



Variability in group identity construction: A case study of the Australian and British *Big Brother* houses



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how social identity is constructed and manifests itself in interaction in reality television discourse, two national versions of the gameshow *Big Brother* – Australia 2012 and UK 2012. The analysis concentrates on two forms of group formation, spontaneous and imposed, and how different attitudes towards group formation are revealed in interactional practices. The findings show that in both types of group formation, the prevailing tendency among the Australian housemates is the avoidance of public group discourse, especially when it might suggest the superiority/inferiority dichotomy. In the British house, on the other hand, groups are frequently referred to in terms of them being popular/unpopular, with the unpopular group striving to reach popularity. Furthermore, unlike in the case of spontaneous groups, unwillingly becoming a group member does not trigger group identity construction and explicit membership claims. In both houses, a strong link to the original group identity seems to be preserved.

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“[O]ne thing that we have in common is our difference from others”.

[Jenkins (2008: 102; original emphasis)]

1. Introduction

Being an individual necessarily entails being part of a social context. It is in interaction with other individuals that we find ourselves, whether as members of a group of people that happen to be similar to us in some way or highlighting our differences from other interactants. Whichever is the case, our communicative practices can help us establish our membership status or perform ‘otherness’. In other words, we are dealing with a multi-faceted phenomenon of social identity that is constructed and negotiated in interaction.

This paper is part of a larger research project on social interaction in reality television discourse (see Sinkeviciute, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), where it was noticed that interactional behaviours significantly vary depending on the participants’ in-group and out-group status. Thus, this article aims to examine how social

relationships are conceptualised and represented in a particular community of practice, the reality television gameshow *Big Brother*, in two different cultural contexts (Australian and British). Analysing the housemates’ interactional practices and also focusing on their meta-talk on those practices (primarily where the category *group* is explicitly or implicitly invoked), the main aims are to observe in what way the concept of group manifests itself in *Big Brother*, how the housemates’ discourse contributes to constructing their group identity, what similarities and differences there are in how group-talk (in-group and out-group) is accomplished in the two houses and two cultural contexts,¹ and whether there are interactional differences in spontaneous and imposed group formations.

The paper opens with a brief discussion of social (group) identity from the perspectives of social psychology and studies in interaction, namely, how in-group and out-group membership is constructed and the ways in which people behave towards in-group and out-group members. After introducing the data and the *Big Brother* format, the analysis of the datasets will be presented. It will consist of two parts, one referring to the housemates’ interactions regarding spontaneous group formation, and the other

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¹ It is important to note that even though differences between the two cultural contexts will be observed in the analysis, they are primarily indicative of the group variability in the two examined versions of *Big Brother* and should not be seen as general claims about Australian and British group identity patterns.

concentrating on imposed group formation and how group identity and membership manifest themselves in those contexts.

2. Social identity and group discourse

At the heart of the concept of identity, which derives from the Latin *idem*, lies similarity. It refers to a person's continuous self (their sameness) with all their characteristics and traits that simultaneously "define the uniqueness of each human being" (Edwards, 2009: 19), i.e. evoking differentiation from other individuals (Jenkins, 2008: 102). Importantly, however, those characteristics are not individualistic, since it is a social context that provides the "potential from which a personal identity can be constructed" (Edwards, 2009: 20; Ladegaard, 2012). In other words, "society is in the individual as much as the individuals are in society" (Turner and Oakes, 1986: 239–240; Turner et al., 1987; De Fina et al., 2007). In this section, a brief overview of research into social (group) identity will be presented. While for decades theoretical and experimental (quantitative) research dominated in identity studies from the perspective of social psychology, there was also the need for a new type of data that would include interactional behaviours. Thus, new approaches largely inspired by work by Sacks (1972, 1979) on membership categories and Gumperz (1964, 2008[1968], 1982) on contextualised interpersonal communication, expanded existing theoretical frameworks and significantly influenced further group membership and identity research in sociolinguistics, conversation and discourse analysis, and pragmatics. This paper seeks to acknowledge those two essential, albeit different, contributions to the research into group identity and, building on both traditions, aims to examine how in-group/out-group relations are indexed in linguistic choices of the group members.

