

A reassessment of Tajfel's Social Identity Approach from a critical psychological perspective

Daniel Schnur

Abstract

Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) grew out of criticism of the social psychological mainstream that emerged in the wake of the crisis of social psychology in the 60s' and 70s'. In contrast to prevailing assumptions at the time that the causes of social action were to be found intra- or interpersonally - i.e., the social only as a relationship between individuals - Tajfel stressed the importance of theorizing the social itself and individual action within it independently. He accused other approaches of individualistic reductionism. His theory grasps the action-guiding social identity in the dynamics between in- and out-groups. For many of the researchers referring to it, SIT represents a "critical" social psychology in the broadest sense, with which it should also be possible to grasp the psychological dynamics in the context of social change. From the perspective of German Critical psychology, the present text formulates central points of criticism of the social identity approach: (1) the untouched dichotomy between the social and the individual, which manifests a subdisciplinary split between a social-psychological and a general-psychological subject, (2) the model-like version of the social as an in-group/out-group constellation, (3) and, finally, inherent in the latter arguments, the different epistemological interests of the various works relying on Tajfel's legacy.

Keywords

social psychology, Critical Psychology, Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) gained influence from the 1970s onwards and is now considered one of the "great theories" (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012) in social psychology. SIT originated as an attempt to explain the so-called "minimal group experiments" at the University of Bristol in the department of Henri Tajfel (Turner, 1996). It is also an answer to questions about the social context of individual action that were raised in the course of the "crisis of social psychology" in the 1960s and 1970s (Marvakis & Mentinis, 2014). At the same time, Critical Psychology (sometimes referred to as Berlin school or German critical psychology; in German: *Kritische Psychologie*), initiated largely by

Klaus Holzkamp, emerged at the *Freie Universität* in Berlin. Holzkamp criticized the dominant psychology of the time and started from similar premises as Tajfel. However, his scientific development was significantly different from Tajfel's and he arrived at fundamentally different categorical conclusions. In the discussion with Tajfel and the authors of SIT, it is striking that they do not arrive at a common conception with regard to the connection between the social and the individual, although it was precisely in the early days of SIT that the aim was to create clarity here on a paradigmatic level. As will be shown, this was already the case with Tajfel himself: In my opinion, a comparison of SIT with the perspective of critical psychology can illustrate this well. First, I will discuss the basic concepts, the context in which SIT emerged, and Tajfel's epistemological position. I then discuss central points of Tajfel's understanding of the connection between the social and the individual from a critical psychological perspective.

1. Basic Concepts of Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel formulated the SIT for the first time as part of his "minimal group studies." Tajfel, born in Poland, experienced the Second World War as a member of the French army and concealed his Jewish identity while a prisoner of war of the Germans. After the end of the war, through contacts with the British military administration in West Germany, he made his way to Great Britain, where he studied psychology and later became a professor. Early on, Tajfel took issue with US-style social psychology, accusing it of mechanistic modeling of individual behavior that could only inadequately explain the phenomena he researched, such as discrimination. He was of the opinion that the aim should be to explain collective similarities, not individual deviations. In debates about the "crisis of social psychology," he engaged in sometimes harsh polemics against the mainstream of (social) psychology at the time and called for the rethinking in the scientific community.

Tajfel noticed that social psychological laboratory studies revealed certain similarities in the behavior of test subjects, which, according to him, required their own theoretical concepts to explain. Tajfel's questions were as follows: How is the relationship of the individual to the social context to be understood? How do people form an image of their social environment and how do they search for meaning in it? And: What are the interactions between individual behavior and social context?

Tajfel formulated his concepts for the first time in concrete terms as an interpretative framework for his "minimal group studies" (Tajfel et al., 1971). The key question of the experiments was under what minimal conditions conflicts or intergroup discrimination occur between two experimental groups, i.e. different behavior towards members of an out-group and members of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel & Turner modeled a baseline condition under which it was expected that no intergroup behavior would occur: Subjects were randomly assigned to a group with no real meaning (e.g., group "X" and group "Y") and were then presented with a list of out-group and in-group

members (e.g., labeled member "4" in group "Y"). The task of the test subjects was now to attribute small fictitious amounts of money to the various individuals on the list. Tajfel and Turner expected that the money would be distributed relatively fairly between the fictitious individuals on the list, regardless of their group membership. However, they observed that even in this arrangement (where this was only indicated by a letter), there was discriminatory behavior towards the other group and preference for one's in-group. In contrast to the vacation camp study by Sherif et al. (1961), there was no conflict of interest between the groups in Tajfel and Turner's (1979) study; nevertheless, the experiment resulted in discriminatory behavior in their decisions by the subjects towards the other group. The mere social categorization - the perception of belonging to one group and not another - was sufficient to give rise to discriminatory behavior. Tajfel called this "in-group bias" or "in-group favoritism": the in-group is preferred, even if "fairness" would not mean a disadvantage. According to Tajfel and Turner, the in-group is concerned with maximizing the difference to the out-group.

