REVISIÓN CRÍTICA

Collective Identity in the Anglophone Social Psychology

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The present article is aimed at offering a non-exhaustive although comprehensive review on the academic activity around the topic of collective identity in English-written Social Psychology during the last years. In our view, a useful criterion to draw the line between the highly permeable sociological and socio-psychological arenas regarding collective identity is that it has been sketched in the latter as an individual property and not as a *sui generis* social entity, in contrast with the dominant Marxian and Durkheimian paradigms in the sociologies of identity. Hence, this review has been made on those perspectives on identity that share a methodologically individualistic perspective that is congruent with the standards of the mainstream Social Psychology, even if it has been developed by sociologists.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century two different theories on identity were developed among sociologists (Identity Theory) and social psychologists (Social Identity Theory). Although they developed independently they share similarities such as the claim that between individual behavior and social structure there is a dynamic mediation of a self which is socially constructed. We will describe both theoretical models, as well as some of the social psychologists' efforts to systematically compare them in the years thereafter, in order to create a unified theory on collective identity out of both explanatory frameworks that have occupied parallel but homonymous universes. Additionally, we will make a journey into the discourse analysis' fields on identity, and we will explore some of its key features. Although this article is not aimed at discussing a particular hypothetical body, we would like to state that our thesis is clear: greater inter-paradigm communication and commonality of goals will lead to greater comprehension levels of broad identity phenomena.

THE SOCIAL IDENTITY PARADIGM

Let us first describe some tenets of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorization Theory (SCT) which have been highly influential in Social Psychology. Social psychologists have followed social cognition theories, which assume that humans have limited cognitive capacities and draw upon group schemata. The use of schemata provides meaning to face the surrounding world, helps to organize ideas and planning behavior, but also entails the loss of relevant information and the reduction of interpersonal communication skills. Through schemata social identities are embedded in sociopolitical contexts and permit people to identify themselves both in terms of group memberships and as individuals (Tajfel, 1981).

Henri Tajfel also stressed that social cognitions and beliefs play a pivotal role on phenomena such as prejudice, discrimination and racism. According to the earliest formulations of SIT there are two dimensions: the *social* (i.e. identification with one or various groups) and the *individual* (i.e. the personal self) which are located at opposite ends in a continuum. Which identification will become more salient depends on the interaction context. More recently Kay Deaux (1993) has argued that the individual and social identities are not easily separable since people need to evaluate themselves positively. She stressed that in order to enhance their self-esteem people usually draw upon their group identity, and tend to evaluate positively groups to which they belong in order to achieve a positive self-image.

Further development of SIT brought about the closely related and equally seminal SCT in the 1980s (Turner et al, 1987), which had also contributed to the perception that there is a distinct European social psychology whose agenda was slightly different from the North American rather individualistic social psychology. Yet, this regional distinction between North America and Europe has gradually been blurred through the 1990's. SCT posits that perceptions of group memberships are represented in people's mind and provide them with orientation as to how should they think and behave in particular contexts such as those involving interaction with other groups. Through perceptions of social identities people categorize themselves and other people in terms of ingroups and outgroups. All these processes have evaluative consequences. For instance, people feel the need to self-enhance or to hold a positive self-concept. They achieve it through comparing their in-group with a relevant out-group drawing upon positive stereotypes of the former and negative stereotypes of the latter.

Thus, SCT stresses how subjective belief structures influence behavior of group members in specific intergroup comparison situations. The theory depicts a dynamic picture of social identities whose stability depends on whether the basic human need of positive social identity is fulfilled or not. That is, at an individual level people perceiving that their group has a lower status position (e.g. a derogated minority) which he/she believes is illegitimate and unstable would be more likely to engage in a movement of social change and intergroup competition, instead of attempting to abandon the group. On the contrary, a lower status group member who perceives that her/his group's status is legitimate and stable, but that society offers chances to pass psychologically into the dominant group, will be more unlikely to engage in social change or show solidarity towards such ingroup mobilization.

