Object Relations and Prejudice: From In-group Favoritism to Out-group Hatred

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss how identifications with groups can develop along a continuum from minimal identification to overidentification. The strength of these identifications has important implications in the social world. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Object relations theory proposes that human beings are inherently motivated to establish cooperative and satisfying relationships (Fairbairn, 1952). In contrast, it is also evident that we can be motivated to reject certain individuals or social groups. Given these two observations about human behavior, the following question may be examined: Is our nature to affiliate interrelated with the potential to repel? This question is suggestive of a dialectical relationship that provides one way to examine prejudice. For example, Mackie and Smith (1998) reported that prejudice has often been defined as a positive or negative evaluation of a social group and its members. This definition implies that one aspect of prejudice can involve an attachment and preference for one's own group (in-group), and another, the derogation and rejection of some other groups (out-groups).

Historically, prejudice has been examined by two separate levels of analysis. One effort advances a socio-cultural, group-oriented examination of prejudice (Tajfel, 1969; Turner et al., 1987), while the other identifies intrapsychic and personality determinants of prejudice guided by psychoanalytic theory (Adorno et al., 1950; Bird, 1957). Both approaches are instructive and offer valuable

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insight into the problem, but leave us short of an overarching theory that takes into account both the socio-cultural and psychodynamic determinants of prejudice. Today we can begin to ask how these subdisciplines can combine efforts to address prejudice. The task, then, to study the dynamics of prejudice requires consideration of the interrelationship between the individual and the group, and positive identification with the in-group in relation to an out-group.

IDENTIFICATION AND PREJUDICE

In his book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) posited that one's own social group is psychologically primary because attachment and preference for one's in-group develops before attitudes toward dissimilar groups. Supporting this observation, evidence was found that prejudice and discrimination may be a result of favoring the in-group, rather than negative evaluation or outright hatred of an out-group (Brewer, 1999). The social cognitive perspective proposes that social identification, group belongingness, or psychological group formation are dependent upon self-categorization, which is a basic human need to categorize the social world into meaningful groupings (Tajfel, 1969; Turner et al., 1987; Hogg and Abrams, 1988). The groups with which we affiliate become part of our group identity, called "collective identity" in the social cognitive literature.

Self-categorization theory, however, suggests that people can categorize themselves as individuals or as group members (Reynolds et al., 2001). These identifications are context-driven so that when collective identity is salient, self-definition is dependent upon being a group member, and comparisons are made along social dimensions such as gender, race, religion, or political ideology. Importantly, there is evidence that depersonalization occurs when collective identity is highlighted, which minimizes differences between in-group members, and accentuates differences with out-group members (Verkuyten and Hagendoorn, 1998). In addressing prejudice it is important to go beyond the basic categories that become part of collective identity to understand the psychological function of identification with a social group.

This paper will discuss how identifications with groups can develop along a continuum from minimal identification to overidentification. The strength of these identifications has important implications in the social world. For example, in-group favoritism may be represented by a common situation in an ethnically diverse high school lunch room where teenagers tend to congregate with ethnically similar peers. Further along the continuum could be the recent vote in France which rejected the European Union Constitution, one reason for which was a reaction to a threat of losing the specialness of being French. Having potentially greater intergroup consequences, we may consider the vote in Iraq, in which each ethnic group voted for the candidate of their own ethnic group. At the extreme is the overt racist, overidentified with his or her group, and less likely to be influenced by social variables.

I will discuss a vignette below as it pertains to prejudice, but first I would like to introduce a theoretical basis for discussion. Fairbairn's object relations theory provides a useful framework for understanding difficulties in relating to other people, and by extension, groups of people. This relational perspective is conducive for integration with empirical findings from social cognitive psychology.

OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Fairbairn (1935) recognized that the original social group is established in the family. He suggested that as we develop relationships with the surrounding community the available groupings substitute for the original identification with our parents. Given that this is a developmental process we can speculate that the original identifications influence subsequent identifications with individuals and social groups. Fairbairn's comments offer a psychoanalytic parallel to Allport's (1954) speculation that in-group identifications are primary and established before one can develop attitudes toward the out-group. We can extrapolate further by suggesting that early familial identifications are recapitulated during early adulthood (Blos, 1962), and provide a template for identifications with in-groups.