On this basis, the authors formulate the theory of social identity: According to this theory, social groups represent a social way of understanding oneself. In this sense, Tajfel and Turner speak of social identity as those aspects of the individual's self-image that result from the social categories to which the individual feels he or she belongs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the concept of social identity, they link the process of social categorization with the motivational basis of individual action: Individuals strive to maintain or improve their self-esteem. Social categories and membership in social groups are associated with positive or negative evaluations depending on the comparison with certain other groups. Consequently, social identity is negative or positive, depending on the evaluation of one's in-group. If the social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals may leave the group and look for a group that is more conducive to self-esteem. Alternatively, individuals can try to collectively improve the status of the group in relation to the relevant out-group.

Tajfel and Turner go on to ask themselves when individuals tend to orient their actions towards the social and when they tend not to do so. They postulate that social behavior can be mapped on a continuum between interpersonal and intergroup behavior. On the one end, one encounters an individual with his or her individual characteristics, i.e. only on the basis of an interindividual relationship. On the other end, one encounters a person only as a member of a foreign group, i.e. the relationship is primarily characterized by the fact that two group members interact with each other on the basis of (assumed/perceived) group characteristics. In reality, according to Tajfel and Turner, it rarely happens that social behavior is characterized by only one of the two extremes; rather, it is usually a position on a continuum. Their interest, however, is the question of the conditions under which social behavior approaches one of the two extremes. For Tajfel and Turner, the *conflict* between two groups is essential: The more intense it is, the more likely another person is to be regarded as a member of a group or social category and the more likely social behavior will approach the "intergroup extreme."

Tajfel and Turner claim to explain "ideological" conceptions of society by linking the continuum between interpersonal and intergroup extremes with a thesis on "belief systems": Accordingly, in the case of "social mobility," individuals believe that a change of their group membership is possible if their own group membership is experienced as unsatisfactory. If individuals have no experience of social mobility, they perceive the social system as so hierarchical or confrontational that the possibility of changing an unsatisfactory group membership is considered unlikely. Social change, i.e. a change in the group constellation, is considered desirable or even necessary in this case. Tajfel and Turner assume that the more widespread inequality in a society is, the more widespread the conviction of the need for social change is.

According to Tajfel and Turner, certain group constellations can lead to social identity being experienced as negative or threatened, but social mobility is not possible due to conflict of interests. They discuss three ways of dealing with belonging to a disadvantaged group. Firstly, one could try to leave the disadvantaged group through "individual mobility" and take off the identity, i.e. the feeling of belonging to the group. A second possibility is "social creativity," through which one tries to change the dimension of comparison with the privileged group in order to upgrade the disadvantaged group. And thirdly, there is the possibility of "social competition," i.e. the in-group tries to outperform the dominant out-group with regard to the relevant dimension of comparison, e.g. the fulfillment of social norms.

The basic concepts of SIT presented here already reveal Tajfel's fundamental criticism of the prevailing social psychological mainstream at the time. In contrast to the mainstream, Tajfel wants to understand the genuine social nature of the individual without assuming that behavior is unilaterally determined by circumstances. In addition, Tajfel attempts to explain how belief systems or ideological convictions can be linked to directly experienced social behavior.

2. Tajfel's Epistemological Position

The development of SIT took place against the backdrop of Tajfel's confrontation with the Allportian mainstream of social psychology at the time. This was particularly evident in his demand that social psychology should do more than examine the relationship between individuals. In particular, Tajfel accused the mainstream of his time of clinging to abstract individualism. According to Tajfel, social psychologists narrowed their perspective when they attributed ideas of individuals only to relationships between individuals (cf. Billig, 1996, 343). The complexity of the social behavioral context is not done justice if it is understood as a mere stimulus. One must begin by conceptualizing the context differently.

For Tajfel, the function of theories is to formulate guidelines for the interpretation of experimentally obtained data. Ultimately, these guidelines are assumptions about the behavior of people in relation to groups and to society as a whole ("society at large").

