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Social Identity and Navajo High School Students: Is a Strong Social Identity Important in the School Context?

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the concept of identity. We do this by suggesting that one's identity self-concept is multi-dimensional (personal, social, & cultural). Before examining the question in the title, we distinguish between these constructs. We then describe social identity theory and illustrate its utility by examining Navajo high school students' positive and negative ability beliefs about school and how social identity theory might explain the results. We conclude by pointing to the need for more research in this important area of study, particularly in terms of the need for similar research with other cultural groups.

Introduction

What do we mean when we speak of cultural or social identity? Moreover, what, if any, is the relationship between one's cultural or social identity and one's behavior? Between Australia and England there is a traditional sporting rivalry dating back over one hundred years. This rivalry is such that it stirs national passions in both countries on either side of the world. We refer, of course, to that quaint, mysterious, and ancient game of Cricket. Such is the rivalry between these two nations that in 1932-33 a major diplomatic row erupted over the bowling (pitching) tactics of the English. The sole purpose of the English tactics was to nullify the batting (hitter?) prowess of the Australian champion, Don Bradman. The English tactics were very simple. With tremendous speed the English bowled the cricket ball at the batsman, but with a variation that was in spite to an unspoken law of cricket. That unspoken law was that the bowler should not intentionally try to strike the upper part of the batsman's body. The tactics worked and the series became known as the "bodyline series". However, the Australian people saw the English cricket team as adopting unfair tactics; an affront to an important social value held by Australians, the idea of "a fair go for everyone". Moreover, Australians believed the English team's tactics flouted the traditions and spirit of Cricket concerning fairness. Speeches were made in the Australian Parliament about these unfair tactics and the parliament urged the English team to immediately cease with the use of these unfair tactics. Such was the public condemnation and strength of feeling around the country that people talked of seceding from the Commonwealth of Nations. This event illustrates that aspect of social identity theory which states that the perception of discrepancies between what one's group is entitled to and what they experience (Brown, 2000) leads to discontent and subsequent action.

This paper describes our experience in cross-cultural psychology, particularly as it relates to cultural identity. In the following we briefly describe the links between various concepts of identity as we sought to understand the links between Navajo high school students being stereotyped as underachievers and their beliefs about their school abilities.

Social Cognitive Definition of SELF

In defining cultural and social identity as an integral part of one's self we follow Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987). For Turner et al. (1987) group processes are a basic process of self-perception and social interaction, not merely social behavior, hence

> "... interdependent individuals form a social-psychological system which transforms qualitatively their character as individuals and gives rise to 'supra-individual' properties." (p viii).

As we understand Turner et al. (1987), they are saying there is a psychological process in which individuals, through social comparison and evaluation, categorize themselves in terms of an in-group and out-group(s). To this extent, the individual is an agent in the

process. Hence, this formulation of the social self is consistent with the individualistic approach to social cognitive psychology. This tendency to identify with a group makes possible pro-social relations such as social cohesion, co-operation, and influence. The process is adaptive in that it frees the individual from the restrictions of being solely individualistic and hence they become more than individual persons.

From a social cognitive psychological perspective then, how can we investigate this phenomenon of identity? One social cognitive perspective that has generated much research concerning the nature of the individual may be useful here, that is the self-concept perspective.

Self-Concept

A positive self-concept is valued as a desirable outcome in many disciplines such as social psychology, physical exercise, health, education, development, and clinical and social psychology. Self-concept, and related variables, are frequently posited as mediating or facilitating the attainment of other desired outcomes such as self esteem and a sense of well-being, physical fitness, and health-related issues (Marsh, He4y, Roche, & Perry, 1997). In educational psychology, for example, academic self-concept positively influences academic behavior, academic choices, educational aspirations, academic persistence and subsequent academic achievement (Craven & Marsh, 1997; Marsh, 1990).

