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**Social Identity and Social Change: rethinking the context of  
social psychology**

*Tajfel book*

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## A return to the repressed

If a concept is a tool, and if its significance depends upon the explanatory work it is designed to perform, then the very idea of social identity is all too frequently misunderstood. On the one hand, it is easy to over-extend the concept by ignoring the context of its usage. Social identity was not intended as a general model of identity per se. In introducing the concept, Tajfel (1978) explicitly seeks to avoid "endless and often sterile discussions as to what 'is' identity" (p. 63). He acknowledges that there are many other fascinating questions as to the origins and development of identity. However his explicit and limited interest is in how aspects of the self are relevant to his particular concern with the psychology of intergroup behaviour. More recently, it could be argued that self-categorisation theory has extended the use of the social identity to an explanation of group psychology in general (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1993). Nonetheless, it remains true that social identity remains a useful concept precisely because its field of applicability is limited but clearly delineated.

On the other hand, a constricted view of context can lead to social identity being conceptualised too narrowly. In part, at least, this relates to a question of method. As with most social psychology, research in the social identity tradition has been dominated by laboratory experimentation. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of such methods (see, for instance, the interchange between Billig (1994) and Spears (1994)) there are certain things they are not very good at. One is the exploration of a historical dimension to human action. For reasons of practicality and in order to avoid a profusion of conditions, laboratory experiments are predominantly one-shot interventions. If history is excluded, then an awareness of social change necessarily goes with it.

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This may go some way towards explaining a puzzle that goes to the heart of social identity research. In one of the earliest discussions of the issue, Tajfel (1972) stresses that social identities are not simply means of simplifying a complex social reality. Rather, they are a means of both creating and defining ones place in a dynamic social world. Above all, and the original phrase is stressed in italics, social identity "*is a guide to action*" (p. 298). Such a perspective impels one forward, for not everybody can be satisfied with their social place, and even if they are it needs work to be maintained. Therefore, to talk of social place inevitably raises the issue of whether social change will be sought or impeded. And, if social identity is bound up with the analysis of social place, it must also be bound up with the analysis of social

change. In a later chapter that builds upon his earlier sketch, Tajfel makes this quite explicit: "social identity is understood here as an intervening causal mechanism in situations of 'objective' social change (cf. Tajfel, 1972) - observed, anticipated, feared, desired or prepared by the individuals involved" (1978, p. 86).

For Tajfel, then, the notion that people will strive to achieve positive social identity by positively differentiating the ingroup from the outgroup was merely the prelude to asking further questions relating to social change. What happens when group members find themselves negatively defined in relation to other groups? What are the conditions under which they will remain passive as opposed to active? When will they adopt collective as opposed to individual strategies of change? What are the options for collective action? It was with how and when the oppressed and the marginalised (more neutrally described as 'minorities') can change their lot that Tajfel was concerned both intellectually and personally. Yet, for all this, the emphasis on social change has been lost - if not repressed - in the ever-burgeoning field of 'social identity' research.

In 1987 a 'Social Identity Conference' - the only one of its kind - was held in Exeter. Of the thirty five papers and presentations only four even touched on the issue of social change and only one had it as the central concern. By contrast, the number of references to the 'minimal group experiments' (where allocation of people to groups on trivial or even random grounds leads participants to give greater rewards to ingroup members than outgroup members, even at the cost of reducing absolute level of reward to ingroup) was striking. Even more striking was a tendency to refer to 'social identity theory' as if it were limited to an explanation of the differentiation found in these experiments in terms of social identification, social comparison and the desire for positive social identity. In other words, what for Tajfel was a point of departure was widely treated as an end in itself and social change therefore dropped off the agenda.

On those occasions where the issue of social change is addressed, the work shares two characteristics. First of all, it is largely confined to investigating whether Tajfel's various assertions about relationships between variables can be empirically grounded. Such questions include whether collective action is related to collective identification (Kelly, 1993; Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995), whether the adoption of collective as opposed to individualistic change strategies is related to such factors as the permeability of group boundaries and the stability of intergroup status relations (Ellemers, Doosje, van Knippenberg & Wilke, 1992; Ellemers, van Knippenberg &

Wilke, 1990; van Knippenberg, 1987), and whether Tajfel is correct in his identification of strategies of social change (Williams & Giles, 1978). This is in marked contrast to other areas of social identity research where the forward development of concepts and theory predominates over retrospective validation.

Secondly, as Kelly & Breinlinger (1995) note, psychologists remain reluctant to venture out of their laboratories even when they are looking at social change. Field studies of when and how people participate in collective action are remarkably rare. Characteristically, the researcher will manipulate such variables as group salience, ability to pass between groups and ability to challenge inter-group inequalities, and then observe the results in terms of group action. Hence, the key parameters of context are fixed in advance and social action is seen as a dependent variable. This makes it hard to see how social structural variables - and the ways in which they are perceived - may themselves arise out of social action. It is even harder to observe the reciprocal process by which action and context constantly impinge upon each-other.

