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Abstract

Self-categorization theory (SCT) argues that people can perceive themselves as unique individuals or as members of a group (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). SCT is a theory that explains the situations in which people perceive themselves as individuals or group entities and the implications of such perceptions. The target research area of SCT lies in the personal and group aspects of individual's psychological process.

Keywords: self-categorization; theory; categorization; social group; identity; self-categorization; theory; categorization; social group; identity

SCT argues that it is important to understand the psychological nature of the self (e.g., mind, memory, cognition, behavior) within the scope of social groups and membership (Turner et al., 1987). It is impossible to have a comprehensive understanding of individual's self-process without considering the group aspect of the mind and behavior. People live in a socially structured system where there are group-based regularities about proper ways of perception, judgment, and conduct. Once an individual identifies with a social category, he or she is expected to behave as a member of the category. For example, a student is expected to go to classes. As a member of the category of students, an individual should be present in a class when he or she is scheduled to, otherwise the student may be judge as not being a good student.

SCT has guided research in a wide range of areas including intergroup behavior, social identity, social influence, group cohesiveness, and group polarization. The theory has also been applied to better understand and solve social issues regarding stereotype, prejudice, and discriminative behavior.

Levels of self-categorization

SCT proposed that individuals define themselves at three levels of abstraction – the interpersonal level, the intergroup level, and the superordinate level (Turner et al., 1987). The three levels of self-categorization differ at levels of inclusion and result in individuals' varied judgments on others and themselves.

The interpersonal level defines the self as a unique entity relative to other individuals who are available for comparison (Turner et al., 1987). When individuals categorize themselves at the interpersonal level, they pay attention to their unique characteristics that separate them from other people.

At the intergroup level, individuals view themselves as a member of a social group (Turner et al., 1987). After categorizing oneself as a member of the group, individuals no longer primarily view themselves as a unique being but a group member who share many similarities with other members of the same group. Meanwhile, the ingroup members judge the outgroup members as sharing many similarities with the rest of the outgroup, but the shared characteristics of the ingroup members and outgroup members are distinct. For example, if an individual categorizes herself as a woman, all other women would be her ingroup members and men belong to their immediate outgroup. Once this individual categorizes herself at the intergroup level (i.e., a woman), she perceives all women as sharing a set of stereotypic traits and all men as sharing a different set of stereotypic traits. Additionally, the perceived traits that are shared among ingroup members tend to be positive among ingroup members (e.g., women are caring and moral), while the shared traits of the outgroup tend to be negative (e.g., men are impatient and condescending).

The superordinate level of categorization happens when an individual defines himself or herself as a member of a large social group, such as a member of the country (compared to people in other countries) or a human being (compared to other lifeforms; Turner et al., 1987). The superordinate level is a more inclusive level of self-categorization than the intergroup level. On this level, individuals overlook interpersonal and intergroup differences. Instead, they focus on the similarities shared by the large-scale ingroup and the differences between the more inclusive ingroup and the outgroup.

Stereotyping

SCT argues that through self-categorization in a given situation, people no longer view themselves as unique individuals but members of a social group (Turner et al., 1987). By making the group identity salient, individuals primarily evaluate themselves through the shared traits of

group membership. This process is referred to as self-stereotyping. For example, in a situation where a female primarily identifies herself as woman, she would present herself with stereotypic act of a woman but overlook the characteristics of hers that are inconsistent with the woman identity. Through an increased amount of perceived similarities, self-stereotyping promotes greater liking and trust between ingroup members.

In addition to self-stereotyping, self-categorization also leads ingroup members to stereotype outgroup members by reducing an outgroup members' complex personalities into a few shared attributes and perceive the outgroup members through these stereotypic traits (Turner et al., 1987). Continuing the previous example, after making the woman identity salient, the person judges all males in that situation as members of the male category instead of unique individuals with varied characteristics. According to SCT, the stereotypic traits of outgroup membership are typically distinct from ingroup members' perceived traits. In this way, ingroup members feel similar and as a result close to other ingroup members, while feeling different and distant from outgroup members. As a result, the process of stereotyping also promotes ingroup members' favoritism toward other ingroup members.