Descriptions of self-concept include that it is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional construct. For example, one facet of one's self-concept may be one's academic self-concept. The dimensions that comprise one's academic self-concept may be one's math, science, of language self-concepts. Individuals' self-concepts are believed to have motivational consequences and that they mediate interpersonal and intra personal processes. Self-concept depends on the motives being served (e.g. self-enhancement, consistency maintenance, or self actualization), and the context and social situation. Self-concept can be understood through

"...mood changes, shifts in self-esteem, social comparison choices, the nature of self presentation, choice of social setting and in the construction of, or meaning given to one's situation" (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Self-concept has been described by Markus & Wurf as a collection of images, schemas, conceptions, prototypes, theories and goals arrayed in space. Now let us briefly return to the important concept of self as multi-faceted and multi-dimensional construct mentioned earlier. Where, in such a schema, would cultural and social identities fit?

Facets of Self-Concept

As we have said, we see self-concept as multi-faceted. We might like to think of these facets in terms such as one's academic self-concept, or physical self-concept, or even spiritual self-concept. We see each of these as a facet of self-concept. We are interested in the facet of one's identity self-concept and delineating its dimensions. Much of the

Social Psychological theory and research concerning identity has focused on three dimensions of identity. That is, identity can be seen as multidimensional; namely, personal (e.g. locus of control), cultural (e.g. individualism and collectivism), and social identities (inter-group behaviors & attitudes). For a discussion on the distinction between personal identity and social identity see Descampes and Devos, (1998), while for a discussion on the distinction between social and national identity see Salazar (1998). In this chapter our focus is on social identity and to a lesser extent cultural identity. We will leave the important dimension of personal identity until another time. Recent research concerned with cultural and social identity have been much concerned with methodological issues such as construct validity as it might relate to cultural and social identity.

The Validity of Identity Constructs

For multi-cultural societies and the global economy, this notion of cultural and social identities and their relationships with outcomes is becoming increasingly important. There is in the modern era more and more mobility of individuals between nation states for work and leisure. Increasingly, individuals and groups of people with culturally specific ways of behaving, responding, and interacting, are encountering each other. We see individuals come together to show their displeasure with current social or economic situations (e.g. the demonstrations concerning economic globalization at world economic forums). Understanding how individuals see themselves as members of particular groups such as culture or a minority group, and the interaction of groups, could contribute to economic and social benefits not the least of which would be equity issues. In this context, it becomes important that we are able to rely on the constructs we use to define cultural or social identities. Many researchers are concerned that the published theory and research concerning the self reflect a western conception of self. Hence, they argue, such constructs may lack validity when speaking of non-western cultures. Indeed, this raises important questions concerning issues of the specificity and universality of psychological explanations.

To address this specificity/universality issue some researchers have relied on a conceptual framework termed the emic-etic dimensions (e.g. McInerney, 1995). Etic focuses on the universals such as we all eat, we all interact with members of the opposite sex, and we all have ways of dressing. Emic on the other hand focuses on these issues within the culture or group. That is, precisely what, and how, do we eat? How do we interact with members of the opposite sex? How do we dress? Such an approach has the distinct advantage of evaluating universals and importantly how similar, or dissimilar, are the manifest behaviors associated with the emic dimension between cultures or groups. To assess the contribution that cultural or social identity makes to an outcome, research that investigates differences between subjects will shed light on the following question: Does having a particular cultural heritage (e.g. Navajo), or identifying with a particular disadvantaged group contribute to one's scholastic outcomes? Some evidence suggests that having a particular cultural heritage has little influence (e.g. McInerney et al., 1997).

Cultural and Social Identity Distinguished

When writing about the nature of culture, Triandis, Bontempo, Leung, and Hui (1990) caution against confounding cultural, social, and personality constructs. Cultural level constructs they define as those constructs shared by speakers of a particular dialect, living in a geographical proximal location, during the same historical period. They include shared norms, roles, values, associations, particular ways of categorizing experience, affect, and so on. Social level constructs differ from cultural level constructs in that, social constructs are those shared by particular groups or categories (e.g. gender, status, age). Social level constructs are the same contents as those dealt with by culture (e.g. shared norms, values, ways of categorizing experience and so on). However, it is possible that while the values associated with one's cultural heritage may be relatively stable, the values associated with identifying with a group may be less stable. For example, social identity theory hypothesizes that when social inequity is experienced and groups are prevented from righting that injustice, a group may accentuate value(s) other than those perceived to belong to the out-group (e.g. to group loyalty over acquisitiveness).

