Social Identity Theory in Practice

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ABSTRACT

The article is based on literature review. It explores social identity and its related practices on human resources and organizational development (HROD). Social identity theory was originated in the social psychology field of study. It suggests that an individual is likely to maintain a positive identity through sorting others into different social categories, then, identifying himself/herself to particular category(ies) in line with his/her self-identity. To enhance self-esteem, people develop positive views and judgments about their own category (ingroup favoritism) and less favorable ones about other categories (outgroups). The article also lists a few research that had been conducted to test social identity theory. Because of its popularity, social identity theory has been put into practice in various fields including human resources, management, sociology, politics, economics, law, marketing, leadership, merger and acquisition, and others. Examples of the practices favoring ingroups (in line with social identity theory's suggestion), as well as outgroups (contradictory to its suggestion) are also discussed; they are ethnocentrism, functional silos, leadership, cross-functional collaboration, merger and acquisition, and top management incentive based on the overall performance of multinational corporation (MNC). Finally, future research expanding HROD field are suggested. They include job survival rate of organizational newcomers, criteria of reference group and intergroup relation, intergroup conflict, learning transfer system inventory, and other HROD-related theories.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory, Self-Identity, Ingroup, Outgroup, Organizational Practices

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Introduction

Developed in 1979 and refined in 1987, social identity theory is a social psychology theory. This mental process starts with social categorization, social identification, and then social comparison; and the prominent outcome of social identity theory is "ingroup favoritism" (Appaih, Westerwik, & Alter, 2013, p. 518), which tends to allow individuals to prefer their own group members to others. Though ingroup favoritism is common in our daily lives, some practices prefer outgroup members. With extensive review of literature, this paper examines both practices in human resources and organizational development (HROD) perspectives. The findings may serve as the guidelines for organizational management and future studies particularly in HROD-related. The objectives of this study are (1) to explore social identity theory and its HROD-related practices (2) to suggest the future study expanding the HROD field.

Theory and Academic principal

What is Social Identity Theory?

Social identity approach is a two-in-one theory comprising social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). In 1979, Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed social identity theory (Chen & Li, 2009). Tajfel earned Ph.D. in psychology from University of London. He was a social psychologist. Turner had his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Bristol. Social identity theory was an offspring of "minimal group studies" (Reicher et al., 2010, p. 7), a 1967 experiment wherein schoolboys, who hadn't known one another before, had been divided into groups. The schoolboys were, then, requested to reward two other individuals. The result was "ingroup favoritism" (Appaih et al., 2013, p. 518) – schoolboys tended to reward unknown ingroup members rather than unknown outgroups. Thus, the finding suggested that only dividing people into groups was sufficient to solicit intergroup discrimination (Reicher et al., 2010) – 'We' versus 'They'.

In an attempt to refine social identity theory, Turner and his colleagues developed self-categorization theory in 1987 (Hornsey, 2008). Self-categorization theory explains how an individual identifies himself/herself to a group – from 'I' to 'We'. In simple term, in accordance with his/her criteria, an individual breakdown a social group into several categories. He/she, then, identifies himself/herself to a particular category comparable to his/her self-identity (Hogg & Terry, Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts, 2000).

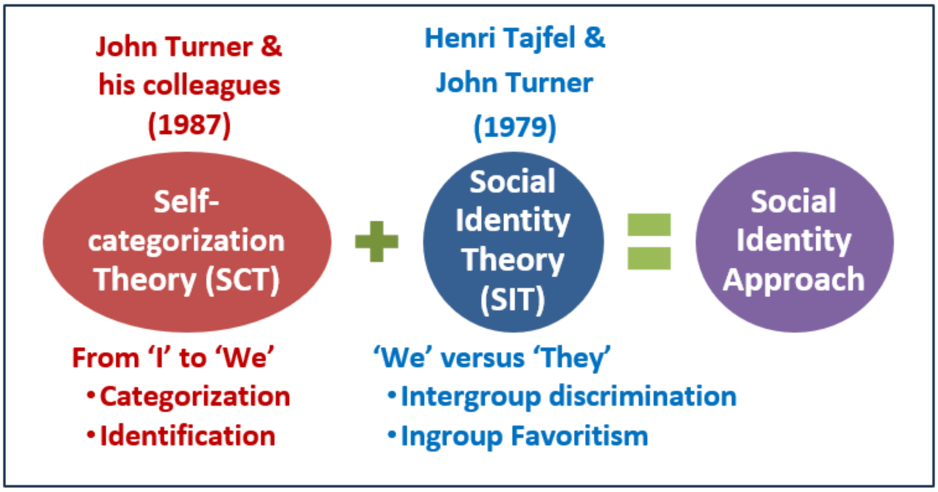

Figure 1: What is Social Identity Theory?

