

Recognising complexity in intergroup relations

Richard J. Crisp, joint winner of the Society's Spearman Medal 2006, outlines his latest research

From gender discrimination to inter-ethnic conflict, social categories define our experience of intergroup relations. This article discusses 10 years of research into the psychology of social categorisation and, in particular, how encouraging an appreciation of social and cultural diversity can have a positive impact on intergroup attitudes.

Think for just a moment about all the different ways in which you can describe yourself. I am, for example, a psychologist, male, white, young(ish), British and liberal. The wonderfully complex and multifaceted nature of our identities affords us a dazzling mixture of possible selves and, I will argue here, the capacity to see this potential in others. Tapping into this potential may hold the key to addressing some of the most pressing social issues facing Britain today: discrimination on the basis of one's race, gender, age or religion.

A defining feature of what makes us 'us' is that we can think about ourselves in many different ways, depending upon the situations in which we find ourselves, and the choices that we make. At work we might be a psychologist, a butcher, a dentist or priest. At home a mother or son, father or daughter. I might be English in Scotland but British in the US. Feminist, vegetarian – these are labels people choose, and they're chosen to communicate key facets of identity. We all possess this potential to think about ourselves in many different ways, but also to appreciate this diversity in others. Why then, when it comes to some groups, do we appear resolute in defining our world in its most simplistic form; the basic division into 'us' and 'them'?

Let's take one example: the national debate on the wearing of veils by Muslim women, which brought to the fore the issue of integration and assimilation in multicultural Britain. This is an important debate but, if conducted in simplistic terms, it runs the risk of fixating us on just

a single basis for describing ourselves and others; that is, religion. Thinking categorically is an inevitable characteristic of how we define ourselves and how we think about others, but when one single basis for classifying people dictates our impressions we may end up exacerbating tensions between communities.

It's easy to see how we may develop tendencies to focus on overly simplistic notions of identity. Pick up any newspaper and look at the major issues of the day. It's apparent that we are compelled to classify, and are resolute in doing so in the most simplistic way. Our identities are fluid, flexible and dynamic, but not, apparently, when we are talking about those very identities that define the biggest social problems we face. We could be talking about the Northern Ireland peace process, conflict in the Middle East, gender discrimination, institutional racism, immigration or asylum seekers. Just one basis for categorisation defines these social issues, and there seems little acknowledgement of any other possible basis for self-definition for the people enmeshed in these (often troubled) intergroup relations.

What would happen if we got people to think about all the different ways in which they could describe themselves and others, rather than (for example), just Catholic or Protestant; just black or white; or just Muslim or Christian? I have argued that to combat social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, to help create dialogue in contexts of conflict, and to develop systems and expectations to do so, then we must focus not on single divisive criteria – the 'us' versus 'them' mentality – but instead encourage an appreciation of the multifaceted nature of identity.

Multiple social identities

Psychologically speaking, our enduring use of classification is consistent with what we know about mental functioning in more general terms. According to social cognitive theory we like things to make sense, to be coherent, to be

question

What are the psychological, social and behavioural benefits that accrue from exposure to multicultural diversity?

resources

- Crisp, R.J. & Hewstone, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Multiple social categorization: Processes, models and applications*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Crisp, R.J. & Turner, R.N. (2007). *Essential social psychology*. London: Sage.
- More information on Richard Crisp's research: www.richardcrisp.net

references

- Allport, G.W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Crisp, R.J. (2006). Commitment and categorization in common ingroup contexts. In R.J. Crisp & M. Hewstone (Eds.) *Multiple social categorization* (pp.90–111). Hove: Psychology Press.
- Crisp, R.J. & Beck, S.R. (2005). Reducing intergroup bias: The moderating role of ingroup identification. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 8, 173–186.
- Crisp, R.J. & Hewstone, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Multiple social categorization: Processes, models and applications*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Crisp, R.J. & Hewstone, M. (2007). Multiple social categorization. In M.P. Zanna (Ed.) *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 39 [pp.163–254]. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Crisp, R.J., Hewstone, M. & Rubin, M. (2001). Does multiple categorization reduce intergroup bias? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 76–89.
- Crisp, R.J., Stone, C.H. & Hall, N.R. (2006). Recategorization and subgroup identification: Predicting and preventing threats from common ingroups. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 230–243.
- Crisp, R.J., Walsh, J. & Hewstone, M. (2006). Crossed categorization in common ingroup contexts. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 1204–1218.
- Fiske, S.T. & Taylor, S.E. (1991). *Social cognition* (2nd edn). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gaertner, S.L. & Dovidio, J.F. (2000). *Reducing intergroup bias: The*

