Social Structures and Social Status

Maintaining Status and Creating New Meaning



Social Structures and Social Status

People often maintain their social status because they believe it is **not changeable** or because **social and cultural barriers** make change difficult.

Social Creativity

A strategy used when a lower-status group redefines the comparison to protect its self-esteem.

1. **Downward Comparison:** The lower-status group compares itself to an even lower-status group.

2. **Positive Redefinition:** The group emphasizes valued differences (e.g., being warm and caring) that contrast with less desirable traits of the higher-status group (e.g., cold or callous).

Typical Comparison (Higher-Status Group)



- ✔ Higher status
- ✔ More power
- ✔ Often seen as cold or impersonal

Social Creativity (Lower-Status Group)



- ✔ Lower (or less recognized) status
- ✔ Emphasizes valued traits
- ✔ "We may not have their power, but we are more caring, close, and supportive."

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)

How Group Membership Shapes Thinking and Behavior



What Is Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)?

A theory developed by Turner and colleagues that explains how we **cognitively categorize** ourselves and others into **social groups** (e.g., "us" vs. "them").

Depersonalization (in SCT)

A shift in self-perception from seeing ourselves primarily as a unique individual to seeing ourselves as a **representative member of a social group.**

Key Cognitive Processes in SCT

The processes through which a social identity becomes psychollogically meaningful.

1. Social Categorization



We organize the social world by perceiving some people as similar to us ("ingroup") and others as different ("outgroup").

2. Social Identification



We adopt the values, goals, and meaning of the group as part of our self-concept ("this is who we are").

3. Ingroup Internalization



Group norms and expectations become psychologically relevant, influencing how we think, feel, and behave in social situations.

Key Takeaways

SCT explains how we come to understand ourselves as group members.

Depersonalization is not a loss of personality, but a shift toward a shared group identity.

Group identification can shape our perceptions, emotions, and behavior—for better or for worse, depending on the context.

Identity Salience in Social Identity Theory (SIT)

When a Particular Identity Becomes Most Important



What Is Identity Salience?

The degree to which a particular social identity becomes **cognitively accessible** and most important in a given context.

A Key Idea in SIT

Identity is **not fixed**. Which identity guides our thoughts, feelings, and behavior depends on the situation or **context**.

Two Processes That Increase Identity Salience

Comparative Fit

The degree to which the current situation makes comparisons between groups meaningful (e.g., "us" vs. "them").

vs.

Normative Fit

The degree to which the situation highlights the group's values, norms, and expected behavior (e.g., what it means to be a "good member").

- Group values
- Group norms
- Expected behavior

Examples

Moral Identity:
More likely to act ethically when the situation highlights moral values.

Academic Identity:
More likely to avoid cheating when student identity is salient (e.g., academic integrity is emphasized).

In-Group Success:
Increases self-esteem and motivation (e.g., celebrating group achievements or GPA).

Key Takeaway

We are more likely to act in ways that reflect the identity that feels most **relevant**, **meaningful**, and **supported** by the situation.

Identity Salience

When a Social Identity Becomes Most Relevant



What Is Identity Salience?

The degree to which a particular social identity (e.g., gender, student, nationality) becomes **cognitively accessible** and most **relevant** in a given context.

Effects of a Salient Social Identity

Greater Ingroup Bias

People tend to show more favorable attitudes toward their ingroup and greater distinction from outgroups (e.g., accentuating ingroup characteristics).

More Self-Stereotyping

People are more likely to see themselves as similar to their group's typical characteristics (e.g., "we are collaborative"), though they **do not necessarily** adopt every group stereotype.

Example

Gender and Test Performance

Asking for gender before a math or science test can make a gender identity more salient, which may increase the use of gender-related expectations (e.g., performing in line with stereotypes).

Research Takeaway

When a social identity is salient, people show more **ingroup bias** and more use of **ingroup characteristics** in self-perception.

Analysis

- ✓ Identity salience is a key bridge between the situation (context) and group-based behavior.
- ✓ The effects are context-dependent and can influence performance, judgment, and behavior.
- ✓ The same process can support positive outcomes (e.g., cooperation, solidarity) or negative ones (e.g., discrimination), depending on group norms.

Multiple Identities

We Hold Many Identities, and Their Salience Changes With Context



What Are Multiple Identities?

We have **multiple, meaningful identities** (e.g., student, friend, woman, athlete, citizen) that can become more or less prominent depending on the situation.