One of the main elaborations of SCT has been to describe phenomena of ingroup similarities and outgroup differences accentuation. By means of group *prototipicality* or *stereotipation*, individuals might be able to finally render the surrounding world meaningful; in terms of orientation to action in each particular context they face. The theory described how group prototypical people become depersonalized within the ingroup, without losing their individual self. Therefore, here depersonalized does not mean dehumanized or deindividualized; on the contrary it describes a change in the emphasis on level of identity. As Hogg et al (1995, p. 261) put it: "through depersonalization, self-categorization effectively brings self-perception and behavior into line with the contextually relevant ingroup prototype, and thus transforms individuals into group members and individuality into group behavior".

In this sense, a process named as metacontrast is activated when people tend to minimize ingroup category differences and maximize outgroup category differences. In other words, people asses their own prototipicality (i.e. how close they are from the prototype of the ingroup in terms of values, feelings and action) and strive to achieve similarity—they also do so by comparing their group prototype with relevant outgroups. Since relevant comparison outgroups might change over time—they might stop to be available—and group stereotypes depend on immediate comparative social contexts which can change, SCT sees social identities as highly dynamic and relatively unstable.

In the USA, Marilynn Brewer (1991) found that people seek both assimilation and distinctiveness. Accordingly, human beings tend to align with groups that provide a meaningful identity that includes a sense of solidarity and similarity, but the certainty that their chosen group provides a meaningful identity is constructed in contrast with other groups. A desire of interdependence and security might drive

people to become prototypical; but they also need to feel that they are distinct and do strive to become unique within the group (Brewer, 1993).

Apparently, people experience ambivalence underpinned by a constant dilemma that pushes them to various stages of group development. That would explain why human beings might eventually abandon groups when they feel that their identity groups do not allow them to develop their potentials. This struggle between desire to join groups and feeling secure, which clashes with the need of personal development (individuation versus interdependence) appears to offer fertile ground for future research (Worchel and Coutant, 2004).

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) stresses that category distinctions are very difficult to change because they are linked to the aforementioned human need for similarity/integration and differentiation, and that individuals feel safer when they feel included in groups whose boundaries are clearly delimited. To know who is included and who is excluded from the group when it is unambiguously defined reduces uncertainty (Brewer and Gaertner, 2004, p. 307). She aims at finding solutions to intergroup discrimination and prejudice. Accordingly, she posits that neither high degrees of individuation (i.e. stressing the self instead of the group identity) nor inclusive superordinate categories are likely to satisfy human beings' need for distinctiveness and sense of belonging. Therefore, it has been pointed out that SCT implied competition within and between groups. In other words, people strive for similarity and try to approach the group's ideal identity or prototype; and they do so not only via comparing themselves with relevant outgroups but also with group members who do not fit the pattern, or do it less successfully.

Yet, in SCT most emphasis is put on intergroup competition and conflict, rather than within ingroup comparisons. Even if these theories had stressed that drawing upon categorization and stereotyping people perceptually come to see ingroups and outgroups as homogeneous entities, later some studies found that ingroup solidarity may be particularly important for a minority, and therefore social minorities tend to perceive the ingroup as more homogeneous than outgroups (Simon, 2004).

Social Identity Theories have shed light into processes of social categorization, self concepts and intergroup relations, even if the more and more research has moved toward the study of small-groups and intragroup phenomena. These theories have provided much detail on self-categorization and depersonalization. Yet, neither it is clear nor there is much research on how social belief structures affect identity construction at different levels. The Social Identity paradigm

considers a sociological perspective since it highlights how identity does not rest merely as a sociocognitive process.

The main bulk of social psychological research on collective identities has been influenced by social cognitivist approaches; and we will attempt to review non-exhaustively academic works that have been published in the last fifteen years in English speaking countries. Our literature review is based on articles we found in academia.edu and psycArticles:

- *Majority minority discrimination* or *how to reduce intergroup conflict and discrimination*: Some social psychologists tried to confirm predictions derived from Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness and people's need for assimilation/differentiation theory (Pickett and Leonardelli, 2006). This was followed, at the University of Toronto (Canada), by the study of *negational* identity relative to *affirmational* identity (Zhong, Phillips and Leonardelli, 2008).

