Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

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Synonyms

Group distinctiveness; Identity distinctiveness; Intergroup differentiation; Meta-contrast principle

Definition

A model for group identification which posits that individuals have needs for inclusion and distinctiveness that they seek to satisfy using group identity.

Introduction

Optimal distinctiveness theory was created to explain the psychological motivations driving people to identify with groups. The theory states that humans have two competing motivations: a need to belong and a need to feel unique or distinct. These two needs work in opposition and can be activated or deactivated depending on the context. The theory was proposed by Marilynn Brewer in 1991, and is based on previous research on social identity theory, social dilemmas, and evolutionary biology. This entry will cover the history of optimal distinctiveness theory, its basic tenets, its implications for intergroup relations, related psychological concepts, and future directions for research.

History

In her account of optimal distinctiveness theory’s history, Marilynn Brewer highlights three findings from previous research that were particularly important to the development of the theory (Brewer 2011). The first finding was that in-group preference and out-group denigration are two distinct behaviours caused by different mechanisms. The second finding was that people tend to behave more cooperatively when they are given a shared and salient group identity. The third and final finding was that humans are dependent on group membership for survival. The following section will explain each of these findings and how they relate to optimal distinctiveness.

The finding that in-group favoritism and out-group denigration arise from different cognitive processes comes from ethnographic research as well as experiments employing the minimal groups paradigm. Starting in the 1960s, a large-scale project called the Cross-Cultural Study of Ethnocentrism interviewed members of tribes from various countries about tribal organization and intertribe attitudes prior to colonization. One of the main findings of this study was that group loyalty and
group cohesion did not directly lead to hatred or intolerance of other groups. Many of those interviewed expressed that while they preferred the ways of their own group, they understood that other groups behaved differently. Similar findings were reported in laboratory studies conducted using Henry Tajfel’s minimal groups paradigm. In these types of studies, individuals are placed into groups based on arbitrary criteria, such as preference for styles of art. Studies have found that under these conditions, individuals tend to allocate positive resources or outcomes to members of their in-groups (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). However, when individuals were tasked with giving out negative outcomes, they did not show bias towards in-group or out-group members (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). This suggests that while they are willing to help members of their in-group, individuals are not comfortable directly hurting members of the out-group. Prior to these lines of research, scholars assumed a preference for one’s own group was automatically associated with out-group derogation. However, this is not the case.

The finding that individuals are more likely to act cooperatively when they believe they are part of a group comes from research on social dilemmas. Social dilemmas are situations in which the needs of the group and the needs of the individual must be balanced for both long-term individual and group success. In these situations, behaving in a way that does not consider the rest of the group can lead to negative outcomes. This is illustrated in Garrett Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons,” a parable in which several herders graze their animals on a common field. Individually, the herders would be better off if they had as many animals as possible. However, if all the herders maximized the number of animals they owned, the field will become overgrazed and all the herders would suffer the negative consequence of no longer being able to use the field. So the herders need to work cooperatively by limiting the number of animals they each own so the field remains useful. When this situation was replicated in experiments, it was found that if an individual was given a group identity, and told they shared this identity with the other participants, the individual was more likely to reduce their use of the shared resource (Brewer 2011). In the absence of a shared group identity, the participants tended to increase their consumption of the shared resource (Brewer 2011). This suggests group identity can help facilitate cooperative behaviour.

The finding that humans, in our evolutionary past, needed to be a part of groups to survive and the implications of this fact first arose from research in evolutionary biology. Relative to other animals, humans are not well adapted to living alone. They relied heavily on tools for survival, and knowledge of how to make these tools had to be shared among group members. Hunting in groups also tended to give better results than hunting alone. This has led to the conclusion that early humans exhibited “obligatory interdependence” (Brewer 2011). Being a part of a group was essential to human survival (Baumeister and Leary 1995). This makes the ability to choose membership in effective groups essential as well. If a group is too small, it would not be powerful enough to compete with other groups for resources or in battle. It would not benefit individuals to be a part of this smaller group. However, if the group is too large, more resources are required and these resources have to be shared among many individuals. Eventually, the resources are spread so thinly that group membership is no longer beneficial. It has been suggested that because of this, humans have adapted to seek out membership in groups that are neither too big nor too small (Brewer 2011). This concept is one of the foundations of optimal distinctiveness theory.

