

Macro-theories of Identity Formation: A Conceptual Framework

1. Introduction

The rock is volcanic, dry and alien and, from a distance, people climbing on the rock look like small black specks. Suddenly, a flag appears over the top of the rock and the flag and the climbers soon become shimmering figures against the gray, lunar-like surface of the rock.

This rock is located in the Aegean Sea amid an ancient sandy sea bottom that I have always wanted to explore. Unfortunately, the rock has been the center of generations-long disputes. In the nearby islets, the locals (Greeks and Turks) are consumed by the battle of turning a long range of rocky islands of unwelcoming sandy soil into working farms and fisheries.

The climbers move along with only one marker to orient them and no physical objects to limit their wanderings. The flag, on a long post, rises above them like a thin spiral of smoke drifting tentatively in the air with the Mediterranean's gentle breeze. A wisp of this symbolic "smoke" curls with a condescending smile. Planting this flag on the rock can be characterized as a tension-rising strategy that often becomes graduated and reciprocated to demonstrate either a Greek or a Turkish possession of the rock like the one reminiscent of the American and Soviet astronauts planting their flag on the moon.¹

I am only giving you a short version of a longer dispute that emerged in January 1996 when Greece and Turkey came close to

¹ If such patterns of rising tension exist, then it is more likely that coercion will increase. Mitchell argues that the problem with coercion is that "it tends to bring forth a response of counter-coercion plus increased hostility, to be met in turn by increased coercion and further hostility." (Mitchell 1981)

starting a war over a rocky unpopulated island called “Imia” in Greek, or “Kardar” in Turkish. Volkan (1997) characterized the dispute as a war between two NATO partners that “could have erupted over a mere ten acres of real estate.”

This is part of a process of constructing a collective identity contaminated with traumas and schemata of humiliations, resembling opportunities for revenge, such as the rebuilding of the Ottoman Empire or the remaking of Constantinople as the new capital of Greek and Christian Orthodoxy. From a social-psychological perspective, Druckman (1994) argues:

strong, even extreme, attachments to ethnic, religious, national, and clan identities have appeared to push individuals and groups to engage in what often seem to be inhumane and improbable acts toward those perceived to be the enemy.

In this paper I will try to develop a conceptual framework in examining several theories related to the construction of collective identities and how that process is important for conflict resolution analysts and practitioners. Though the case of Imia/Kardar is not a case study in this paper, nor an inquiry into the Greek-Turkish relations, it is only used in the introduction in order to demonstrate that collective identities are important phenomena in conflict analysis and resolution and must be further explored.

Since the Asia Minor War in the early 1920s,² both Greece and Turkey have been engaged in a constructive de-escalatory trend of negotiated treaties, agreements and other cultural understandings with the exception of a displaced “aggressive manifest conflict process” (Sandole 1999) like the one that erupted in July 1974 over the island of Cyprus between Turkish troops and local Greek Cypriot national guards (including a small faction of Greek forces already stationed in the island). That war was

² The early 1920s was the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire and it gave birth to modern Turkey.

terminated five weeks later with a major ceasefire agreement patrolled by the deployment of a United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and an almost permanent separation of the two major ethnic/religious communities (identities) on the island. This led to the implementation of what Galtung refers to as “negative peace.” Similarly, the Imia/Kardar incident was a part of a long series of disputes that developed into larger scale “manifest conflict processes” over the proclamation of sovereign zones in the Aegean Sea. The Rock imbroglio was the second major incident since the 1974 division of Cyprus when Greek and Turkish navy vessels, air-jet fighters and the army stationed in surrounding islets faced off. From a spectator’s point of view, Imia/Kardar is the story of two groups of people who have been caught in intractable and protracted cycles full of hostile feelings over the last five centuries. In retrospect, the Imia/Kardar dispute is an example of violence that continues over time (at least as latent violence) and, despite the signing of formal agreements between the two countries, the termination of decades’ old destructive violence are still producing potential spirals for retaliations.

On the bottom of these relations are fundamental biological and culture-specific differences that give people an easy means of categorical differentiation that very often reinforced the “we” versus “they” ethnocentric syndrome. Ethnocentrism is defined as

the view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything.... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior...and looks with contempt to outsiders (Sumner 1906 in LeVine and Campbell 1972)

2. Conceptual Framework

What is Identity?