A Key Claim

Identities are **context-sensitive:** the more a situation makes a particular identity relevant (or "diagnostic") to how we think, feel, and act, the more **salient** that identity becomes.

Examples: The Same Person, Different Salient Identities

In a classroom:
A student identity is more salient (e.g., focused on learning and performance).

At a family gathering:
A family identity may be more salient (e.g., as a daughter, sibling, or cousin).

On a sports field:
An athlete identity may be more salient (e.g., emphasizing team membership and performance).

Implications

- ✓ We can shift between identities without "losing" a single, core self.
- ✓ Salience is influenced by situational cues, social norms, goals, and what the situation seems to require.

Key Takeaway

Our identities are **multiple and dynamic**, and which identity guides us at a given time depends on the **context** and what is most **psychologically relevant.**

Group Emotions

The Intergroup Emotions Theory



Intergroup Emotions Theory

A sub-theory of social identity that explains how **emotions can be shared at the group level** and influence intergroup attitudes and behavior.

Key Assumptions

- Group members can experience emotions that are **common and shared** because of their social identity (e.g., as women, students, citizens).
- These group-based emotions are **distinct** from emotions toward out-groups and can guide intergroup judgments and behavior.

The Process: From Individual Emotions to Group Emotions

1 Individual Experience

An emotion is initially felt and experienced at the individual level.

2 Amplification Through Group Ties

The emotion intensifies as it is shaped by shared experiences and identification with the group.

3 A Shared Group Emotion

The emotion becomes a shared, collective state (e.g., group pride, anger, or fear).

4 Intergroup Regulation

The group emotion helps regulate intra-group processes (e.g., cohesion, norms) and guides attitudes, action tendencies, and behaviors toward out-groups (e.g., support, confrontation).

Key Takeaways

- Emotions are not only individual; they can become group-based through social identity.
- Group emotions can strengthen group cohesion and motivate intergroup action.
- The **direction of** intergroup behavior (e.g., cooperation or conflict) depends on the emotion and group context.

From Social Identity to Prejudice and Discrimination

When and Why Can Group Processes Lead to Intergroup Harm?



A More Nuanced Question

Social identity processes can sometimes contribute to prejudice and discrimination, but they are **not inherently harmful.** The outcome depends on the social context, group norms, and perceived intergroup relations.

Key Mechanisms

Social identity and positive distinctiveness: People are motivated to see their group in a positive light, which can include favoring the ingroup and viewing outgroups less favorably, especially when status or resources feel threatened.

Perceived threat: Realistic (e.g., competition for resources) or symbolic threats (e.g., to values, identity, or status) can intensify ingroup solidarity and increase negative attitudes toward outgroups.

Group norms and context: Prejudice and discrimination are more likely when they are supported, justified, or seen as normative within the group or broader society.

From Processes to Outcomes

A simplified pathway (not a fixed sequence) showing how social identity processes can contribute to intergroup harm under certain conditions:

Social identification
Define the self in group terms.

→

Group goals and evaluation
Seek a positive and distinct group identity.

→

Threat or competition
Perceive risk to the group's status, values, or resources.

→

Ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias
View the ingroup more positively and the outgroup more negatively.

→

Potential outcomes
Can include stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., exclusion, unequal treatment, or collective harm).

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Group identity can motivate **both cooperative and harmful behavior.**
- ✓ Prejudice and discrimination are more likely under conditions of **perceived threat, competition,** and **supportive group norms.**
- ✓ Understanding these processes helps explain when group loyalty leads to **exclusion and harm,** and when it instead supports **solidarity and positive intergroup relations.**

Why Do Groups Matter?



If groups can foster conflict, why do they also sustain us?



Key Resources Groups Provide

- **Belonging** — A sense of connection and acceptance.
- **Shared Meaning** — A common purpose and understanding of what matters.
- **Support** — Emotional, practical, and informational resources.
- **Continuity** — A sense of stability, shared history, and identity across time.

Key Point

Group membership can be a powerful source of well-being, but it is not **automatically beneficial**—it depends on the **context,** norms, and **quality of the group experience.**

The Social Cure: Identity and Health



How Social Identification Can Support Health

Social Identification
Feeling connected to and a part of a group.

→ **Felt Support**
→ **Shared Meaning**
→ **Collective Efficacy**

→ **Possible Health Benefits**
Linked to better mental and physical health (e.g., well-being, lower stress).