Fairbairn's object relations theory suggests that the earliest relationships involve primary identification and infantile dependence upon caregivers. At this stage there is little or no psychological differentiation between the infant and parental figures. Fairbairn's description of psychological development provides one explanation for conditions that minimize differentiation between self and other, and perhaps between self and group. Again, this description seems to be supported by findings, discussed above, from social psychology about the depersonalization that occurs when collective identity is salient. Both perspectives indicate that the self–other, and self–group, boundary can be blurred.

To various degrees, identifications with caregivers become the emotional experience of self (Fairbairn, 1952). Fairbairn's theory suggests that if primary identification persists into adulthood and dependence needs are directed beyond the family, primary identification with these parental substitutes would minimize differentiation between self and group. In such cases, primary identification with the group continues to function as a defensive operation promoting an overidentification with the group to compensate for the experienced inadequacy of the infantile character. When little or no differentiation is present between self and group, then overidentification with the group would provide an emotional experience of self. Under these conditions the in-group represents the self. In previous papers on object relations theory and prejudice (Aviram, 2002, 2005) I suggested that, in certain cases, the primitive defense of primary identification may be recapitulated in early adulthood when identity formation is the primary developmental task. In these individuals group affiliations are overidentifications. We would predict that for these individuals collective identity would remain salient regardless of context.

I will now turn to clinical material that elaborates the dynamics of prejudice in an individual case from a developmental perspective. Considerable changes are utilized to protect confidentiality. I realize that clinical material of an individual has the potential of being dismissed as unrelated to intergroup processes. Furthermore, people are multidimensional so that in highlighting certain aspects that pertain to prejudice, we are focusing on one dimension of the individual. I will attend to interpersonal dynamics that have particular relevance to intergroup dynamics associated with prejudice. These may manifest in individuals when self–other differentiation is minimized and perceptions of individuals primarily attend to their group identity. Furthermore, idealization and devaluation of interpersonal relationships parallel perceptions of in-groups and out-groups. The psychological maneuvers of the individual to avoid the threat of annihilation of self may be relevant in discussion of group survival strategies, of which prejudice is one strategy.

CLINICAL VIGNETTE

Mr A grew up in a family where religion, ethnicity, and class were intertwined to identify good and bad people. He described an idealized early childhood during which he was very close to his mother. As treatment proceeded he recognized that he relied on her for soothing and protection from his father's fluctuating rage or disregard. His parents' relationship involved considerable conflict, leaving him in a bind about giving up the affections of one in order to try to receive the affection of the other. During childhood his father was often derogatory toward his mother and at times was violent. As a child, Mr A felt a strong need to protect his mother, and hated his father for being so cruel. As he entered puberty he recalls a sudden shift in his loyalties and began to experience his mother as weak and unable to provide the safety and sense of acceptance that he craved. This was subsequent to a perceived betrayal which shattered an idealized attachment to her. He began to distance from his mother and consciously identified with his father against her. His anger generalized to teenage girls, and though he would seek their attention and admiration, simultaneously he resented needing them to feel good about himself. He felt weak in relation to male peers as well, but struggled to be accepted by them. In an effort to manage his social anxieties during adolescence, he turned his attention to religious activities that excluded the opposite sex. This gave him a sense of joining with similar male peers while avoiding the anxiety of sorting out if and how he will be desired by girls. This kind of adolescent overidentification could be expected, as Erikson (1959) suggested, but it also foreshadowed future overidentifications that he would establish for similar self-protective reasons.

As he developed into a young adult Mr A compensated for his feeling of insecurity and belief that there was something wrong with him by seeking power and control. Striving to possess women that other men would envy offered temporary relief from an underlying self-hatred of which he was becoming aware. Overidentification with the roles that provided a fantasy of power, e.g. male, ultra-religious sects, and professional status, were accompanied by misogynistic views of women.