Pruitt (2001) differentiates between individual and group identities. Interested more in the latter, Pruitt distinguishes between high, medium and low identities, referring to the degree members are associating themselves with the group. In that sense, he argues that in small groups (family, clan, local community) members are more likely to feel close to other members than in larger groups (nations, regions) which is defined as “a shared feeling of we-ness among group members that enhances group functioning” (Pruitt 2001)

Levels of Identity

All human beings pass through several developmental stages during their lifetime and grow up in environments dominated by their physical surroundings, family, schools, and culture. All these surroundings are filled with physical, psychological and social conditions that shape the instincts and genes we have inherited from our ancestors. As we mature and learn how to draw upon both secular and spiritual resources within ourselves (a holistic paradigm) to exercise our intuition, skills, abilities and perhaps our freedom of will, we discover that we have various tendencies, habits, or worldviews that may conflict with perceptions of what is ethical or best in a situation. If one’s identity is composed largely of one’s origins, it is also important to note that this identity is not immutable. In that respect, identities can be separated between four levels of analysis beginning from the micro, meso, macro and global levels. Indeed, I hypothesize that identity formation at all levels, micro, meso, macro and global, are contingent on a situation and context and is, to a certain extent, subject for change and transformation.

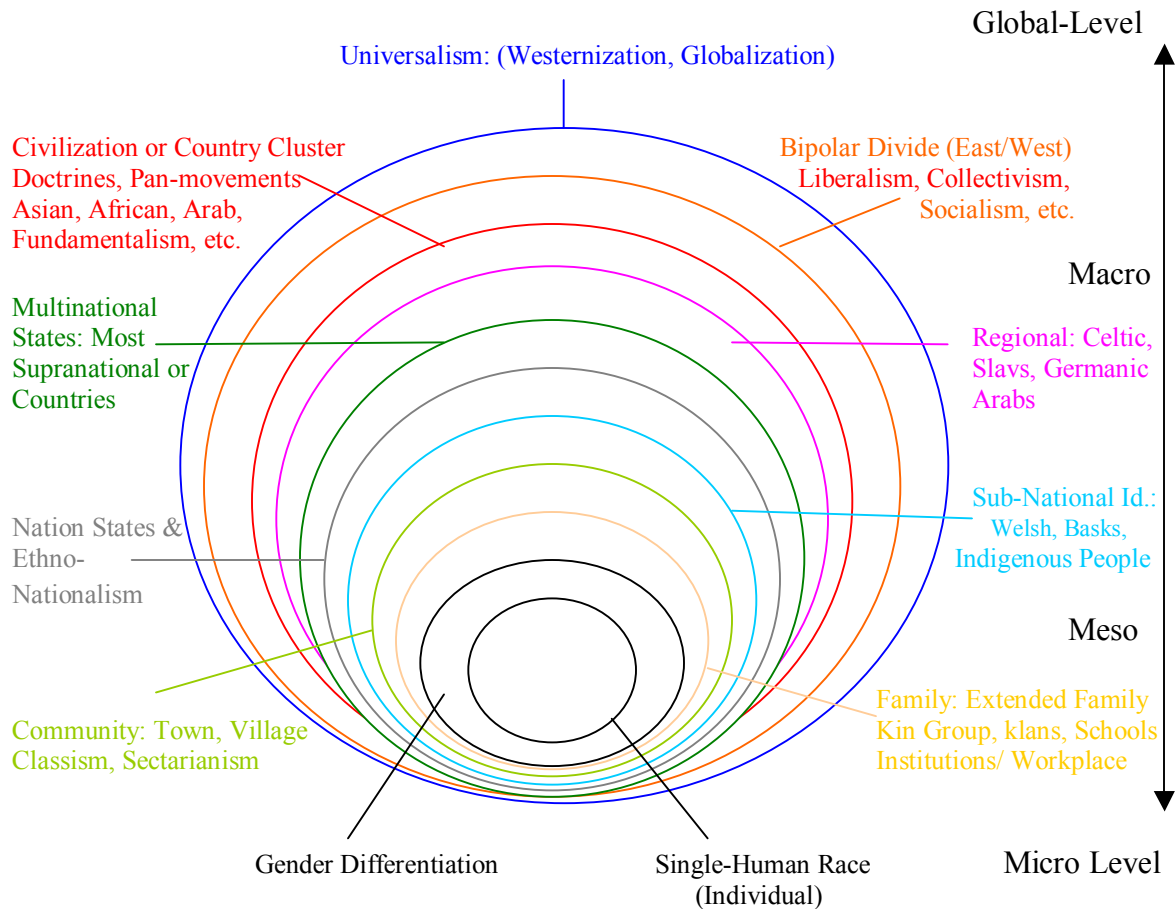
According to the following map, (figure i) individual and collective identities are depicted as very dynamic phenomena (constructed-deconstructed and reconstructed) and are the end results of various factors such as: historical, social and cultural continuity; geographic reality that affects local human biological

appearances; a belief of common roots in history; and other mentally constructed schemata and symbols that differentiates one form of collective identity from another.