Turner says that Tajfel occupies an intermediate position between philosophy and atheoretical empiricism, from which he reflects on the social background of the behavior (Turner, 1996, 10). He does not place his own research in a historical-social context, which would probably also run counter to his understanding of science (Tajfel, 1979, 188). On the other hand, SIT is obviously not the result of a random idea in the ivory tower: Tajfel refers several times to the struggle of black Americans in his time to prove the social relevance of his ideas. Only by considering the possibility of social change can one arrive at a social psychology that is appropriate to reality. For him, the choice of research questions is also not random, but rather linked to social conditions and needs and to the relevant ideas and norms of the researchers. This is a central difference to the previously prevailing attitude that research questions and methods are neutral in relation to the social world. This difference has consequences for epistemology: "Instead of proceeding from the individual to the social, which produced reductionist explanations, we needed to start from an analysis of social functions to reach the individual ones." (Tajfel, cited in Turner, 1996, 14).

A key concept is that of the "social context" of behavior. For Tajfel, the "social" are group relationships; from the point of view of the individual, society appears as a group arrangement. Individuals are categorized by societal processes, the significance of which is reflected in individual actions aimed at maintaining or improving self-esteem. To investigate these processes, Tajfel, on the one hand, calls on social psychology to be interdisciplinary, while, on the other hand, he sharply distinguishes psychology from other disciplines:

'Social reality' can be described or analyzed in terms of socio-economic, historical or political structures. Such descriptions or analyses are not within the competence of the social psychologist. But he can ascertain that, for whatever reasons, the system of the relations between social groups is perceived by the individuals located in the various parts of the system as being capable or incapable of change, as being based on legitimate or illegitimate principles of social organization. (Tajfel, 1979, 187).

According to Tajfel, a special quality of individual behavior develops in social contexts, which can be seen, for example, in culturally learned norms: "Society, social structure are the natural environment of human behavior and social psychology's task was to relate psychological processes to that context" (ibid., 19). Tajfel's suggestion that society is more than the totality of social groups raises conceptual questions about the relationship between individual, group, and society. Tajfel merely argues that the intergroup relationships studied by social psychologists must somehow be placed in relation to the "macrosocial" context and can be examined in their "relatively autonomous" consequences by social psychology.

Tajfel sharply distinguishes himself from pure empiricism when he emphasizes the independent significance of theory; however, unlike critical psychology, for example, he does not consider the development of concepts as such empirically. The concepts of SIT merely have to be experimentally

falsifiable. However - and in my opinion this is a central epistemological problem of SIT - he argues that there are certain aspects of the relationship between the individual, group and society that cannot be investigated experimentally. These include numerous SIT assumptions, e.g. the link between self-esteem and group membership, which are based on theoretical assumptions. The same applies to Tajfel's equation of the social with intergroup relationships, the deduction of which is not empirically based.

Ultimately, Tajfel's epistemological position remains committed to experimentation as a method. He argues that the value of experiments depends on the "quality of the ideas tested"; the experiment itself is neither good nor bad, rather it depends on the quality of the hypotheses. One arrives at "trivial findings when guided by trivial ideas" (Tajfel, 1981a, 20). For him, the task of research remains the experimental acquisition of data, although these should be analyzed in the light of theories that do not necessarily have to come from psychology. "I do not believe that 'explanations' of social conflicts and social injustice can be mainly or primarily psychological" (Tajfel, 1981, 7).

Tajfel does not offer a broad methodological and conceptual critique of the Allportian type social psychology, but rather turns the then dominant individual-centered social psychology into a group-centered one. He does not claim to investigate how individuals behave in groups, but rather wants to show how group memberships are reflected in the individual and how group norms and beliefs influence the group behavior of individuals. In other words, his subject is the "group individual" or its behavior. However, he concedes that individuals also have a life outside the group; but this should be dealt with - for example - by general psychology or sociology (cf. Tajfel, 1979). Tajfel has no equivalent to the view of critical psychology, according to which the individual is a genuinely societal being, whose actions relate to sections of a society based on the division of labor: For him, there are only groups and the individual.

3. The "Double Tajfel": Critical Concepts and Methodological Conventions

It is noticeable in the literature that SIT and its further developments (e.g. Turner et al., 1987, Reicher et al., 2010) emphasize Tajfel's critical concern, but simultaneously use his concepts more as state-of-the-art experimental design and as an interpretation template. However, this contradiction was already inherent in Tajfel himself. Stroebe, a companion of Tajfel, writes about critical psychology:

Holzkamp's criticism seems to be quite similar to the objections raised against its individualistic approach by Moscovici, Steiner or Tajfel. [...] However, this similarity is only superficial. While we merely argued for more consideration of the social context in social psychological theorizing, the critical psychology arrives at a much more radical conclusion (Stroebe, 1980, 109f.).