Tajfel and Turner (1986, as cited in Brown, 2000;p.747) identified three classes of variables that might affect intergroup discrimination: "people must be subjectively identified with their ingroup; the situation should permit evaluative intergroup comparisons; the outgroup must be sufficiently comparable and that pressures for distinctiveness should increase with comparability".

In summary, social identity theory is a social psychology theory. It involves three major mental processes: 1) social categorization – an individual sets up categories, then, assigns objects/people to each category; 2) social identification – an individual identifies himself/herself to a particular category (from 'I' to 'We'); and 3) social comparison ('We' versus 'They') – an individual enhances the status of the group to which he/she belongs (ingroup) and/or holds prejudice views against the outgroup (ingroup favoritism). Under social identity theory, an individual views himself/herself not only in term of personal identity – his/her characteristics and their interpersonal relations that distinguish him/her from other individuals, but also in term of social identity - characteristics of social group to which he/she belongs in relation to other groups (Giessner, Steffen R; Ullrich, Johannes; van Dick, Rolf;, 2012). Nevertheless, if the chosen identity is not satisfactory, an individual may find ways to gain more positive distinctiveness of it or leave his/her group (Brown, 2000).

Testing and Advancement of Social Identity Theory

According to Chen and Li (2009), many research had been conducted to test social identity theory and most of them confirmed or even advanced it. For example, in a game experiment with third-party punishment, there were stronger altruism towards ingroup victims and more lenient judgment for ingroup violators (Bernhard, Fehr, & Fischbacher, 2006). In addition, the behavior in Vietnamese village is affected by ethnic groups. Khmer shows strong in-group favoritism while Vietnamese and Chinese shows in-group favoritism against each other but not against Khmer (Tanaka, Camerer, & Nguyen, 2008, as cited in Chen & Li, 2009). Eckel and Grossman (2005, as cited in Chen & Li, 2009; p.8) found that "just being identified with a team is, alone, insufficient to overcome self-interest". Thus, activities arranged to improve team identity such as, team building, group problem solving are likely to streghten team collaboration. With fourty years of social psychological research on intergroup relations, Brewer (1999, as cited in Chen & Li, 2009; p.6) concluded that "ingroup formation and attachment is psychologically primary while attitudes toward outgroups is not".

Social Identity Theory in Practice

The application of social identity theory has been evident in various disciplines.

Examples of Ingroup Favoritism Practices

Ethnocentrism. Polycentric corporations believe that the foreign subsidiary should be managed by local people as host country managers really understand the culture and behavior of the host country market (Dressler, 2013). In contrast to those with polycentric practices, an ethnocentrically oriented corporation perceives that home country's attitudes, management style, knowledge, evaluation criteria, and managers are superior to those available in the host country (Dressler, 2013). Such perspectives lead to certain employment practices. Multinational corporations, with ethnocentric staffing policy, fill key management jobs (in foreign subsidiaries) with parent-country nationals. Rationales include the motive to cultivate a unified corporate culture and tighter control, lack of qualified host-country senior management talent, and the desire to transfer the parent company's core competencies to foreign subsidiaries (Dressler, 2013). However, weaknesses of ethnocentric staffing policy are - discrimination and injustice against host country nationals; verbal and non-verbal language barriers; alien style of management which is perceived as non-participative and mis-informative by host country nationals; headquarter-oriented decision making (not subsidiary);

limitation on the ability of local managers in the subsidiaries to select, recruit, train and promote employees of their choices; and an above-average turnover rate of local employees (Banai, 1992; Horwitz, Ronnie, & Kamoche, 2023).

