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BJSP and the changing face of the group in social psychology

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I reflect on the contribution that BJSP has made to the conceptualization of the group within social psychology by highlighting two cases studies from the social identity tradition published in 1990. These illustrate BJSP's distinctive strength and openness to theoretical innovation over the last decades.

Being asked to look back as a past editor of BJSP provides a useful space to reflect on the influence the journal has had on the field and why. Of course, this is a personal view coloured by my time as editor but also before that (and since) as a contributing author (and late reviewer!). Before getting to the substance of some research it is worth reflecting a bit on the identity of the journal and the climate in which this has emerged.

As we all know journal publishing is an increasingly competitive and cutthroat business and the importance of impact factors and journal rankings have only exacerbated this situation. So the question arises of how a journal like BJSP competes with journal juggernauts and with new journals starting up every year? One key way in which BJSP has prospered in this marketplace is to focus on its distinctive strength and niche areas, if not necessarily as a conscious or top-down strategy. I will reflect on this strategy further below and will illustrate my point by discussing the case of the social identity approach (social identity theory and self-categorization theory) for which BJSP has formed a friendly home over the years.

Social identity research itself is one of the niche areas and strengths of the journal. I would like to focus the substantive part of my 'retrospective' to consider the very nature of the group from the social identity perspective. Again the social identity tradition and especially the work of John Turner and his colleagues has been especially influential here. Although Turner's (1982) piece on the 'cognitive redefinition of the group' was not published in BJSP (it was a book chapter but also a French conference paper and journal article!) its influence and legacy can be strongly felt in these pages (a true bridge between social cognition and group psychology perhaps).

BJSP has offered a welcome home for much of the research that followed in this tradition. Prior to this piece it is fair to say that the group in social psychology had been seen in quite literal terms, in keeping with the group dynamics, small group

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research and interdependence traditions, as the sum of its 'individual parts'. Of course, the focus on social categorization developed by social identity theory started to eat away at the edges of this strict definition and approach. However, it was the 'cognitive redefinition' manifesto that perhaps made clearer than anything before that the group was an important psychological basis for self and identity that transcended the individual members, but also formed identity (the 'group within the individual'). This article was also the starting point for the development of self-categorization theory and the rich research program that followed (see, e.g., Postmes & Jetten, 2006).

Three thousand words are too few to sum up the research inspired by even this specific theme. Instead, encouraged by the methodological pluralism licensed by BJSP, I propose to take a more anecdotal 'case study' approach and focus on two papers published over 20 years ago to make my point. These articles were published coincidentally but conveniently side by side, and epitomize this theoretical approach to the group. Both are about group-based social influence, and both can claim to have had some influence themselves, each cited well over 100 times.

The first paper really establishes the cognitive basis for the group and its influence on the self and is entitled 'Knowing what you think by knowing who you are . . .' (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). It provides some of the first compelling evidence for the self-categorization analysis of influence in groups. The fact that this paper was published in BJSP (and not elsewhere) illustrates well one of the strengths of BJSP: it has been ahead of the game, especially in forming an appreciative audience for critical research in the social identity and self-categorization tradition long before this became acceptable mainstream. It shows BJSP's openness to theoretical innovation (and indeed the importance of theory) perhaps more so than is evident when considering the work published in some other journals.

Let me say a bit more about the research presented in this paper and how it was novel and important for moving the field forward. This research took three classic paradigms of social influence, the Sherif paradigm, the Asch paradigm, and the group polarization paradigm, to show how central the group is to genuine social influence, and not just a source of normative pressure to comply as in the classic dual process account of influence. Study 1, adapted Sherif's classic social influence paradigm, which capitalizes on the autokinetic illusion (i.e., a point of light in a dark room that appears to move). Research in this paradigm shows that the estimates of naïve participants converge on the predetermined (over)estimates of confederates. Abrams *et al.* showed that when participants in the session were categorized with fellow participants (i.e., in a different category to the confederates), and especially when this was reinforced with explicit group membership beforehand, participants resisted the influence of the confederates and did not converge.

In the Asch paradigm, three confederates made clearly incorrect judgments of which line was longer than the other, interspersed with correct judgments, and the naïve participants gave their own responses either privately or publicly. The crucial group manipulation in this study was again whether the confederates emanated from the same group (fellow psychology students) or another discipline (ancient history). Results shows that participants only conformed more when the confederates were from the same group as the participant and especially so when their responses were made publicly. Abrams *et al.* argued that the public condition 'should render categorization as a groups member more salient, as well as opening the way for normative influence'.