Thus, the same methodological constraints which have marginalised the study of change within social identity research are employed even where the importance of change is recognised, and they serve to limit the way in which it is conceptualised. It may seem particularly ironic to study social dynamics in a way that excludes the processes by which people create and re-create the conditions of their social being. Perhaps it is a warning for a discipline which often seems to prioritise the tools of enquiry over the jobs they are meant to do. As Moscovici (1972) noted, psychology is afflicted a fetishistic attachment to the one method of laboratory experimentation, seeing it as the sole mark of true science. Yet, he argues: "social psychology will be unable to formulate dangerous truths while it adheres to this fetishism. This is its principal handicap, and this is what forces it to focus on minor problems and to remain a minor pursuit. All really successful sciences managed to produce dangerous truths for which they fought and of which they envisioned the consequences" (p. 66).

The aim of this chapter is to reassert the importance of social change to social identity research. Indeed it should be criterion for the adequacy of any social psychological theory, and especially a theory relating to groups, that it provides an account of change. After all, for all the attempts to hold back the tide, society and human understanding never stands still. Moreover, whether we look microsocially or at the major events that change our world, collective action is always to the fore: 1789, 1830, 1848, 1917, 1989 - these dates alone are sufficient to make the point.

In arguing for putting change back at the core of the agenda where it rightfully belongs, I am not simply arguing for a return to Tajfel's promised land from which we have somehow erred. Part of my argument is that, while Tajfel may have stressed the importance of change and described some of its elements, he never did provide an *explanation* of the phenomena. The supposition that he did has hamstrung the continuing trickle of research on change from a social identity perspective. Moreover, I shall argue that an adequate account requires us to reassess central concepts within this perspective such as 'context' and even 'social identity' itself.

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However, before moving on to these arguments, a personal note on 'dangerous truths' is in order. My first acquaintance with Henri Tajfel, with traditional group theory and with the social identity tradition came in my first year as an undergraduate at Bristol University. It was a period where student radicalism, albeit in decline, was still alive. In the midst of the course there was an occupation of Senate House over the specific issue of nursery provision and a general concern with equal access for women to university. Two things struck me from this coincidence of events. The first was a sense of the contradiction between what mainstream psychology was saying about groups and my own experience of group action. Although group theories described collective action as intellectually impoverished if not downright irrational, I had never come across the level of intellectual debate in mass meetings which would stretch on - sometimes throughout the night. And if psychologists implied that groups were at best conservative and at worst socially destructive, my overwhelming experience was one of transformation - on a personal level, in that my own understanding and sense of self altered dramatically through participation, but also on a social level in that the occupation went some way towards altering the institutional position of women. At least some women could come to university who previously were excluded.

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If this mismatch provided a basis for challenging group psychology, the motivation to do so was enhanced by the active way in which traditional psychological ideas were employed during the events. This is the second thing that struck me. As we were inside Senate House, so the authorities sought to discredit the occupation as mindless. Various the activists were described as getting carried away, as innocents misled by agitators and as professional activists with ulterior motives. While the language was less technical, these arguments faithfully reproduced the various conceptual strands met in the lecture room. Thus, traditional psychological ideas did not only omit the possibility of social change in theory, they were actively used in practice to undermine collective attempts at social change.

If this is a relatively trivial example, it nevertheless illustrates a larger point. A concern with social change is not just an abstract intellectual exercise. To imagine change is, as Tajfel (1978) indicates, one of the conditions for its occurrence and psychology cannot avoid its place within the cultural imagination. We can therefore either serve to reify the status quo and pathologise anything that stands outside it, or else to envision alternative worlds and to explicate the processes by which they are achieved. Whether or not a psychology of social change will produce dangerous truths is an open question. However it is certain that its absence will condemn us to conservatism. For political as well as for intellectual reasons, a return to the repressed priorities of social identity theory is long overdue.

### **Social Change in the Social Identity Tradition**

The nearest thing to a manifesto for the emergence of a distinctively European tradition in social psychology was Israel & Tajfel's 1972 text: 'The Context of Social Psychology'. The book can be read as a critique of reification in social psychology: the way in which human behaviour is considered without reference to its social context and the resulting consequences. First of all, the social determination of behaviour is ignored. Secondly, because an examination of social significance is possible only if the links between actor and social world are considered, the meaningful and symbolic character of human action is eliminated. Thirdly, since the removal of action from a specific location renders it timeless and universal, social change is also ruled out of court.

The critique also has a reflexive element. Traditionally, there is a tendency to ignore the socially situated nature of psychological theory: how our ideas are shaped by current models of the human subject, how our research questions methods and analyses are influenced by our values and, perhaps most crucially, what the social significance of our work might be. That is why Tajfel's introduction suggests that, although the book has no dedication, had there been one it would have read "to our students and colleagues who care, whether they agree or disagree" (1972, p. 13).

These arguments informed both the concerns of early European social psychology and the ways in which they were addressed. If the problem is a desocialisation of psychology through ignoring context, then it is necessary to explore the social dimensions of human being through considering actors in context. Consequently, the

issues of social determination and, especially, social change rose to the top of the agenda. Indeed, it is worth quoting from Tajfel's introduction again: "ideally the central issue of social psychology should be the study of psychological processes accompanying, determining, and determined by social change" (1972, p. 4). Such ideals were translated into practice in the work of the two best known European social psychologists: Moscovici and Tajfel himself.