predictable (Heider, 1958). Thinking about someone in terms of their gender, race or religion helps us to organise our worlds (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and helps us make sense of it all (Turner et al., 1987). Categories tell us who we are in relation to others. They define us, they provide us with a sense of who we are; they are the essence of our identity.

The problem is that while categories define us, they also provide the bedrock – the defining feature – of prejudice (Allport, 1954). Racism, sexism, ageism; these are all social problems characterised by our tendency to categorise. How then can we address these social problems when they are predicated on the very same categories that form the basis for how we make sense

now multiple ways in which we can be the same as, or different from, other people. Really appreciating this multiplicity may be the key to reducing prejudice and discrimination along any one criterion.

Social psychological research has supported this basic idea. Laboratory studies have found that prejudiced attitudes are challenged by encouraging people to use many different ways of thinking about others, rather than categorising all the time in terms of just race, just religion, just gender or just age. For example, we (Crisp et al., 2001) asked university students to think about a number of different categories that they could use to describe someone from a rival university, other than the simple fact that

they were from a rival university. This changed not only how people saw the other group members in relation to themselves (they were perceived as not so different) but also their feelings towards those other group members. While typical ingroup favouritism emerged under baseline conditions

(people evaluated others in their own group more positively than people in a comparison group), this difference was eliminated in the condition where participants were encouraged to think about multiple identities.

Perhaps this works because rather than applying a negative stereotype to someone

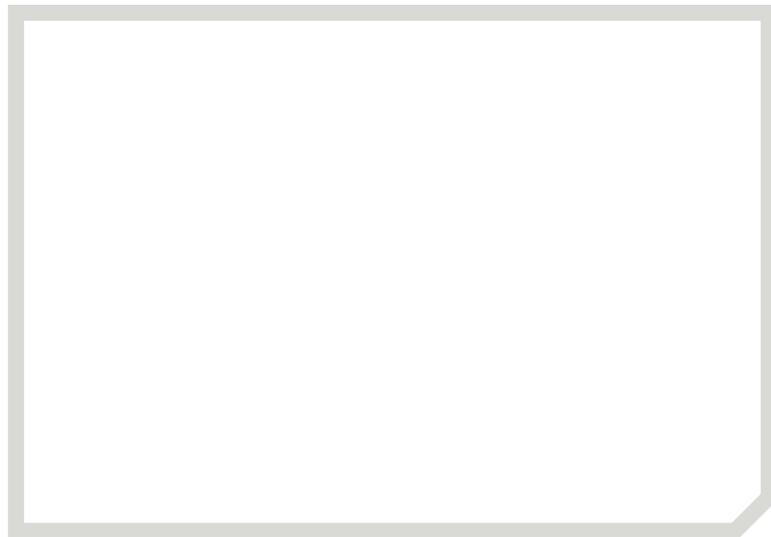
just because they are a member of a stigmatised group, people come to realise that social categories can be flexible, dynamic, complex and convoluted, and that there are many different (and positive) ways in which anyone can be described (Crisp & Hewstone, 2006, 2007; Hall & Crisp, 2005; Hutter & Crisp, 2005). In this way the impact of any one negatively valued identity is reduced. It shows us that we all have a lot in common, but that we are also distinct from one another, and we can all bring something unique to the societies in which we live.

Studies like this may sometimes seem quite removed from the sort of pervasive intergroup conflict I've described earlier, but they allow us to get at the psychological processes that are the starting point for prejudiced attitudes. In so doing, they give us an important base upon which to build our policy and educational interventions.

Getting around commitment

The studies I have described so far focused on identities that were not particularly important to people. What happens when identities are really important to us, when we regard them as central to who we are? Will encouraging an appreciation of multiple identities lead to the sort of attitude change described above? What if people like defining themselves in a certain way, even though this may provide the basis for intergroup conflict? Commitment to categories has been a problem for some other social psychological interventions for improving intergroup attitudes, but recent research has found that creating more complex categorisations can help avoid these problems.

