

Identity Process Theory

Identity, Social Action and Social Change

EDITED BY

Rusi Jaspal and **Glynis M. Breakwell**



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Identity Process Theory

We live in an ever-changing social world, which constantly demands adjustment to our identities and actions. Advances in science, technology and medicine, political upheaval and economic development are just some examples of social change that can impact upon how we live our lives, how we view ourselves and each other, and how we communicate. Three decades after its first appearance, *Identity Process Theory* remains a vibrant and useful integrative framework in which identity, social action and social change can be collectively examined. This book presents some of the key developments in this area. In eighteen chapters by world-renowned social psychologists, the reader is introduced to the major social psychological debates about the construction and protection of identity in the face of social change. Contributors address a wide range of contemporary topics – national identity, risk, prejudice, intractable conflict and ageing – which are examined from the perspective of Identity Process Theory.

DR. RUSI JASPAL is Lecturer in Psychology and convenor of the Self and Identity Research Group at De Montfort University, Leicester. He has published widely on Identity Process Theory, intergroup relations and the media. His research spans across multiple cultural and geographical contexts, including the UK, India and Israel. Dr. Jaspal is the author of *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism: Representation, Cognition and Everyday Talk* (2013).

PROFESSOR DAME GLYNIS M. BREAKWELL has been Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bath since 2001. In the 2012 New Year's Honour list she was appointed Dame Commander of the British Empire for her work in Higher Education. She is a member of the Council of the Economic & Social Research Council and chairs its Research Committee. Her research has focussed on leadership, identity processes and risk management and she has published more than twenty books, including *The Psychology of Risk* (2007). She is the originator of Identity Process Theory.

For our parents
(RJ & GMB)

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Foreword

Kay Deaux

My first encounter with Identity Process Theory came in the late 1980s, soon after the initial publication of Breakwell's (1986) *Coping with Threatened Identities*. Great Britain had proved to be the mother lode for my burgeoning interest in socially constructed identities: I first looked to the influential work of Henri Tajfel, then found Breakwell's work and soon after added Turner (1987) to my bookshelf of required readings (not coincidentally, both Breakwell and Turner were students of Tajfel). These works all resonated with me and with increasing frequency I began to use social identity rather than self as my concept of choice. Thinking in terms of group memberships and categories was not a wholly new endeavor, as I had long been interested in stereotypes that observers apply to recognizable groups of people. But in studying gender, for example, my comparisons of women and men aligned more with a traditional individual difference framework. While classic Social Identity Theory and the developing self-categorization work spoke to group-based definitions of self, Breakwell's work allowed me and many others, to keep the person more prominent in the story. Long a believer in the need to consider both personality process and situational influence (Deaux, 1992; Deaux and Snyder, 2012), I found in Breakwell's (1986) analysis a way to bring both elements into the explanatory frame.

In the nearly three decades since the publication of *Coping with Threatened Identities*, Identity Process Theory has grown in influence and expanded its theoretical network, as this volume created by Jaspal and Breakwell so richly demonstrates. This richness lies in wait for the reader to explore in the pages that follow. Here let me just highlight some key elements in the work emanating from Identity Process Theory that establish its distinctiveness and its contributions to the field of social and personality psychology.

The theory is, first and foremost, a dynamic model, concerned with the ways in which individuals define, construct and modify their identity. Originally introduced as a model of how people deal with threats to their

identity, the work has expanded over the years to consider more general processes of identity construction and maintenance. As a pivotal concept in the introduction of Identity Process Theory, threat led some to think of the theory as primarily clinical in its goals, concerned with how people cope with unforeseen (and sometimes foreseen) events that can cause them to change their conceptions of self. Yet threat was from the beginning more fundamentally conceived by Breakwell as a window on, or crucible for testing, more general processes of change.

