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Original Article

Social identity theory and the formation of self-identities in the socially marginalised groups

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Abstract

Identity formation is a complex process of associating oneself with some virtual or actual group. Identity formation and, in that identity, the formation of self is a social construct. Tajfel's theory explains how group categorisation, identification, and comparison are significant stages in the formation of the self. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand how this formation of self and self-identity is constructed in marginalised groups. Though in NEP 2020, a new nomenclature has been used for this group, calling it SEDGs, e.g., a socio-economically disadvantaged group, but using a new nomenclature does not necessarily change the social psychology, which has a significant role in forming their identity. Hence, calling it a marginalised group would be too broad; understanding social psychology from their perspective and their experiences from a social psychological point of view would be an exciting task worth undertaking in this paper.

Keywords: *identity, social categorisation, social identification, social comparison*

Background of the study

India's diversity in religions, languages, customs, traditions, and more makes it a unique and complex cultural space. This complex of India is not only distinct but also peculiar in many respects (Brubaker, 2004). Geographically as well, India has huge diversity, from the hottest place to the coolest, from the desert of Thar to the place that receives the most rain in the world. This diverse geography also significantly contributes to the country's cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. In such a diverse country, it becomes extremely difficult to categorise people as a single monolith. Basically, what defines people is the small groups formed around many categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Understanding the psychology of these people through a single lens of behaviourism, psychoanalysis, or any other paradigm is not a comprehensive approach. Social psychology provides the space and paradigm through which these many different groups, psychologies, and their identity could be understood (Freud, 1992; Bhabha, 1994). But the challenges in understanding them are not just that there are so many different groups, but these groups also have subgroups. This means that historically, there have been groups based on varna. But in Varna as well, there are thousands of castes (Srinivas, 1996; Rege, 2013; Omvedt, 2012). These castes have further sub-castes. Another difficulty in understanding these groups is regarding women. Women across all categories of these groups hold different places. That is why the wave of feminism could not bind all women together. Hence, feminism in India has become an upper-caste women's movement; those women who belong to the very last step of society are not part of it. It is an issue of representation: their voices do not find a place within mainstream feminism (Chakravarti, 1993; Rege, 1998). This is because, in marginalised groups, identity formation is a process which is quite different from that which takes place in upper-caste women. All these differences are the differences of distinct socialisation, which includes the socio-historical context as well. All this diversity is reflected in every sphere of human life in India. Indian society has become so dynamic and conflict-ridden that each group, directly or indirectly, competes with the others because the distribution of resources is unequal. (Zacharias & Vakulabharanam, 2009; Tagade & Thorat, 2021)

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What are marginalised groups?

Though Turner and Tajfel (1979) say that there are three different ways in which we evaluate others as "us" or "we", these are also the ways in which we group and out-group others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). But in Indian society, there are many groups, which roughly fall into the categories proposed by Turner and Tajfel. Historically, Indian society has been divided into the varna order, with people called Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras (Ambedkar, 1936, 1946, 1948). Their categories were decided by religious sacred texts, so it was difficult to challenge their foundations; hence, more or less, even today, Indian society is structured as it was two thousand years ago. One of the distinctions of these groups was that they maintained a hierarchy among themselves; in addition, the work or the tasks of these groups were also decided. For example, the Brahmins were supposed to read the sacred texts and teach the same to the other varnas (Ambedkar, 1946, 1948). More generally, it was the same as in Greece: there was a social group in Plato's Republic known as philosophers (Plato, 2004). But beyond the sharp hierarchy among the groups, some were not allowed to study the sacred texts. This varna was known as the Shudras. Other than this, there were more such groups known as untouchables. The untouchables were not allowed to walk in public places or take water from public places. Seeing, touching, and speaking were considered polluting elements (Ambedkar, 1948). So, historically, identity formation and self-conception have differed between these groups. The hundreds of years of repression have created a sense of selflessness. Selflessness is not in the sense of devoting oneself without caring about oneself, but selflessness in the sense of not caring about self-respect or having no self-esteem or low self-esteem. Traditionally, this group has been engaged in work considered low-grade or menial from economic or socio-political perspectives. So no single parameter can be used to measure or evaluate these people's self-identity. Someone might ask what they need to know about the history of these groups (Omvedt, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2005; Paik, 2014). It is essential to understand this because, through the history of these people, we can reach a fair conclusion about how identity formation has taken place in marginalised groups and what factors have shaped the conception of self in these groups.

Overall, marginalised groups, especially women, have suffered the most because of their female identity. Women have historically been denied many rights, and they have suffered greatly in many historical events (Rege, 1998). While considering this fact of women's oppression, the question of intersectionality can not be ignored because the struggles and sufferings of women across the caste and varna have not been the same. Hence, identity formation in women across other groups has been a very different construct (Chakravarti, 1993; Rege, 1998; Paik, 2014).