**Basic Tenets of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory**

Optimal distinctiveness theory states that humans have two needs they must satisfy (Brewer 2011). The first is a need to belong to a group and feel included. The second is a need to feel distinct. These two needs work in opposition to each other and can be activated or deactivated depending on the situation. For example, when an individual is part of a very inclusive group, their need for inclusion is satisfied, but their need to feel distinctive is activated, causing them to seek out
membership in groups that are more exclusive. The opposite happens when an individual is part of a very exclusive group, their need to be distinctive is satisfied, but their need for inclusion is activated. When the need for distinctiveness is activated, an individual will tend to view him/herself as separate from the group, and use social comparison to make distinctions between oneself and other members of the group. This can happen at both the level of the individual and at the level of the group. At the group level, subgroups within a larger group will engage in social comparisons, seeking to distinguish themselves from other subgroups. When the need for inclusion is activated, however, the opposite happens: the subgroups coalesce under the superordinate group. At the individual level, the person will see him/herself as part of the group, and subgroups will categorize him/herself as being part of a larger overarching group (Turner et al. 1987).

People generally strive to maintain a balance between the two needs. They will choose to associate more or less with different groups in order to best meet both needs and maintain homeostasis. They will also seek to become a part of groups that are “optimally distinct,” which are groups that are inclusive enough to meet the need for inclusion but also different enough from the general population to meet the need for distinctiveness. Members who are already a part of such a group tend to identify strongly with it.

Whether a group is optimally distinct depends on a number of factors. The social context an individual finds him/herself in can have a significant influence on one’s identity or self-concept (Brewer 2011). A certain group may be considered optimally distinct in one situation, but may be considered too broad or too specific in another. For example, a university student may introduce herself as a psychology major when attending an event on campus. At events off campus, however, she may introduce herself as simply a university student, because in this context, she may be talking to people from many different occupations and “psychology major” is too specific a group, whereas “university student” is more optimally distinct. At the event on campus, it is expected that most of the people attending would be university students, so “university student” is not distinctive enough. Levels of need for inclusion and distinction can also fluctuate depending on how secure the individual feels within their own group (Brewer 2011). When an individual first joins a group, they may feel a greater need for inclusion, because they feel insecure about their status as a group member. Over time, they come to feel more certain about their group membership and will start to feel a greater need for distinctiveness. There are also individual, situational, and cultural variations in the extent to which individuals are affected by these two needs (Brewer 2011). For example, individuals can vary in how sensitive they are to changes in need for inclusion and distinctiveness. Despite these variations, the need for both inclusion and distinctiveness is universal and has been demonstrated in a variety of situations.

Optimally Distinct Groups

As noted in the previous section, individuals tend to seek membership in groups that can satisfy both their need to belong and their need to be distinct. As a result, people prefer to identify with minority over majority groups (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). Minority status is determined by the group’s size or power in relation to the general population. Minority groups can be large in number as long as they make up a relatively small percentage of the population, or have limited power over the majority group. Individuals within minority groups have been found to report higher levels of group identification and more readily exhibit in-group favoritism than members of majority groups (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). The reason for this is that minority groups are optimally distinct. Their relatively small size allows them to satisfy the need for distinctiveness, yet they are still large enough to satisfy the need for inclusion. However, one criticism of this explanation is that it can be difficult to determine whether minority group members show greater group identification because they genuinely prefer to be part of this group or if they do so simply because they cannot be part of the majority. To test this, an interesting experiment was devised by Leonardelli in 2006. Participants were
given minimal group tasks from which they were assigned to two groups. Each participant was told that their answers put them in the minority group for one task and in the majority group for the other task. In this way, each of the participants had membership in both a minority and a majority group. The participants were then asked to choose which group they would like to represent in an upcoming social interaction task. To avoid having the participants choose a group based on perceived need for a representative, all participants were told that the group they chose not to represent would be given adequate representation anyway. Results of the study showed that most of the participants (78%) chose to represent the minority group. This implies that even when given a choice between a majority and a minority group, individuals will choose membership in a minority group, as these groups are more optimally distinct.

One important caveat to this finding is that there appears to be an “inverted U relationship” between group size and level of group identification (Leonardelli et al. 2011b; Badea et al. 2010). In other words, only minority groups of a certain size are considered optimally distinct. If the group gets any larger or smaller, it becomes less preferred. This is understandable in the context of optimal distinctiveness theory, as groups that are too small would not be able to fulfill the need for inclusion to a satisfactory degree. It also relates to evolutionary perspectives mentioned in previous sections. A group that is too small would be at a disadvantage when competing against larger, stronger groups, and thus individuals would be less likely to benefit from membership in these groups. Likewise, when the group is too large, it is unable to properly fulfill the need for distinctiveness.

