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Four Problems for Researchers Using Social Categories

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Abstract

Research on lay categorization processes has revealed that it can lead to distortions. Yet researchers routinely categorize people into groups and cultures. We argue that researchers should be aware that social categories are (1) perspectival, (2) historical, (3) disrupted by the movement of people, and (4) re-constitutive of the phenomena they seek to describe. We illustrate these problems with reference to contemporary research on globalization and the 'clash of cultures.' It is argued that problematizing cultural categories would do more to reduce inter-group conflict than reifying them.

Four Problems for Researchers Using Social Categories

“What shall we call a thing anyhow? It seems quite arbitrary, for we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes. For me, this whole ‘audience’ is one thing, which grows now restless, now attentive. I have no use at present for its individual units, so I don’t consider them. So of an ‘army,’ of a ‘nation.’ But in your own eyes, ladies and gentlemen, to call you ‘audience’ is an accidental way of taking you. The permanently real things for you are your individual persons.”

(James, 1907, p. 106-7)

Jahoda (IN PRESS) has presented an insightful survey of how academics have carved out ‘culture’ as a topic of study to suit researchers’ purposes. He traces the emergence of the concept from discussions of ‘high culture’ through the idea that every national or geographic group has a distinctive pattern of thought and action, to the more recent idea that a group’s culture is a variable causing patterns of thought and action. Culture as a variable serves the all too human purpose of trying to predict human behavior.

‘Culture,’ as Jahoda’s analysis makes clear, has a diversity of definitions, so we want to start by making a distinction. Culture can be conceptualized as artifacts (Cole, 1995) and semiotic structures (Valsiner, 2001) which mediate human activity. These definitions we find relatively unproblematic, and will leave aside. Our critical focus is on using the term ‘culture’ to refer to the property of a group, something which either describes or explains the groups’ behavior. This occurs most clearly when culture is operationalized as a variable that differentiates groups.

The problem of categorizing people into cultural groups, stands in a long line of social categories which have received critique, including, class (Pakulski & Waters, 1996), race (Miles, 1993), nationality (Anderson, 1993), and ethnicity (Carter & Fenton, 2010). Although each of these categorizations operates differently (for example, categorizations of class are often pointing to income, categorizations of nationality are often pointing to different legal frameworks, and categorizations of ethnicity are often pointing to cultural differences), we maintain that there is a set of common problems which arise when researchers categorize anyone into a social group (e.g., bullies, terrorists, tourists, migrants etc.) or cultural group (e.g., African American, Asian or English).

Our aim in this paper is to build on Jahoda’s (IN PRESS) analysis to outline four problems which researchers need to be aware of when mobilizing social categories. Social categories, we argue, are (1) perspectival, (2) historical, (3) disrupted by the movement of people, and (4) re-constitutive of the phenomena they seek to describe. We bring problems to Moghaddam’s (IN Press) analysis of globalization leading to a clash of cultures, with the aim

of showing how problematizing social categories, such as culture membership, provides potential avenues to diffuse some of the tensions associated with globalization.

1) Social Categories Are Perspectival

To say that categories are perspectival means that there is no independent way of assigning a person to their 'true' category, but that the process of categorization always stems from a social position, a historical way of seeing and particular interests.

O'Doherty and Lecouteur (2007) reveal the perspectival nature of social categories in their analysis of how 'unexpected arrivals' (their term) were talked about in the Australian media. They found several social categories mobilized, and their analysis reveals how each categorization points to a different implication. The category 'illegal immigrant' legitimates sending the unexpected arrivals home. The category 'illegal migrant' defines the arrivals in terms of their movement, questioning whether Australia should be their final destination. The category 'escaped detainees' legitimates re-detention. The category 'boat people' enables discussion about how the arrivals sank their boats to force the Australian Navy to take them in. In contrast, the social categorizations of 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' provide legitimacy to the unexpected arrivals.

Another example comes from tourists in Ladakh, a remote region in northern India. They talk about 'Ladakhi culture' in terms of the Ladakhis they have met, usually hoteliers, waiters, shop-keepers, and mountain guides. They describe these people as having a traditional culture that stands in opposition to the consumerism and alienation of modernity (Gillespie, 2006). However, if one talks to Ladakhi villagers, many of whom have had no encounters with tourists, they will describe the hoteliers, waiters, shop-keepers and mountain guides as not being part of Ladakhi culture, but rather as modern, because they speak English, listen to American music, and watch Hollywood movies (Gillespie, 2006). Thus, the same group of front-line tourist workers are categorized both as representatives of 'traditional' and 'modern' culture, the only difference is one of perspective.