- *Collective guilt*: A group of psychologists such as Melinda L. Leonard (University of Kentucky, USA) and Ed Cairns (University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, UK) posited that collective guilt predicts forgiveness among those who identify with their religious group, independent of age and community background (Leonard, Yung and Cairns, 2015).

- *Low status group and acceptance/defiance of status quo*: According to Shaun Wiley (The College of New Jersey) and Key Deaux (CUNY Graduate Center and New York University) and Carolyn Hagelskamp (Yale University) who studied immigrant generations born in USA, meritocracy represents a legitimizing and system-justifying ideology. Further, endorsing it can make low-status group members more accepting of inequality (Wiley, Deaux and Hagelskamp, 2012).

- *Ethnic identification and well-being* has been also studied looking at intergroup coping strategies' appraisals among South African Canadians (Outten and Schmitt, 2015).

- *Sexual identity*, *self-esteem and activism*: Queer identity self-definition is associated with higher collective self-esteem and activism; whereas bisexuality correlated with lower self-esteem and activism on a research (Gray and Desmarais, 2014).

- *Native-American identities in action*. Native communities' traditions and beliefs motivate these groups' collective actions in social conflicts in Canada (Giguère, Lalonde and Jonsson, 2012). Richard Lalonde (2002) is the best

known for an article in which he tried to test the social identity *intergroup differentiation hypothesis*.

• *Collective gender identity and relationships*: A team of psychologist women from Rutgers University (Piscataway, New Jersey, USA) focused on men's own perceptions about women to empirically prove that heterosexual men who felt their masculine identity was devalued were more able to take the perspective of their romantic partner, which in turn enriched the relationship (Moss-Racusin, Good and Sanchez, 2010).

• *Identity fusion*: It can be described as a *visceral feeling of oneness with the group*. The boundaries between personal and social-self become porous and stimulate pro-group behavior (Swann Jr. et al 2012).

• *Collective threats*. Particularly minority groups might be prone to feelings of collective threats. They are thought to be more often afraid that an ingroup member's actions might reinforce negative stereotypes of one's own group. One study by psychologists from the Department of Psychology, Yale University, Geoffrey Cohen and Julio Garcia, concluded that although in White majorities and ethnic minorities collective threats are correlated with low self-esteem, stereotyped minority groups do more often self-report having felt collective threats (Cohen and García, 2005).

• *Stigmatized ethnic minorities*: In the UK, those members of stigmatized groups who activated negative interiorized stereotypes, felt more ingroup stigma and less self-worth and found it more difficult to cope with barriers they faced in work places (Owuamalam and Zagefka, 2014).

• *Collective narcissism and the tendency to aggress outgroups*: Recent research by Golec de Zavala and colleagues (2009), from the Department of Psychology, School of Health and Social Sciences of Middlesex University in London, suggested that unrealistic beliefs in the in-group's greatness promote aggressions towards outgroup members.

• *Collective nostalgia and emotions*: Wildschut and colleagues (2014) approached how some group-level emotions confer benefits to a given group. Nostalgia appeared to be a highly significant element to define, or even predict, group attitudes and behavior.

• *Intergroup Emotions Theory* (IET): Social identification is thought to be a weak predictor of collective action. Some social psychologists from the Australian University of Canberra (Australia) argued that to predict collective intergroup action we should study identification with groups that are already positioned and have opinions and emotional reactions. Therefore, they

posited that it is necessary to combine SIT with IET (Musgrove and McGarty, 2008).

