The Social Self:
On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time

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Most of social psychology's theories of the self fail to take into account the significance of social identification in the definition of self. Social identities are self-definitions that are more inclusive than the individuated self-concept of most American psychology. A model of optimal distinctiveness is proposed in which social identity is viewed as a reconciliation of opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation from others. According to this model, individuals avoid self-construals that are either too personalized or too inclusive and instead define themselves in terms of distinctive category memberships. Social identity and group loyalty are hypothesized to be strongest for those self-categorizations that simultaneously provide for a sense of belonging and a sense of distinctiveness. Results from an initial laboratory experiment support the prediction that depersonalization and group size interact as determinants of the strength of social identification.

In recent years, social psychologists have become increasingly "self"-centered. The subject index of a typical introductory social psychology text contains a lengthy list of terms such as *self-schema, self-complexity, self-verification, self-focusing, self-referencing, self-monitoring,* and *self-affirmation,* all suggesting something of a preoccupation with theories of the structure and function of self. The concept of self provides an important point of contact between theories of personality and theories of social behavior. Yet there is something peculiarly *un*social about the construal of self in American social psychology.[1]

The *self-* terms listed above are representative of a highly *individuated* conceptualization of the self. For the most part, our theories focus on internal structure and differentiation of the self-concept rather than connections to the external world. Particularly lacking is attention to the critical importance of group membership to individual functioning, both cognitive and emotional. The human species is highly adapted to group living and not well equipped to survive outside a group context. Yet our theories of self show little regard for this aspect of our evolutionary history. As a consequence, most of our theories are inadequate to account for much human action in the form of collective behavior. The self-interested, egocentric view of human nature does not explain why individuals risk or sacrifice personal comfort, safety, or social position to promote group benefit (Caporael, Dawes, Orbell, & van de Kragt, 1989).

Even a casual awareness of world events reveals the power of group identity in human behavior. Names such as *Azerbaijan, Serbia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Tamil, Eritrea, Basques, Kurds, Welsh,* and *Quebec* are currently familiar because they represent ethnic and national identities capable of arousing intense emotional commitment and self-sacrifice on the part of individuals. Furthermore, they all involve some form of separatist action—attempts to establish or preserve distinctive group identities against unwanted political or cultural merger within a larger collective entity. People die for the sake of group distinctions, and social psychologists have little to say by way of explanation for such "irrationality" at the individual level.
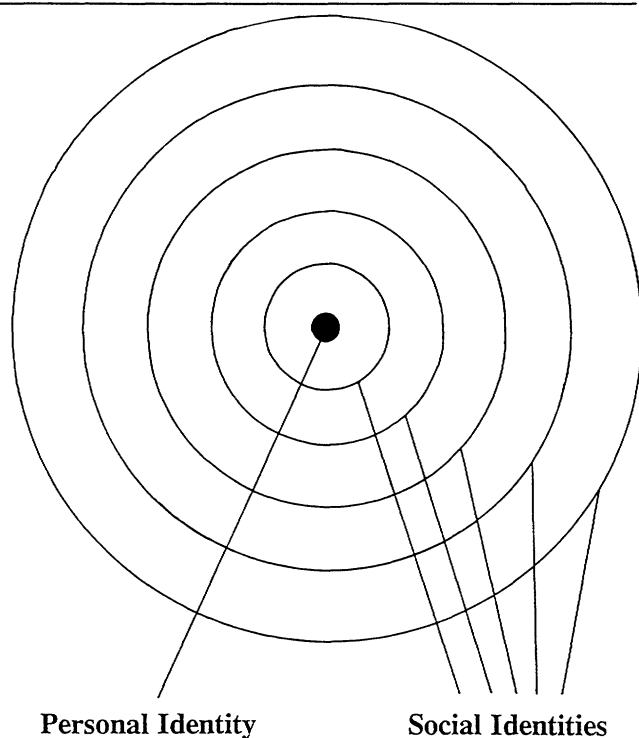
Figure 1   Personal and social identities.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

It is in this context that I have been interested in the concept of social identity as developed by European social psychologists, particularly Henri Tajfel and John Turner and their colleagues from the University of Bristol (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Although social identity theory has been introduced to U.S. social psychology, as a theory of self it is often misinterpreted. Americans tend to think of social identities as *aspects* of individual self-concept—part of internal differentiation. But the European conceptualization is one involving *extension* of the self beyond the level of the individual.