The core element in all forms of identity is the biological reality that all human beings are one race with many wonderful variations. At the micro level, and in almost every society, individuals are taught the behaviors expected only of boys and only of girls. Children's gender identities develop around the cultural lessons of "masculine" equals "boy" and "feminine" equals "girl." At the meso and macro levels, the lessons learned at the micro level are also reinforced through interaction within other circles that form collective identities such as, family, schools, neighborhoods, workplace, religious institutions, political organizations and system of administration, the military and ideologies and other circles (see the figure below) that are either positive or negative reinforcements for their developing self and collective identities. Finally, when individuals and groups begin to define and differentiate themselves, they almost invariably develop some prejudices for their own group and often against the other group.

One example of social programming taught to most is that one's gender and racial identity is paramount to social success in life. Further, cultural masculine and feminine behavior and appearance ideals are used to establish and maintain personal, cultural, national, international and global power relationships among individuals, businesses and governments and other actors from the micro to the global levels of interaction.

Figure I: The Nested Worldview of Identities



Intensity

In an idealistic world, everyone would have the right to his or her own opinion. However, in many societies social, political and economic institutions try to force their belief system on their constituencies. Very often, group elites attempt to manipulate people's beliefs by rewarding and punishing certain attitudes and behaviors (Kedourie 1998). Strong psychological programming tends to produce individuals and groups who stubbornly adhere to the dogmas instilled in them by the institutions. Thus, the combination of many isms, such as religious fundamentalism and nationalistic patriotism which are often instilled in people through the family and religious, social and political organizations, can lead to the blindness that supports in-group policies and hatred toward anything vaguely referred to as out-group beliefs. In that sense, racial, gender, class, ethnic, religious and other identity-based differences remain the primary sources in promoting and maintain inequality and oppression in many heterogeneous societies with its fundamental premise of unequal distribution of power. However, over the years many societies have promoted social change through heterogeneity, respect and equality among identity groups. Therefore, what differentiates these societies from others is the intensity or the strength of the core belief system of the identity that is maintained throughout time. From this perspective, identities (at all levels of analysis) are separated between their degrees of intensity on the spectrum from very fluid to fundamentally durable.

Fluid Identities

Fluid identities are more likely to change while circumstances in the surrounding environments are changing. Some individual members of larger collective identities might

demonstrate more fluid identities relative to the group's identity, which sometimes can be very dogmatic. For example, two-thirds of the "Americans" in some public polls supported the war in Iraq. Also, while a large number of that group of Americans who supported the war maintained a nationalistic identity, some did so for patriotic reasons. Others were trapped in the dilemma of being classified as less American if they maintained a pro-peace stance.

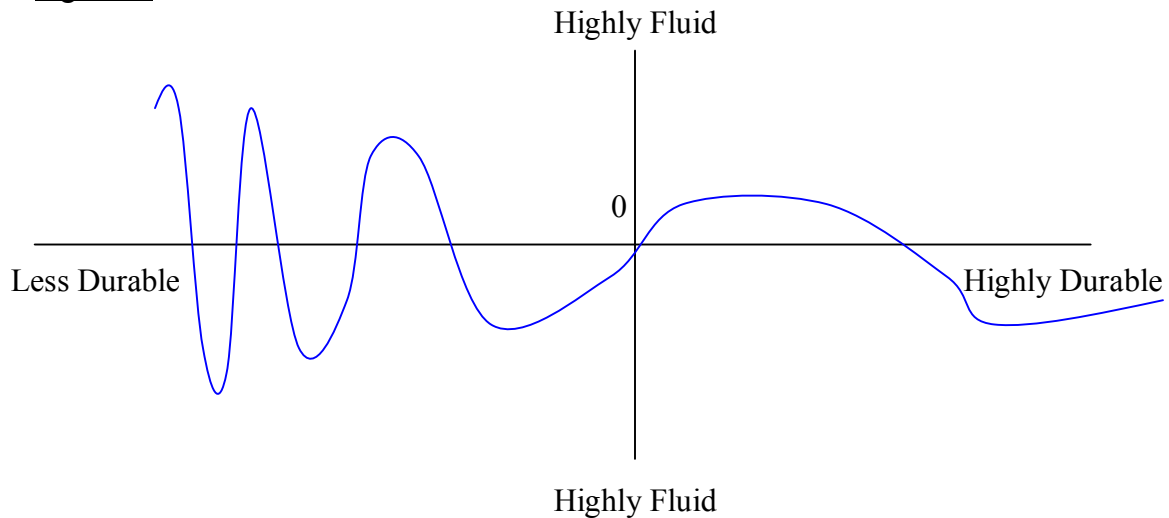
Fluid identities are more flexible in adjusting their collective positions while circumstances are changing. Fluid identities are more susceptible to elite manipulation including myths in relation to the out-group or nation. Participation in conflict or combat causes fluid identities to be more subject to change, (Lynn 1984), or it may more easily change their decisions from escalation to de-escalation, or vice versa.