This notion of shared characteristics is important. It is important because it is generally consistent with social cognitive theories and the social cognitive approach to facets and dimensions of self-concept and their interrelations. Shared characteristics lend themselves to psychometric studies and provides a method with which to study what is in the minds of individuals as shared by a group; any group (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Moreover, it provides a method whereby different dimensions of identity may be classified. Hence, we can think of identity in terms of the social and cultural. These represent the dimensions of the facet of identity from the perspective of self-concept.

The Individualist and Collectivist Dimensions

Much social science research concerning culture uses two dimensions articulated by Hofstede (1980) following a major international study of values. These dimensions have stimulated, and continue to stimulate, a burgeoning amount of research. The dimensions, generally, are referred to as the individualist and collectivist. Cultures considered as individualistic tend to be non-traditional, heterogeneous, and people are likely to be a member of multiple groups. In such a dimension, it is believed that individual values will be emphasized. Cultures considered as collectivist tend to be traditional, homogeneous, and people are likely to be a member of very few groups. In this dimension, it is believed that group values are emphasized. Growing up in either an individualist or a collectivist culture is believed to have different consequences for how people see themselves. People who grow up in an individualist culture are likely to see themselves in terms of individual qualities, whereas people who grow up in a collectivist culture are likely to see themselves in terms of groups. In studies that ask participants to complete 20 sentences commencing with the words "I am ...", it has been found members of a collectivist group complete many of the sentences implying a group. For example, I am a son; implies family, and I am a Roman Catholic; implies religion. These responses are rare among participants who are

from an individualist culture where the response is more likely to be in terms of individual characteristics e.g., I am kind, and I am tired (for more detail concerning this notion of collectivism and individualism, see Bochner, 1994). However, other researchers have found that the variance attributed to cultural differences is small while the within groups variance is quite diverse (Watkins, 2000). Clearly individual differences are accounting for most, or so it seems, of the variance.

However, it may be that yet another factor accounts for some of this variance. People are usually in contact with other people at least in some proximal sense and so influence, and are influenced by, others. Often people see themselves in terms of belonging to a group. For example, a male student in year eight sees his self as a male, a student, and whether he is one of the brighter or less bright ones in class. He also sees his self as a male interacting with females, a student interacting with teachers, and a brighter or a less bright student interacting with members of his opposite group. Hence, one question we can ask concerns the contribution theories of inter-group interaction might make to understanding outcomes.

Social Identity Theory

In Europe, following the devastation caused by the Second World War, there was much concern to understand better the nature of inter-group relations. There was also the perception that the North American Psychology's focus on an individualistic perspective to psychology did not adequately account for inter-group behavior. Building on interdependence theory, Turner et al. (1987) developed a theory of Self-categorization. The central tenet of Self-categorization theory is that group behavior is the behavior of individuals acting on the basis of categorizing self and others as a social group. This social group categorization is seen by Turner et al. (1987) as being of a higher order of categorization than the categorizing of people as individuals.

While the forgoing suggests how one might classify oneself as belonging to this or that group, there is the question of why one identifies and what are the consequences of identification. In essence, social identity theory posits that we can think of self in terms of personal and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). They posited that social identity theory makes explicit the difference between behavior the individual influences, and that which is influenced by group based processes. A central tenet of social identity theory is that individuals strive to achieve and/or maintain a positive social identity. Consider this tenet in the context of low-status minority groups you know, or, in the context where one finds oneself a resident in another culture, one in which you don't know the language or customs. In this respect there is a considerable body of theory and research concerning social identity and socio-cultural/psychological adjustment (e.g. Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

For low-status minority groups, social identity theory predicts three possible responses for its members when they perceive social injustice and impermeability of boundaries precluding them access to high status group participation. In the school context, this may mean that Navajo students perceive that they do not have the same

opportunity to achieve as the wider community. Hence, the three possible responses are, first, they can leave the group and this is not always possible; they are Navajo and school attendance is compulsory. Second, they can create various ways that reconstruct or redefine the dimensions that are the basis of comparison. For example, poor school achievement is consistent with how they view themselves, i.e. they can accept the stereotype. Third, they can contest the dominant groups right to its superior position, for example they can hold high positive ability beliefs about school. For a more detailed description of social identity theory, see Brown (2000).