Research Evidence

- **Cruwys et al. (2026):** Systematic review of 106 studies (N = 290,816) found a consistent association between stronger social identification and better health outcomes.
- **de Hoog & Pat-El (2024):** Meta-analysis of 115 articles found a small positive overall association between social identification and health behavior.

Key Takeaway

Identifying with a group is linked to better health and well-being, though the evidence shows **association,** not a **guaranteed causal effect.**

The Social Cure and the Social Curse

The Double-Edged Nature of Group Life



The Social Cure: When Groups Support Us

- **Supportive Norms** — Encourage well-being and healthy behavior (e.g., care, inclusion, help-seeking).
- **Inclusion** — A sense of value and belonging.
- **Agency** — Shared goals and collective efficacy (e.g., "we can make a difference together").

The Social Curse: When Groups Harm

- **Stigma** — Negative views about certain identities (e.g., mental health, gender, or minority status).
- **Exclusion** — Rejection or devaluation of some members or outsiders.
- **Harmful Norms and Pressure** — Norms that encourage risky or unhealthy behavior (e.g., excessive drinking, overwork, or hostility).

Research Insight

Lebedova et al, (2026): A review of 14 intervention studies found physiological benefits of group-based programs, but these benefits were not consistent across all interventions.

Key Point

The impact of group membership deppeds on the context and the quality of the group experience.

Belonging Without an Enemy



Groups are sources of identity and purpose, not necessarily rivals.

Key Takeaway

We do not have to abandon our groups to respect another group.

Reflective Question

What allows strong group belonging and respect for outsiders to coexist?

The Social Cure and the Social Curse

How Group Membership Can Support or Undermine Well-Being



The Social Cure

Potential benefits of group identification



- **Sense of belonging** — connection and acceptance.
- **Shared meaning** — a framework for understanding experiences and purpose.
- **Social support** — emotional, practical, and informational assistance.
- **Collective efficacy** — a shared belief in the group's ability to respond to challenges.

The same group processes that create support, meaning, and connection can also contribute to psychological difficulties under certain conditions.



The Social Curse

Potential costs of group identification



- **Restrictive norms** — expectations that discourage seeking help or limit expression.
- **Stigma** — negative attitudes toward psychological difficulties or difference.
- **Harmful behavior** — group norms that encourage or justify unhealthy actions.
- **Exclusion** — rejection by a valued group may have a significant emotional impact.

Key Takeaway

Group membership can be a source of strength and well-being, but its effects depend on the group's norms, relationships, and social environment.

Belonging, Conformity, and Psychological Freedom

Related but Distinct Experiences in Group Life



Conformity

I adjust my behavior in response to group expectations.



Compliance

I respond to someone's request.



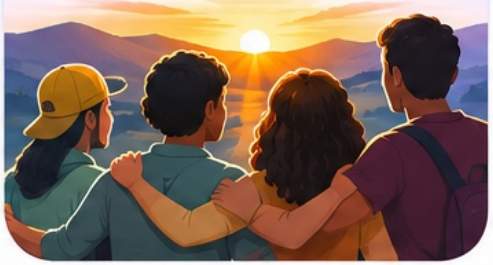
Obedience

I follow the instructions of an authority figure.



Belonging

I experience meaningful connection and acceptance.



Key Distinctions

- ✔ **Conformity, compliance**, and **obedience** are forms of social influence that can shape behavior.
- ✔ **Belonging** is a psychological experience of connection and acceptance.
- ✔ These processes can overlap, but they are not the same.

A Question for Reflection

Can a secure sense of belonging provide the psychological freedom to disagree with the very group to which we belong?

Belonging Without an Enemy

Positive Identity, Meaningful Differences, and Cooperation



The Core Question

Does maintaining a positive social identity require distinguishing ourselves negatively from other groups?

The answer is no.



What This Means

- We can **recognize meaningful differences** between communities without seeing them as superior or inferior.
- We can **take pride in our cultural identities** without devaluing others.
- We can **maintain strong relationships within our own communities while building relationships across community boundaries.**

A Shared Identity

Working toward a common goal (e.g., a community project) can create an additional sense of shared identity.



Coexistence, Not Elimination

A shared identity can coexist with meaningful differences. The goal is not to eliminate group distinctions, but to create social environments in which those distinctions do not require hostility, exclusion, or unequal treatment.

Key Takeaway

We can experience a strong sense of belonging, maintain meaningful differences, and cooperate toward shared goals—without needing an enemy.