A third example comes from Brixton, which is a densely populated and highly diverse part of London. For many Brixton clearly has its own distinct culture (Howarth, 2002). Some describe it as multicultural, renowned for its antiracist attitudes and political tolerance. And yet others describe Brixton's culture as hostile, aggressive and predominantly black. These different perspectives are built in opposition to one another as different interests and identities are at stake in defending or contesting different perspectives on what Brixton's culture 'really' is. Social categorization is often contested, people debate who belongs and who does not, and what belonging means anyway.

The perspectivism of social categorization cannot be overcome by scientifically establishing 'true' social categories. It can only be addressed through engaging with the pluralism of the social world. This means heeding James' (1884, p. 196) caution about the psychologist's fallacy, namely, the failure to clearly distinguish between ideas in the psychologist's mind and ideas in the minds of research participants. Specifically, a social categorization can exist in at least three minds: It can be a category in the mind of researchers (e.g., 'they are collectivist,' 'they have a Protestant work ethic'), it can be a category in the mind of the

given group (e.g., 'we are freedom fighters', 'we are united by our experiences of discrimination'), and it can be a lay category mobilized to talk about an outgroup (e.g., 'they are religious fundamentalists,' 'they are terrorists'). Common sense recognizes this perspectivism with the saying, 'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist.' Accordingly, the first step when studying social categories is to ask, who is using the category? And what are they using it for?

2) Social Categories Are Historical

Social categorization is afflicted with two problems of history. First, the social categories we use to conceptualize groups are also changing. Second, all human groups are historical and changing. Let us consider each of these aspects in turn.

Jahoda (IN PRESS) has clearly shown how the concept of culture has changed, and we can add to this a more specific example, namely, categorizing cultures as interdependent and independent. This social categorization developed out of the distinction between individualism and collectivism (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002) and arguably goes back, via Hofstede (1984), to Durkheim's (1893) distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. Durkheim characterized traditional societies as having mechanical solidarity based on similarity and homogeneity. In contrast he characterized modern societies as having organic solidarity based on a division of labor and the inter-dependence of individuals. Such is the distance travelled that nobody today would associate interdependent/independent cultures with traditional/modern cultures.

Not only has our understanding of culture changed, but cultures themselves have not remained static. The meeting, mixing and governance of different groups has been an issue throughout history (Vertovec, 2010) and this means that cultural diversity as old as humanity (Kymlicka, 2010). What is the culture of the USA today? What was it one hundred or five hundred years ago? And what will it be in another hundred years? The fastest growing cultural groups in the US and UK are people who explicitly identify as 'mixed' (Institute for Social and Economics Research, 2011). There is even evidence to suggest that the major cultural differences of our age might have little to do with geographic origin, but more to do with wealth or profession (Murray, 2012).

Perhaps because culture itself is always changing, conceptualizations of culture always seem to be out of date. For example, most common sense understandings of 'culture' are based on the past – clearly evident in what people consider to be cultural dress. Cultures, as commonly understood, seem to be stuck in the past. Equally, when scholars talk about the problem of cultures interacting in the age of globalization, they usually fail to see that the cultures they assume no longer exist because for they have already been changed by the very processes of globalization being described (Gilroy, 2004). Bakhtin (1986, p. 6) made the point that the Ancient Greeks never knew they were Ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek culture, as we would describe it, would probably surprise the Ancient Greeks. The point is that people don't always see the culture they are in, until they are no longer in it. Maybe the culture of many multicultural cities of today will, in the future, be characterized in terms of a culture focused on defining cultural difference.

3) People Move Between Social Categories

Matching individuals to their social categories is not simple because individuals move between social categories. People move between places, social roles, life stages, genders, abilities, social classes and even cultures – and in so doing, they move between many social categories. They swear allegiance to a new country, they adopt new customs, they take up new responsibilities, or they are perceived differently. And even if the people don't move, culture itself, artifacts and boundary-objects, move, creating encounters and repositioning people (Riesch, 2010). The point here is not simply that people are members of multiple social categories or subordinate and superordinate categories, but rather that people move into and out of social categories.