In the 1970's the limitations of the information-processing models adopted in cognitive psychology started to be criticized. For instance, social constructionists and, gradually, discourse analysts like Billig (1987), Wetherell and Potter (1992) or Edwards (1996) rejected the traditional psychological methods, theories and research foci (Hogg and Williams, 2000). One basic tenet of the Loughborough University's group of discourse analysis is that *the sound of argument is the sound of thinking*. Therefore, the intellectual debate and the clash of different ideas are put at the center of thought dynamics and social change, which stresses people's agency in such processes. In *Banal Nationalism* (1995) Billig observed the *taken for granted* nature of the nationalist ideology. Before that he had studied how family groups spoke and argued about the British royal family, pointing out that this institution was daily sustained by being noticed over and over again (Billig, 1992).

More recently, Susan Condor (2006), has carried out studies in topics such as: attitudes to national history and diversity in Great Britain, British multiculturalism and conspiracy accounts as intergroup theories. Both Billig's and Condor's interests are in how national representations may be conveyed through pronouns (e.g. 'here', 'us', 'them') or nonspecific nouns (e.g. 'people'), looking at how the ideology of nationhood is embedded in the unnoticed routines of everyday life that serve to reproduce a nation as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). Interviewees forge a distinction between Englishness (i.e. identified with homogeneity, ethnic nationalism and the past) and Britishness (i.e. identified with pluralism, civic nationalism and historical progress). Yet, there is an implicit moral order of national cultural homogeneity that speakers try to conceal underneath an explicit discourse of national ingroup diversity. Therefore, Condor (2006) points out to the dilemmatic quality of people's accounts of Britishness.

IDENTITY THEORY

This sociological theory adopts symbolic interactionism's tenet that society is not something static. On the contrary, society is constantly in the process of being created. As George H Mead's core-concept of *reflected appraisal* suggests, people identify what it is necessary or relevant to be taken into account, and their actions reflect those identifications—they attempt at achieving their goals bearing in mind others' expectancies. Therefore, they plan their lines of action in a particular situation, trying to fit one's action with other people´s. Yet, the structural symbolic interactionism that is in the base of identity theory posits that there is indeed a pattern of behavior within and between individuals, and that society is not

therefore randomly shaped. Accordingly, a pattern can be found in people's behavior which is quite stable and shaped by society.

One important feature of identity theory is that while focusing on the social structure and how it guides or informs people's behavior, it still stresses the importance of people's agency and of how individual performances and interactions shape and can gradually transform the social structure itself (Hogg et al, 1995).

A great emphasis is put on social roles. Sheldon Stryker (1980) argued that individuals have role identities. Roles have a shared meaning, and people consider these meanings as a guide to behave on ways that is presumed that others consider the ideal or most appropriate way. That is, people are aware that others have expectancies about their performances in a given context and they try to fit their behavior by playing the role as best as possible. Identity theorists have referred to this as reflexivity, since the theory stresses that individuals tend to think what other people believe and expect from them viewed as the object or recipient of a given role in terms of properness and fit behavior. Every role that we perform includes meanings such as being a worker, nurse, peasant, husband, and so forth... These are derived from social structure and culture. However, while society provides a guide as to how we should understand such meanings, not all role-related meanings are socially shared. Precisely, other identity theorist have highlighted that people usually have their own or idiosyncratic understanding about role identity meaning (McCall and Simmons 1978). It can eventually modify our views of an ideal role performance and the way we will behave on a particular role.

At this stage, it seems necessary to point out that there are two main research threads within identity theory. First, there is Sheldon Stryker, whose work has focused on how social structure can influence people's identity and behavior. His has been depicted as the most structural approach. Then, we have McCall and Simmons, who shed much light into how identities are deployed in relation to counter identities (clerk-customer, doctor-patient) in real interaction contexts and situations. They underlined that in real situation we perform our roles in close interrelation with other identities, and that we seek confirmation that our identity performance fits the situation and the counter identities. Otherwise, interaction would reach an impasse and we would have to negotiate our identities, since identity claims need to be confirmed in order to interaction proceed smoothly.