Durable Identities

Durable identities are less subject to change with changing circumstances. From a conflict analysis and resolution perspective, durable identities may exercise a stronger degree of commitment to their course of action, whether it is violent or nonviolent. Durable identities are very solid and conversion is infrequent. However, durable identities may be sensitive to social changes that occur within the macro, or national level, such as changes in economic conditions, (macro level decline) power and status reversals within and between nations, (Bienen 1995). Constituents who share durable identities are also found to make more credible commitments, (Schelling 1960). On the contrary, though constituents with durable identities are very difficult to manipulate for mobilization (by elites), once they are engaged in conflict they can sustain such participation.

The following hypothetical diagram (Figure ii) aims to differentiate between fluid (vertical axis) and durable (horizontal axis) identities.

Figure ii:



Fluid identities tend to fluctuate more often (see the left part of the figure) while durable identities fluctuate less often and are less susceptible to change (see the right portion of the figure). The closer the identities are to the zero (intercept point) the less fluid they are, while the more stretched across the vertical axis the more highly fluid the identities are. In addition to their degree of intensity, individual and collective identities can also be characterized in terms of how widely the same characteristics are shared in a population. This is measured in terms of spread-ness.

Spread Identities

Spread-ness is measured by the number of people who share the same identity and by the salience of the group as reflected by its activities. The spread-ness it is affected by the type of socio-political and economic system. It is likely that in totalitarian, nationalistic and fundamental regimes the national identity is

widely spread and shared by almost all members in those societies, (Van Ereve 1995). In democratic, pluralistic and non-nationalistic states it is also likely that spread-ness will be strongly affected by people's mobility to freely identify themselves with multiple identities and create less visible cross cutting edges between various groups. Spread-ness is also affected by conditions in which societies are undergoing transition from one political, social and economic system of governance to another.

Widely spread collective identity (ethnic) embraces more popular support for the representatives, giving them more authority to design policies that favor the majority. On the contrary, narrowly spread identities increases a more pluralistic approach at the domestic level in developing policies that would favor diversity. Finally, spread and durable collective identities militate against the influence from the larger regional or global identities. On the contrary, fluid and spread identities are faced with a dilemma in balancing adhering collective values and interests on the one hand, while being sensitive to international and/or regional-global concerns on the other hand.

Identity and Conflict Resolution

Transforming Identities

From a conflict resolution perspective Druckman (2001) argues that collective social identities are influenced by the negotiation process in terminating protracted conflicts. This can be demonstrated by looking at how values and interests interact during the course of negotiations in a conflict situation. For example, when negotiated agreements based on interests are reached, this reduces the intensity of the conflict and reduces polarization (and commitment) and group cohesion. In that sense, Evan and MacDougall (1967) argue that intra-party factions are very important in reaching an agreement with another party. In

particular, Evan and MacDougall argue that agreements occur when moderates within a group manage to pull the extremists towards the center. Similarly, Alexrod (1970) argues that more durable peace agreements occur when the interests of the members constituting the groups are crosscutting.

Also, the negotiation process influences individual and collective identities as they move towards or away from an outcome. This varies accordingly depending on the degree of commitment the members hold over time towards the group, (Druckman 1994; Pruitt and Carnevale 1993). Druckman (2001) argues that this process can move in the opposite direction when groups' values are polarized, thus increasing the intensity of the conflict over interests. If the negotiation process does not lead to a negotiated outcome, meaning that interests are not resolved, then the disputed parties "pull further apart on their values and members strengthen their identity with and loyalty to the group, increasing the group's cohesion," (Druckman 2001; also see Evan and MacDougall 1967).

