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A Social Identity Theory of Attitudes

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Synopsis

The concept of attitudes is probably the most distinctive and

indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology.

(G. Allport, 1935, p. 798)

Attitude research emerged as a significant part of the social sciences during the early part of the twentieth century. Attitudes are as central and dominant in social psychology today as at the field's conception. Over the years, the attitude concept has been explored in a number of ways. Psychologists focused initially on issues such as attitude measurement (Likert, 1932; Thurstone, 1928; see also Fazio & Olson, 2003) and attitude change (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; see also Crano & Prislin, 2006). Sociologists were more descriptive, focusing on the attitudes that individuals held toward various social, political, and racial groups (see e.g., Bain, 1928; Droba, 1934). And, of course, attitude researchers were interested in the nature of the relationship between individual attitudes and individual action (e.g., LaPiere, 1934; see also Ajzen, 2001; Sheeran, 2002).

However, it is important to note that, irrespective of the way the attitude concept has been explored, almost all attitude research conceptualizes attitudes

primarily as intra-individual cognitive representations – attitudes are acquired and possessed by individuals and they are a central part of human individuality. The emphasis is on individual cognition. The psychology of attitudes is based primarily on an analysis of the psychological processes and structures of individuals (Bohner & Wanke, 2002; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). There is little emphasis on the structure of the social environment relative to the considerable emphasis on psychological structure and process, particularly at a cognitive level.

Moreover, even when some attempt to take the social environment into account is made – primarily through a consideration of the role of normative influence (i.e., perceived social pressure from significant others) – there is little attention given to conceptualising the structure of the social environment in terms of group memberships, social identities, ideologies, and social systems. Indeed, in the recent *Handbook of Attitudes*, only one out of 18 chapters focused on the role of social factors in attitude phenomena (Prislin & Wood, 2005). However, attitudinal phenomena – acquisition, change, and enactment – occur in intragroup and intergroup contexts. This is true even in domains that appear to be highly individualistic, such as health behaviours. Thus, it is critical to understand the ways in which the processes associated with group membership and social identity influence attitudinal phenomena.

In the present chapter, we present a social identity theory of attitudes that draws on, integrates, and extends basic principles of social identity theory, broadly conceived. We argue that social identity is an organising and unifying construct that accounts for attitude processes. Such an integrative review is timely because, within the attitude field, there is no integrative account of the impact of social context and social identity on attitudes and attitudinal phenomena – attitude researchers have no single place to go to learn what social identity theory has to say about attitudes and attitude phenomena.

In addition, although there has been interest in attitudes as an outcome in social identity research (i.e., stereotypes and prejudice), attitudes and attitudinal phenomena have not been an explicit or central focus in social identity research and, as a result, are somewhat understudied and under-theorised. Social identity researchers largely mention attitudes only in passing.

In this chapter, we argue that although attitudes have an intra-individual dimension, they are socially formed, socially configured and socially enacted. That is, we acquire our attitudes from others, they are mutated in social interaction, and their expression in discourse and action is framed by the social context. As argued by Sherif, "man's socialization is revealed mainly in his attitudes formed in relation to the values or norms of his reference group or groups" (1936, p. 203). Attitudes are grounded in social consensus defined by group membership – many, if not most, of our attitudes reflect and even define the groups that we belong to or identify with. Attitude phenomena are impacted significantly by social identity processes – they are socially structured and grounded in social consensus, group memberships, and social identities. Our approach to attitudes situates attitudes within a more elaborated analysis of the social context, a context in which socio-historical, socio-structural, and ideological factors impact upon the formation, stability, and expression of attitudes.

In this chapter, we outline the advantages of a social identity approach to attitudes, emphasizing the contribution of such an approach to our understanding of attitudes and attitudinal phenomena and describing theory and reviewing research conducted primarily within our own extended research group over the past 10 to 15 years. First, we provide a brief overview of the social identity approach and focus on what it has to say about attitudes – how attitudes are embedded in descriptive and prescriptive group *prototypes*, how attitudes become group normative, how social

categorization of self assigns group attitudes to self via *depersonalization*, how social identity processes underpin influence in groups and the development of norms.

We then discuss a social identity analysis of attitude change and persuasion. Shared group membership between the source of the message and the recipient of the message has an important impact on the effectiveness of persuasive appeals and attitude change attempts – these processes are dependent on salient group memberships and social identities. Moreover, this shared identity can have direct effects on attitude change, as in the case of group polarization and prototypical leaders (see e.g., Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003), and indirect effects, as in the case of vicarious dissonance (Cooper & Hogg, in press) and minority influence. In this section, we discuss research, based partly on our own work, on referent informational influence theory, group polarization, leadership, and vicarious dissonance processes.

We also discuss the relationship between people's attitudes and their behaviour – put simply, when do attitudes translate into action? More importantly, it is critical to understand the processes involved in translating collective attitudes into collective action – that is, which factors encourage social mobilization. Our emphasis will be on more recent research from our lab that speaks to these issues. We will review evidence demonstrating that strategic concerns – that is, whether one's attitudes and actions will be visible to others – influence the expression of group-normative behaviour and attitude-behaviour consistency (Smith, Terry, & Hogg, in press, 2006). We also discuss the way in which self-relevant uncertainty (Hogg, in press) influences the extent to which individuals alter their attitudes and their actions to be in line with group norms (Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2006). The chapter concludes with a summary, a balanced assessment of the contribution of social identity theory, and a road map for future directions.

The article is based on our own work (with others) reported in the following papers:

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