In the face of critical psychology, one must self-critically admit that the context of the discussion of SIT has created a "homo socio-psychologicus" that is more reminiscent of "Frankenstein than the result of evolution" (Stroebe, 1980, 110). The fact that this concession did not lead to a change in the research program is due to the fact that Tajfel and the social psychology he criticizes have similar ideas about the object of research and method. Additionally, Tajfel is concerned with an experimentally based prediction of group behavior. Tajfel's critical stance therefore remains external to the method.

In contrast, Holzkamp does not want to apply critical standards to psychology "in retrospect," but rather starts his critique at the conceptualization stage. For critical psychology, the cognitive interest and goal is the (self-)enlightenment of people about the societal mediatedness of their action, combined with the question of whether and how the societal conditions can be changed.

Tajfel's approach was different: He saw the central problem of social psychology of his time primarily in theoretical individualism, which he no longer considered plausible against the background of the experience of fascism and his own biography. For Tajfel, there was never any question of leaving the methodological framework of the psychological mainstream. Laucken (1997, 247ff.) classifies three types of dealing with the "crisis of social psychology" in the 1970s: These are, firstly, immanent "improving" (e.g. better condition control in experiments); secondly, immanent "expanding" to include new concepts; thirdly, "transcending." Tajfel's approach can ideally be categorized as "expanding," i.e. he introduces new concepts without leaving the methodological framework. This can be seen, among other things, in the reception of his work, which is characterized by diverse debates on the question of what Tajfel "really meant" (cf. Condor, 1996, 286). Michael Billig, an early companion of Tajfel, criticizes the reception that separates Tajfel's empirical works such as the minimal group studies from his texts critical of empiricism - to Billig, both belong together (Billig, 1996). However, Billig does not discuss the question of why Tajfel, himself, never brought together his epistemological position and his research practice. He ultimately remained an experimental social psychologist who reflected on and criticized the restrictions of experimental social psychology along the way.

In this respect, it is understandable that two interpretations of SIT emerged from the debates about Tajfel's "true concern": On the one hand, the one that does not take note of Tajfel's numerous references to the relevance of interdisciplinarity and to the limitations of purely psychological explanations; on the other hand, the one that explicitly refers to the possibility of social change conceptualized in SIT and thus attempts to grasp the historicity of the social (Reicher, 2004, Drury & Reicher, 2009; for an overview, see Schnur, 2021). Many of those who refer to the second reading have accused others committed to the minimal group studies of having turned Tajfel's ideas into an individualistic social psychology (cf. Reicher et al., 2010; Wetherell, 1996). In particular, concepts such as collective empowerment and collective self-objectification (Drury & Reicher, 2009) offer starting points for critical-psychological questions.

However, this group of authors is not so much a scientific community in its own right; for example, it does not run its own journals or institutes. They merely insist on Tajfel's "critical" claims within the framework and community of SIT.

However, Reicher and Drury do not draw any methodological conclusions from the claim to a "more social social psychology" either: As for Tajfel, it is easy for them to criticize the relatively theory-poor formulations of others without focusing on their methodology. Here, too, theory in a way 'hovers' over the empirical data. Interpreting study results in terms of SIT is ultimately left to the individual decision of the researchers. Reicher and Drury's appeal to take Tajfel's entire work seriously repeats his "double track": A real connection between "criticism" and research practice does not succeed. Here, too, a methodologically grounded "outside view" of the subjects ultimately prevails. When, for example, climate activists are studied in Reicher and Drury's research context, their a field experiment has the police act in a certain way in order to then examine how the dynamics among the climate activists change (cf. Vestergren et al., 2018). The conditions under which the groups are formed, which groups there are, who is part of the experiment, etc. - all of this is set by the researchers. Thus, the actions of the group members are not interpreted as a special case of possible reference to the world, but as a reaction to conditions that were set from outside and cannot be influenced. The level of intersubjectivity between researchers and research subjects is excluded (for methodological reasons) and only brought in retrospectively through the interpretative framework of SIT.

4. A Critical-Psychological Perspective

While in critical psychology society is understood as the sum of the mediated relationships between individuals, i.e. society is based on collective and "average" activities (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 233ff.), in SIT, despite Tajfel's claim, there is a dualism between the individual and the social. The groups exist before the individual joins them and is faced with the task of dealing with the consequences of belonging to the group. It remains unclear where the "social context" comes from.

