Social identity change: Shifts in social identity during adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the proposition that adolescence involves significant shifts in social identity as a function of changes in social context and cognitive style. Using an experimental design, we primed either peer or gender identity with a sample of 380 early- (12–13 years), mid- (15–16 years), and late-adolescents (18–20 years) and then measured the effect of the prime on self-stereotyping and ingroup favouritism. The findings showed significant differences in social identity across adolescent groups, in that social identity effects were relatively strong in early- and late-adolescents, particularly when peer group identity rather than gender identity was salient. While these effects were consistent with the experience of change in educational social context, differences in cognitive style were only weakly related to ingroup favouritism. The implications of the findings for theory and future research on social identity during adolescence are discussed.

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The physical, psychological and social changes experienced by adolescents are such that psychologists generally regard adolescence as a critical period for self and identity development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987). For example, Erik Erikson (1968) claimed that the range and depth of change experienced by adolescents initiates the psychosocial conflict of 'identity versus role confusion', and leads them to become preoccupied with the question: "Who am I?" From this viewpoint, normal progress through adolescence ultimately results in an integrated understanding of self and identity, and some resolution of this question.

Whereas research has shown that people do report marked changes or flux in the self-concept during adolescence (Harter, 1998; Rosenberg, 1986; Smollar & Youniss, 1985), it has been guided by the idea that adolescence entails change to the personal identity, that part of the self that reflects individual attributes. Equally plausible, and yet largely ignored in the research literature, is the likelihood that adolescence is marked by changes to a person's social identity, that part of the self reflecting one's group memberships and attributes. Indeed, some theorists (Kegan, 1982; Newman & Newman, 1976) have postulated an additional psychosocial stage confronting early adolescents, the conflict of 'affiliation versus alienation'. As such, group identity becomes a dominant theme in early-adolescence, as young people strive to achieve a sense of belonging within a valued social group (Kroger, 2000). In fact, Newman and Newman (2001) suggest this striving for belonging, or social identity formation, is a precursor to the late-adolescent focus on personal identity and intimacy (Erikson, 1968). The focus of the present research was to investigate the changes in social identity occurring during adolescence.

Social identity

The social psychological literature provides a good basis to understand the conception of social identity. Various approaches (e.g., social identity theory, self-categorisation theory) posit that social identity is a socially derived psychological

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process reflecting knowledge of one's group memberships and their associated value and emotional significance. Moreover, Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that social identity contributes to a person's self-concept and self-esteem. Indeed, strong group identification has been shown to promote identity formation, self-esteem, and the ability to cope with developmental problems amongst adolescents (Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1990).

Self-categorisation Theory (SCT: Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), an extension of SIT, further expounds the role of cognitive and social processes in giving rise to social identity effects. Social identities are assumed to be activated by the cognitive process of self-categorisation, through comparison of relative similarities and differences between self and others. Such comparisons are inherently social in nature, in that self-categorisation with a certain social identity is embedded in the frame of reference provided by the immediate social context. Moreover, social contexts are proposed to determine the accessibility and fit of a person's different social identities to the social environment (Oakes, 1987), making certain social identities more or less relevant than others in different comparative contexts. Thus, from the SCT perspective, social identities are group-based cognitive representations of the self that differ in their level of accessibility depending on relevant social contextual cues.

A large body of research has investigated the proposition that when social identity is salient the self becomes 'depersonalised', and categorised as an interchangeable group member (For overviews, see Abrams & Hogg, 2001; Onorato & Turner, 2002; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). This process of depersonalisation is evidenced by self-stereotyping, where the self is perceived in terms of stereotypical ingroup characteristics (Biernat, Vesico, & Green, 1996; Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendy, 1995), and by intergroup behaviours such as ingroup favouritism, where the ingroup (and thus the self) is favoured over other groups (for reviews, see Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Diehl, 1990; Messick & Mackie, 1989). Self-stereotyping is generally operationalised as similarity between perceptions of the self and ingroup, particularly on prototypical ingroup characteristics. Ingroup favouritism is typically operationalised in terms of discrimination in favour of the ingroup compared to a relevant outgroup on points allocation tasks and evaluative dimensions.

Together, self-stereotyping and ingroup favouritism have been found to be robust effects of social identity salience (for overviews, see Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Capozza & Brown, 2000; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). However, these effects are not entirely straightforward, as they are also influenced by factors such as a person's degree of identification with the relevant group identity and their perception of group entitativity (or sense of the ingroup as an entity). For example, studies have shown that higher perceived group entitativity is associated with stronger category-based perception of group members and, thus, greater stereotyping (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995; Crawford, Sherman, & Hamilton, 2002; Rydell, Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007). Furthermore, degree of identification with the group has been shown to be associated with self-stereotyping and ingroup favouritism, in that higher identification with the group enhances and lower identification decreases these effects, but only in the face of a group threat (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997).

Social identity and adolescence

Despite some recent interest in the development of social identity (e.g., Bennett & Sani, 2004), most related research has been conducted with children, and researchers have assumed adolescents to be equivalent to adults (Ruble et al., 2004; Sani & Bennett, 2004). While the few studies with adolescent samples have shown ingroup favouritism effects in minimal groups (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Moghaddam & Stringer, 1986; Turner, Sachdev, & Hogg, 1983) and real groups (Palmonari, Pombeni, & Kirchler, 1989; Palmonari et al., 1990; Tarrant et al., 2001), as well as self-stereotyping effects (Verkuyten, 1991; Widdicombe, 1988), they have assumed that the social identity processes of adolescents are consistent across adolescence and into adulthood. Only one study identified has considered the possibility of developmental trends in social identity in adolescents that might be tied to processes unique to the experience of adolescence. Teichman and colleagues (Teichman, Bar-Tal, & Abdolrazeq, 2007) studied 852 adolescents aged 8–17 years, to test the proposition that disequilibrium of identity in early-adolescence, arising from the marked psychosocial developmental changes associated with puberty, results in a high need for reassurance that intensifies intergroup biases. They found that younger (pre- and early-) adolescents did indeed display greater ethnic ingroup bias than later (mid- and late-) adolescents.

Adolescents typically experience distinct and significant changes in their physical, cognitive and social domains of functioning. As such, adolescence is usually labelled by contemporary theorists (Harter, 1999; Kroger, 2000) in terms of the sub-phases of early- (approximately 12–14 years), mid- (15–17 years), and late-adolescence (18–21 years). While the progress from early- to late-adolescence entails significant physical developments, it is changes in the cognitive and social domains that are most relevant to understanding shifts in social identity during adolescence. This is because the central process that gives rise to social identity salience is proposed by SCT to entail the activation of cognitive categorisations of the self in social situations (e.g., Turner et al., 1987). It stands to reason then, that the changes in the social and cognitive domains experienced by adolescents are likely to impact on their social identity and its range of effects.

In most Western cultures, adolescents generally experience significant change in their social world during two major transitions that are clearly afforded by the prevailing social-cultural milieu. Early-adolescents are exposed to the transition from primary school to secondary school, and late-adolescents experience the transition from secondary school to university or work. Both of these transitions represent a marked period of discontinuity in the adolescent's social world, because they confront more diverse and heterogeneous social situations with the possibilities of new social group memberships, roles, expectations and responsibilities (Gecas & Mortimer, 1987; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Indeed, greater heterogeneity in new social contexts tends to highlight differences between the self and others and, by implication, entails some impact on one's