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Workgroup 2

Dilemmas in Social Change

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Social Identity Theory describes the perception of “cognitive alternatives” inspiration for members of disadvantaged groups to develop a competitive orientation towards the outgroup and to take action designed to create social change (i.e., collective action). In itself, this is a rather simple idea; disadvantaged groups will only take action to produce social change when they can image a situation in which their group status is improved. However, Social Identity Theory also described four key prerequisites to the perception of cognitive alternatives. First, the individual must identify with the relevant disadvantaged ingroup. Second, individual mobility from the disadvantaged to the advantaged group must be understood to be impossible (i.e., group boundaries must be seen to be impermeable). Third, the status of the ingroup must be seen to be illegitimate. Finally, the present social context must be seen to be at least somewhat unstable.

Research has investigated each of these four requirements and, for the most part, supported SIT. However, greater elaboration has also illuminated a number of dilemmas involving each of these processes. For example, some of the most disadvantaged categories are unable to attract strong ingroup identification precisely because the relevant distinctions are not recognized as legitimate bases for self-categorization (e.g., poverty, physical weight). Also, work on tokenism has demonstrated that even the slightest degree of group permeability (2%) may be enough to greatly reduce interest in competitive collective actions. A number of theories have pointed to numerous mechanisms, both individual and societal, that serve to legitimate even extremely unequal intergroup contexts (e.g., Social Dominance, System Justification, etc.). Finally, recent theorizing has also called into question assumptions made by SIT (and other social psychological models) about the causal linear relationship between key perceived sociostructural characteristics, identity related variables, and social action.

In this workshop, we will consider a number these types of dilemmas faced by those interested in instigating collective action for social change.

Reading list

[Wright, S. C. \(2001\). Strategic collective action: Social psychology and social change. In R. Brown & S. Gaertner \(Eds.\) Blackwell handbook of social psychology \(Vol. 4\): Intergroup processes \(pp. 409-430\). Oxford: Blackwell Press. \(16 MB\)](#)

[Mummendey, A., Kessler, T., Klink, A., & Mielke, R. \(1999\). Strategies to cope with negative social identity: Predictions by Social Identity Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76, 229-245.](#)

[Kessler, T. & Mummendey, A. \(2002\). Sequential or parallel processes? A longitudinal field study concerning determinants of identity management strategies. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82, 75-88.](#)

[Wright, S. C. \(2001\). Restricted intergroup boundaries: Tokenism, ambiguity and the tolerance of injustice. In J. Jost & B. Major \(Eds.\), The psychology of legitimacy: Emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations \(pp. 223-254\). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. \(7 MB\)](#)

[Simon, B. & Klandermans, B. \(2001\). Politicized collective identity: A social psychological analysis. American Psychologist, 56, 319-331.](#)