Human groups and social categories
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Studies in social psychology

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Contents

Acknowledgements ix
Foreword by Jerome S. Bruner xi

1 The development of a perspective 1
   1. Some personal issues 1
   2. The social dimension 3

PART I
Social psychology and social processes 13

2 Experiments in a vacuum 17
   1. Introduction
   2. Individual, inter-individual and social psychology 24
   3. A perspective for a sociopsychological problem 30

3 Individuals and groups in social psychology 41
   1. How ‘social’ is social psychology?
   2. Individualistic and group theories 43

PART II
From perceptual judgement to social stereotypes 57

4 The importance of exaggerating 62
   1. Introduction
   2. ‘Relevant’ dimensions the accentuation of differences 63
   3. Social perception
   4. An experimental illustration: value and the accentuation of judged differences 70
   5. Values, classifications and stereotypes 75
   6. Statement of predictions 78
   7. Application of predictions to the various series 79
   8. Abstract continua 88

5 Differences and similarities: some contexts of judgement 90
   1. Introduction
Contents

2. Classification and judgements of length 91
3. Polarization of judgements in the perception of people 104
4. Accentuation of social similarities and differences: two examples in ethnic stereotypes 114

6 Cognitive aspects of prejudice
1. Introduction 127
2. Categorization 132
3. Assimilation 134
4. Search for coherence 136
5. Summary and conclusion 141

7 Social stereotypes and social groups
1. Introduction: stereotypes and social stereotypes 143
2. The four functions of social stereotypes 146
3. The cognitive functions of stereotypes 147
4. Social stereotypes and individual values 150
5. The 'ideologizing' of collective actions 154
6. Links between the collective and the individual 157
7. Concluding remarks 161

PART III

Insiders and outsiders

Introduction 165

8 The experience of prejudice
1. Introduction 168
2. Prior experience 169
3. Experience in Britain 174
4. The image of Britain 181
5. Changes in attitudes 183

9. The beginnings of ethnocentrism
1. The development of children's preference for their own country 187
2. The devaluation by children of their own national or ethnic group: two cases studies 197

10 Children's international perspectives
1. An exploratory study 207
2. Knowledge and preferences 210
Contents

PART IV

Introduction 223

11 The attributes of intergroup behaviour 228
   1. When does inter-individual behaviour become inter-group behaviour?
   2. From social mobility to social movements 244

12 Social categorization, social identity and social comparison 254
   1. Social categorization and social identity
   2. Social identity and social comparison
   3. Social comparison and relative deprivation 259

13 The achievement of group differentiation 268
   1. The ‘minimal’ intergroup experiments and ‘real’ social contexts
   2. Strategies of intergroup differentiation 276

14 Exit and voice in intergroup relations 288
   1. Exit and voice, mobility and change
   2. Individual exit, group exit and group chorus
   3. Voice, status quo and social comparison in intergroup relations 305

15 The social psychology of minorities 309
   1. What is a minority group?
   2. The internal and external criteria of minority membership
   3. From social stability to social change: the psychological effects of minority membership 316

References 344

Author index 363

General index 367
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Foreword

These essays are more than an expression of the creative talents of Henri Tajfel. They are also a sensitive testament to the times in which he has lived and in which the social sciences have grown. Tajfel has contributed to the growth of the social sciences in a notable way, but he has also had the courage and the sensibility to suffer the doubts and the metamorphoses that have been a feature of that growth. The doubts have not all grown in the protected soil of academic research either. He has, like many of his contemporaries, witnessed and survived man’s inhumanity to man in our times. He has worked in a practical way to rehabilitate other survivors, looking after the orphaned young of the victims of concentration camps. And he has wondered how or whether the work of the social sciences might have prevented such catastrophes from happening. The essays, substantive contents aside, recount a moving story of change and response – intellectually and politically.