Moscovici's work on social representations (e.g. Moscovici, 1961, 1984, 1993) deals with the inherently consensual and ideological nature of individual understanding but it is also concerned with the way in which understanding is transformed, how the unfamiliar becomes familiar and how familiarity itself mutates. Moreover, his work on minority influence (Moscovici, 1976) starts from the observation that conventional models always imply that influence serves to reproduce existing social relations. As a counter-balance, Moscovici seeks to examine how active minorities may succeed in redrawing the social landscape.

Social identity theory posits the social determination of individual psychology on at least two levels. In the first place, the very concept of social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63) relates selfhood to a broad ideological context. If, on the one hand, social identities are intensely personal in the sense of defining who we are and where we stand (to the extent that people are even prepared to die for the good of social collectivities such as religions and nations (Reicher, 1993a,b), on the other, the meaning of any social identity cannot be reduced to any particular individual. What it means to be British, Catholic or whatever is something that is a historical function of politics, economy and culture. In the second place, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as well as its development into self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1993) acknowledges that the meanings of any given category will be a function of the immediate social situation: groups define themselves through comparisons with such other groups as are present in a given context.

However, as I have stressed, Tajfel was equally interested in social change (Tajfel, 1974, 1978, 1981). Moreover in his hitherto unpublished Katz-Newcomb lectures of 1974 - probably the most comprehensive of his accounts - Tajfel stresses once again that this is not a secondary interest within social identity theory. If anything, it is the

theory's *raison d'être*. The very concept of social identity is understood as a mediating variable in the explanation of change.

What Tajfel means by this is that, if group members desire positive social identity, then a tension arises when they discover themselves to be negatively defined in relation to other groups. It is this tension which provides the dynamic for change. However, it does not automatically follow that change will occur, nor is it inevitable that the change will be collective. Before this happens a number of conditions must be met. Tajfel's account is essentially a description of what the crucial conditions are.

First of all, where individuals find themselves to be subordinated as members of a group, they might be expected to adopt an individualistic strategy of seeking personal advancement by denying group identity (what Tajfel (1975) following Hirschman (1970) calls 'exit'). However, such an approach is only feasible where group boundaries are perceived to be permeable and where the individual is not automatically limited because of his or her group membership. In Tajfel's terms, the strategy of 'exit' depends upon a belief structure of social mobility. Conversely, the precondition for a collective strategy of seeking personal advancement by changing the position of the group as a whole (which Tajfel (1975), again following Hirschman, terms 'voice') will depend upon seeing group boundaries as impermeable. For Tajfel, the strategy of voice depends upon a belief structure of social change. Thus, he uses the example of South Africa under apartheid as a situation in which the oppressed black majority can only advance by challenging their structural exclusion and he quotes the work of Danziger (1963) and Geber (1972) who use a technique of 'future autobiographies' to show that, in consequence, black people speculate about their fate in collective as opposed to individual terms (Tajfel, 1978).

A belief that individual mobility is impossible may be necessary but it is not sufficient for collective action to occur. It is also necessary that a change in the group's position is seen as both morally desirable and practically possible. To take the two in turn, Tajfel argues that it is only when domination is seen as illegitimate that comparisons with the dominant group become possible and hence the issue of change arises. Where hierarchical or unequal social relations are seen as legitimate (as an example, the Indian caste system is invoked) change is not even a matter at issue. On the question of practicality, Tajfel employs the term 'cognitive alternatives' to denote a situation in which group members can envisage a future in which they are no longer



subordinated, which renders their present situation contingent or 'insecure' and which makes action for change a realistic option.

Where all these conditions are satisfied, collective action is predicted to ensue, but the form this action will take remains open. Three options are outlined: subordinate group members may try to redefine themselves in terms of the characteristics of the dominant group, they may try to redefine characteristics previously seen as negative in positive terms or else they may adopt a strategy of 'social creativity' whereby, through the diffusion of new ideologies, new group characteristics are made which have a positively valued distinctiveness from the superior group. Tajfel also deals with dominant group members - albeit less fully. Very rarely will they accept the injustice of their dominance and either leave the group or else accept challenges from the subordinate group. Much more frequently, they will respond to any challenges by increased discrimination and by the creation of new ideologies which differentiate them from the subordinate group as well as justifying repression.

In sum, Tajfel presents us with the factors involved in a psychology of social change: belief structures, perceptions of legitimacy, cognitive alternatives and strategies of action. More properly, he presents some of some of the factors that are involved since recent research in the social movement literature points to the importance of such additional variables such as, perceptions of collective action as legitimate, perceptions of the forms of collective action that are proposed as potentially successful, and self-identification as an activist (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Klandermans, 1989; Klandermans, Kriesi & Tarrow, 1988; Morris & McClurg-Mueller, 1992).

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However, the important thing is not so much the number of factors in Tajfel's account, but rather the status of the account as a whole. In effect, it is a list of (some of) the psychological ingredients that go towards producing social change. However it cannot in itself be characterised as a psychological model, let alone a theory, of social change. Indeed, if it were to be taken as such, there are dangers that crucial issues may remain unexplored and the consequent vision of change - both in terms of means and possibilities - would be severely limited. There are at least three major areas in which Tajfel's account would need to be elaborated before the term 'model' could properly be applied.