Construction of Self and Social Identity

For a very long time, the discipline of psychology has been dominated by individual psychology and many streams of psychology, such as behaviourism and structuralism, but with the advent of social psychology, a new and altogether different dimension has emerged in the discipline. Though social psychology does not claim that individuals have no role in society, it does not view individuals and society in total isolation; rather, it sees them as interacting (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity is not much different from individual identity; when the same kinds of identities are clubbed together, they form a group, and people identify with these groups. Tajfel and Turner argue that once individuals are associated with a certain group, they begin to identify with the group itself (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They adopt the group's costumes and traditions. This is how they internalise the externalities of every individual. A group's collective identity becomes its individual identity, and this is how they associate themselves with certain groups (Lacan, 2001). But this possession is not so mechanical; it operates in subtle ways, and many times individuals are unaware of this internalisation. Once this internalisation has taken place and so many groups are formed based on language, religion, caste, class, gender, or region, these groups start comparing themselves to one another. That comparison is often unhealthy, but both Turner and Tajfel seem to suggest that humans are, by nature, competitive. But the above discussion comes from the question of basic nature. These two basic questions guide the very direction of Tajfel and Turner's writings. Are humans, by nature, competitive? And another question is: what is this thing called "essential nature"?(Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Let us discuss the second question first: what is this thing called "basic nature"? Well, according to social psychology, there should be no such thing as basic nature; all individual behaviour is conditioned or learned. It is highly doubtful that individuals are born with any basic behaviour. Social psychology and social constructivism hold that realities are shaped by social interaction (Freud, 192; Bhabha, 1994). In that sense, language plays a significant role in constructing our reality. But the fact that language is already there when we are born makes it clear that by the time one is born, much of our knowledge and language are already in place, but our interaction with that language and knowledge is what constructs our reality, our understanding of our world (Vygotsky,1978, 1986). In that sense, the interaction becomes significant not only in social interaction but also in self-interaction, which is crucial. This interaction with oneself is known as intrapsychic interaction. Language and other symbiotic tools have a significant role in mediating that interaction. Language is the one which guides our concepts (Vygotsky,1978, 1986, 1997)

Competition and identity formation

Competition has a unique place in human social life. When social groups face each other, questions of class and standards come up in the discussion. Though this competition is for upward mobility, power, and dominations over resources, that mobility has been known by different names in sociology (Srinivas, 1996). This competition for upward mobility is named Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1966, 1996). Though in this upward mobility, only lower-caste groups found their motivation in a particular society, of course, this motivation is not for food; it is for recognition in that society, and this recognition is achieved only when

someone has formed their identity by associating themselves with specific groups. These groups give the individual the space to stay in the particular group. That space also helps individuals form their self-identity. Identity formation and interaction with the groups are intra- and inter-communication. At one point, an individual has a conversation with the self; at another, with society. So the process of identity formation lies in that intra- and inter-psychic conversation (Vygotsky,1978, 1986, 1997).

But this competition has one more dimension: the economic one. The economic conception of competition holds that humans are, by birth, competitive and should be left free to produce their own goods so that society can become more competitive and individuals can achieve their optimal capacity (Smith, 1776, 1976). The concept of the free market is the production of this kind of thinking in the sphere of human psychology. The rationality of humans is considered at a general level: humans are said to be rational and can make rational decisions, but one forgets that, in saying this, rationality in humans is a potential capacity that needs to be nurtured to achieve human potential. It implies that peer groups, society, and primary socialisation play a significant role in shaping our rationality. In fact, social constructionists believe that rationality is also socially constructed. But if that is so, then one ends up asking what the basic human nature of beings is? If everything is socially constructed, is there anything that is uniquely and specially individualistic? If competition is so natural in humans, what is that particular thing which competition would prompt to the maximum level? The same question can be asked in another sense: what is the basic nature of human beings? This question is not limited to the individual; the groups individuals form also have broader implications. If humans, at the individual level, are more competitive than in groups, this competition will become even more intense, potentially leading to dangerous consequences for society. This is true not only in theory; numerous historical examples suggest how dangerous this group's competitors are. Still, it is difficult to understand why, in social psychology, so much importance is placed on social groups and on how individuals compete within them. These are some of the questions which still need to be tackled in social psychology.

Conclusion

The process of identity formation in marginalised groups is complex, and no single theory or understanding can fully capture it. To understand this process, one needs a holistic view, which social psychology, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner, provides. This view provides a comprehensive understanding of identity formation in marginalised groups.

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Conflicts of interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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