Relevance of Social Identity Theory to Research

Social identity theory has implications for explaining Navajo high school students' relative academic achievement. Among Navajo high school students, there is persistent underachievement. Deyhle (1995) posits stigmatization as a factor in explaining Navajo and Ute American Indians negative attitudes toward school. One such negative attitude may be that students hold negative beliefs about their school abilities. Recently Hinkley, McInerney, and Marsh (2002, April) presented a paper that investigated the relationship between Navajo high school students' social identity with their achievement motivation. Steele and Aronson (1995) posit a link between being a member of a negatively stereotyped group (poor achievers) and students' low ability beliefs. These low ability beliefs follow students' failure at school and are attributable to being stereotyped. In the Hinkley et al. (2002, April) study, we examined whether there is a difference between near traditional and non-traditional Navajo high school students' beliefs about their school abilities.

Deyhle (1995) also hypothesized that the stronger American Indians social identity, the more likely these students will be successful at school. We need to digress slightly here to see clearly the links we established for their research. Within educational psychology, theory and research suggests a positive relationship between students' beliefs about their academic abilities and their academic motivation and achievement. Other theory and research suggests a link between being negatively stereotyped as an academic underachiever eventually leads to low or negative ability beliefs (Hinkley et al., 2002, April; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In addition, Deyhle (1995) asserts that Navajo students are stereotyped as underachievers. Hence we hypothesized that:

a) Navajo high school students will hold both positive and negative beliefs about their school abilities; and
b) The stronger Navajo students' social identity then the stronger will be their positive ability beliefs.

Many researchers hold the belief that Navajo generally experience identity crisis. That is, their cultural heritage is neither Navajo nor that of the population at large. Further, this identity crisis is held to be more pronounced among Navajo students classified as non-traditional than it is among those who are considered near traditional (Vadas, 1995).

Vadas found that Navajo students who were near traditional spoke Navajo at home and came from rural districts. Vadas also found that non-traditional students spoke English at home and come from urban areas. Using these classifications, we argued that near traditional Navajo students social identity is more likely to be stronger than non-traditional Navajo students (for a discussion on the relationship of the region in which one lives and/or language with social identity see Salazar,1998).

To operationalize the constructs of near traditional and non-traditional, we classified near traditional students as those students who speak the Navajo language at home or as those who lived in remote locations. Non-traditional students they classified as those who do not speak the Navajo language at home or as those who live in urban areas.

Participants

Navajo students from Kayenta High School (n = 300) and Window Rock High School (n = 529) participated in the survey. Both schools generally follow mainstream state prescribed curriculum. In a bid to strengthen cultural identity among Navajo children, both schools have recently introduced Navajo language classes.

Kayenta is in the relatively remote north of Navajo land where there is little industry. The major industries in the area are coal mining at Black Mesa, tourism, and farming. There is high unemployment in the area, few job prospects, and it is remote from major centers of population and industry. Such circumstances mean that graduate students seeking work need to consider relocation in order to be closer to employment centers. Kayenta is considered the more traditional of the two locations (conversations with the Kayenta High School site council in April 1998 and, the Window Rock senior student counselor, (James Arviso, January 1999). It is common to hear Navajo spoken in school meeting areas (cafeteria) and school corridors at Kayenta.

Window Rock is in the South East corner of Navajo land and about an hour's drive across the State border (Arizona/New Mexico) from Gallup (New Mexico). Gallup is a major center for American Indian artifacts; it has significant mining and tourist industries and it is well serviced by rail. Window Rock is the center of Government for the Navajo Nation. Thus, for graduate students there are more job opportunities at Window Rock and Gallup than at Kayenta. For more information about the Navajo Nation visit the Navajo web site, http://www.navajo%20land.com.