The common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) argues that recategorising people from two groups – 'us' versus 'them' – into one inclusive group 'we' can reduce prejudice because it removes the categorical basis for intergroup bias. This is in some ways similar to the multiple categorisation



JESS HURD/REPORTORIAL.CO.UK

We should encourage an appreciation of the multifaceted nature of identity

of the world? I have argued that the solution is not to try to ignore categories, but to embrace them. If we have to use categories, let's do so in a way that emphasises diversity. Social perception is a complex business and in an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious world the reality is that there are

common ingroup identity model. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.
Greenwald, A.G., McGhee, D.E. & Schwartz, J.L.K. (1998). Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1464–1480.
Hall, N.R. & Crisp, R.J. (2005). Considering multiple criteria for social categorization can reduce

intergroup bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1435–1444.
Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
Hewstone, M. & Brown, R. (1986). Contact is not enough. In M. Hewstone & R. Brown (Eds.) *Contact and conflict in intergroup encounters* (pp.1–44). Oxford: Blackwell.
Hogg, M.A. (2000). Subjective uncertainty

reduction through self-categorization. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 11, 223–255.
Hornsey, M.J. & Hogg, M.A. (2000). Subgroup relations: A comparison of mutual intergroup differentiation and common ingroup identity models of prejudice reduction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 242–256.
Hutter, R.R.H. & Crisp, R.J. (2005). The composition of category

conjunctions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 647–657.
Rosenthal, H.E.S. & Crisp, R.J. (2006). Reducing stereotype threat by blurring intergroup boundaries. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 501–511.
Turner, J.C., Hogg, M.A., Oakes, P.J. et al. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

intervention I've described earlier in that it directs attention away from the initial us–them dichotomy. Here though, rather than making things more complex, recategorisation simplifies the intergroup context focusing people on a single basis for classification, a categorisation that includes both ingroup and outgroup members. Recategorisation involves getting people to think in more inclusive terms (i.e. 'We all have things in common', 'We're not so different'). It would be like, for example, thinking of oneself as 'British' rather than English or Welsh, or 'European' instead of British, French or Italian. It's a form of shifting categorical focus that suggests an alternative social identity that includes, rather than excludes, members of other groups.

The trouble with this and any strategy that tries to refocus the way people think categorically is that categories often matter to people. People use categories to define themselves – they like being a member of categories – membership gives them a sense of identity, of certainty – they define their place in the world (Hogg, 2000). Religion is often a central part of identity; for some people it is gender; for others the football team they support is essential to who they are. Here's the paradox: the sort of identities involved in conflict, discrimination and prejudice are often those that are important for how people define themselves, and yet these are precisely the identities we need people to reassess in order to tackle issues like racism, or, in extreme forms, violent and destructive intergroup conflict.

What research has found is that if you try to diminish the importance of these identities using multiple categorisation strategies, there is sometimes resistance. It can even make intergroup relations worse. These categories are important to people – telling them they don't matter, and telling them they need to use other identities, can create a backlash – which can take the form of increased discrimination.

We (Crisp, Stone et al., 2006; Crisp & Beck, 2005) tested these ideas empirically. We asked British undergraduates to think about the what it would be like to have a 'United States of Europe', an inclusive identity within which being British would have no particular relevance, and where all the countries of Europe could reclassify themselves as simply 'European'. We measured their spontaneous positive or negative attitudes using a measure called the Implicit Association Test (IAT: Greenwald et al., 1998). This test measures reaction times to show the extent to which

positive words are spontaneously associated with the ingroup (in this case the British), and negative words spontaneously associated with the outgroup (in this case the French); it's a measure of implicit or unintended bias.

Our fears were confirmed. While for low British identifiers thinking about an inclusive Europe led to more positive attitudes towards the French (a lower IAT effect), for high identifiers, people who regarded British as an important part of their identity, the picture was different. For these people, thinking about an inclusive Europe led to more spontaneous discrimination.

For people highly committed to particular identities, or groups with a history of antagonism, and minorities under pressure to assimilate into a host culture, the prospect of depriving them of these valued social identities can therefore

be a problem. This analysis seems to fit when we take a look at pervasive and problematic intergroup conflicts around the world.

