RESEARCH STARTERS
ACADEMIC TOPIC OVERVIEWS

Social Category & Social Aggregate

Social Interaction in Groups and Organizations > Social Category & Social Aggregate

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of social category and social aggregate and the different ways both phenomena occur and their patterns of social function both individually and in social groups. Both phenomena are analyzed through different lenses which include race, gender, and the theory of distributive justice, which seems to play a significant role in forming group norms. Other terms to be examined include stereotypes and adolescence. Applications will be presented that describe impacts of social categorization and social aggregation on group facilitation and resulting outcomes in building trust will be initiated. Issues of continuing research in these two phenomena will be further addressed, and a conclusion will further support such ongoing research.

Overview

Social categories might be described as a group of people who are categorized because they share the same characteristics. social aggregates might be described as a group of people who happen to be at the same place at the same time, with no direct connection to one another. To better understand the potential relationships between social category and social aggregates, it would be helpful for readers to analyze the two phenomena as independently occurring social phenomenon, which must be analyzed as two distinct, separate, yet simultaneously occurring social phenomenon. While social categories may be focused on improving understanding the tendency for individuals to categorize themselves with like minded, or similar acting individuals, the social aggregate phenomenon tends to operate within the context of the group dynamic that follows when non-specific individuals come together and operate within a group setting.

Social Category

At a social level, people are categorized into groups: ingroups and outgroups (Allport, 1954; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). This process of social categorization is particularly relevant for inter-group social psychology, as the distinction between individuals on the basis of category membership seems to be at the root of group-based phenomena, such as in-group favoritism, intra-group perceptions, stereotyping and prejudice (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971). In connection to other disciplines, theorists have described categorization as a process that operates on stimuli present in the environment, modifying and reconstructing them into new entities (McGarty, 1999; Medin & Heit, 1999). Through the process of modification and reconstruction, otherwise incongruent and disorganized objects become meaningful, assimilated to some stimuli and, at the same time, differentiated and contrasted from others (Brewer, 1988; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994).

The concept of self-categorization (Turner, 1985) and the related concept of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) offer an explanation of how group-and category-boundaries influence a wide range of behaviors, such as cooperation, conflict and interper-

Keywords

Activation

Categorization

In-groups

Social Aggregate

Social Category

Social Identity

Sociodynamics

Stereotypes

sonal trust among individuals (Buchan, Croson, & Dawes, 2002; Kramer, Brewer & Hanna, 1996). In contrast to personal identity, which is "highlighted by thinking of the self in terms of unique attributes," one's social identity comes into play when one thinks about one's similarities with the members of one's ingroup and the differences one has with an outgroup (Deaux, 1996, p. 780).

Category-Based Trust

Previous research has indicated that race and ethnicity are especially strong dimensions along which people categorize themselves and others (Brewer & Campbell, 1976; Tajfel 1982). Second, researchers have long pointed to the effects of inter-group boundaries on interpersonal trust (Tajfel, 1982), predicting that individuals trust in-group members more than out-group members. In fact, Brewer (1999) defined in-groups as "bounded communities of mutual trust and obligation that delimit mutual interdependence and cooperation" (p. 433). Brewer further noted that this trust is generalized to all category members: "An important aspect of this mutual trust is that it is depersonalized, extended to any member of the in-group whether personally related or not" (p. 433). This is the essence of category-based trust. However, it is important to note that individuals within specific groups may or may not specifically interact with one another.

Other studies have

> addressed the role of category-based trust for other types of social categories, such as gender, (Orbell, Dawes, & Schwartz-Shea 1994) university affiliation (Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Yuki et al. 2005), and experimentally created "minimal groups" (Buchan, Croson & Dawes 2002; Yamagishi & Kiyonari 2000) These studies generally report strong, but many times conditional, effects of social categories on trust. For example, Orbell, Dawes, & Schwartz-Shea (1994) found that both males and females expected females in general to be more trustworthy than males. Similarly, Tanis and Postmes (2005) found that when participants could only identify each other by category memberships, they extended higher levels of trust to in-group members than out-group members (Simpson, McGriccon & Irwin, 2007, p. 529-530).

Again, while trust may be more present with in-groups such as in-group trust, every individual within the group may not be interactive, as group categories represent the group in its entirety.