Our relationship fluctuated between his capacity to idealize or devalue me throughout our work. From the initial session when he commented that the referring clinician told him that I had an expertise and worked with people like him, right? I felt he was desperate to feel that he was in good protective hands and needed reassurance. Different aspects

of interpersonal functioning involved a capacity to minimize differentiation to manage collective identity and belongingness. This could be understood in relation to underlying feelings of powerlessness for which he made various efforts to compensate. Similarly, periods of paranoia led to frantic efforts to maintain differentiation between himself and perceived powerful beings. This was emotionally tangible in terms of closeness or distance, and took physical form in his sitting on the couch close to me or moving further away. Other manifestations involved his trust or mistrust of my intentions.

DISCUSSION OF VIGNETTE

I would like to discuss the role of overidentification, idealization, and devaluation in relation to prejudice. Mr A overidentified with several social roles that included masculinity, religion, and professional. These collective identities converged to provide a fantasy of power and safety. Loss of trust in others, Sutherland (1994: 56) writes is "accompanied by an increase of omnipotence, though it may be covered over." Mr A lost trust in his parents early in life, and we can speculate that his compensation of omnipotence attached to social groups. He experienced his father as a frightening, but strong, figure, with whom he began to identify, and formulate idealized perceptions of this kind of strength. Similarly, religion provided a socially acceptable idealized structure that provided self-definition and avoided his insecurities about being good enough to receive affection and acceptance. Finally, becoming a powerful professional offered another social avenue for self-definition. Together these overidentifications provided strength, but with a cost of encountering a world of devalued out-group members that are constantly threatening. We can further surmise that a "persistence of infantile dependence" continued into adulthood and promoted the overidentifications. Ultimately, each of these various interpersonal and intrapsychic strategies reflects a propensity to blur boundaries, especially during periods of heightened stress and anxiety. During these times the group or work role compensates for the inadequate experience of self.

HEALTHY IDENTIFICATION AND GROUP IDENTITY

Self-categorization theory states that positive self-regard is a motivational factor that facilitates positive in-group distinctiveness in relation to the out-group. As such, when the in-group represents the self, the individual may need to idealize the in-group and devalue the out-group to maximize distinctiveness in a positive direction for his or her own group. This has important implications, suggesting that healthy individuals may utilize primary identification when social conditions highlight collective identity. For example, if someone makes a racial slur, collective identity is automatically triggered and the self–group boundary becomes permeable and promotes depersonalization. This helps explain how the social context can affect a majority of people and lead to prejudice against an out-group in any society.

Fairbairn theorized that healthy development involves an emergence of mutual dependence between an infant and caregivers, proposing that both the developing child and the adult are interdependent, but with sufficient boundaries. Carrying this forward to early adulthood we can suggest that a mutual dependence may be an important relationship to establish between an individual and the group. Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) recognized a similar process in describing identity formation. For him, identity is the experience of developing a well-organized, integrated self within a social environment. Erikson (1968) stated:

> identity formation . . . is dependent on the process by which society (often through sub-societies) identifies the young individual, recognizing him as somebody who had to become the way he is and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted. The community, often not without some initial mistrust, gives such recognition with a display of surprise and pleasure in making the acquaintance of a newly emerging individual. For the community in turn feels "recognized" by the individual who cares to ask for recognition; it can, by the same token, feel deeply, and vengefully, rejected by the individual who does not seem to care. (Erikson, 1968: 159–160)

One's inner sameness must be matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others (Erikson, 1959). Mutual dependence that must be established between the child and caregivers could be repeated between the young adult and social groups.

The strength of identification between self and in-group will determine the manner in which we relate to out-groups (Duckitt, 1994). Different individuals may manifest identifications with their in-group on a continuum, at the extremes of which are alienation or overidentification. The stronger the identification with the in-group the greater is the likelihood of out-group hatred. Environmental factors, such as war, can overwhelm any individual, and social conditions can lead to temporary overidentification with the in-group. Just as importantly, characterological factors can promote one end of the continuum over the other regardless of social conditions. An interaction between social context and character is inevitable.