I think that the shape and the energy in Tajfel’s rich work derive from two deep conflicts that have beset the social sciences from their start, and he has been honest enough to live with them and give them expression. One grows from the issue of objectivity: whether it is ever possible to describe and understand man’s world from a position entirely free of and outside the values that each society cherishes. He doubts profoundly whether, in fact, we can ever be neutral in the sense that the physical sciences can claim neutrality. He offers as a partial answer to this problem the expedient of pluralism, the need for ‘a social psychology which grows simultaneously in many places’ nurtured by many points of view. Yet, pluralism aside, there is, in his view, no way of escaping the taking of a value position. Eventually, one must relate one’s conclusions about particular social behaviour to ‘the wider social setting’ in which individuals operate. The wider social setting strongly influences and is influenced by individual behaviour, though it has a being of its own as well.

This leads immediately into the second energizing conflict in Tajfel’s thinking. It has to do with the locus of explanation. There is a profoundly puzzling relation that exists between individual, human psychological functioning on the one hand and ‘the large-scale social
Foreword

processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it’ on the other. Tajfel cannot, for example, accept the view that prejudice is an expression only of individual malaise or maladjustment or even of straightforward inter-individual conflict. Its existence also expresses certain structural properties of the broader society as well, these serving to create the categories in terms of which people sort out and evaluate the society immediately around them. Given these ‘large-scale processes’ and social structures, individual behaviour is channelled along certain lines that are only indirectly determined by the psychology of the individual. There is a constant interaction between the more structural ‘superorganic’ forces that animate the wider society and the individual reactions that appear superficially to be impelling human behaviour. For Tajfel, there can be no proper microscopic individual social psychology without specification of the social and cultural setting in which it occurs.

Whether viewed as intellectual autobiography or simply as essays in contemporary social psychology, this book is about the resolution of these two sets of conflicts. Substantively, I suppose, one could characterize the main topic of the volume as ‘group prejudice’, and there are searching essays on this topic, studies that have won the author world-wide renown. But it would, I think, be an error to interpret the main topic in this way. When Tajfel talks about the psychological significance of being a member of a disadvantaged minority, of the social comparisons that such members make between their own group and more privileged ones, he is dealing as well with the much more general question of the sensitivity of people to the social climate of group differentials as they exist in the broader social setting. The study of prejudice may be the manifest content of the research, but the deeper programmatic significance is equally applicable to any social psychological phenomenon – whether political power, aspirations for social mobility, or even migration. Indeed, speaking from my own personal perspective, I find Tajfel’s essays speaking directly to issues in human development, particularly to the question of how children enter the society and so quickly take up its standard positions though they have too few exposures ever to have achieved an individual sense of what those positions entail. In this sense, the book provides a propaedeutic to what one might call ‘realistic’ social learning.

I cannot resist a few personal comments in writing this preface, for I have known the author well for a quarter of a century and value him as a friend. He is a man of huge hospitality in the broadest sense. He listens, reacts, brings you another drink, argues you down and sets you back up. He sets his guests at each other when he fears pseudo-agreement, thunders at them when he thinks their differences finical. Add one
Foreword

further element to that. Tajfel is the canonical European, not only linguistically equipped with several languages deployed with breathtaking speed and fluency, but with a deep sense of European culture. I have already commented on his faith in pluralism as an antidote to parochialism in social psychology. A happy confluence: Henri Tajfel chose to throw his hospitable, European, pluralistic energies into stimulating a ‘European’ social psychology. I think he was particularly eager to set up a base that would be distinctive to the reigning American social psychology of the time – the post-war decade. It is inconceivable how anybody could have done more to promote the cause – helping found a Society, editing a monograph series, a regular lecturer in Leiden, Paris and Bologna and a peripatetic one in a dozen other centres. I think I speak the complete truth when I say that I have never visited the Tajfels in Bristol without there being an attending Dutch social statistician or a passing-through Italian social developmentalist or a German student of prejudice. It is hard to ascribe causes in history. Tajfel’s intellectual enthusiasm, his buoyant hospitality, his European convictions, his faith in pluralism – any of these could have done it alone, could have created a lively and interesting ‘European’ social psychology. But I must also look to the ‘large scale social processes’. I think Tajfel sensed something deeper about the European scene, a point of view waiting to be expressed. And he more than any other helped bring it into being.

This book is a striking example of the genre. If it cannot be said that they are ‘European’ essays, it can certainly be said with emphasis that their spirit is ‘European’. And that is to be welcomed on whatever side of whatever ocean the reader finds himself.

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