, diminishing the threats mutually, reconstituting the norms, re-identifying categories have been suggested and used to diminish the conflicts (Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel, 1982; Worchel & Cooper, 2000).

Although the benefits of those conflict resolution strategies have been observed and accepted, there have still been many conflictual relations between ethnic groups for several generations or more. The common aspect of these strategies is the external nature of these interventions. However, basic conceptualization of SIT and SCT highlights the motivations, needs, desires, tendencies, expectations, and biases which direct our behaviors as an individual. Thus the main agent in these theories is the "social individual". Therefore the individuals' own interventions might be more prominent instead of external interventions. My argument is that, as the main agent of inter-group comparison, competition, discrimination, and conflict, the individual himself/herself should be in the center of the inter-group conflict resolution process to reach a viable result.

The proposed argument can be explained by drawing an analogy with psychotherapy. People seek advice for their psychological problems and participate in individual psychotherapy sessions. Psychotherapists try to instill some awareness in their patients about their emotions, cognitions, and motivations in order to solve their internal conflicts. Psychotherapists reflect a mirror to the patients to help them see the reality that is impossible for patients to achieve by

themselves. SIT explains the effects of a group on an individual's behavior through basic psychological processes. SIT tries to understand and explain the inter-group processes by looking at the group created psychologically by the individual. It means that even the inter-group relations seem to be between the groups; in fact the exact source of all group relations (e.g. competition, discrimination, and conflict) is the individual. From this perspective it can be proposed that in order to solve the intractable inter-group conflicts all over the world, it might be worthwhile to augment the individuals' awareness of their psychological processes that contribute to the creation of conflicts rather than just giving some directions to group members to take action to restore the impaired inter-group relations.

Individuals who are in the middle of an intractable inter-group conflict might not be aware of the role of their motivations, needs, and cognitive biases that fuel the conflict. If they could gain some awareness to all of their responsible psychological processes, they might try to consciously change their behaviors, and to give precedence to their personal identities over social identity. When an individual starts to behave within his/her personal identity, that person begins to explore the similarities rather than differences between her/himself and the other group's members. These minor but remarkable steps might trigger the consecutive changes in social beliefs and behaviors, and then lessen the use of stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations towards the other groups' members. When individuals observe the changes in their behaviors as a result of heightened awareness of their psychological processes, encourage themselves to take more initiative not just for themselves but also for their children's future. Hereby stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations that stir up the inter-group conflicts from one generation to another might weaken in due course. Mutual movements from individual members of each group can defeat the obstacles coming from powerful and malicious third parties. Furthermore, with the recent advances in mass communication devices, broadcasting the information on increasing the awareness of the

conflict parties and informing them of even small successes attained in other conflicts can be easily achieved and widely distributed.

Besides psychological and socio-psychological reasons, there are crucial economical, political, historical, and ethnic reasons for the generations of inter-group conflicts in the world. Dynamic relations and conflict of interests among groups might be directed by great powers. However, people have the mental capacity and power to actively determine their own destinies. If individuals understand the mechanisms behind their behaviors, then they capture the chance to alter and control some aspects of their social behaviors. If individuals are able to control their behaviors and personal identities in psychotherapy; they may also understand that it is a necessity to give precedence to personal identity over social identity in order to crate a positive change in conflictual inter-group relations.

Conclusion

Social identities that we associate ourselves with are a significant part of our self-perception and they connect us with other people and social categories. Being a member of a group affects not only our perception of our group and other groups but also our self-perception and our perception of other people. All the reasoning processes, ways of thinking, and cognitive biases that we use for ourselves as individuals are also valid in our evaluations of groups. Self-categorization and group identification form a social basis for individual's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Hence, focusing on individuals in dealing with social identity and the social categorization process is essential in comprehending the inter-group relations (that is the comparison, competition, discrimination, and conflict between groups) and conflict resolution.

When the explanations of the theories of social identity and self-categorization are assessed; the formation of social identity, self-categorization and stereotyping process, and the relations among social beliefs and social behavior within a social structure are dominated by underlying psychological processes (motivation, attention, need etc.). However, it is known that individuals are not aware of these processes that shape their behaviors. Our fundamental needs such as relatedness and positive self-esteem feed the formation of social identity. On the basis of these needs, our creation of "us" perception may be easily shaped by mental categorization mechanisms. Moreover, others are categorized as "them" again on the basis of the same needs. The culture, time period, economic conditions, and value systems that we live in determine the social identities we develop. Whether we predominantly use our social identities or our personal identities is also based on those facts.

Self-categorization and stereotyping initiate the comparison process automatically since the group needs to evaluate itself. We can have an idea regarding our social status by comparing our group with other similar groups. During these comparisons, the main motivation is to enhance our self-esteem. When the mind operates with this motivation, it is inclined to distort the information which is used to identify, evaluate, and compare the groups in favor of its own group. Consequently, stereotypes are formed. Stereotypes are almost stable and due to our limited mental capacity, we use stereotypes frequently in inter-group relations. When stereotypes are negative and intense, inter-group comparison easily turns into a conflict.

The most significant psychological process, which determines the mutual relationships of social behavior and societal belief systems within the social structure, is the subjective perceptions concerning the group's or the individual's status in society, the permeability of boundaries among groups, and the inequality in social status. These subjective perceptions are

significant because they determine the relations between the two groups in inter-group conflicts more powerfully than the actual situation.

As a result, the psychological mechanisms that lay beneath the social identity and the complementary processes and how powerful these mechanisms are in shaping the inter-group relations can be explained to the group members, experiencing conflicts for years. The social identity theory can have a unique contribution to the resolution of inter-group conflicts by making the individuals aware of their own psychological power and mobilizing them to take action at the individual level to reduce the conflict and bring forward their personal identity.

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