Categorization by Race

Simpson, McGrimmon and Irwin (2007) indicated that group categorization also extends to issues of race. The United States is far more segregated by race than other categories like gender or university affiliation (p. 529). As a result, most individuals are more gender than racially interdependent. For example, American households are far less likely to be racially heterogeneous than demonstrate gender heterogenity (Hobbs, 2005). In further examining issues of race and category activation, Lepore and Brown (1997) determined that when primed with category words, ssuch as the word "Black," people high in explicit prejudice showed a greater automatic stereotype activation than people low in explicit prejudice. However, when primed with a stereotypical term, such as the word "lazy," both groups showed the same levels of stereotype activation.

Additional research on stereotyping and prejudice of African–Americans, women, and the elderly demonstrated that explicit and implicit attitudes may even operate with apparent independence (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Greenwald, Banaji, Farnham, Nosek, & Mellott, 2002; Henry & Hardin, 2006; Perdue & Gurtman, 1990). For example, the degree to which participants unintentionally associate traditionally gendered vocations like nursing with women and construction with men is unmoderated by participant gender or participant willingness to explicitly endorse gender stereotypes (Banaji & Hardin, 1996).

Explicit Prejudice & Stereotype Activation

In addition to the relevance of stereotype activation, Akrami, Ekehammar, and Tadesse (2006) indicated that daily social interaction is not "based on primed stereotypes or social categories, and people, in their social interaction with members of other ethnic groups, tend to base their categorization on the target person's external markers" (p. 519). Lepore and Brown (1997) suggested that stereotyping and category priming can be differentiated. They further argued that people with high and low measures of explicit prejudice might have different cognitive representations of categories and their associated stereotypes. Their research showed that participants with high measures of explicit prejudice tended to automatically activate their stereotypes when primed with specific category words. They concluded that these groups exhibited different activation levels when primed with category words but not when primed with both category and stereotypical words. Also, similar to Devine (1989), they found that people with high and low measures of explicit prejudice did not differ in their knowledge of cultural stereotypes.

Gross and Hardin (2007) suggested that there are "several rigorous ways to test if stereotypes are being used in social judgment," (p. 141) and they integrated the most important of these to demonstrate that "common beliefs about adolescents are indeed used

as stereotypes in judgments of adolescents" (p. 141). One test is to assess the degree to which individual differences in endorsing a stereotype discriminately predict perceptions of stereotyped social targets. From an inquiry perspective, a question that could be asked: "Is a given adolescent perceived as more rebellious to the extent that one endorses stereotypes of adolescents?" Gross and Hardin tested the adolescents' social judgment as follows:

> A second test is to assess the degree to which common beliefs about a group are more easily—or even automatically—associated with that group compared to other groups. For example, are words like "moody" and "risky" and "rebellious" more easily associated with adolescents than adults? A third test is to assess the degree to which an experimental manipulation of the cognitive accessibility of a stereotype discriminately affects perceptions of stereotyped social targets. For example, is a given adolescent perceived as more rebellious when adolescent stereotypes are cognitively salient? (Gross & Hardin, 2007, p. 141).

If explicit, conscious beliefs about adolescents operate as stereotypes, then the stereotypes also may operate "implicitly." Indeed, other common stereotypes involving ethnicity and gender are known to operate in the absence of the perceiver's intentions, conscious awareness, or control (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwedner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005). Given that multiple stereotypes seem to operate in regard to adolescents, this information provides some cogency in regard to previously held concepts.

In summary, categorization and category stereotype activation are fundamentals of social information about social categories. Moreover, stereotypical information is a necessary part the social information we need to understand the social world

Current research has shown that stereotype activation and implicit prejudice are somewhat inevitable, adding support to Bargh's (1999) statement that "evidence of controllability is weaker and more problematic than we would like to believe" (p.361). Based on this evidence, additional research needs to be conducted in determining effects of stereotype on group norms and potential interactions. Such study might involve better differentiating between social categories and social aggregates.