A schematic representation of social identity theory is presented in Figure 1. The concentric circles represent definitions of the self at different levels of inclusiveness within some particular domain. *Personal identity* is the individuated self—those characteristics that differentiate one individual from others within a given social context. *Social identities* are categorizations of the self into more inclusive social units that *depersonalize* the self-concept, where *I* becomes *we*. Social identity entails "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (Turner et al., 1987, p. 50).

The concentric circles in Figure 1 also illustrate the contextual nature of social identity. At each point in the figure, the next circle outward provides the frame of reference for differentiation and social comparison. To take a concrete example, consider my own identity within the occupation domain. At the level of personal identity is me as an individual researcher and teacher of social psychology. For this conceptualization of myself, the most immediate frame of reference for social comparison is my social psychology colleagues at UCLA. The most salient features of my self-concept in this context are those research interests, ideas, and accomplishments that distinguish me from the other social psychologists on my faculty.

My social identities, by contrast, *include* the interests and accomplishments of my colleagues. The first level of social identity is me as member of the social area within the department of psychology at UCLA.[2] Here, the department provides the relevant frame of reference, and social comparison is with other areas of psychology. At this level the most salient features of my self-concept are those which I have in common with other members of the social area and which distinguish *us* from cognitive, clinical, and developmental psychology. At this level of self-definition my social colleague and I are interchangeable parts of a common group identity—my self-worth is tied to the reputation and outcomes of the group as a whole.

A yet higher level of social identity is the Department of Psychology within UCLA. At this level, the campus becomes the frame of reference and other departments the basis of comparison. The next level of identification is represented by UCLA as institution, with other universities providing the relevant comparison points. And, finally, there is my identification with academia as a whole, as compared with nonacademic institutions in the United States or the world.

The point to be made with this illustration is that the self-concept is *expandable and contractable* across different levels of social identity with associated *transformations* in the definition of self and the basis for self-evaluation. When the definition of self changes, the meaning of self-interest and self-serving motivation also changes accordingly.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

In American psychology, social identity theory is associated with self-esteem. Most of the experimental research derived from the theory has focused on the consequences of being assigned to membership in a particular social group or category. Within this research tradition, category identity is imposed either by experimental instructions or by manipulation of the salience of natural group

distinctions, and the emphasis is on the effect of such categorization on in-group favoritism in the service of positive self-esteem (e.g., Lemyre & Smith, 1985; Oakes & Turner, 1980). In general, social identity research has concentrated on the evaluative implications of in-group identification to the exclusion of research on why and how social identities are established in the first place (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Doise, 1988).

Social identity should not be equated with membership in a group or social category. Membership may be voluntary or imposed, but social identities are chosen. Individuals may recognize that they belong to any number of social groups without adopting those classifications as social identities. Social identities are selected from the various bases for self-categoriation available to an individual at a particular time. And specific social identities may be activated at some times and not at others.

Available research leaves unanswered the question of the direction of causal relationship between identification and positive in-group evaluation. Do individuals select a particular social identity because it has positive value or status, or does identification produce a bias toward positive in-group evaluation? In-group bias may not be a method of *achieving* self-esteem so much as an *extension* of self-esteem at the group level (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990).

Particularly problematic to self-esteem explanations of social identity are those situations in which individuals choose to identify with groups that are of low status or negatively valued by the population at large. In the real world, individuals who belong to disadvantaged minorities do not consistently reject their group identity despite its possible negative implications, nor do they suffer from excessively low self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). Even though evaluative bias in favor of own-group identities may be an inevitable *consequence* of social identification, it does not fully account for the *selection* of social identities.