Outcomes and Interpretations

We found that the positive and negative ability belief factors were well defined factors and that the relationship of these factors with the model's motivation factors offers empirical evidence in support for the concept of negative ability beliefs among Navajo high school students. While there may many explanations for this finding, importantly this finding did not contradict social identity theory. Generally, the findings suggest that high school students may hold both negative and positive beliefs about their school abilities rather than view students as having degrees of positive ability beliefs only. Traditionally, constructs such as ability beliefs have been held to be composed of a single continuous dimension.

This finding suggests additional ways in which to understand ability beliefs and their relationship with behavior. In terms of social identity theory, we should note that the finding concerning empirical support for negative ability beliefs is also consistent with the second of social identity's predicted outcomes for low status minority groups. This is important.

One limitation of social identity theory is that it is unable to predict with accuracy low-status groups response to perceived social injustice and impermeability of boundaries precluding access to high status group participation. Recall that social identity theory hypothesizes three possible responses to the above condition. First, individuals can leave the group and this is not always possible. Second, they can create various ways that reconstruct or redefine the dimensions that are the basis of comparison. Third, they can contest the dominant groups right to its superior position. Social identity theory led us to predict the presence of negative ability beliefs among Navajo high school students. Their finding suggests that individuals may emphasize negative values due to being members of negatively stereotype groups in the context where the basis of comparison (school) is perceived as belonging to an out-group (the surrounding dominant society).

However, beyond this, we found that there was no difference between the near traditional students and non-traditional students in terms of their positive ability beliefs. Such a finding was contrary to their hypothesis that the stronger Navajo students' social identity then the stronger will be their positive ability beliefs. Recall that it was the near traditional students who, it was believed, have the stronger social identity. What does this mean for the relationship between students' strength of social identity and their positive ability beliefs?

First, it may mean that the classifications used to operationalize the constructs of near and non-traditional may not be sensitive enough for the intended purpose. If this is the case, then there is a need for more research, using large sample sizes and different measures of strength of identity, which explores the relationship between strength of identity and other socially important outcomes such as education.

Second, it may mean that one's strength of social identity is not a factor when considering ability beliefs among Navajo high school students. This raises two questions. First is the question of whether Navajo high school students' strength of identity and its relationship with ability beliefs differs to other low-status minority groups, and for that matter, groups that are not low-status minorities. Second is the question of the relationship of individual's strength of social identity with other socially desirable outcomes (e.g. academic achievement).

Conclusions

At present, one of the concerns among social identity theorists is to establish the conditions under which the three responses (leave the group; reconstruct; or contest) are predictable. There is an abundance of theory concerning social identity theory. However, much of the empirical work has been done with small samples and there is a strong reliance on qualitative and experimental methods. There is far less research with large samples in naturalistic settings. Despite the strengths and the informative nature of

qualitative and experimental methods, there are questions of reliability where generalizations are concerned. We believe that quantitative methods, using large samples of data, such as used in the Hinkley et al. study, will advance our understanding of the conditions under which social identity's theory concerning low-status minorities will be advanced.

Finally, the issue of the relationship of the three identity dimensions (personal, social, cultural) needs to be examined. In what context is one or the other of these identities likely to be emphasized? For example, under what conditions are characteristics of one's social identity likely to be emphasized more than individual or cultural identity characteristics? One starting point might be to focus on contexts in which the individual is expected to behave independently compared to contexts in which the individual is expected to behave as a member of a group.

If we accept the second of the central tenet's of social identity theory that individuals are motivated to have a positive social identity, then in a world in which increasingly the boundaries of one's identity are constantly under challenge, understanding the effects of individuals' strength of social identity on socially desirable outcomes is, correspondingly increasingly important.

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Questions for Discussion

1. List 5-10 formal or informal "groups" to which you belong (e.g., clubs, family, extended family, social/peer groups, school/work groups, cultural/ethnic groups).
2. Indicate which of these you identify with and how strong is your sense of identification.
3. What is the difference in your subjective feelings about your involvement in each

group?

4. Now compare these differences with operational definitions of social identity discussed in this chapter.