2.1. Studies in social psychology

It is true that most early work on intergroup relationships was done in the field of social psychology. Tajfel's and his colleagues' experimental studies, in most of which subjects were classified into groups (here referred to as *imposed group formation*; see Section 4.3), focus primarily on the relationships between the members of the in-group and the out-group (see also Duszak, 2002). Labelled as social identity theory, this approach emphasises the role that one's group belonging plays in an individual's behaviour towards other individuals (Tajfel, 1981: 240). Here, contrary to the early approaches to identity as an individual mind and self-consciousness (for an overview, see Benwell and Stokoe, 2012: 18–24), the interest of social identity theory lies in the conditions that make people define themselves and behave as members of a particular group rather than projecting their individual identity (Tajfel, 1982b) and, thus, it can be said that the social is conceptualised as "prior to the individual" (Labov, 2016: 598). Later, it was also suggested that while we categorise other people, we necessarily do it in reference to the self, thus also categorising ourselves (Turner et al., 1987). This is referred to as self-categorisation theory, which aims to explain how people form groups, are able to behave in a collective manner, and which, in general, focuses on issues related to individual identity and group phenomena (Oakes et al., 1994; Turner and Reynolds, 2012). Indeed, as will be seen from the data analysis, social identity combines at least two different needs, assimilation with other people in the same group and differentiation from other individuals at the same time² (see also optimal distinctiveness theory in Brewer (1991)).

Based on the experimental data, what is said to happen in any group situation is that individuals tend to compare their own group to the out-group in order to claim positive distinctiveness, which helps them achieve a positive social identity (Oakes et al., 1994). In case there is lack of positive distinctiveness, individuals would be motivated either to join the other group or at least to dissociate from a group psychologically in order to achieve a desirable social identity (Turner, 1982). This desire to maintain positive social identity can be the reason for in-group members to discriminate against out-group members (Turner, 1975, 1982; Sherif and Sherif, 1966; Locksley et al., 1980; Baxter and Wallace, 2009; however, see Wetherell, 1982).

Furthermore, when at least two groups are present, it is easy to conceive that one of them could position itself as superior in one way or another, e.g. in terms of the members' number, their popularity, physical strength, financial wealth, etc. This can also be further supported by the behaviour of the other. For instance, in terms of the number, members of minority (inferior) groups may not tend to discriminate against the dominating (superior) out-group, but actually attribute more favourable characteristics to such an out-group than to the members of their own group, thus exhibiting what can be referred to as "the self-derogation of disadvantaged groups" (Tajfel 1982b: 497; Tajfel, 1981; Hewstone and Jaspars, 1982). A differentiation between dominating and dominated groups also plays a crucial part in how one is perceived (Deschamps, 1982). Members of a peripheral, dominated as well as any out-group tend to be seen as depersonalised, homogeneous and possessing only stereotype-based group identity with its members functioning only as 'extensions' of that group (Tajfel, 1982b). On the other hand, individuals in a dominating majority or in-group manage to escape out-group homogeneity and are not perceived in terms of their group affiliations. It is via idiosyncratic traits that their individual identity manifests itself (Turner, 1982). Thus, as Tajfel (1982a: 5) suggests, "[t]he achievement or the construction for oneself of full individuality is the privilege of social power". It can happen, however, that if competing groups have an opportunity to communicate with each other, their members might start seeing individuals in the out-group and the depersonalisation might be significantly reduced (Horwitz and Rabbie, 1982).

Whether groups are formed on the basis of similarities among individuals, merely liking people or being joined for a random reason, what seems to be sufficient for in-group and out-group behavioural patterns as well as to create social cohesion, is a person's social identification as belonging to a group (Turner, 1982). Thus, group identity can be referred to as "the product of *collective internal definition*" (Jenkins, 2008: 105; emphasis original). Even though similarities between people (e.g. common fate, shared interest in something, or threat) do play an important role in determining real-life natural divisions into groups (Sherif and Sherif, 1966 [1953]; Jenkins, 2008: 102–103; here referred to as *spontaneous group formation*, see Section 4.2), experimental studies based on imposed random group assignment suggest that it is one's mere categorisation as a group member that influences in-group favouritism (Tajfel et al., 1971; Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Allen and Wilder, 1975; Locksley et al., 1980; Leonardelli and Brewer, 2001). Interestingly, it was also observed that this group favouritism can manifest itself even when there are previous close relationships among the members of the newly imposed groups (Sherif and Sherif, 1966[1953]; however, see Section 4).

2.2. Studies in interaction

While experimental studies discussed above do not concentrate on the participants' interactional practices, they undoubtedly analyse social behaviours, conceptualisations of which are the primary

² This is what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) refer to as 'adequation' and 'distinction' in their sociocultural linguistic approach.

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