Identity theorists have tried to understand how multiple identities, or diversity of identities, can affect behavior. A main concern has been to find means to predict identity expression in a given situation, but the fact that we can relate to multiple

identities makes it difficult. An important concept in Stryker's identity theory that tries to show that identity expressions can be predicted is that of *salience*, which implies a hierarchy of identities within the self. It also refers to people's *commitment* to an identity. That is, how tied one is to a larger social community (i.e. how strong these ties are). A salient identity to which one feels commitment would be very much likely to be invoked in different situations. Thus a salient identity would be often reflected in our behavior and thus would be predictable.

In their extensive review of psychological and sociological collective identity literature Ashmore and colleagues (2004) listed *social embeddedness* among the elements of collective identity as individual-level constructs. Pointing out that this term had been used mainly by sociologists, they described it as "the degree to which a particular collective identity is embedded in the person's everyday ongoing relationships" (Ashmore et al, 2004, p. 83). The more *social embeddedness* is high the more painful will be to abandon a given social identity. Further, they underscored that Stryker's *commitment* variable is what inspired the notion of *social embeddedness*, and that later even Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke would adopt the term *structural embeddedness* and use it as equivalent to *commitment*. Finally, Ashmore et al (2004, p. 92) end up recommending the use of the concept of *social embeddedness* instead of *commitment*, since they consider the former more measurable at the level of the individual.

In turn, McCall and Simmons (1978) chose another term to tackle the issue of identity expression predictability. Instead of Stryker's behaviorally defined *salience*, they drew upon the term of *identity prominence*, which is described as a rather psychological process whose emphasis is on role identities. Their theory proposes two dimensions of role identities. The first dimension is the conventional (i.e. the role of role identities). Here what is important is how people view or expect that a given role should be ideally performed. People being aware that expectations are tied to social positions just try to fit and perform the role in order to comply with social structure. The second dimension is the idiosyncratic (i.e. the identity of role identities). Here people's agency modifies the performances. What it is important is how I see myself in that role. I can be a teacher, but I am also a nice and open-minded person. Then, even if society requires a proper teacher to be strict and traditional, I view it differently, and I will perform this role according to how I do believe a good teacher should be (nice and open-minded).

Therefore, an important innovation of McCall and Simmons was to show how people can improvise, negotiate and transform social roles according to idiosyncratic views of role identities that they try to negotiate in spite of social

structural pressures. The inclusion of the idiosyncratic dimension has been a step forward in sociological identity studies, given that it would serve to predict unconventional role identity behavior.

To sum it up, according to McCall and Simmons *prominence* would refer to a hierarchy of identities, but its main emphasis is put in how people see themselves regarding their ideals, their desires, or what it is really relevant for them. They somehow equal *prominence* with the ideal self. The most prominent element in the identity hierarchy is how people would like to be (ideal self). Therefore, prominence depends upon 1) whether or not others support this identity; 2) if self-esteem depends on this ideal identity and in what degree–the more self-esteem is at stake the more commitment and investment in this ideal self–and 3) depending on the rewards we can have by sticking to this identity.

To put it shortly, McCall and Simmons identified two different identity hierarchies. On the one hand there is *prominent hierarchy*, which is described as more enduring and stable. It would be linked to our need to attain an ideal identity. On the other, there is the more situational *salience hierarchy*. Unlike Stryker's more stable view of salience, it is characterized as rather fluid. But both Stryker's and McCall and Simmons' theories agree that when others do not support one's role performance negative emotions will surface.

Even among cognitive social psychologists *salience* is a concept that has tended to be depicted both as stable dispositions to behave in certain ways in diverse situations—which would be a chronic identity expression disposition like in Stryker—and as something more volatile and unstable—acute identity expression reactions activated or not depending on the situation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, quoted in Ashmore et al, 2004, p. 97). Therefore, the use of *salience* has been criticized as too varied, confusing and even an obstacle for a necessary project of disentanglement and unification of sociological and psychological concepts so far constructed to tackle the study of collective identities (Ashmore et al, 2004).