In the phylogenetic deduction of the psychic, which Holzkamp (1983) executes in his *Foundation of Psychology*, groups only play a decisive role in the maintenance of life before the emergence of humans - for mutual communication, e.g. for food intake or warnings against predators (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 114f.). With the production of tools and the division of labor, the societal process becomes increasingly autonomous, which, in turn, means that the existence of the individual or the reproduction of society is no longer directly dependent on individual activities or "contributions" (Holzkamp, 1986, 396f.). Social groups can be understood here as arrangements of meaning; For the acting individual, they represent possibilities and impediments to action mediated by society as a whole. Groups and the norms, ideas, etc. associated with them can therefore serve as a subjective orientation for action.

The "social identity" in Tajfel's sense could thus be understood as an experience that mediates between the significance of the group and the social position and situation of the subject - the contradictory nature of which is not taken into account in SIT. An example of the one-sidedness of SIT is its modeling of the motivational aspect of human action: SIT assumes that the pressure to evaluate one's in-group positively and thus increase one's own self-esteem leads to comparisons with the out-group. Critical psychology understands motivation as an aspect of agency and thus links it to the goal of (collectively) expanding the possessing of societal conditions (Holzkamp, 1983, 402ff.). It is therefore not necessarily about a comparison with a foreign group in which one must "come away" well, but about intervening in and participating in the social process. The idea of the world from the perspective of comparing one's own group is only one possible approach to the world.

In SIT, however, the "social context" (defined by groups) and society itself is one thing. It is only possible to describe action in the group because it remains open how the mediation between group and society is to be understood. The direct and purely situational (present) confrontation between two groups, which is necessary for SIT, makes the model abstract because groups, especially in the ideal-typical constellation of self and other groups, do not act in a vacuum. Due to its model-like character, the SIT interprets all possible subjective action orientations from the outset as part of social identity. Other possibilities are left out. Reicher and Drury (2009) supplement SIT with a perspective on "empowerment," which is to be achieved through social change, but, in my opinion, the basic problem remains: The direct confrontation between two groups is an example of a special situation, even if the representatives* of SIT declare it to be the normal case. Consequently, Reicher et al. (2010) speak of the group-based perception of the world corresponding to their reality.

The following studies cited as examples with reference to SIT take place in contexts in which a dichotomous group arrangement is given: For example, when Trump's supporters are examined during the US presidential election (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). The same applies to a study on the escalation of nationalism in the course of the Bosnian war (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017, 183ff.), where the fact of the war created a friend-foe scheme, as well as to a study on the Scottish independence referendum, where the vote has only two options to choose from (*ibid.*, 215ff.). However, the principle that one belongs either to one's own group or to a foreign group quickly reaches its limits: The emerging nationalisms that Reicher examines in connection with the disintegration of Yugoslavia cannot be understood exclusively on their own terms without, for example, understanding the function of the nation as a specific form of socialization. The concrete groups must ultimately be able to be placed in relation to society, otherwise there are only (manageable) groups, on the one hand, and an unmanageable and not conceptually comprehensible society, on the other. It remains unclear how the connection between group formation and social processes is to be understood.

However, the fact that groups must be mediated by society as a whole does not, conversely, mean that they are derived from the analysis of social conditions. What is essential is the question of the relationship between social structure,

individual group membership and subjective action. With Marvakis, society can be understood as a system "in which the individual subjects act with 'limited' insights due to the social division of labor" (1996, 126f.). From the subject's perspective, the social structure represents the totality of the framework conditions that enable and hinder certain actions (cf. *ibid.*, 128f.), e.g. through certain norms, institutions, but also social groups. Certain compromises between conflicting particular interests of collective subjects are solidified here. This is where concrete subjective action takes place - and even if it does not directly determine the overall social process, the social process is accelerated, delayed, and influenced by subjective action mediated by the meanings. In the examples cited above from SIT research, the conflict between identities -or even the assertion of one social identity at the expense of another- has no conceptual relationship to the overall social process. Ultimately, the concept of social identity in the sense of SIT limits subjective action to the respective group situation.

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Daniel Schnur, Psychologist (M.Sc.), lives in Berlin, works in in- and outpatient psychotherapy. Member of 'Society for Subject-Scientific Research and Practice' (*Gesellschaft für subjektwissenschaftliche Forschung und Praxis*), the association of German critical psychology. Former organising committee member of Critical Psychology Summer School (*Ferienuni Kritische Psychologie*). Interests: History and ideology of psychological practice and social psychological theory. Email: daniel.schnur@posteo.de