For example, the imposition of an overarching Yugoslavian identity in the Balkans failed, in the long term, to replace separate Serb, Croat, Macedonian, Albanian and Muslim identities; all identities that were critically important to the people involved.

How then to balance a basic need for a distinctive and defining social identity with the need by policy makers to de-emphasise a single focus on stigmatised or antagonistic intergroup divisions? The answer might be to encourage a simultaneous appreciation of both distinctiveness and diversity along with similarity and inclusion (Crisp, 2006; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Put another way, by taking a multiple categorisation approach – refocusing not on a superordinate identity at the expense of subgroup identities, but in addition to original identities, we can satisfy high identifiers' need for inclusion while at the same time encouraging an appreciation of alternative, cross-cutting and inclusive bases for identification.

What we and others have found is that if you get people to appreciate what people have in common along multiple criteria,

and at the same time make sure they know that this does not devalue other important bases for self-definition for them, then this can lead to reductions in bias, even when identities are highly valued. And further increasing the complexity of how superordinate groups are represented can greatly enhance the extent to which introducing a common ingroup identity can improve intergroup attitudes (Crisp, Walsh et al., 2006).

Together with the research described earlier, these studies tell us that getting people to appreciate the many different ways that they can describe themselves and others can reduce intergroup bias. Critically, however, this must be done not in a way that ignores the original source of intergroup tension, but in a way that embraces and integrates that identity with others. In so doing we can balance people's need to belong with getting them to acknowledge and accept the multiple cross-cutting and complex ways in which categories define relationships within and across different groups.

What next?

Incorporating tasks that encourage an appreciation of the multiple and diverse nature of identity into social and personal education should help encourage more religious and ethnic tolerance. But appreciating the flexibility and dynamism of our multiple identities can also tackle social exclusion in the form of academic underachievement (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007; Rosenthal & Crisp, 2006). A capacity to think of ourselves in many different ways lies at the heart of self-determination, aspiration and innovation, and this is no more evident than in the career choices we make at school, university and beyond. Should one become an engineer, teacher, artist, scientist or banker? Thinking simplistically about identities can stifle these aspirations and damage confidence.

Take gender: it is well established that women face gender discrimination in both

"this must not be done in a way that ignores the original source of intergroup tension"

implicit and explicit forms in their professional lives. Psychological research has shown that the career and academic choices of women, like those of a range of groups, are influenced by perceived social and cultural expectations – that is, social

stereotypes. For example, women, if we are to believe

society's expectations, are just not as good as men at maths. Many women believe this stereotype and so choose gender-stereotyped careers to avoid the discrimination they perceive to be inevitable were they to enter a male-dominated profession.

In this case, we are talking about the attitudes one has about oneself rather than the attitudes of others. Just as an appreciation of the multiplicity of identity can discourage us from holding negative expectations about others, it can also free us from the negative expectations we hold

about ourselves. If gender is a source of discrimination (for instance, for women contemplating a career as an engineer, soldier, banker or priest) then we must encourage the appreciation that gender is just one (albeit misplaced) criterion for entering such domains; there are many more identities that are important for self-definition, self-determination and, ultimately, career success. This and other techniques may provide the basis for developing practical interventions to help us realise the benefits of multiple identifications.

Conclusion

In this article I have given a brief overview of research on multiple social categorisation. From racial prejudice to gender discrimination, from efforts to promote closer integration of European member states to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, from ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia to the genocide in Rwanda, social categories define intergroup relations, and they define prejudice, discrimination and intergroup conflict. Understanding and addressing

these problems are among the most important issues we face.

My colleagues and I have shown that how we classify ourselves, and others, along multiple social criteria, has a significant impact on how people perceive others and, more generally, intergroup relations. Our social world is increasingly characterised by multiple affiliations, and the psychological implications of these relations are becoming increasingly relevant. Application of the psychological models I've discussed may provide an invaluable contribution to the promotion of social inclusion and the establishment of harmonious intergroup relations. Our multiple identities may ultimately prove critical in addressing some of the most pressing social issues that we face.



I Richard Crisp

*is Professor of Psychology in the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, Department of Psychology, University of Kent
r.crisp@kent.ac.uk*