

Key study: Tajfel (1970) Minimal group paradigm

Background

Social Identity Theory is based on the assumption that the most important feature of people's attempt to make sense of the social world is in the classification of groups as 'us' and 'them'. Psychologically, this means making a distinction between in-groups - that is, groups that we belong to - and out-groups - groups that we do not belong to. According to Tajfel people develop norms of behaviour towards in-groups and out-groups.

Procedure

The aim of Tajfel's research was to investigate if intergroup discrimination would take place based on being put into different groups with consequent categorisation into in-groups and out-groups in a situation where people had just met. Tajfel hypothesised that it would and that categorisation and discrimination operate automatically, even when there is not necessarily any prior prejudice.

The sample was made up of 64 schoolboys ages 14 - 15 from a state school in the UK. They came to a psychology lab in groups of eight. All boys knew each other well before the experiment. The first part of the experiment was designed to create group categorisation, and the second part of the experiment investigated the effects of this.

In the first part, the boys were told that the psychologists were interested in the study of visual judgement. Forty clusters of varying numbers of dots were flashed onto a screen. The boys were asked to estimate the number of dots in each cluster. The experimenters then pretended to assess the judgements of the boys, and told them what kind of judgements they had made. Some of the groups were categorised on the basis of accuracy, and some were categorised on the basis of over or underestimations. The boys were then assigned to groups at random and were told they were either an "overestimator" or "underestimator" in one condition, or highly accurate or poorly accurate in the other condition.

The boys were then asked to give rewards of real money, though not very much, to the other boys in the experiment. They did not know the identity of the boys they were giving the money to, but they were told whether they were members of the same group (in-group) or another group (out-group). They could choose numbers that allocated specific amounts of money to the chosen boy. The participants were also told that they could not award money to themselves. Each boy was given an 18-page booklet with sets of numbers. They were asked to choose a pair of numbers that would allocate money to two other boys.

Results

The researchers found that a large majority of the boys gave more money to members of their own group than to members of the other group. It is important to remember that the boys came into the



psychological laboratory as a group of eight, were arbitrarily divided into two subgroups of four by the psychologists, and were not aware of who else was in their subgroup.

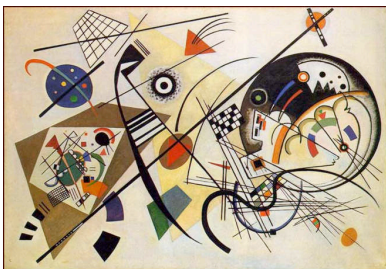
Procedure 2

Three new groups of 16 boys were tested. This time they were divided into groups based on their supposed artistic preferences. The boys were shown 12 paintings by the abstract expressionist painters Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. The boys were then randomly told that they had preferred either Klee or Kandinsky.

Tajfel then asked the boys to fill out similar sets of reward booklets to the first experiment. In this experiment, Tajfel was interested in which of the three variables would have the greatest effect on the boys' choices: maximum joint profit (giving the largest reward to members of both groups); largest possible reward to in-group (giving the largest reward to the member of the in-group regardless of the reward to the boy from the other group); or maximum difference (giving the largest possible difference in reward between members of the different groups, i.e. in-group favouritism).



Paul Klee painting



Wassily Kandinsky painting

Results

Tajfel found that the most important factor in the boys' choices was maximizing the difference between the two groups. This was a bit surprising since it meant that the boys left the study with less money than if they had all given each other the largest amount of money possible. Tajfel therefore concluded that out-group discrimination is very easy to trigger and that once it has been triggered, we have norms of behaviour for out-groups which include discriminating against them.

Discussion

The results indicated that the boys clearly adopted a strategy of in-group favouritism although the groups were indeed very minimal since they had been created on the basis of flimsy criteria, had no past history or possible future, the boys did not even know the identity of other members of each group, and there was no self-interest involved since they could not award money to themselves. Social identity theory was therefore supported. Since this classic study, Social Identity Theory has been associated with group behaviours such as ethnocentrism, in-group favouritism, conformity to in-group norms and stereotyping.

The study is important because it contributed to the development of social identity theory, which states that social groups and categories to which we belong are an important part of our self-concept, and therefore a person will sometimes interact with other people as a representative of a whole group or category of people rather than as a single individual. Tajfel demonstrated that a "minimal group" is all that is necessary for individuals to exhibit discrimination against an out-group. This experiment is considered a classic in psychology because it demonstrates that intergroup conflict is not required for discrimination to occur. The study thus challenged previous beliefs that competition was necessary and sufficient to produce prejudice.

The study has been criticised for artificiality. The experimental set-up is so far from natural behaviour that it can be questioned whether it reflects how people would react in real life. This criticism relates to demand characteristics of experimental design that is that the boys in this experiment perhaps interpreted the experimental task as a sort of a competitive game and therefore reacted the way they did. It has also been argued that competition and discrimination demonstrated in the experiment is less likely to happen in other cultural settings.

References

Tajfel, H. (1970). Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American*, 223, 96-102 in Banyard, P. and Grayson, A. (1996). *Introducing Psychological Research*. London: MacMillan Press LTD, p.69-73.