OPTIMAL DISTINCTIVENESS THEORY

My position is that social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other). The idea that individuals need a certain level of both similarity to and differentiation from others is not novel. It is the basis of uniqueness theory, proposed by Snyder and Fromkin (1980), as well as a number of other models of individuation (e.g., Codol, 1984; Lemaine, 1974; Maslach, 1974; Ziller, 1964). In general, these models assume that individuals meet these needs by maintaining some intermediate degree of similarity between the self and relevant others.
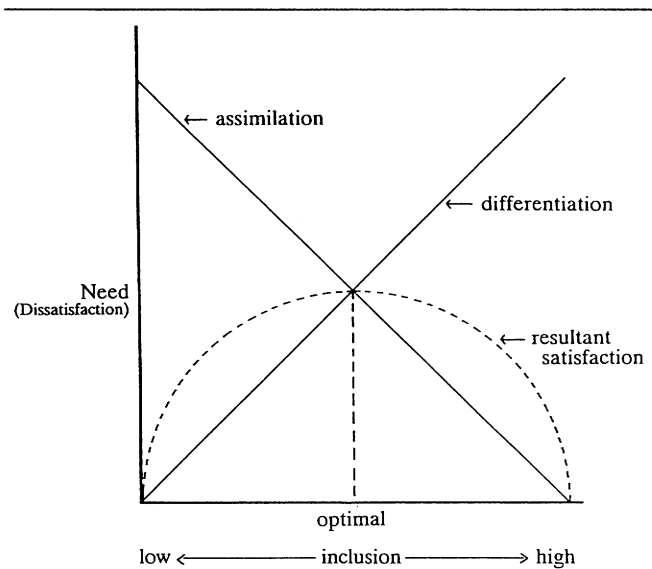

Figure 2   The optimal distinctiveness model.

The theory of social identity provides another perspective on how these conflicting drives are reconciled. Social identity can be viewed as a compromise between assimilation and differentiation from others, where the need for deindividuation is satisfied within in-groups, while the need for distinctiveness is met through *inter*group comparisons. Adolescent peer groups provide a prototypical case. Each cohort develops styles of appearance and behavior that allow individual teenagers to blend in with their age mates while "sticking out like a sore thumb" to their parents. Group identities allow us to be the same and different at the same time.

The model underlying this view of the function of social identity is a variant of *opposing process* models, which have proved useful in theories of emotion and acquired motivation (Solomon, 1980). Instead of a bipolar continuum of similarity-dissimilarity, needs for assimilation and differentiation are represented as opposing forces, as depicted in Figure 2.

As represented along the abscissa of the figure, it is assumed that within a given social context, or frame of reference, an individual can be categorized (by self or others) along a dimension of social distinctiveness-inclusiveness that ranges from uniqueness at one extreme (i.e., features that distinguish the individual from any other persons in the social context) to total submersion in the social context (deindividuation) at the other. The higher the level of inclusiveness at which self-categorization is made, the more depersonalized the self-concept becomes.[3]

Each point along the inclusiveness dimension is associated with a particular level of activation of the compet-

ing needs for assimilation and individuation. Arousal of the drive toward social assimilation is inversely related to level of inclusiveness. As self-categorization becomes more individuated or personalized, the need for collective identity becomes more intense. By contrast, arousal of self-differentiation needs is directly related to level of inclusiveness. As self-categorization becomes more depersonalized, the need for individual identity is intensified.

At either extreme along the inclusiveness dimension, the person's sense of security and self-worth is threatened. Being highly individuated leaves one vulnerable to isolation and stigmatization (even excelling on positively valued dimensions creates social distance and potential rejection). However, total deindividuation provides no basis for comparative appraisal or self-definition. As a consequence, we are uncomfortable in social contexts in which we are either too distinctive (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990; Lord & Saenz, 1985) or too undistinctive (Fromkin, 1970, 1972).

In this model, equilibrium, or *optimal distinctiveness*, is achieved through identification with categories at that level of inclusiveness where the degrees of activation of the need for differentiation and of the need for assimilation are exactly equal. Association with groups that are too large or inclusive should leave residual motivation for greater differentiation of the self from that group identity, whereas too much personal distinctiveness should leave the individual seeking inclusion in a larger collective. Deviations from optimal distinctiveness in either direction—too much or too little personalization—should drive the individual to the same equilibrium, at which social identification is strongest and group loyalties most intense.

The basic tenets of the optimal distinctiveness model are represented in the following assumptions:

> *A1.* Social identification will be strongest for social groups or categories at that level of inclusiveness which resolves the conflict between needs for differentiation of the self and assimilation with others.
>
> *A2.* Optimal distinctiveness is independent of the evaluative implications of group membership, although, other things being equal, individuals will prefer positive group identities to negative identities.
>
> *A3.* Distinctiveness of a given social identity is context-specific. It depends on the frame of reference within which possible social identities are defined at a particular time, which can range from participants in a specific social gathering to the entire human race.
>
> *A4.* The optimal level of category distinctiveness or inclusiveness is a function of the relative strength (steepness) of the opposing drives for assimilation and differentiation. For any individual, the relative strength of the two needs is determined by cultural norms, individual socialization, and recent experience.