Many scholars and practitioners in conflict analysis and resolution differentiate between settlement and resolution approaches. The settlement focuses more on values, interests and needs while the resolution confronts these issues. Also, settlements refers to agreements reached through compromise where the process is characterized by giving-and-taking and the outcome by both parties converging towards a mid-point in the options range. Resolution or problem-solving approaches, on the other hand, leads to the integration of interests among parties and avoids the need of conceding or compromising. Other characteristics can be produced by the problem-solving approach such as awareness, empathy building, sensitivity to the other party's interests, attempts to incorporate those into an integrative process, and the like might lead to a new identity formation or identity transformation.

Another example relevant to the practice of conflict resolution is provided by Rosoux (2001) who argues “solving conflict in a durable manner requires a gradual transformation in the way parties represent the past and elaborate their identity.” Specifically, Rosoux developed a framework of rapprochement by analyzing and interpreting the relationship between processes and outcomes from various negotiable treaties signed between France and Germany during the post-WWII era (from the first European coal and steel production) through today. She further argued that collective identities on both sides of the Rhine (pre-reconciliation stage) were mutually exclusive and hostile to each other. However, as rapprochement (intervening variable) started to take place, new identities began to reemerge as they developed through the process of reconciliation. In other words, what Rosoux suggests is that the two identities were no longer a subject for a total rejection (“ethno-nationalism”) but of a mutually negotiated process. Rosoux also makes the argument that national identities (at least for as far as Franco-Germans are concerned) are either based upon exclusion or negotiations. The former, as the author contended, is divided between accentuation (single interpretation and escalation of violence) and occultation, (hindering of rapprochement and absence of interpretation). The latter, or “work of memory” as the author referred to, (national identity) is based on building rapprochement while coping with several interpretations and it is constructed through the process of negotiations.

Conflict Analysis and Identity Theories

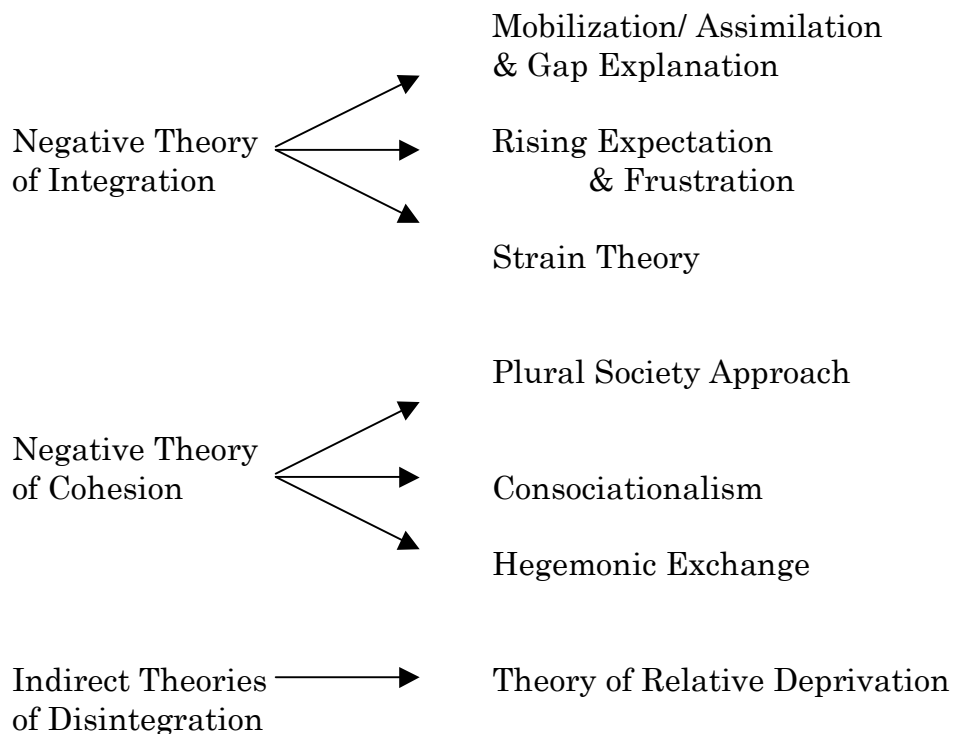
Indirect and Direct Theories

As human history has progressed, multi-identity societies have developed from conquest and annexation; European colonization; population movement and migration; and the politicization of the principle of national self-determination between and after the two major World Wars. The tendency of

ethnic nationalism to disintegrate in different parts of the world has led to many scholars developing theories on the phenomenon. These theories can be categorized as either “indirect theories” or “direct theories.” The indirect theories concentrate on the rise in ethnic nationalism as a result of the modernization process. Direct theories focus on ethnic political mobilization.