First of all, the very concept of change requires clarification. It is not simply that the account is limited to the psychological precursors of psychological change as opposed to the factors which lead to involvements in movements for structural change (after

all, the various civil rights movements are as much if not more about changing laws, altering institutional practices, challenging exclusion and redistributing resources as they are about members evaluating themselves positively) but also that the vision of psychological change is itself limited.

In a book that is often taken as a call for black separatism, Carmichael & Hamilton (1967) argue that black people must come together in order to challenge those psychological and structural impediments that stop them participating on equal terms with whites. In other words, autonomous organisation may be a means, but the end is to render irrelevant racial categorisation. Similarly, Michael Farrell - a founder member of one of the radical republican organisations in Northern Ireland - argues that it is futile to try and get Catholic and Protestant workers to unite in a sectarian state. Rather, the priority must be to organise amongst those who are willing to challenge the nature of the state and hence create the conditions for future unity (Farrell, 1980). It would be easy to find similar examples elsewhere. The general point is that even where people organise around ~~of~~ a particular form of difference (be it racial, ethnic, national, religious or whatever) that does not mean that action is limited to redefining the terms of that difference. Rather, their aim may be to destroy the system of difference entirely and reassert another. Perhaps the most famous expression of this view is Nelson Mandela's statement at the Rivonia trials of 1964. After arguing that "political division, based on colour, is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one colour group by another", he concludes with the oft-quoted words: "During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" (1978, p. 175). As Mandela's recent donning of a Springbok shirt at the rugby world cup final makes clear, now as then the category 'African' involves both 'black' and 'white'. Moreover, it supersedes them.

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In limiting change to the redefinition of group characteristics, the definition of social identity is reduced to a set of characteristics whose major importance is whether they are evaluated positively or negatively. To define social identity in such terms sits uneasily with Tajfel's arguments elsewhere that identity is something involved in the dynamics of practice: 'a guide to action'. How can a set of traits, attributes or whatever allow one to organise and manipulate the complexities of our shifting social relations? Moreover, such a static conception makes it difficult to see how identity is

bound up with the processes of social change. I argued above that the very conception of social identity helps overcome the dualism of self and society. I shall argue below that this conception needs to be refined if we are to overcome the dualism of social determination and social change (cf. Reicher, 1987a).

② The second set of issues which need to be elaborated has to do with the interactions between terms. Most obviously, Tajfel outlines the possible strategies of change that may be adopted by subordinate and dominant groups. However, no mention is made of the way in which the strategy of each group may be affected by the actions of the other. Similarly, there is little consideration of the ways in which other variables - such as belief structures, perceptions of legitimacy and cognitive alternatives - may be affected by the responses to initial forms of collective action. For instance, there is much evidence that early modern rioting was often done in the name of the King or Queen in order to reclaim what were seen as traditional rights (Stephenson, 1979). Whether their sense of loyalty was undermined or not depended upon the way in which officers of the monarch responded. Similarly, as Therborn (1980) points out, revolutionary movements rarely if ever start off with a blueprint of a new society - or even any sense of a new society. It is only through their actions, the retaliations of those in power or else their impotence in the face of mass actions, that the existing regimes are delegitimated and possible futures are glimpsed. What is more, many struggles involve more than two parties and it is essential to examine the more complex interplay between them. For instance, the rise of the Muslim League culminating in the partition of India and the creation of an independent Pakistan can easily be mystified as expressing an essentialist Muslim identity (see, for instance, the Lahore resolution (Khan, 1988) as a key expression of Muslim nationalism) unless one examines the role of the British Imperialism. The League gained power and credibility only when the British gave them political office as a means of undermining the Congress Alliance's 'Quit India' movement (Singh, 1987). All in all, no model of social change can hope to explain what any single party does apart from the interaction between them all.

③ This raises the third and possibly the most crucial issue. As things stand, the variables of interest are simply stated as if they confront the subject from without and constitute 'entry conditions' for the process of social change. Before the mass acts they must see individual progress as futile, inequality as illegitimate and alternatives as possible. But where do these understandings come from? How do they develop? Unless these questions are answered, any model of social change must ultimately defeat itself. The explanation founders upon pre-given understandings which are either a feature of the

structural and ideological context or else derive from stable intra-psychic beliefs. Either one has a social determinism which ultimately denies the agency of actors and makes them puppets of transcendental understandings or else a pure voluntarism whereby action pays no heed to social reality.

On the whole, where Tajfel does give illustrations, it is to point to the importance of contextual factors. Thus beliefs of social change derive from the structural barriers of apartheid or else perceptions of legitimacy reflect the hegemony of the caste system in India. For social change as for social determination, Tajfel is concerned to put behaviour back in its social context. His stress is on the way in which various aspects of this context influence the occurrence or non-occurrence of social change. Billig (1987) points out that the meaning of any term is dependent upon the argumentative context in which it is expressed. Against the background of a psychology which systematically decontextualised human understanding and action it is entirely understandable why Tajfel should have wished to stress the importance of context to the extent of over-stressing its fixity and solidity. However such a concept is clearly inimicable to his project of explaining change.