OVERIDENTIFICATION AND OUT-GROUP HATRED

Erik Erikson (1959) recognized that the process of identity formation during adolescence could contribute to prejudice by facilitating a developmental overidentification with an in-group. He stated that youths may:

> . . . temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with heroes of cliques and crowds. On the other hand they become remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are "different" in skin color or cultural background. (Erikson, 1959: 97)

Erikson (1959) suggested that this behavior is an adaptive defense in adolescence against a sense of identity confusion. Bettelheim and Janowitz (1963) saw that

such behavior is not restricted to adolescence. They noted that the need to overidentify with the group is a compensation for a weak sense of personal identity, or self (Erikson, 1959; Bettelheim and Janowitz, 1963). It is a compensation to avoid the emotional strain of identity confusion or total loss of identity. These authors were influenced by ego psychology which advocated adaptation of the ego to the environment. This was an advance from classical psychoanalytic formulations which considered social conditions as externalizations of man's inner conflicts and unfortunately disregarded social, political, historical, and economic factors (Freud, 1921; Bettelheim and Janowitz, 1963). Social psychology contributes supportive evidence for Erikson's clinical formulation, showing that individuals do compensate for weak personal identity by highlighting their collective identity (Ng, 1985, 1986).

This leaves unanswered the questions of how and why does overidentification with the in-group lead to out-group hatred and aggression? For Fairbairn, aggression is an effort to control a bad object by expulsion or retention (Plumlee, 2005). In Fairbairn's theory, love and hate become internally differentiated. Intrapsychically, the libidinal self wants to be attached to, and accepted by, the good idealized internal object. The antilibidinal self seeks to reject dependence upon a frustrating object by labeling it "bad." Aggression is a response to the fear of losing love and security from the needed object, and the simultaneous inability to eliminate dependency on the "bad object." Aggression and hate can arise from frustration of the self in obtaining security and self-confidence for its own survival (Suttie, 1935; Sutherland, 1994).

Sutherland (1994) further clarified how the intrapsychic environment of object relationships can be relevant for the discussion of in-group and out-group dynamics. He suggested that tension due to unconsciously perceived attacks arising from internal objects leads to the need for self-defense. This is achieved by projecting these bad objects outward and gaining a fantasy of safety. He stated that this process is "perhaps reinforced by a clinging to the idealized internal object, as well as by the development of the defense of avoiding the objects onto which the frightening figures have been projected" (Sutherland, 1994: 113). Sutherland stressed that the cost of such a defense is a world that is filled with dreaded objects that restrict potential interactions. Extrapolating from Sutherland's and Fairbairn's descriptions, I suggest that the fantasy of safety can be established by idealizing the in-group, and blurring the distinction between the self and the in-group. Simultaneously, devaluing the out-group and its members is facilitated by projection of bad objects. This has important consequences in the real world. Out-group members who are discriminated against will tend to react negatively to the person or group that is the cause of mistreatment. For the overidentified individual, feared retaliation from out-group members can provide a conscious justification for his or her prejudice (Aviram, 2005).

Guntrip (1951: 45) wrote that "hate is love grown angry because of rejection." Under this condition, both the hater and the hated are inextricably linked and help define each other. Anxiety stems from the danger aroused by the desire to

reject the bad object that is simultaneously needed for one's identity and survival. Guntrip stated that the easiest solution to this problem is to use the intrapsychic mechanism of splitting to love one object and hate the other. Guntrip was discussing an intrapsychic process with a focus on the relationship between internal selves. In reading this, I considered how this may be applicable to social world problems of prejudice as defined by both positive and negative evaluation of others. It identifies an important condition regarding the interdependence between an in-group and out-group. Both groups become interdependent for their self-definition and to distinguish between the idealized and good self/group, and the devalued bad other/group.