This last assumption makes the model consistent with theories that emphasize cultural differences in definition of the self (Markus & Kitayama, in press; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). However, it is unlikely that any societies exist in which either the extreme of individuation or that of assimilation is optimal, except as a cultural ideal. There is a limit to the cultural shaping of fundamental human needs.

Distinctiveness and Level of Identification

The primary implication of this model of social identity is that distinctiveness per se is an extremely important characteristic of groups, independent of the status or evaluation attached to group memberships. To secure loyalty, groups must not only satisfy members' needs for affiliation and belonging *within* the group, they must also maintain clear boundaries that differentiate them from other groups. In other words, groups must maintain distinctiveness in order to survive—effective groups cannot be too large or too heterogeneous. Groups that become overly inclusive or ill-defined lose the loyalty of their membership or break up into factions or splinter groups.

To return to the concentric circle schematic of Figure 1, the optimal distinctiveness model implies that there is one level of social identity that is dominant, as the primary self-concept within a domain. In contrast to theories that emphasize the prepotency of the individuated self, this model holds that in most circumstances personal identity will *not* provide the optimal level of self-definition. Instead, the prepotent self will be a collective identity at some intermediate level of inclusiveness, one that provides both shared identity with an in-group and differentiation from distinct out-groups.

Evidence for the relative potency of group identity over personal identity is available from a number of research arenas. Studies of the growth of social movements, for instance, reveal that activism is better predicted by feelings of *fraternal deprivation* (i.e., the perception that one's group is disadvantaged relative to other groups) than by feelings of personal deprivation (Dubé & Guimond, 1986; Vanneman & Pettigrew, 1972). Individual members of disadvantaged groups frequently perceive higher levels of discrimination directed against their group than they report against themselves personally (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990), but it is the former that motivates participation in collective action (Taylor, Moghaddam, Gamble, & Zellerer, 1987; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

Individuals also respond in terms of group identity when they are placed in social dilemma situations and faced with a conflict between making profit for themselves

and helping to preserve a collective resource (Caporael et al., 1989). My own research in this area demonstrates that the choice subjects make is affected by the group identities available to them. If there is no collective identity, or if the collective is too large and amorphous, then most individuals behave selfishly, pocketing as much money as they can for themselves before the public good runs out. However, when an intermediate group identity is available, individuals are much more likely to sacrifice self-interest in behalf of collective welfare (Brewer & Schneider, 1990). When a distinctive social identity is activated, the collective self dominates the individuated self.

Recognizing the motivational properties of group distinctiveness makes sense of a number of research findings from the intergroup literature, including the seemingly paradoxical self-esteem of members of some disadvantaged minorities or deviant groups and the accentuation of small differences in intergroup stereotypes.

In a particularly relevant study, Markus and Kunda (1986) found that subjects who had been made to feel uncomfortably unique increased their self-ratings of similarity to referent in-groups but also increased their ratings of dissimilarity to out-groups. This is exactly what would be predicted from the optimal distinctiveness model. Overindividuation should not lead to an indiscriminate preference for similarity to all other people but to a selective need for assimilation to a distinct in-group.

Effects of Group Size Versus Status

The distinctiveness of a particular social category depends in part on the clarity of the boundary that distinguishes category membership from nonmembership and in part on the number of people who qualify for inclusion. Although group size and distinctiveness are not perfectly negatively correlated, categories that include a vast majority of the people in a given social context are not sufficiently differentiated to constitute meaningful social groups.[4] In general, then, optimal distinctiveness theory predicts that mobilization of in-group identity and loyalty will be achieved more easily for minority groups than for groups that are in the numerical majority. This prediction fits well with results of research on in-group bias and group size. In both real and laboratory groups, evaluative biases in favor of the in-group tend to increase as the proportionate size of the in-group relative to the out-group decreases (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1990). Further, strength of identification and importance attached to membership in experimentally created groups are greater for minority than for majority categories (Simon & Brown, 1987; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990).

The effects of relative group size are more complicated, however, when intergroup differences in status are taken into consideration (Ng & Cram, 1988). Because minority size is often associated with disadvantages in status or power, in many contexts group distinctiveness and positive evaluation may be in conflict. Although membership in a high-status majority may satisfy needs for positive social identity, it does not optimize distinctiveness. Accordingly, members of large high-status groups should seek further differentiation into subgroups, which permits greater distinctiveness without sacrificing the positive evaluation associated with membership in the superordinate category.