This tendency is not limited to early versions but is equally apparent in the most recent developments of the tradition. Thus, one of the key propositions of self-categorisation theory (Haslam & Turner, 1992; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Hayes, 1992; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1993) is that the definition of social identity will be a function of the comparative context in which groups find themselves. This means that, far from being rigid and unchangeable, group level perceptions (stereotypes) will systematically vary as a function of who else is present in the context. This variability does not display the distorted nature of stereotyping - quite the opposite. Stereotypes reflect social reality and it is because reality is relational that stereotypes alter as relations change.

There is much to recommend this view - most notably its attack on the mainstream social cognition view of group perception as inherently faulty (just the most recent in the long history of psychologies which propose that the individual is always superior and hence preferable to the collective). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Reicher, 1993; Reicher & Hopkins, in press a,b), the problem is that social reality is taken as self-evident and hence the relationship between reality and categorization is entirely one way: reality determines self-categorization. This is to ignore both the way in which the nature of context and who is to be included in it is often a matter of fierce

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controversy. It is also to ignore that context is made up of the ways in which subjects categorise themselves and these categories also form the basis from which people seek to restructure the context.

Rather than seeing context as something external to and determining of human understanding in general and social identity in particular, it is necessary to develop a perspective which acknowledges how context may itself be made of identities and the actions which flow from them. What we need is a new way of looking at context and its relation to identity. However, in order to do so, we need to take on board the other two issues that I have raised. First of all, any new perspective must involve an interactive element and must also consider the development of interactions over time. Secondly, such a perspective must change our view not only of context but also of social identity. In order to elaborate these points I shall use some work on change in crowd contexts as illustration.

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### Crowds, contestation and the context of change

It may seem ironic to root an analysis of social change in the study of crowds. After all, the traditional view has it that crowd members lose all sense of self, all control over behaviour and hence are 'only powerful for destruction' (Le Bon, 1895, trans. 1947). Even those who repudiate the Le Bonian approach still maintain a distinction between crowds and social movements with only the latter seen as motors of change (Milgram & Toch, 1969; Tajfel, 1978). Such a distinction is, however, difficult to maintain if one considers that crowd incidents may often instigate social movements - the rise of the gay liberation movement after Stonewall being perhaps the most significant recent example. Moreover, crowd action may often form an ideologically coherent and politically effective component of such movements: E.P. Thompson's resonant phrase "collective bargaining by riot" summarises the point with admirable brevity (Thompson, 1971, 1991). More recently, it could be argued that, for all the ways in which they were condemned as irrational and counter-productive at the time, the American riots of the 1960s and 1970s did more to generate responses to the exclusion of at least a section of the black population than a decade of boycotts, sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations (Allen, 1970; Frazier, 1962). Even Martin Luther King, who eschewed all but non-violent tactics, acknowledged that the riots were 'the voice of the oppressed'.

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But Allen says nothing about the effectiveness of riots - the reverse, in fact

If this is so, then it can be argued that those traditional theories which characterise crowds as generically irrational serve not only to obscure the social character of mass action but also act politically to silence the oppressed (Reicher & Potter, 1985). It was with these twin concerns in mind that my initial studies of the crowd were undertaken (Reicher, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1987a). In brief, I argued that people do not lose their identity in the crowd but rather shift from acting in terms of personal identity to acting in terms of the relevant social identity. Correspondingly, people do not lose control over their behaviour in the crowd but rather control shifts to those values and understandings by which this identity is defined. It may be that the situational meaning of this identity within the crowd context needs to be elaborated and that a variety of interpretations are possible. Nonetheless, the range is limited for there are many interpretations that would clearly be dissonant with the broader identity. This can be shown to be reflected in the patterns and limits to crowd action as exemplified by the so called 'St. Pauls riot' of April 1980.

In short, crowd action is socially meaningful because people act in terms of shared social self-definitions. Correspondingly, we should not dismiss crowd action as senseless but rather listen carefully to what it tells us about the understandings of groups whose views are characteristically ignored. As the historian Reddy has written of working class crowds in Rouen: "the targets of these crowds thus glitter in the eye of history as signs of the labourers' conception of the nature of society" (1977, p. 84).

Whatever its merits in terms of reasserting the social coherence of mass action, these studies are vulnerable to criticism on grounds of social change. To start with, the issue of change is largely ignored. Analysis of St. Pauls concentrates on one phase of the events when conflict with the police had started and before the police withdrew. The question of transitions from phase to phase therefore does not arise and possible differences between phases are excluded from study. This empirical limitation is matched by an analytic focus upon the way in which a pre-given identity determines the shape of crowd behaviour. Even if some room for manoeuvre is allowed in terms of situational interpretations, the contours of the superordinate identity are taken as fixed. Once again, the question of how self-understanding may itself change through the process of crowd action is not addressed.