Optimal Distinctiveness and Intergroup Relations

Research into in-group favoritism, the tendency of individuals to prefer members of their in-group over other groups, first began after the development of social identity theory. Using Tajfel’s minimal groups paradigm, it was found that even when participants were placed in arbitrary groups, and held no other social ties to the other members of the group, they still exhibited in-group favoritism (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In tasks where they had to assign rewards to others, participants tended to assign more rewards to members of their own group. Originally, it was proposed that this behaviour was part of what kept groups cohesive, and that it occurred in conjunction with dislike or denigration of out-group members. In essence, in-group favoritism and out-group denigration were thought to always exist together, and be positively correlated. However, later studies found that this was not always the case. As mentioned above, studies in which participants had to allocate positive resources to others, they tended to allocate in a way that benefited members of their in-group. However, when the situation was altered so that instead of giving out positive outcomes, participants were asked to give out negative outcomes, participants tended not to distribute the negative outcome based on group affiliation. This suggested that although individuals tend to act in ways that benefit their in-group, they are less willing to directly cause harm to out-group members. The broader implication of this finding is that in-group favoritism and out-group denigration may not be as strongly linked as previously thought.

Optimal distinctiveness theory provides an explanation for how in-group favoritism can exist on its own. Individuals in optimally distinct groups will show in-group favoritism because they are satisfied with their group membership and wish to maintain it (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). Individuals in groups that are not optimally distinct are satisfied with their group but will still show in-group favoritism in the hopes that this will make their group more optimally distinct. This phenomenon is best illustrated by research on minority and majority groups. Because minority groups tend to be optimally distinct, members of such groups will show high levels of in-group favoritism. Majority groups, on the other hand, do not readily show in-group favoritism. Under experimental conditions, majority group’s members can be “induced” to identify more with their group, by providing the participant with a series of biased questions which
lead them to believe the traits and characteristics associated with the majority group also apply strongly to them. Under these conditions, majority group members have been found to exhibit in-group favoritism. The explanation for why these two groups exhibit in-group favoritism differs. In minority groups, in-group favoritism is thought to be an expression of the individual’s support for the group and of their desire to remain members. In majority groups, in-group favoritism is thought to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the group, and individuals who show in-group favoritism do so because they want to make the group more distinct. This has been supported by findings that in-group favoritism in majority group members is negatively correlated with group satisfaction (Leonardelli et al. 2011b). In other words, the less satisfied a member is with the group, the more in-group favoritism they show, possibly as a signal that the group is still important to the member.

Optimal distinctiveness theory also provides some explanations for how out-group denigration can develop. All group members will generally strive for “positive distinctiveness,” as they wish to be considered better than other groups in qualities that they deem important (Brewer 1999). When two groups deem different qualities important, conflict will not arise because both groups will be able to achieve their own version of positive distinctiveness. However, if the two groups view the same qualities as being important, they are now in competition with one another, and the group that is dominant in this quality will seek to maintain their superior status. Members of the group that is weaker in this quality will seek to challenge the dominant group, or will experience resentment towards members of that group.

It has also been suggested that group members may engage in out-group denigration in order to better meet their need for inclusion. A study conducted by Noel et al. (1995) found that fraternity and sorority pledges were more likely to exhibit out-group denigration than full members. This is thought to be so because the pledges consider themselves to be peripheral members of the group, and thus their membership in the group is insecure. This insecurity would activate their need for inclusion, causing them to engage in behaviour that they believe will increase their status within the fraternity or sorority. Full members of the fraternity or sorority did not engage in as much out-group denigration because they felt more secure in their group membership.

Related Concepts: Sociometer Theory

Sociometer theory was originally developed by Mark Leary to explain the function of self-esteem and the mechanisms that control it. The theory states that self-esteem is a product of an individual’s subjective evaluation of how much they are valued by others (Leary 2011). This is known as relational value, and it fluctuates based on interactions the individual experiences with other people. Acceptance by others raises self-esteem because it signals that the person being accepted is of value to the group, and therefore has high relational value. Rejection lowers self-esteem because it signals that the person has low relational value. Sociometer theory relates to optimal distinctiveness theory, because people have the highest relational value when they are optimally distinct. In order to be useful to a group, an individual must be similar enough to other group members that trusting, cooperative relationships can be established. They also need to be somewhat distinct from other group members, because they need to be able to provide skills or traits the group does not already possess. In this way, sociometer theory builds on optimal distinctiveness theory by explaining how an individual’s self-esteem is affected by optimal distinctiveness, and how self-esteem may act as another motivator for individuals seeking optimal distinctiveness.