Members of low-status minority groups are also faced with a conflict between positive social identity and distinctiveness, but in a way that is less easily resolved than is the case for high-status majorities. On the one hand, minority individuals can dissociate themselves from their group membership and seek positive identity elsewhere. This strategy, however, often violates optimal distinctiveness. Dissociation may be achieved either at the cost of loss of distinctiveness (e.g., "passing") or at the cost of too much individual distinctiveness (e.g., as a "solo" representative of a deviant group). On the other hand, minority group members can embrace their distinctive group identity, but at the cost of rejecting or defying majority criteria for positive evaluation (Steele, 1990). This latter strategy has particularly interesting implications because once group identity has been established, disadvantage may actually enhance group loyalties rather than undermine them.

DEINDIVIDUATION AND
SOCIAL IDENTITY: INITIAL EVIDENCE

Data collection is just beginning on a series of research projects designed to test general hypotheses regarding the interrelationship between social category distinctiveness and strength of group identification. We have already completed one laboratory experiment on the interactive effects of deindividuation and group distinctiveness as joint determinants of strength of identification with a social group or category. In this initial experiment, distinctiveness was operationalized as relative group size so that distinctive and nondistinctive groups could be studied in the same experimental context.

As in our previous research on intergroup relations, we created artificial category identities in the laboratory by giving subjects a dot estimation task and then informing each of them that he or she was an "underestimator" or an "overestimator." To vary inclusiveness of the two social categories, we informed all subjects that more than

and only 20% as overestimators. Thus, assignment to one of the categories meant assignment to either a majority or a minority group.

Our primary purpose in this first experiment was to determine how the preference for minority category membership is affected by loss of distinctiveness in the experimental context. At the outset of the experiment, we created conditions designed to alter subjects' placement on the continuum from individuated to inclusive social identity. To manipulate this variable, we made use of confidentiality instructions that precede data collection in our experimental paradigm.

In the control condition, subjects received standard assurances of confidentiality and generated an ID number that served to protect their personal identity. In the *depersonalization* condition, the subject was assigned an arbitrary ID number in the context of written instructions that emphasized membership in a large, impersonal category. The wording of the depersonalized instructions was as follows:

> Since in this study we are not interested in you as an individual but as a member of the college student population, we do not ask for any personal information. However, for statistical purposes we need to match up different questionnaires completed by the same person. In order to do this, we have assigned you an arbitrary code number that is to be used throughout this session. . . . We are running this study in order to assess the attitudes and perceptions of students in general. For the purposes of this study you represent an example of the average student no matter what your major is. We are only interested in the general category and not in individual differences.

By immersing the subject in the broadly inclusive category of college student, we hoped to overindulge the need for assimilation relative to the need for differentiation for most of our subjects. In accord with an opposing-process model, such overindulgence should inhibit further activation of the assimilation drive and disinhibit or excite the opposing drive, resulting in devaluation of inclusive group memberships and enhanced preference for smaller, more distinctive social identities.[5]

After assignment to the overestimator and underestimator categories, subjects made a series of ratings designed to assess favoritism in their perceptions of the two social groups. In-group bias is the mean rating of the subject's own category (overestimator or underestimator) on a series of evaluative rating scales minus the rating of the out-group category on the same scales. A difference score in the positive direction constitutes one measure of strength of identification with the in-group. Figure 3 depicts the results for the in-group bias measure obtained from the four experimental conditions gener-
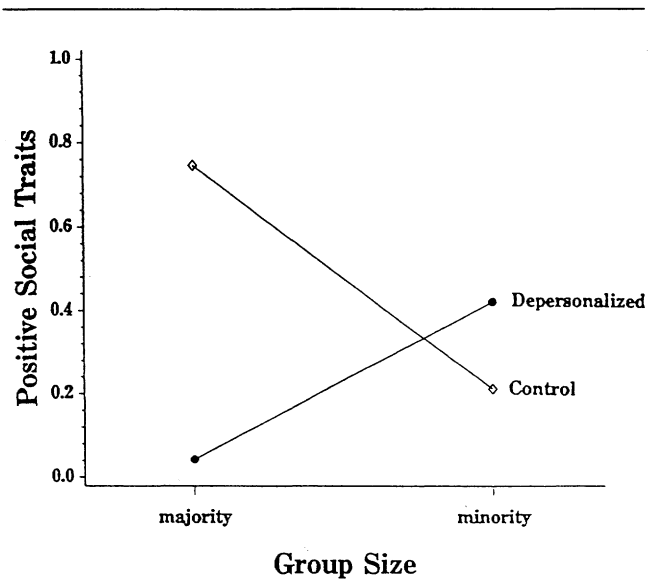