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Nonetheless, even where it is not sought, the issue of social change is hard to repress entirely. Like grass through tarmac, it always manages to poke through. The day after the 'St. Pauls riot' there was something akin to a victory party on the green where

conflict had started. The music that was played was specifically anti-authority and it was matched by the behaviour of the crowd who openly smoked cannabis in front of the watching police. The significance of such acts was encapsulated by the ways in which participants talked about the 'riot' itself: "we took on the police and beat them. They will never again treat us with contempt... they will respect us now". Or else: "The colour of your skin determines everything. We can't beat them in the court, but we defeated them on the streets" (Reicher, 1984, p. 16). In other words, if the conflict arose over what were seen by participants as unwarranted police interventions into the life of the St. Pauls community, and if crowd action was specifically directed at agencies of external control, so the event was seen as redefining relationships with these outsiders. The party was both a celebration and an assertion of this changed relationship.

What renders this all the more significant is the fact that participants did not only refer to social change in terms of social relations, they also referred to themselves in similar terms. When asked to describe crowd members or else to define their identity, no-one responded in terms of attributes or traits. Rather, they talked of 'being from St. Pauls' in terms of their social location (Reicher, 1987a,b). The predominant way of doing so was in relation to the position of being black in Britain. Sometimes this was explicit. Thus, one youth argued that being from St. Pauls was like being black in terms of being denied jobs, being harassed by the police and generally being discriminated against. Another participant claimed of the crowd as a whole that "politically they were all black". Sometimes, the link was stated more generally. As one crowd member put it: "I think it was quite honestly a case of us against them. Us, the oppressed section of society, if you like, against the police, against authority basically" (Reicher, 1984, p. 13). At yet other times, the link was with the core experience of black people. When Desmond Pierre of the St. Pauls Defence Campaign was asked about the rationale for the organisation, he responded that "we are defending ourselves on a lot of issues, but the main one is the right to lead a free life" (Reicher, 1984, p. 14). If a racialised form of oppression defines being from St. Pauls, then defending St. Pauls means the reassertion of autonomy and control.

This way of conceptualising identity has much in common with Billig's (1995) view of national stereotypes and self-stereotypes. He argues that they are not so much descriptions as theories about the social world. Similarly, I would argue that for the people of St. Pauls, and for people more generally, identity is a model of where one stands within a system of social relations. It is therefore simultaneously a theory of the way in which the world works and an analysis of the options and actions open to

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the subject given their position in it. Moreover, the model involves evaluative stances: in the case under consideration, oppression is wrong, autonomy is a right, resistance is permissible if not required. In this sense, identity is more than a passive reflection of what is. It is a statement of what ought to be. Social identity is always, in part, an active project.

The advantage of such a formulation is threefold. First of all, it is adequate in terms of Tajfel's original formulation of social identity as "a guide to action" (Tajfel, 1972).

Unlike a trait adjective checklist, identity as a model of self in social relations prescribes both what one can do and what one should do. Secondly, it overcomes a contradiction between identity process and identity content which continues to characterise work in the broad social identity tradition. Thus, even if recent studies of stereotyping in the self-categorisation tradition insist that the group definition depends upon and varies with the social relations obtaining in context, they continue to operationalise (if not conceptualise) identity as a set of traits (e.g. Haslam & Turner, 1992; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Hayes, 1992; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). But if social identity is a function of social relations, it is surely more consistent to see it as represented in terms of social relations. Thirdly, and of most direct concern here, such a conception carries us forward in searching for an understanding of social change.

I have argued that the major problem for social identity theorists in explaining social change lies in the separation of context from the self and a one way flow of determination from the former to the latter. By defining identity in relation to the structure of social reality and by acknowledging the two-sided nature of this relation (identity is both a theory of how things are and a project for how they should be) then at least we start with concepts addressed to the problems they are meant to solve. The question of how action based on a socially determined identity achieves social change can then be reformulated as 'how can action on the basis of a particular model of self in social relations change the nature of those social relations'? An answer is to be found in the fact that different groups differ in their understandings. The dynamics of identity and change need to be explored in the relationship between these various understandings and the consequent development of interactions between the parties involved. Our recent studies of crowds (Drury, 1994; Reicher, in press; Reicher & Stott, 1991) may help to make this more concrete.

In a number of different situations - such as student demonstrations, football fans at the world cup and anti-poll tax rallies - we have found a similar pattern of interaction.



The student demonstration can serve as illustration of this more general pattern (Reicher, in press). Initially, the mass was heterogenous and consisted of many groups of people who considered themselves in terms of specific affiliations (Exeter students, Labour students, groups of friends) rather than in terms of a single superordinate category membership. However one categorisation which was repeatedly stressed divided 'ordinary students' who were simply seeking to have their concerns heard by parliament from those 'political students' who called for and who initiated confrontational acts.

As a consequence of such acts, the authorities - the police in particular - applied containing or else repressive tactics towards crowd members. The route to parliament was blocked and rows of police were used to force back any students who sought to approach parliament. Critically, however, the police acted against the crowd as a whole. Therefore many people who opposed confrontation were treated along with those who might have initiated it. Everybody was treated with hostility and stopped in their activity irrespective of what that activity might have been. The consequence of this was that an initially passive majority perceived outgroup action as illegitimate, considered their rights to have been violated and hence sought to reassert their rights even if this meant joining in confrontations that they originally eschewed. Concerted attempts were made to breach police lines. More importantly, these attempts were broadly supported. Previously parochial categorisations had given way to a general sense of grievance as students.