Social influence

After self-categorization and self-stereotyping, group members recognize the similarities that they share with other group members. With these salient similarities in mind, group members are cognitively grouped as the same kind of perceivers who view intergroup situations as "us" versus "them". Group members are also motivated and expected to agree with each other in decision-making and respond to a problem with the same reaction. This referent informational influence among ingroup members shapes the norms of group membership and defines "who we are" and "what we do" as a group.

During the process of defining and redefining "who we are" as a group, not every group member is equally influential (Turner et al., 1987). Leadership is proposed by SCT to address the relative influence and power within the group process. The core idea of leadership is that group members pay more attention and endorse more to prototypical leaders than to nonprototypical leaders. Leaders of a group are more influential than other group members because they are more prototypical, which means they are the ideal version of group membership and perfectly embody "who we are". The prototypical leaders represent the beliefs, values, and behavior among people of the same ingroup but do not represent the similarities of the outgroup. Additionally, the group leaders not only serve as a prototype of the group membership, they also have the power to increase the prototypicality of their own behavior that are originally non-prototypical. They can also marginalize some group members (e.g., a minority subgroup) by highlighting their own prototypicality or reinforcing a prototype for the group that only includes certain preferred features.

Salience of Social Categories

According to SCT, there is one salient social category in a given situation (Turner et al., 1987). Individuals may have multiple identities, but we only identify ourselves with one social category under a certain condition. After the social category is made salient, individuals start to act like a typical member of the social group. For example, when a student is in a classroom, he or she may identify oneself as a student, but he or she may instead primarily identify oneself as a son or a daughter when spending time with the parents.

A salient identity is situational. SCT scholars recognized accessibility and fit as two factors that give meaning of a category in the situation where individuals need to make a category salient (Turner et al., 1987). Accessibility refers to whether a social category is

available for an individual to identify with. For example, if the student is at school with other students, the identity of a son or a daughter would not be accessible to him or her in that situation. A category is also said to be situationally accessible if it is obviously relevant in a situation (e.g., the category of college student in the situation of a class). There are two kinds of fit mentioned in the theory – normative fit and comparative fit. Normative fit refers to the extent to which the features of a social category is consistent with the social meaning of the group membership (e.g., it is expected that category of men is associated more with independence and women more with dependence as the pattern of interaction between men and women). Additionally, a social category is likely to fit better if it highlights the similarities among ingroup members (e.g., how they look, what they say, how they act) and the differences between in- and out-group membership (i.e., comparative fit)

Current Research

A number of studies have applied SCT to the research field of media psychology. Some research seeks to incorporate SCT with other fundamental media psychology concepts. For example, Reid and Hogg (2005) explained the third-person effect (i.e., the tendency where people perceive others as influenced by media more than themselves) by differentiating participants' group membership and group status. Media psychologists have also tested the theory in the political context. Research on partisan support examined the effect of party leaders' social influence on fellow partisans' willingness to compromise (McLaughlin, McLeod, Davis, Perryman, & Mun, 2017). Levels of categorization and group membership (i.e., partisanship) of the media source were used to explain hostile media effect (i.e., partisans perceive neutral media information as biased against their side; Reid, 2012). Research has also tested concepts such as

opinion consensus perception through normative fit between the issue and the group prototype (Zhang & Reid, 2013).

SCT has also been used to test media messages in the racial context. Through recategorization with a superordinate category (i.e., human), White participants who were exposed to a minority character and a non-human villain reported less negative attitudes toward Blacks (Ellithorpe, Ewoldsen, and Porreca, 2018). Research in the racial context has also tested the relationship between group prototype and attitudes toward social issues. For example, Mastro and Kopacz (2006) demonstrated that, the more mass media portrays African Americans and Latinos as prototypical Whites, the less likely White audiences attribute negative racial stereotypes to the minority groups, and the more likely the White audiences would support the affirmative race-based policy. In addition, key concepts of SCT such as accessibility, fit, prototype, and norm have been used to understand ethnic media use (for a review, see Johnson, 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the core aspects of SCT as well as current application of the theory in media psychology. Instead of studying individuals as isolated from social experience, SCT offers effective and parsimonious understanding of the person's psychological processes involving both the self and the group. By engaging with the nature of the self and self-categorization, SCT extends our knowledge of the function of mind and behavior.

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