Indirect theories can subsequently be grouped into “negative theories of integration,” “negative theories of cohesion,” and “indirect theories of disintegration,” (Taras and Ganguly 1998).

Indirect Theories



Falling under the negative theories of integration, Karl Deutsch developed a paradigm focusing on the concepts of mobilization and assimilation. He believed with the world

modernizing and better communicating, people could better mobilize politically. But their mobilization would sometimes outpace their assimilation and therefore cause national fragmentation and greater ethnic nationalism. Samuel Huntington and Daniel Lerner similarly described modernization as creating “rising expectations” and “rising frustrations.” Clifford Geertz created a strain theory perspective focusing on the insecurity faced by individuals during political upheaval and change, (cited in Ryan 1995).

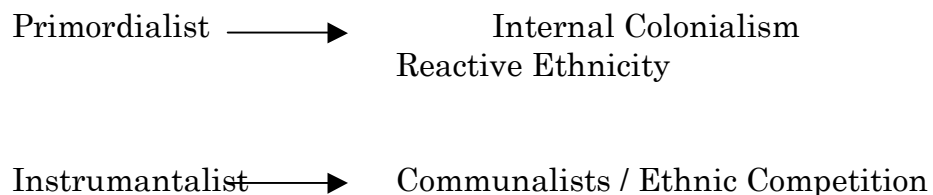
Under negative theories of cohesion, some scholars developed the “plural-society approach” in which different ethnic groups fail to overcome their multiple identity-differences and create a sense of nationalism because of unrestrained economic competition, according to Furnivall. The external force of colonialism can only hold these societies together. Smith modified this by arguing that the different ethnic groups can become a multi-ethnic and multi-identity state through uniform incorporation, equivalent incorporation, and differential incorporation, (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). Secondly under negative theories of cohesion, is the “theory of consociationalism,” developed by Arend Lijphart, (in Forbes 1997). He holds the belief that the way to build a stable democratic multiethnic/identity state is through a framework that includes coalitions of leaders representing communities, proportional representation in parliament, autonomous communities and a power balance among groups. Eric Nordlinger put his own twist on this theory by arguing that crosscutting cleavages may not reduce violence in divided societies but may actually be a catalyst of identity based violence. Lastly under negative theories of cohesion, is the “theory of hegemonic exchange” associated largely with Donald Rothchild. He concluded that in some African states ethnic violence is not a result of different identities but of failed institutions and totalitarian regimes. He also argues that identity-based violence could be prevented through policy changes in allocations of power and wealth. Rothchild argues that the states must act as a

mediator and facilitator instead of an oppressor, (cited in Taras Ganguly 1998).

The final subgroup of the indirect theories is indirect theories of disintegration. In this category exists the theory of relative deprivation developed by Ted Gurr (1993) who argues that collective identities feel the push to take political action when they realize they are receiving less than they deserve and others are receiving more.

Developed chiefly in the 1970s and 1980s, direct theories focus on ethnic political mobilization rather than developmental or modernization problems. An example of a direct theory is the primordialist approach. This approach, which is an independent or explanatory variable, focuses on ethnic identity and the belief that rule by foreigners is degrading to distinct communities.

Direct Theories



A second direct theory is the internal colonialism approach. A main proponent of this theory is Michael Hechter (cited in Gurr and Harff 1994) who uses the word exploitation to describe the relationship between dominant collective identities and that of a peripheral ethnic/identity group. This results in the dominant ethnic group receiving more resources that in turn causes the political mobilization of the peripheral ethnic group. This forms the basis on which the peripheral ethnic group organizes protests and forms separatist movements. Lastly, another direct theory example is the communalist approach. Under this approach,

modernization is believed to affect both peripheral and core identity groups through the erosion of local identities and the reduction of diversity within dominant and subordinate ethnic groups. Large-scale ethnic identity formation is instead promoted, (Taras and Ganguly 1998).

