

Tajfel H, Billig M G, Bundy R P & Flament C. Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.* 1:149-77, 1971. [University of Bristol, England, and University of Aix-Marseille, France]

The paper reports two laboratory experiments, in which subjects were categorized as members of "minimal groups." Such social categorization was sufficient to produce significant ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. [The SC® and the SSC® indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 180 publications.]

The Baseline of Intergroup Prejudice

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The paper reports experiments which Henri Tajfel conducted in the summer of 1968, shortly after coming to Bristol University as professor of social psychology. "How is genocide possible?" was the question which preoccupied him. Unlike psychologists who believed that the sources of intergroup violence lay in irrational emotions, Tajfel had a hunch that cognitive processes were also involved: If you merely categorized people into different groups, then you would see the beginnings of ingroup loyalty and outgroup discrimination. He was searching for a "baseline" condition of prejudice.

At that time, I had just completed my undergraduate degree at Bristol. Like so many others who came into contact with Tajfel, I was enormously influenced by the power of his ideas and the enthusiasm of his personality. That summer, he asked me to design a laboratory experiment to test his hunch. Sheila, my wife, remembers me sitting on the steps of the Bristol refectory one sunny afternoon, notepad in hand, sketching out an experimental design: subjects would be divided into two groups; they would be unaware who else was in their group or in the other group; then they would make choices on matrices, allocating money

to anonymous members of the groups.

I ran the experiment with Bob P. Bundy, also recently graduated and later to teach psychology in Africa. The results were clear—in fact, far clearer than even Tajfel had predicted: schoolboys, placed in these minimal groups, favored their ingroup and discriminated against the outgroup. A second experiment, for which Claude Flament, of Aix-en-Provence, had designed mathematically sophisticated matrices, replicated the results. Again, the subjects were identifying with a meaningless group. As a scientist, Tajfel was excited by the data; but, at the same time, he was appalled by their implications.

Two basic reasons can be given for the impact of the experiments. First, Tajfel had found his "baseline" of prejudice. In doing so, he had provided a paradigm for creating group identity experimentally. Many later investigators were to use, and adapt, this paradigm. Second, Tajfel formulated his Social Identity Theory to interpret the experimental results. This theory was an influential forerunner of the sort of cognitive approach which was to dominate social psychology in the 1980s.¹⁻³

For my doctoral research, I worked within the intergroup paradigm. Then, with Tajfel's generous encouragement, I turned towards studying the psychology of ideology and fascism. Recently, I have been reconsidering the implication that basic cognitive processes inevitably produce prejudiced thinking. Perhaps, the rhetorical complexity of categorization had been underestimated.⁴

Henri Tajfel died in 1982. He would have been delighted to have known that this paper had become a *Citation Classic*. The paper appeared in the first volume of the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, whose foundation Tajfel hoped would give European social psychology its own identity. The subsequent history of the paper illustrates how far this hope has been realized. It is also testament to the unique contribution of Henri Tajfel.

1. Tajfel H. *Human groups and social categories*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981. 369 p. (Cited 135 times.)

2. -----, *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 528 p. (Cited 60 times.)

3. Abrams D & Hogg M A. *Social identity theory: constructive and critical advances*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990. 297 p.

4. Billig M. *Arguing and thinking: a rhetorical approach to social psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 290 p. (Cited 30 times.)

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