Social Aggregate

Socionomy is the science of social laws. Sociodynamics is a science of the structure of social aggregates, of single groups and of group clusters. Moreover, sociodynamics typically overlap in part with the area which is often labeled group dynamics. The term social aggregate can also be used to describe any physical or conceptual aggregate of humans who are mutually aware of each other and the aggregate they form (Nisbet, 1970, p. 81). On the other hand, a social norm is a social rule that may "prove binding on the overt behavior of each individual in a social aggregate of two or more individuals" (Dohrenwend, 1959, p. 470). Social norms are marked by several characteristics. These include having content known to at least one member of the social aggregate and regulating the behavior of any given individual in the social aggregate by virtue of internalization of the rule and providing external sanctions in support of the rule applied by other individuals in the social aggregate or by an authority outside the social aggregate, or any combination thereof (Dohrenwend, 1959, p. 470). Such rules may include social rules that impact gender, race, ethnicity, and the distribution of justice.

Individual & Social Phenomena

Jasso (1980) theorized that social aggregates are governed by two types of experiences. The first type is that social phenomena are aggregations of individual-level phenomena, and the second specifically impact social phenomena. The first type includes any phenomenon observed at the level of the individual. One example of this theory might explain

> an individual's propensity to criminal activity, which would indicate that the aggregate crime rate should be a function of the mean propensity to criminal activity. The second type includes variables that are not observed in individuals . . . but only in aggregates. This type of phenomena can be described as a group's propensity to dissolution and violent revolutionary conflict. Both types of social phenomena . . . may then be explained and predicted by parameters of the observed distribution of instantaneous justice evaluations. Thus, theorists may suggest that interpersonal relations, within a social aggregate, may be regarded as basically a meeting of justice sentiments (Jasso, 1980, p. 7).

Ransford and Miller (1983) further indicated that "sex-role attitudes and beliefs provide the cultural-ideological context in which relations between the sexes are acted out, thereby representing a social phenomenon. Conflict between the sexes and upward mobility for women in the class structure were hypothesized to be more likely to occur when traditional sex-roles were challenged" (p. 46). For example, The Black Nationalist movement of the 60s and early 70s involved an emphasis on black masculinity (p. 46). Little is known, even currently regarding the effects of this "new" black masculinity ideology on the sex-role outlooks of black males. However, according to this view, socioeconomic status, ethnicity/race and gender are somewhat separate hierarchies, each affecting the distribution of power, privilege and prestige (Ransford & Miller, 1983, p. 46). Ransford and Miller (1983) also maintained specifically that the intersection of race and gender created unique aggregates which they called "eth-genders." This aggregate experience postures that life chances and experiences of assumed patterns could not be anticipated simply by adding the effects of race to those of gender. Further, researchers argue that the joint effects of race and gender would "lead to distinctive sex-role outlooks" (p. 46).

In this example, it is suggested that racial discrimination has "forced black women to take on independence roles now idealized by the feminist movement." Given this evidence, it can be surmised that in one sense black women are "already liberated" and are capable of voicing more consistent support for sex-role

emancipation than white women. Based on this, researchers could hypothesize that black women are more likely to hold a feminist sex-role outlook involving:

- Rejection of negative female stereotypes such as that women are excessively emotional or illogical;
- Rejection of the view that women are suited only for a homemaking role; and
- Support of the view that women can be just as capable as men in positions, involving autonomy, such as positions of political leadership (Ransford & Miller, 1983, p. 47).

Aggregates & Distributive Justice

Another theoretical approach to understanding social aggregates is in analyzing the Jasso's (1980) theory of distributive justice. The theory of distributive justice can be used as a lens to examine the roles of gender and race to understand the characteristics of a social aggregate. This theory suggests that "a social aggregate may, at any point in time, be represented by the frequency distribution of the instantaneous justice evaluations experienced by individuals in the social aggregate." (Jasso, 1980, p. 4). The theory also suggests that social phenomena varies as functions of the parameters of their instantaneous distributions. The variation in social phenomena over time can be understood by reference to changes in the distribution of justice evaluations. In the general theory, the dynamic in social life flows from factors both internal and external to the individual, both inside and outside of an individual's control.

> The internal factors include the free selection of goods of value and of what the individual considers just, as well as the innate constraint in the mathematical manner in which the individual appraises the Actual condition and the Just term. The major external factors are the outcomes of the natural and social lotteries, over which the individual may have little or no control. All of these factors combine to produce a distribution of justice evaluations that might take on the infinity of shapes, locations, and scales (Jasso, 1980, p. 6-7).