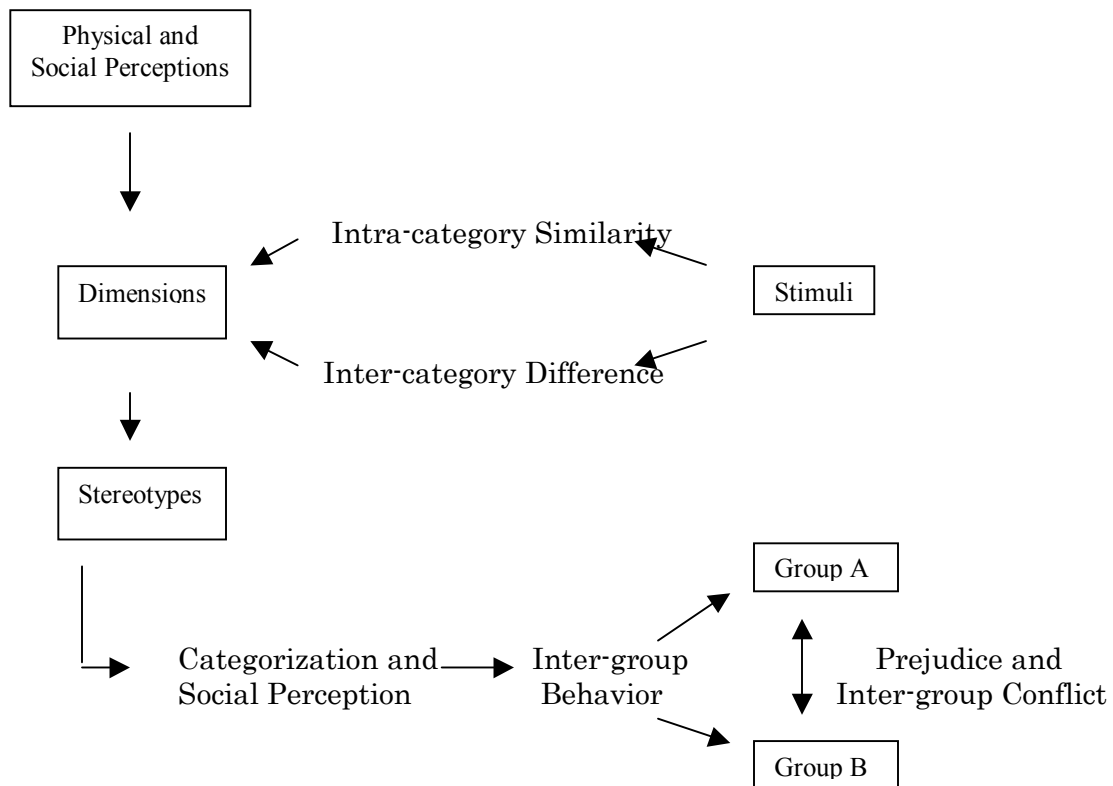
Social Constructivist Theories Identity and In-group / Out-group Relations

The in-group/out-group bias is often ethnocentric, which means that the in-group and the out-group are perceived as having different identities with some specific characteristics based on race, ethnicities, religion, social class, gender, sport teams, etc. Social psychologists describe this process as universal and ethnocentric. Many social psychologists argue that ethnocentrism occurs when small or large groups of people begin categorizing and mentally putting people into coarse and general classes that ultimately boil down to “us” and “them.” Next, people start to discriminate, favoring “us” versus “them,” even when the basis of assortment is totally meaningless, as Tajfel (in Tajfel and Forgas 1981) argues (“minimum group paradigm”), and finally they begin stereotyping. For example, members of the in-group say nice things about themselves and nasty things about the members of the out-group. This temperament is also called “in-group/out-group bias.”

From this perspective, the in-group/out-group bias means that the in-group is perceived as different than the out-group in regard to race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or even in more simplistic areas such as sports. These are referred to as “minimum group paradigm” (Tajfel and Forgas 1981). In addition to the primordial and instrumental theories of identity (see above indirect and direct theories of ethnic-identity), there is another school of thought that argues that identities are socially constructed. The theoretical perspectives regarding collective (social) identity theory have their roots in Tajfel’s (a product of

postwar European social psychology) work on “categorization” and “social perception.” Tajfel’s major research interest was on the inter-group behavior and, in particular, in understanding the causes of prejudice and ethnocentrism (cited by Turner 1996 in Abrams and Hogg 1999). Tajfel’s theory is based on the theory of “accentuation” which simply implies that the categorization of stimuli produces accentuation effect in which intra-category similarities among stimuli and inter-category differences among stimuli are accentuated on dimensions believed to be correlated with the process of self and other categorization (Abrams and Hogg 1999). Moreover, Tajfel argues that the perceptual accentuation effect is enhanced when the correlated dimension (stimuli and categorization) is important to the perceiver, and the effect becomes stronger in the mind of the perceiver because of his/her involvement.