In addition, the sense of power engendered by forming part of a common category with the mass in general - rather than being, as previously, fragmented into small groups - gave people the confidence as well as the reason to challenge authority. Students surged against police lines, they joined in to wrestle free other students (whether they know them or not) who had been arrested. This escalating challenge confirmed initial police fears of and repression towards the crowd as a whole. Police reinforcements were called up, mounted reserves were brought into action. The conflict escalated on both sides and culminated with a mounted police charge into the student crowd causing a number of injuries. For many of the students, especially those who initially saw themselves as non-confrontational, the result was to effect a profound change in their view of the police and of society in general, but also in their views of themselves. Moreover the two were inter-linked. The police were no longer seen as neutral upholders of an order in which the concerns of ordinary people are as important as the defence of parliament. Instead, came to be seen as part of a repressive state apparatus which is used to deny the rights and interests of powerless

groups such as students. Just as the general model of social relations changed from the consensual to the conflictual, so the self-location of the students themselves had to shift. Their identity has changed from the loyal to the oppositional with all the political and moral implications which flow from such a stance.

The aim of this extended description is not to suggest that all crowds or even all crowd confrontations will follow this pattern. Clearly, there is no more a generic pattern to crowd interaction than there is to crowd behaviour. Rather, the aim is to show how our conceptual approach to change needs to be developed in order to account for what happened in this and like instances.

The dynamic originates in the fact that, merely by acting as part of the crowd, members change their social relationship to others. Thus, in other contexts, students may be perceived and treated by others in general and the police in particular as articulate, responsible members of society. In the crowd they constitute a threat, a potential if not actual challenge to social order. In part, this is due to the power of numbers. In part it is due to the dissemination of ideologies which portray the crowd as either made up of trouble-makers or else liable to come under their sway (Cronin, 1995; Stott, 1995) This sets up a number of asymmetries between the perceptions of those parties involved in the crowd event. If insiders (at least initially) see themselves as respectable and non-confrontational, the police see and treat them as dangerous. If insiders see the crowd as heterogeneous and the majority divorce themselves from those who are seen as confrontational, the police tend to see and treat the crowd as homogenous - especially in situations where conflict has been initiated. Lastly, what students see as their legitimate rights (to demonstrate, to be heard in parliament) are seen as illegitimate (a threat to order, the possibility of disrupting parliament) by the police.

It is important that we don't stop with the observation of asymmetry for, while it may set a dynamic in motion, it is necessary to explore how this dynamic is played out. Perceptions of self and other, as I have argued, are not simply descriptions but guides to action. Moreover, the groups involved in any event do not only differ in their understandings but also in their ability to act upon them. In particular, the police have the technology, the means of communication and coordination, and also the institutional support to impose their understandings on the crowd - at least initially. Thus the perception that a crowd is homogeneously dangerous and illegitimate in their actions means that they are treated as such. A police cordon stops everyone passing irrespective of their actions or intentions. A police sweep clears everyone away, and

everyone is equally liable to be hurt, crushed or roughly handled as a consequence. To use a familiar term, police action imposes a common fate on crowd members.

However it is equally important that we don't reify groups and power differences between groups as determining the interaction. Another point that clearly emerges from examining the development of crowd encounters is that relations are reconstituted in the course of an event. Thus, in imposing a common fate on the student crowd, the police create a context in which crowd members redefine themselves in terms of a common category membership. This redefinition serves to alter the power relations between groups, it allows the student mass to resist police actions and to at least attempt to impose their own understanding of rights. Insofar as identity is conceptualised as a representation of one's place in a system of social relations, this reconstitution of social relations is also a reconstitution of selfhood. Hence both the context and the psychological basis for future action is in constant movement. The self-understanding of groups, the relation between those groups and even the nature of the categories involved may shift from one round of interaction to the next.

At one level, this analysis may seem very different to Tajfel's. However it is worth noting that there are similarities between both in terms of the key variables that are postulated as relevant to the occurrence of collective action. Where Tajfel talks of 'belief structures of social change' it is argued here that people will act together collectively where they are treated (and consequently see themselves) as equivalent irrespective of any interpersonal differences. Where Tajfel refers to legitimacy, I propose that groups will enter into conflict with others in order to assert rights which are illegitimately denied them. And where Tajfel invokes 'cognitive alternatives', I suggest that the sense of possibility engendered by collective empowerment is crucial to crowd grievance becoming crowd action.

Thus, in terms of critical variables, the difference between the two approaches is not so much what they are but how they are conceptualised. For Tajfel, they are listed as conditions for the onset of collective action. Here they are seen as emerging in the process of collective action itself. Consequently, where Tajfel's terms are characterised as states of the mass in itself, here they are characterised much more in terms of features of intergroup relations: how insiders can act in the light of outgroup action; what people feel they should be able to do in relation to what they are allowed to do; and what people can do in the face of the opposition of others.