Applications

One application in better understanding the phenomena of social category and social aggregate is in group dynamics extended to both in-group and out-group populations in terms of group function within organizations. As a leader of an organization, or as a group facilitator, both of these phenomena heavily influence relationships and actions within group settings. Bray and Howkins (2006) indicated that "over the past decade, radical changes have occurred in the organization and delivery of services across health and social care, with effective provision increasingly dependent on good team work and active co-operation across disciplines" (p. 224). From their research, Bray and Howkins determined multiple findings that supported ways an enriched understanding of social category and social aggregate would produce improved outcomes in a group setting, especially in professional learning organizations. They indicated that "establishing group trust, clarifying the purpose of the session and achieving credibility as a facilitator were central issues recognized as being necessary" (p. 230-31).

In addition to these findings, group facilitators should engage a flexible approach that enables the group to make choices while allowing the group process to develop. "While facilitation of the social dimension of the group will permit members to get to know one another in order to work together, it is also fundamental to the group dynamics. Learning about each other's professional roles is another part of this social dimension" (p. 231). It is further noted that individuals that comprise social groups "come to groups bringing a variety of issues with them, which include past experiences, learning styles that may make group work uncomfortable, a set of unrealistic expectations, various work issues, and personal baggage. Moreover, the participants' "hidden agendas were also indicated to have a significant impact" on group operations (p. 231). Group facilitation in social and professional groups would be made easier if teachers, group facilitators, and leaders had increased knowledge of stereotypes, and in-group and out-group dynamics within the groups they lead.

Issues

One significant issue that arises from the study of social category and social aggregate is in understanding of how these terms can now be applied to the burgeoning experiences of group interaction through technology interface. Hornecker (2004) indicated that she and her colleagues analyzed different computer systems for their use in establishing group work. She indicated that two groups tested different systems in a role-play, simulating an envisioned use situation of facilitated citizen participation. Findings indicated that the system incorporated or embodied facilitation methods in unexpected ways. "Seemingly trivial design decisions had high impact on group behavior, dynamics and atmosphere of the sessions. Constraints forced people to coordinate actions and, as a result, fostered group awareness and cooperation." These constraints "might consist of shared and/or restricted resources that must be coordinated of structures encouraging reciprocal helping" (p. 240). In initiating the use of technology in appropriating social interaction, emotional and intellectual or utilitarian needs should be considered (Cohn, 1975, Lohmer & Standhardt, 1992, Meueler, 1998, Portele, 1992). From a social systems standpoint, technology interface and impact on social categories and social aggregates dramatically impacts potential interface between individuals and groups that may never have previously interacted, while simultaneously creating the potential for establishing additional in-groups and out-groups. Additional research must be undertaken in order to further understand ways that technology impacts social categories and social aggregates.

Conclusion

This article only provides a brief glimpse into the multiple ways of understanding group category and group aggregate. Groups once limited by category or aggregate now have the potential of interfacing with individuals outside their dynamic as a result of

technology, which is changing boundaries and eliminating barriers. Certainly, the implication of expanded research into group facilitation and technology as singular and combined topics will create many opportunities for sociologists to conduct research and provide rich insights into helping society investigate multiple opportunities for expanded group awareness and increased "systems of diversity." It seems that budding sociologists have the potential for shaping awareness and understanding in multiple areas that, even ten years ago, could never have been conceived, let alone explored.

Terms & Concepts

Categorization: Categorization can be described as a process that operates on stimuli present in the environment, modifying and reconstructing them into new entities.

In-groups: In-groups can be described "as bounded communities of mutual trust and obligation that delimit mutual interdependence and cooperation" (Brewer, 1999, p. 433, qtd. in Simpson, McGrimmon, & Irwin, 2007).

Social Aggregate: Social aggregate can be used to describe any physical or conceptual aggregate of humans who are mutually aware of each other and the aggregate they form.

Social Category: Social categories can be used to describe the distinction between individuals on the basis of category membership, which seems to be at the root of group-based phenomena, such as in-group favoritism, intra-group perceptions, stereotyping and prejudice.

Social Identity: Social identity "operates when an individual thinks in terms of similarities to other members of an in-group and differences from members of an out-group" (Deaux, 1996, p. 780, qtd. in Simpson, McGrimmon, & Irwin, 2007).

Stereotypes: A stereotype is a belief about a person or group that is oversimplified or unfittingly standardized. It is based on the assumption that members of a certain group hold certain attributes in common, whether positive or negative, when, in fact, there is little evidence to corroborate this belief.

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