Applications of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory and Future Directions of Research

Currently, research on optimal distinctiveness is mostly focused on how it relates to groups or large collectives. However, it has been suggested that optimal distinctiveness could exist at multiple “levels of self” (Leonardelli et al. 2011a):
individual self, relational self, and collective self. Not only could optimal distinctiveness be applied at the collective level, focusing on how individuals relate to large collectives or groups, it could potentially also apply to how individuals relate to each other and how individuals view themselves. At the relational level, individuals need to balance the desire to be intimate with others with the desire to remain autonomous. At the individual level, people need to balance the desire to be unique, with the desire to be similar to others.

Already there is some work being done to apply optimal distinctiveness theory to the different levels of self. Slotter et al. (2014) conducted a study on women in romantic relationships using methods similar to those used to study individuals within groups. The participants were first asked to write essays describing ways in which they were either similar to or different to their partner. The purpose of this task was to prime the participant to feel either the need to be more autonomous or the need to be more interdependent respectively. The researchers hypothesized that these two needs fluctuate, similar to how needs for inclusion and distinctiveness can change over time. Their findings supported their hypothesis. Participants who had to write an essay detailing how they were similar to their partner – and thus had their need for autonomy primed – reported wanting to spend less time with their partner, and tended to report that they felt having differences between partners made for a better relationship. When given a task where they had to choose between winning a gift card for a personal item or winning the chance to go on an experience with their partner, participants who had their need for autonomy primed were also more likely to choose to win the personal item. The results of this study are promising as they show that needs for optimal distinctiveness at the relational level operate similarly to needs at the collective level. They can be primed and can lead to behaviours restoring balance between the two needs. Further research is needed to determine how levels of self relate to one another, and whether achieving optimal distinctiveness at one level of self is prioritized over others.

Another important area for further research is the issue of immigration. There has already been some work done using optimal distinctiveness theory to explain why immigrants assimilate to the culture of their host country to different extents. John Berry’s model of acculturation separates immigrants into four categories based on how they react to the host country’s culture (Leonardelli et al. 2011a). Integrated immigrants maintain their home country’s culture but also take on characteristics of the host culture. Assimilated immigrants have given up characteristics associated with their home culture and have completely adopted the characteristics of the host culture. Separated immigrants do not take on the characteristics of the host culture, and instead work to maintain their ties with their home culture. Marginalized immigrants do not take on either culture, losing connection with their home culture and failing to adopt the host culture. It is thought that immigrants fall into these four categories based on how they view membership in the two cultures. In the context of optimal distinctiveness theory, the host country is a superordinate group identity, and their home country is a subordinate group identity. Integrated immigrants view the superordinate group identity as being optimally distinctive, and thus want to view themselves as belonging in their host country. Assimilated immigrants view their subordinate group identity as being too distinctive, and thus seek out the inclusion offered by the superordinate group identity. Separated immigrants find the superordinate group identity to be too inclusive and will seek out the distinctiveness offered by the subordinate group identity. Future research into this area could help develop a better understanding of the process of cultural assimilation, and could guide future policies and programs concerning the integration of immigrants.

**Conclusion**

In summary, optimal distinctiveness theory seeks to explain the processes and motivations behind group identification. It was developed by Marilynn Brewer in 1991, drawn from the findings of previous studies in the fields of social psychology and evolutionary biology. The theory states that individuals have two opposing needs and that can be
met using group identification: a need for inclusion and a need for distinctiveness. The types of groups best suited to satisfying both needs are typically numerical minorities, and this causes members of minority groups to strongly identify with their group and more readily show in-group favoritism. Optimal distinctiveness theory is related to sociometer theory, as self-esteem is thought to act as an additional motivation for seeking optimal distinctiveness. Future research in this field will seek to apply optimal distinctiveness to different levels of self, such as at individual and relational levels. It will also seek to explain the different patterns and extents of assimilation among immigrant populations, in the hopes of improving immigrant relations within their host countries and reducing intergroup hostility.

Cross-References

- Self-Enhancement Motives
- Self-Esteem and Belongingness
- Social Comparison Theory
- Social Identity Theory
- Sociometer Theory
- Uncertainty Identity Theory

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