More recently, Burke and Stets (2009) have further elaborated McCall and Simmons' insights by emphasizing internal dynamics within the self that influence behavior. They pointed out that when we perceive that our idiosyncratic self in a given situation matches the *identity standard*—which would be equivalent to McCall and Simmons *conventional*—a process is accomplished: *identity verification*. In other words, people verify if their performed identity's meaning is like the standard one. If their meaning and the standard one match individuals feel a sensation of relief. When identity verification fails (i.e. if the self in situation meanings does not match the identity standard meanings) people would tend to modify their behavior in order to reach identity verification and thus recover a

sense of balance. This theory is also known as the *cybernetic model of identity process* in which there is a relation between internal self-meaning and the situation from which springs a given behavior. For instance, in a situation in which I see myself as a strong teacher and others agree, I will be likely to maintain this behavior and continue acting as a strong teacher. But in another teacher performance situation people might see me as weak, and I will risk feeling distressed, because of this lack of congruence between my own perception of role performance is not congruent with other people's perception. Therefore, I might tend to emphasize the "strength" of my performance in order to manage to modify other people's appraisals of my performance, striving to be finally seen by them as a strong teacher (Stets 2006, p. 97).

It can be noted how, although identity theory is thought to be sociologically oriented, its researches have dealt mainly with individualistic outcomes of identity processes. In turn, SIT and SCT generally described as more psychological have been most interested in intergroup relations; as well as avoidance of *we versus them* conflict and racism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our intention along these lines has been that of exposing the tenets of the Social Identity paradigm and of Identity Theory. This pair of theoretical and empirical frameworks had served as vanishing points for multiple and different theories and viewpoints on collective identity, but those developments have rarely attempted a real merging between those frameworks. Although we have not stated a hypothetical body to be tested, we made it clear that the thesis that underlay the whole article was in the advocacy of greater theoretical unification, and thus we find it convenient to highlight some exemplary research.

One rare example of the use by social psychologists of the more sociological Identity theory can be found in the book Identity and Story – Creating the Self in Narrative (2006). One chapter wrote by Bertram J. Cohler (1938-2012), and Phillip L. Hammack portrayed several autobiographies of gay men from different generations over a period of four decades. They were interested in how sexual minorities constructed community to respond to cultural heterosexism. The article observed the difficulties gay men had in the early 1960's to overcome a situation the authors defined as *spoiled identity*. Further, it was stated that at that time gay men lived in a society in which between their psychological experience of the self and the role possibilities available in their culture there was a deep division. In other words, there was not any positive social role available to assume as a gay man, and the structure of society did only ascribe positivity to

heterosexual roles, "since the roles available to an individual are always historically and culturally bound". (Cohler and Hammack, 2006).

More explicitly, Hogg and colleagues (1995) and later on Stets and Burke (2000) detected a need for theoretical merging, or at least for maximization of theoretical congeniality, to avoid explanative overlaps. The former saw that the differences between SIT and IT are, still, bigger than their similarities. Despite the proven usefulness that both theories have shown in their respective domains, not only a conceptual reformulation of the concepts of group, role and person would be required in order to perform a theoretical merging. Additionally, also a theoretical depuration of conflicting explanations, especially at a cognitive level, pitting IT and SIT against each other would be advisable (Hogg et alia, 1995: 266-267). On the other stream of the discussion, Stets and Burke showed themselves much more enthusiastic about a theoretical merging. The authors suggested that most of the differences between SIT and IT are of emphasis rather than kind (Stets and Burke, 2000: 234) and that some of the apparent inconsistencies between both theories, such as the uneven foci either on role or group identities, need to be solved to make SIT and IT compatible. Further, such move might also provide a general socio-psychological and sociological theory of the self with a correct conceptualization of the different levels at which one identification is likely to become salient. That is, it would pay special attention to the personal level, which is something that, according to them, both theories have largely neglected in their uneven framings.

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