**Learning Outcome: Evaluate social identity theory, making reference to relevant studies.**

**Command term ‘Evaluate’**, -Make an appraisal by weighing up the strengths and limitations.

**Social identity theory (SIT) Tajfel and Turner 1979**

Background Information:

Tajfel was a European Jew who escaped Nazi persecution and fled to work in the UK after the war. Unsurprisingly, Tajfel was particularly interested in identity, group membership and relationships between groups, especially those involving prejudice and discrimination. The social identity theory was initially put forward by Tajfel and later developed with colleagues (i.e. Turner).

According to this theory an individual strives to achieve or maintain a positive self-image/self-concept. This has two components: a personal identity and a social identity. The **social identity** is a sense of who we are derived from the group(s) we belong to (such as gender or ethnicity). Our social identity contributes to how we feel about ourselves, so we seek positive social identities to maintain or enhance our self-image. People can have several social and personal identities, reflecting the groups they identify with and the personal characteristic that define them as individuals.

SIT is based on the cognitive process of **social categorization**. Social categorization divides the social environment into **in-groups**, to which an individual belongs *(us)* and **out-groups**, to which an individual does not belong *(them).*

Social Categorization:

* Reduces perceived variability within the group (*we* are similar to each other)
* Reduces perceived variability in the out-group (*they* are all the same)
* Increases perceived variability between the in-group and the out-group (*we* are different from *them*).

Positive social identities may result from the process of **social comparison**. We compare our in-groups with relevant out-groups. We aim to establish, maintain and defend **positive distinctiveness**-this is the motivation to show that our in-group is preferable to an out-group. This ensures that our social identities and hence our self image is positive.

What sort of behavior can SIT explain?

* Ethnocentrism-this can be defined as an in-group – serving bias (the group equivalent of SSB). So if *we* do good things it is because we are good and if we misbehave that is due to situational factors. The reverse applies to *them*.
* In-group favouritism and out-group discrimination.
* Intergroup differentiation-behaviour that emphasizes differences between our in-groups and out-groups.
* Stereotypical thinking
* Conformity to in-group norms

Questions:

1. Draw a flow diagram to represent the key points of SIT. Include the terms, Social categorization, social comparison, positive distinctiveness, in-group, out-group, favouritism, discrimination.
2. Can you think of an example when being a member of a certain group would raise someone’s self image?
3. Can you think of two examples that demonstrate how one group can discriminate against another?
4. Find a news article that shows how social identity has lead to conflict between groups.

**Evidence:**

Tajfel and Turner’s theory was based on a series of laboratory experiments called the minimal group studies. They found that even when people are randomly assigned to a group, it automatically becomes their in-group, and they will see all others as an out-group.

**Minimal groups. (Tajfel et al 1971) Experiments in intergroup discrimination.**

**Background:**

The name *Minimal group* comes from the fact that participants are put into groups randomly, without any actual reason; hence there should be no reason to distinguish between the groups. In fact, group members do not even know who else belongs to their in-group or out-group. However, group members can quickly favour their in-group and discriminate against their out-group, because they believe that the group that they belong to is the best. Thus maintaining a positive social identity. Tajfel carried out a number of minimal groups experiments, one of which is outlined below.

**Aim:**

When boys are placed in random groups will they display in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination.

In an experiment conducted in a Psychology laboratory, boys were randomly allocated to groups based on their supposed preference for the art of Kandinsky or Klee. Actually the groups were randomly assigned. They had to reward points to in-group and out-group members. They were not allowed to give points to themselves. Points were then converted into money that the boys could spend.

This is the points matrix that was used:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Points you can give to your in-group | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| Points you can give to your out-group | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 11 | 13 | 15 | 17 | 19 | 21 |

Simply put, boys could choose to assign based on:

1. Maximum joint profit
2. Largest possible reward to in-group (regardless of reward to out-group)
3. Maximum difference

**Results:**

The boys tried to maximize the difference between the two groups rather than leaving the study with the largest amount of money possible.