Functional Silos. Functional silos refer to compartmentalized functional units with operation isolated from their surrounding organizational environment (Motiwalla & Thompson, 2009). As the organization grows, there is a need to split up its workforce into discrete units – each in-charge-of specific functions. Under such functional compartmentalizing, functional groups are held responsible for their respective goals, thus, business processes are better monitored. Unfortunately, these groups naturally develop an unhealthy inward focus on their functional goals, then, lose sight of the overall organizational objectives (Lambert, Stock, & Ellram, 1998). Functional silos are organizational functional departments that do not communicate information horizontally (among themselves). Employees create silos out of a lack of trust in their colleagues and the belief that they only win if someone loses. As a result, their organization loses accordingly. For example, a purchasing manager switches to a low-cost supplier with varying delivery lead times. As deliveries of materials become highly erratic, the production manager is forced to schedule more frequent and shorter runs, increasing total cost per unit. Thus, while the purchasing manager accomplishes his/her objective of low-cost inputs, he/she ignores the effect of delivery delays on the production department (Lambert et al., 1998). In this sense, the adverse impacts of functional silos on organizational performance seem inevitable (Krasodomska, Michalak, & Świetla, 2020).

Leadership. Social identity theory has been one of the underlying fundamentals for leadership. The social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, A social identity theory of leadership, 2001) outlines leadership as “a group process that arises from the social categorization and depersonalization processes associated with social identity” (p. 196). Prototype-based depersonalization and the behavior of followers warrant individuals as leaders, permeate them with charisma, and create leader-follower status differential. Accordingly, prototypical leaders can raise group solidarity and cohesion by highlighting their prototypicality (Hogg, A social identity theory of leadership, 2001).

Group membership based social attraction supplies the leader a higher status over the rest of the group, then, enables the leader to secure compliance with his/her opinions and instructions (Hogg, A social identity theory of leadership, 2001). In other words, under social attraction, socially attractive leader tends to gain compliance with his/her requests – people tend to agree and comply with those people they like (Hogg & Terry, Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts, 2000). Once leader and followers become ingroup members, leader may legitimize his/her status, then, exercise his/her power over the followers (Shafaei, Nejati, Omari, & Sharafizad, 2023).

The ingroup favoritism practices have also been found in other areas, for example, human resources such as talent management, employee segmentation, best employee award (Van Zelderen, Dries, & & Marescaux, 2023), management such as, functional organizational structure, headquarter relocations (Slangen, Valboni, Eerola, & Lindner, 2023; Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2021), sociology such as, social classes, critical theory, glass ceiling, subgroup (Ahmed, 2023; Madun & Kamarulzaman, 2023), politics at both organizational and national levels (Huddy, 2001; Atwell, 2023), Economics (Jetten, et al., 2021), marketing such as, product branding, market segmentation, niche marketing (Rodrigo & Mendis, 2023; Zuliarni, Kartikasari, Hendrawan, & Siregar, 2023), labor union, and professional associations (Asenso-Okyere, 2023; Khan, Latif, Shahid, & Shah, 2023)

Examples of Practices against Ingroup Favoritism

Cross-functional Collaboration. Organizations are struggling to create long-term, more collaborative organizational environments to strengthen their overall competitiveness (Laycock, 2005; Kirk, et al., 2023). Inputs from several functional areas support joint planning, help solve operational problems, work to accomplish goals collectively, promote a mutual understanding of responsibilities, and help improve overall cost efficiency (Stank et al., 1999, as cited in Chen, Mattioda, & Daugherty, 2007).

Eight key factors play vital roles in supporting cross-functional collaboration. They include organizational culture (Barratt, 2004), senior management support (Laycock, 2005), trust (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2006), common goals and clear performance metrics (Holtzman & Anderberg, 2011; Sacramento, Chang, & West, 2006; Larsen, Thernøe, & Andresen, 2003), commitment (Holtzman & Anderberg, 2011), non-hierarchy team structure (Devine, Boyle, & Boyd, 2011), heterogeneity (Holtzman & Anderberg, 2011; Southern, 2005; Thomas, 2005), and reward (Chen et al., 2007).

As a matter of fact, heterogeneity prefers outgroup members. In the context of cross-functional collaboration, heterogeneity refers to “a group of individuals with a diverse set of skills, talents, and experiences” (Holtzman & Anderberg, 2011, p. 76). Homogeneous teams are characterized by having individuals with similar competencies, such as a team of ten programmers. Holtzman and Anderberg (2011) stated that because of its access to a greater information source than a homogenous team, a heterogeneous team can introduce challenges do not present in homogeneous teams, achieve synergy, therefore, are more likely to achieve better decisions and more effective outcomes. Furthermore, winners are more likely to understand that lasting collaborative relationships often involve dissimilar but complementary partners that allocate roles and responsibilities in accordance with their respective strengths (Thomas, 2005). With different perspectives and disagreement, diversity strengthens collaboration (Southern, 2005).