Figure iii: Tajfel’s Model



The above figure is an attempt to visualize Tajfel's theoretical framework and it might not fully represent all of the theoretical aspects of Tajfel's theory.

According to Tajfel's conceptual model, those who fall within categories (in-groups/out-group) start to stereotype and discriminate; favoring the category they belong to even when the differences are totally meaningless between their group and another group -- at least from an outsider's perspective. Several other experiments conducted by psychologist Robert Cave and others who have observed young teenagers in summer camps, have similarly argued that teenagers quickly form groups, develop cultures, collective identities and favor those in their own group and are ready to be aggressive to outsiders.

Collective social identities, according to Tajfel, are constructed because people want to belong to a group ("favoritism") and as soon as they do so they begin to differentiate themselves from other groups. In that sense, this social process will lead to a dynamic interaction between in-groups and out-groups ("ethnocentrism") and increase self-esteem even if their substantial differences are insignificant or minimal within the content of interaction -- "minimum group paradigm."

Identity and Stereotypes in Group Relations

It is likely that almost all human races abhor biases and stereotypes that lead to all sorts of categorizations – racial, gender, ethnic, religious, political, and many more, and we all fall prey to such categories with an appealing ease described in human beings as early as the Peloponnesian wars, to the Holocaust, to the hunting of bushmen (black South Africans) by Boers (white Afrikaners in South Africa), to the ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia. From the social cognitive approach, stereotypes exist cognitively as schemas, or cognitive structures, and facilitate cognitive processing by directing attention and

conserving cognitive resources, (Augoustinos and Walker 1995, in Abrams and Hogg 1999). In that sense, stereotypes can be separated between individual (schemas contained within a particular individual) and social stereotypes that are widely accepted. Locke and Walker (1999) argue that “although all people know the stereotype in a group and that stereotype is automatized in all people, not all people accept the stereotype.”

Similarly, group members have personal beliefs, values, or attitudes that may conflict with the stereotype or with the process of stereotyping. Therefore, according to the authors, these group members are “low prejudice” people compared with high prejudice people who do not experience any conflict between their personal system of values, beliefs and attitudes in accepting the stereotype. At the collective level, Devine (1989) has developed the “dissociation model” to suggest that social stereotypes of major groups in society are well known by all members in society. Therefore, every member in the society, regardless of their personal prejudices and beliefs, can identify the contents of the stereotypes of major groups. This happens to the extent that not only the stereotypes are becoming internalized as memory structures, but they are also becoming automatic, and are by no means inevitable (Bargh 1989). In addition to this, Mackay (1973) states that the context surrounding the word influences the activation of the concept (cited by Locke and Walker, in Abrams and Hogg 1999). It can be further argued that different people in different contexts will activate different sets of information with which to make judgments, even if such contexts or sentiments can be manipulated from group leaders.

In conclusion, Turner (1981) argues that there is more bias against groups that are more similar in status to one’s own party. Therefore, groups that are roughly equal in status are more likely to compete for status. In addition, Hogg and Turner (1987) argue that an increase in the conformity to a perceived group norm is attributed to group categorization and increases self-esteem. Also,

very often, as Taylor (1981) suggests, people who constitute a numerical minority in an organization become the focus of attention from the majority. Oakes et al (1995) found that as members of groups interact over a period of time, perceptions of the group become more homogeneous as well, and members of each group are more likely to be described in group-stereotypic terms.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, collective identities are very complex and dynamic social phenomena. From a conflict analysis and resolution perspective, the picture becomes even more complex in trying to design conflict termination and sustainable peace strategies in post-conflict societies where the populations are comprised of multiple identity groups and multiple local cultures, such as military elites, paramilitaries, groups that have strong and durable religious affiliations and others with strong ethnic and ideological attachments. For example, in some places the military elite may develop deeply durable (resisting change with alter circumstances) and coerced (identity formation) identities making the change from a conflict-oriented mentality to a collaborative conflict resolution state of affairs almost impossible. Also, some groups may maintain fluid identities and favor problem-solving (resolution) approaches to the conflict. In that sense, it can be hypothesized that these groups may show higher participation in confidence building activities than durable and coerced identities that might favor a settlement or a win-lose approach.

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