More generally, in order to examine the dynamics of social change, the broader conceptual basis through which social identity theory approaches social change has been reconceptualised in relational terms. First of all, it is suggested that both change and social identity itself be thought of in terms of social relations. Change is a matter of shifting social relations and is directly linked to identity insofar as social identity is a representation of one's place in a system of social relations.

Secondly, it is argued that an analysis of change needs to be rooted in situated studies of interactions between groups. Moreover, such studies need to be historical and examine the development of these interactions. Only in this way is it possible to see how action on the basis of social identity may alter the relations between groups and set up a process in which the successive responses of each group to the other progressively redefine the groups themselves and the ground on which they act.

*method*

Thirdly, and lastly, such a historical and developmental approach breaks down the traditional opposition between subject and context. In situations of social conflict, the context in which human beings act is made up of the actions of other human beings. This is especially obvious in crowds where those others are physically present and the constraints they impose take a direct and visible form such as cordons of officers, squads in riot gear and so on. However, it is no less true in other situations where human activity has been formalised into institutional practices and regulations. Thus, subject and context are not different orders of reality. Indeed what derives from the subjectivity of one set of actors forms the context in which others act and in which their subjectivity is formed. Thus, the self-conceptions of the police as upholders of order in the face of student threat leads them to mount a cordon of officers in the students path and push back any who seek to progress. This, then, is the physical context in which students act, in which they develop their own self-understandings from which flow the actions that constitute the context for further police action.

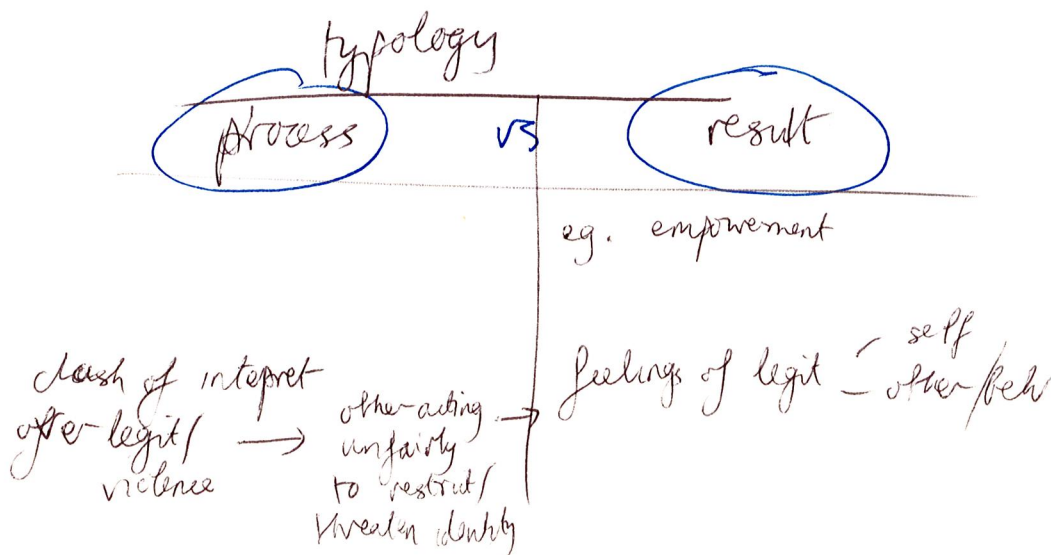
*subject*  
*context*

Viewed in this way, the distinction between subject and context refers to the social distribution of conscious human practice over space and time. What is the action of some subjects is the context of others. What is context at one point in time resolves into action at another. It perhaps only because psychology has been so bad at studying interactions and has viewed behaviour ahistorically that these connections are obscured, subject and context are torn apart and the dynamics of social change become so elusive. Conversely, it follows that only by defining our concepts in relational terms, adopting methods that can incorporate interactive and historical

dimensions, will we avoid the dualism of subject and context and be able to understand social change.

## Conclusion

The foregoing has been long, so I will be brief. This chapter has sought to do three things. The first is simply to remind us of the central place that understanding social change had in the origins of social identity theory and to argue that this priority needs to be restored. No social psychological theory which ignores change is intellectually adequate. No theory which implicitly or explicitly denies change is politically acceptable. The second aim was to argue that Tajfel may have insisted on the importance of change but his was more the prolegomenon to any future model rather than a psychological model of social change in itself. I have argued that such a model requires us to elaborate if not change some of the fundamental concepts of social identity theory. In particular, the notion of context, which in its early stages may have been the basis for overcoming the reifications of traditional psychological theory, is now in danger of becoming a major impediment to progress. It is essential to overcome the notion of context as external to and determining of self-categorisation and to substitute an understanding of the two as mutually implicative of the other. I have also argued that the study of social change needs to look at the interactions between groups in a historical perspective. Thirdly, and finally, I have provided one illustration of such a study and how it can help elucidate the process of social change. As I stressed, this example is in no way intended as a template for all social change. There may be many different forms of social interaction which lead to change and there may be many similar forms of interaction in which change does not occur. What is now necessary is to undertake detailed historical studies of different interactive relations in order to elucidate the conditions under which change occurs and the forms it takes. If this chapter encourages anyone to undertake such studies, it will have succeeded in its purpose.



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