Figure 3   In-group bias as a function of in-group size and depersonalization.

ated by the factorial combination of minority-majority in-group size and initial depersonalization.

Analysis of the in-group bias measure revealed a significant interaction between the effects of depersonalization and in-group size, $F(1, 91) = 4.62$, $p < .05$. Under control conditions, subjects expressed significant in-group bias in favor of their own group in both minority and majority conditions, but more so when the in-group was in the majority. This latter effect was somewhat surprising in light of previous research on the relationship between group size and in-group bias. Apparently, in our laboratory setting, assignment to either of two mutually exclusive and distinct categories activates social identity regardless of relative group size. And in the absence of explicit information about group status, subjects may assume that majority categories are superior to minority groups.

The direction of effect of in-group size was clearly reversed, however, under conditions of deindividuation. When subjects had been exposed to depersonalizing instructions at the outset of the experiment, in-group bias was enhanced for those assigned to the minority category but virtually eliminated in the majority condition. As predicted by an opposing-process model, making subjects feel excessively depersonalized reduced valuation of identity with large social categories compared with more distinctive groups.

We are currently undertaking a series of field studies designed to parallel the laboratory experiment in a natural setting. For this purpose, we are studying student organizations at UCLA under the assumption that

a large, urban university campus provides a natural deindividuated context for assessing formation of differentiated social identities. As a first step in this research, we have compiled an inventory of campus groups based on listings of student organizations registered with the UCLA Associated Students, which has proved to be an interesting data set in its own right. More than 425 organizations are registered, which range from social clubs (including sororities and fraternities) to interest groups based on ethnicity, religion, political positions, and sexual orientation. Both the number and the differentiation of these organizations tell an interesting story about needs for social group identification on a campus where the student body numbers more than 30,000.

The initial lab and field experiments are designed to test one side of the opposing-process model—the effects of excessive deindividuation on sensitivity to ingroup size and preference for distinctive social identities. Further experiments will address the other side of the equation—the effects of too high a degree of individuation on preference for assimilation to a distinctive social category. This aspect of optimal distinctiveness theory has potential implications for the way in which people cope with being deviant or stigmatized.

The basic tenet is that excessive individuation is undesirable—having any salient feature that distinguishes oneself from everyone else in a social context (even if otherwise evaluatively neutral or positive) is at least uncomfortable and at worst devastating to self-esteem. One way to combat the nonoptimality of stigmatization is to convert the stigma from a feature of *personal identity* to a basis of *social identity*. Witness the current popularity of support groups for individuals with almost any kind of deviant characteristic or experience. Among other functions such groups serve is that of creating a categorical identity out of the shared feature. What is painful at the individual level becomes a source of pride at the group level—a badge of distinction rather than a mark of shame. Collective identities buffer the individual from many threats to self-worth, and it is time that their motivational significance is clearly recognized in social psychology's understanding of the self.

NOTES

1. Here I join many other critics who have pointed to the highly individuated conceptualization of self as an ethnocentric product of the Western worldview (e.g., Caporael, Dawes, Orbell, & van de Kragt, 1989; Sampson, 1988, 1989). My point is that such a conceptualization is not adequate to an understanding of American selves either.

2. The use of this particular illustration should not imply that social identity requires spatial contiguity. I also have a strong sense of identification with social psychologists all over the world who share my research specialty.

3. In this article, the terms *deindividuation* and *depersonalization* are used more or less interchangeably, although the former refers to the

identifiability of the individual to others whereas the latter refers to self-perception.

4. Take as an illustration the idea of classifying persons by the number of arms they have. It is easy to imagine one-armed individuals as a meaningful social category. Having two arms, however, is not sufficiently distinctive to provide a basis for social identity, even though it is a well-defined classification.

5. A complete description of the full design and results of this experiment is currently in preparation (Brewer & Manzi, 1990).

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