This emphasis on identity change was in itself somewhat revolutionary, given the state of the field at the time. Personality theorists such as Erikson had put forward the idea of a critical period for identity formation, with implications of stability thereafter. Social identity theorists had increasingly focused on the ad hoc construction of an identity group, despite Tajfel's initial grounding in long-standing intergroup relations. Into this landscape came a theory that talked about the motivations (identity principles) that lead people to absorb new information about themselves and to make changes that incorporate that information in their sense of self. As de la Sablonnière and Osborne assert in Chapter 10 of this volume, "IPT is one of the first and only theories to make change an essential, foundational component of one's psychology." Although those in the field of developmental psychology might justifiably dispute this assertion (and some personality psychologists as well), it is certainly true that social psychology as a field has only rarely incorporated change into its models and theories. A developmental theory of identity processes may remain the Holy Grail, as Breakwell says in Chapter 2, but the work presented in this volume surely shows us why that would be a relevant quest.

A focus on change inevitably requires us to consider just what is changing and the answers that Identity Process Theory provides – content and value – raise fundamental issues about the meaning of an identity. Meaning, within Identity Process Theory, is at once highly individual and inevitably social in its conception. Breakwell has always refused to maintain a sharp distinction between personal and social identity, a position that sets her theory apart from the traditional assumptions of Social Identity Theory (and a position that continues to generate theoretical debate, as exemplified by the Pehrson and Reicher chapter in this volume). In delving into the meanings that are associated with a person's identity, IPT investigators show how porous the line between personality and social can be. Identities signify distinctive content and value for the people that hold them; yet the source of these meanings must necessarily emerge from the social surroundings in which one exists. Symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead and Sheldon Stryker laid

the foundation for a view of self as socially constructed and dependent on specific relationships with others; more recently, social representation theory expands the universe from which we as investigators can seek to discover the meanings that people use to define and redefine themselves.

A concern with meaning has led many identity process theorists to adopt the framework of Social Representation Theory to develop further their analysis of the relationship between the personal and the social. Personal representations are assumed to be manifestations of more general societal meaning systems, though it is psychological processes such as awareness and acceptance that mediate individual incorporation of these meanings. Here as elsewhere, Identity Process Theory accepts the possibility and indeed the inevitability, of change, both in the personal endorsement of meaning and in the available social repertoire. Further, change itself may be initiated either at the level of the individual, whose identity is threatened in some way such that an adaptive response is required, or at the level of society, where the consensual meaning of a particular concept may shift with circumstances. Considerable explanatory mileage is gained by the merger of Identity Process Theory and Social Representation Theory, as the framework holds the promise of a full-spectrum theory of person and context. Individuals operate not in a vacuum but in a world of socially constructed and communicated meaning that inevitably shapes their individual perspectives; at the same time, attention to individual psychological processes provides a workable account of how social meaning is transmitted to and played out in the lives of individuals.

The theoretical tractility of Identity Process Theory is evident in its engagement with multiple levels of analysis, as theorists move freely between the personal and the social and between the individual and the group. Methodological eclecticism, with a particular embrace of qualitative strategies, has also encouraged investigators to take the theory into the field. Salient social issues, including migration, ongoing intergroup conflicts and assessment of health risks, have been framed and explored with the assumptions of Identity Process Theory. Here the pay-off of a theoretical framework that includes both individual psychological process and contextual structures and forces becomes quite clear. In contrast to theories that focus on only one half of this conceptual territory and that as a consequence inevitably come up short when attempting to provide comprehensive analyses of complex social issues, the work described in this volume has the conceptual range that is needed both to improve our theories and to contribute to potential solutions.

Identity Process Theory is very much a theory in process. Yet the possibilities for change are not seen as threats to the theory's identity, either by

the editors or by the roster of authors included in this volume. One of the remarkable and refreshing aspects of this volume is the way in which it opens its pages to competing ideas and unresolved questions. Potentially competing theories are introduced as intellectual dilemmas that may be resolved; research programs are described in ways that encourage other investigators to become engaged in further work. Rusi Jaspal and Glynis Breakwell offer all readers of this volume both reason and opportunity for participation in these processes.

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