As I thought about this relationship a personal anecdote seemed relevant. As a young child I was an immigrant to the USA and grew up with a firm awareness of my previous location in Israel. Growing up I felt somewhat like an outsider and identified myself as Israeli. After finishing high school I decided to return to Israel and volunteer for military service with idealistic notions and a sense that my identity required it. Once there I did my best to fit in, but I was undeniably different in comparison to my peers. Upon entering the army I was affected by my American egalitarian perceptions of the Arab–Israeli conflict. I believed that we should be able to coexist peacefully. Shortly after my enlistment the war in Lebanon began and I found myself a combatant, scared at times and uncertain of safety. During the time I wore a uniform I was keenly aware of my status as an Israeli and simultaneously as a target. Toward the end of my service, as I had time to reflect about my choices and experiences, I understood that my idealism provided a strong identity, which led me to volunteer for the army. My identity placed me in relation to an out-group that was identified with its own idealism. It became powerfully clear to me that my idealism and identity, and a young Palestinian's idealism and identity were two sides of the same coin. We were inextricably linked by our own identities and our interdependent in-group and out-group status.

Erikson wrote about such categorical distinctions, calling them "pseudospeciation" and advocating a supraordinate identity concept of human as a necessary antidote to prejudice (Erikson, 1985). This solution, however, is unlikely to provide the kind of permanent identity structure necessary for people to balance needs to belong with needs to be unique (*see* Brewer, 1991). To address this issue, Kelman (1999) conceptualized a transcendent identity that can incorporate positive elements of two separate identities while maintaining the uniqueness of each for individuals of both groups.

CONCLUSION

Allport's cognitive perspective, that our attitude toward the in-group is primary, can be integrated with Fairbairn's view. Developmental conditions may influence the degree of identification with the in-group, and influence intergroup behavior from in-group favoritism to out-group hatred. In Fairbairn's terms, when infantile

dependence persists into adulthood, pathology can reflect boundary problems between self and other, and between self and group. The recapitulation of primary identification can promote an overidentification between the person and his or her in-group. This suggests that the experience of self is overly dependent upon the evaluation of the group. When the in-group represents the self, perceptions of the in-group may need to be idealized, while the out-group is devalued. The individual who has overidentified to compensate for developmental faults must rely upon collective identity to maintain a fantasy of power and safety.

The relational perspective appears to be influencing current discussions in the social cognitive literature in ways that are highly conducive for integration with object relations theory. For example, Mackie and Smith (1998) concluded that human beings are motivated to make connections with both individuals and groups. From a social identity theory perspective people are motivated to view their in-group more favorably than out-groups, in an effort to enhance or maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When this happens group members become depersonalized and in-group attributes become part of the psychological self.

These social cognitive findings parallel Fairbairn's comments about primary identification and infantile dependence, and together support the notion that idealization of the in-group has both intrapsychic and intergroup motivations. An important study that points to this interaction was reported by Smith and Henry (1996). They wanted to see if in-group attributes are incorporated within a mental representation of the self. Subjects were given questionnaires asking about the self, ingroup, and outgroup. On a task of reaction time, they found that response time was faster when traits matched both the in-group and the self, and slower when in-group traits mismatched the self. Therefore, they suggested that meaningful identity groups do become perceived as an aspect of self.

I now return to the question posed at the beginning regarding the interrelationship between attachment to, and rejection of, social groups. Both object relations theory and social identity theory predict our need to affiliate. The capacity to reject or hate an out-group is not necessarily a given. The theory outlined in this paper suggests that there is a continuum in the strength of identifications with an in-group, influenced by early development and character formation, as well as by social context. Fairbairn's object relations theory provides a psychoanalytic developmental account of the relationship between early identification and adulthood identifications with social groups. We can speculate that out-group hatred will be associated with the strength of in-group identification. These identifications are affected by developmental conditions, and during certain intergroup conditions the identification can be intensified and affect a majority of people.

Social psychology and object relations theory seem to have been developing parallel lines of thinking. Addressing the problem of prejudice has been an

emphasis for both subdisciplines. Prejudice has deep unconscious motivations, and is also an outcome of social conditions and intergroup dynamics. It is unlikely that we can make progress if these two subdisciplines cannot converge to attend to multiple levels of the problem simultaneously. The concept of identity is deeply connected to prejudice, and seems to be an appropriate concept for cross-pollination and integration of both psychoanalytic and social cognitive theory and research.

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