**Conclusion:**

There was identification with the in-group, in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. The fact that boys tried to maximize the difference between the in-group and out-group demonstrates **positive distinctiveness**. This supports SIT as it demonstrates the strong tendency to favour people with whom we share membership of a social group-however trivial or minimal that membership is.

**Evaluations:**

**Strengths:**

* The participants did not meet face-to-face during the experiment; therefore it showed more clearly that they were favoring in-groups rather than individuals.
* These experiments contributed to the development of SIT. A ‘minimal group’ is all that is necessary for individuals to exhibit discrimination against an out-group. It is not necessary for there to be inter-group conflict for discrimination to occur as previously thought.
* Billig and Tajfel found an in-group preference even when participants were told groups were randomly assigned and giving them meaningless names such as A’s and B’s.

**Weaknesses**

* Demand characteristics may have influenced the results as the boys may have thought it was supposed to be a competition.
* Culturally, results may vary. Wetherell studied white and Polynesian children in New Zealand and found the latter to be much more generous towards the out-group reflecting cultural norms.
* The study is artificial, as the experimental set up does not reflect a real life situation. Therefore the tasks lack mundane realism and therefore the study has a low ecological validity.
* The evidence shows more positive in-group bias NOT derogatory attitudes towards the out-group. There is more liking of ‘US’ rather than disliking of ‘THEM’.

**Questions:**

1. The study was carried out on teenage boys. What effect do you think this had on the results?
2. Why were the boys deceived about which groups they were put in and instead randomly assigned?
3. What is the most interesting result in terms of SIT?

**Additional Studies:**

**Brown (1978)** Demonstrated in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination in a natural setting with real life groups.

Carried out a field experiment of wage negotiations in a British aircraft-engineering factory. He found that trade union representatives from one department sacrificed around 2 pounds a week in order to increase their relative advantage over a competing out-group to 1 pound. This clearly demonstrates positive distinctiveness.

**Lonsdale and North (2009)** Carried out two experiments to test whether or not people would behave more favourably to those who shared their musical taste than to those who liked a different genre of music. In the first experiment they found that clear, negative stereotypes were applied to fans of a different musical genre. The ‘minimal group paradigm’ of awarding points to in-group and out-group members was used in the second study. They found that greater rewards were allocated to in-group members who shared their musical taste than out-group members. This shows that SIT is still relevant.

**Jane Elliott (1968)** was an elementary school teacher in the USA. She was shocked by the casual acceptance of racial segregation in her students. Elliott decided to teach her class of 7 year olds about racism, using first-hand experience. On the first day of the exercise, Elliott told the blue-eyed children that they were the superior group and had higher intelligence, which was linked to the colour of their eyes. She also told her class that brown-eyed people were stupid and badly behaved. Elliott provided brown fabric collars, which the brown-eyed children had to wear as a method of identifying them as the minority group. The blue-eyed children were given extra privileges.

The brown-eyed children became sullen, angry and depressed whereas the blue-eyed children taunted them and refused to play with them.

The next day, Elliott reversed the exercise and told the brown-eyed children that a mistake had been made and they were the group with superior intelligence. Elliott found the patterns of behavior were reversed, although the brown-eyed children were somewhat less intense in their bullying of the blue-eyed group. Finally all the children were debriefed.

**See** [**www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeK759FF84s**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeK759FF84s)

**Brown eyes and blue eyes Racism experiment (Children Session) – Jane Elliott**

**Write a brief evaluation of Elliott’s study:**

**Overall evaluations of SIT**

+ SIT assumes that intergroup conflict is not required for discrimination to occur and this is supported by Tajfel et al (1971).

+ SIT emphasizes the crucial role of social categorization in inter-group behavior.

+ SIT drew a distinction between personal identity and social identity and explored ways our basic need to belong affects social interaction.

+ SIT can be applied to understanding ethnocentrism and stereotyping.

- SIT cannot fully explain how in-group favouritism may result in violent behavior towards out-groups.

- Other factors play a bigger role in behavior than social identity. The environment in which we are in for example (cultural expectations).

-There is some evidence suggesting that individual differences do affect the SIT process. Platow et al (1990) found that competitive participants showed greater in-group favourtism than cooperative participants.

- Sometimes personal identity is stronger than group identity.