Merger and Acquisition. Giessner et al. (2012) said that the remarkable financial failure of merger and acquisition activities is partly attributable to human factor. In merger and acquisition, two identities of the organization exist - the pre-merger identity of the organizations prior to the merger and the post-merger identity of the merged organization. Merger and acquisition usually lead to "us-versus-them" (Giessner et al., 2012, p. 8) perception in which employees often identify themselves with their pre-merger organization and view the other organization as a potential threat. Such loyalty to the pre-merger organization hinders the post-merger success. Accordingly, the main challenge of merger integration is to encourage a common post-merger identification so that employees cooperate with the colleagues from the merger partner beyond what is absolutely required. Though this process is time-consuming and requires remarkable diplomatic effort, management is tasked to strengthen employees' loyalty with the post-merger organization.

Additionally, Hogg and Terry (2000) stated that lower-status premerger partner will respond favorably to a merger, if it possesses legitimate status and the boundary between the premerger partners is permeable while higher-status premerger partner will respond unfavorably to permeable boundaries as they pose a threat to the status it enjoys. Mergers are time-consuming and move through several social identity stages. A successful merger needs a common post-merger identification, not ingroup pre-merger favoritism. Accordingly, management is encouraged to periodically check social identity and self-categorization processes in the merger (Heidemann, 2023).

Top Management Incentive Based on the Overall Performance of MNC. Agency theory suggests that CEO equity ownership and firm performance are positively correlated (Harris, Johnson, & Souder, 2013). Agency theory suggests MNC to align the goals of the principal (MNC CEO), and the agent (subsidiary top managers) (Fey & Furu, 2009). According to Fey and Furu (2009), the performance-based incentive for subsidiary general managers and other top subsidiary managers that relates to overall MNC performance helps to align principal and agent interests. This incentive is expected to motivate these executives to participate actively in knowledge sharing which, in turn, helps improve MNC performance. In this way, subsidiary executives earn more money when the overall MNC performs better, and thus it is in their self-interest to maximize organization-wide benefits for MNC. In addition, the subsidiary executives are also expected generate spillover effect - to encourage all other people working at the subsidiary to follow the same knowledge-sharing practices to boost MNC performance so that the subsidiary executives can earn a larger MNC performance-based bonus. The bonus motivates subsidiary executives to look outward, not only their local performance. However, in designing incentive scheme, MNC also needs to take Victor Vroom's expectancy motivation theory (Dressler, 2013) into consideration. It makes no sense to motivate people through unattainable targets.

In addition, other studies are showing the practices that go against ingroup favoritism; for instance human resources such as team building, recruitment policy in favor of external candidates (neither internal promotion nor rotation) (Shafaei, Nejati, Omari, & Sharafizad, 2023; Selvi A, Aiswarya, & Geetha, 2023), social psychology such as groupthink - the tendency for a highly cohesive group to reach consensus on its decision making without considering alternatives, leading to poor decisions with potentially damaging consequences (Lunenburg, 2010; Ren & Chong, 2023) and economics such as the generalized system of preference (Shayo, 2020)

Conclusion

Though the primary payoff from social identity theory is ingroup favoritism, organizational practices surrounding social identity theory involve two sides of the same coin – ingroup favoritism versus outgroup preference. Furthermore, a few practices such as, organizational recruitment policy in favor of outside candidate, and generalized system of preference cannot be explained by social identity theory. As a result, a theory has its own strengths and weaknesses and, therefore, may not be universally applied. Accordingly, HROD practitioners whose task is to maximize employees' capabilities, then, organizational are required to pick up the appropriate theory(ies) so that organizational objectives can be satisfied.

Limitation and Future Study

This article is completely based on literature review; thus, triangulation is not the goal. To expand HROD field, future research on the application of social identity theory to organizational behavior/development are strongly recommended. Research on the impact of social identity theory on job survival rate of organizational newcomers is one possibility. Only few research on the criteria of reference groups, as well as intergroup comparison have been found, therefore, situational studies are recommended. Research focusing on the reduction of intergroup conflict by enhancing the value of organizational identity are also encouraged. Approaches to adopt learning transfer system inventory through identifications with the workgroup, organization, and profession can be studied. Research combining a HROD-related theory such as, big five personalities, Victor Vroom's expectancy motivation theory, situational leadership theory to social identity theory can also be conducted.

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