In a third study, the researchers demonstrated the self-categorization analysis of the group polarization effect, how that group polarization is stronger when the participants have a common categorization and identity (see also Wetherell, 1987).

In short, in three classic paradigms of social influence this research demonstrated that the basis of influence is a positive group process. This conclusion stood in sharp contrast to prevailing views at the time, which emphasised the sheep like pressure to conform in which the group is seen as an external and imposed force. All too often the group had been contrasted to individual rationality: the 'enemy without', so to speak, whereas the self-categorization analysis turned this on its head into the 'friend within'.

In the following article of this issue, we (Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990) coincidentally also used the group polarization paradigm to test some ideas about social influence in the group and how this might be affected by the then relatively new medium of computer-mediated communication. This research, like the previous paper, was theoretically inspired by social identity theory and self-categorization theory. More especially it had its roots in another BJSP paper published some years earlier by Reicher (1984), which provided another social identity critique of another classical approach to behaviour in the group: deindividuation theory. Reicher had shown how the classic deindividuation manipulations, which rendered participants anonymous in overalls and hoods, could actually *depersonalize* them (not *deindividuate* them in the sense of a loss of self or self-awareness as deindividuation theory would argue). Provided that a group identity was salient, such depersonalization led to stronger (not weaker) social identity and social influence effects. We transferred this idea to the setting of computer-mediated communication in which people were also rendered (visually) anonymous by virtue of their isolation at computer terminals. We found evidence for stronger group-based social influence (polarization towards a group norm) under condition on anonymous isolation, again provided that group identity was salient.

In some ways this demonstration, and the idea underlying it, carries the cognitive redefinition of the group to its logical extreme. In this study, people could become a group, and indeed *more* group-like, when they were physically isolated from their fellow group members. Further research has confirmed this effect for a range of group-related effects beyond social influence (Postmes & Spears, 1998).

This effect seems to directly contradict the one found by Abrams *et al.* in their Asch experiment, where they showed greatest conformity under condition of public responding, where they argued that group identity was most salient. It is not immediately clear what explains this apparent discrepancy (the paradigms are different, after all) but it is one that has intrigued me over the years, also given the proximity of this comparison between papers inspired by the same theoretical tradition. Of course, it could simply be that there is still an element of conformity or normative influence in the public responding condition as Abrams *et al.* suggested. Clearly there are conditions under which accountability might increase conformity. However, in some ways more counterintuitive, and therefore more psychologically powerful, is the idea that the group can be impactful even or especially in the absence of others, and when there is no group surveillance. This idea is very much a child of the self-categorization idea of the 'group within the individual', a case where the group has primacy, and perception and behaviour becomes depersonalised. The SIDE model (the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects) grew out of this study and the earlier one by Reicher (1984), to confirm how anonymity and isolation could have paradoxically strong group effects. Much of this work was also published in BJSP (e.g., Reicher & Levine, 1994; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998).

These 'case study' papers illustrate the important role and tradition of BJSP in several ways. At a substantive level they took a distinctively European theoretical approach (indeed one with a strong British roots), namely social identity and self-categorization theories. This research found a home in these pages at a time when other high-profile journals were perhaps less receptive to this approach.

A common feature of the two papers presented is that they both challenged mainstream orthodox views of social influence and the group, prevalent within social psychology at the time. And although this became the new orthodoxy, of course, some chutzpah is needed by journals as well as researchers to swim against the tide of the time. Deindividuation theory was also widely accepted at the time, but as a result of this and the following work, the orthodox view of deindividuation as a way of understanding how people act in the mass, has largely been discredited (see Postmes & Spears, 1998).

We can see such papers as part of the reconstruction of the classical edifice of social psychology. Another good example in this tradition is the critique of the Stanford prison experiment, which has also received the 'social identity' treatment (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). This research also found a receptive home at BJSP.

The general approach to the group, self, and identity illustrated in the two papers discussed here has been important not just in the area of social influence and collective behaviour, but has guided research on a broad range of topics (stereotyping and prejudice, leadership, intragroup processes, to name a few topics) as well as having influences well beyond social psychology (e.g., political science, organizational behaviour, health). What these case studies and anecdotes show is that BJSP has provided a platform to challenge some of the old orthodoxies and vested interests in our discipline and there are not many institutions of the British establishment that this can be said for. For this reason I can look back in pride as both editor and author. BJSP has been fairly unique (and I also speak from personal experience) in allowing for a range of different voices and views. Which other journal would let you get away with a commentary titled 'Where did Vincent's van go?'

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