Take for example the social category 'terrorist.' Members are not born preparing explosive devices to make political points, it is an activity they are socialized into, and thus a social category they move into. Moreover, many 'terrorists' retire, leaving the category behind. Research with retired members of ETA shows how they question the progress their organization has made, the risks they have had to take, and personal sacrifices they have had to make (Reinares, IN PRESS). Some retire simply because they want to get married and have children. One could also ask the question, is a terrorist always a terrorist? Are they a terrorist when making their dinner or playing with their kids?

The social category of immigrant is also disrupted by movement. Immigrants were not immigrants before they left their home community. Equally, many do assimilate into the host culture and cease to think of themselves as immigrants. Again, it is a social category they move into and out of. People join the category by crossing a boarder. The journey itself is trivial – in what sense are they different after crossing the national boarder? The psychological significance of the re-location is quite different, occurring on a different time scale, fluctuating with context and audience (Gillespie, Kadianaki & O'Sullivan, 2012).

The psychological significance of people moving between social categories is huge. Given that humans have memory, individuals must be seen as *accumulations* of roles and identities. The self cannot be understood as a single role or identity. The self is a composition of social selves (James, 1890), and discursive subject positions (Davies & Harre, 1990; O'Doherty & Davidson, 2010). As selves move between social positions, roles, life stages, relationships, and countries and cultures they accumulate increasingly diverse aspects or identities which can interact in often surprising ways.

Categorizing people as white, black, bullies, tourists, immigrants, terrorists, or racists obscures not only the heterogeneity of society, but the heterogeneity of individuals. For example, 60% of children who bully are themselves bullied (O'Neill, Livingstone & McLaughlin, 2011). People are not simply instances of a social type, they are unique accumulations of experiences produced by their own unique trajectories through a range of social positions, roles, and social categories.

Consider the case of second generation Turkish teenagers living in London (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008). They participate in relatively traditional Turkish lifestyles at home while participating in relatively British cultural norms and values at school. The result is a creative

hybrid, in which, for example, Turkish values are expressed through British forms of culture. The positions that they take up (British, Turkish) fit in to different cultural and contextual expectations. British teenagers with black and white parents in Howarth, Magnusson, Sammut and Wagner (IN PRESS) described this hybridity vividly in saying they felt white at home and black in public where their pale brown skin often marked them as different. Thus moving between home and public spheres can disrupt a seemingly simple social categorization based on skin color.

Instead of trying to characterize and contrast bounded groups or cultures, we suggest that a more productive trajectory for research is to focus on people moving between and through roles, stages, groups and cultures. How do diverse experiences layer up within an individual? How and when do tensions arise within individuals, and with what consequences?

4) Social Categories Interfere With Their Phenomenon

Categorizing people is different to categorizing things. While things suffer our impositions silently, people are more reactive. As James (1907, p. 107) pointed out, our descriptions of the world do not exist on a separate plane, they are part of the world. This is particularly evident with social categorizations.

Gergen (1973) showed how social psychology has interfered with its phenomenon. Investigations into the authoritarian personality and obedience to authority (e.g., Milgram, 1963) have fed back into society, so that awareness of the problems of obedience or authoritarianism have influenced the design of institutions, and the behavior of individuals. Social and cultural research reflects history, contributes to the creation of history, and, accordingly, much will be consigned to history.

One mundane way in which research contributes to the creation of our social world is by reproducing common sense social categories, which, via the legitimacy of science, naturalizes them (Howarth, 2009). As Reicher (2004, p. 942) writes:

Psychological theory is not only a commentary on the world and how we behave within it: it is also a part of our world and serves to shape our own self-understandings. Those models that serve to reify social categories in theory may also help to reify categories in practice. They tell us that there is only one basis of defining ourselves, only one way of perceiving others, and only one form of intergroup relations. The consequence of telling us that particular forms of domination are inevitable could be to render such domination all the more likely and to make counter domination strategies all the more futile.

In many studies on prejudice and radicalized identities we see time and again methodological designs that assume the easy categorization of participants into black and white, majority and minority, host and migrant. Researchers assume the importance of social categories *before* they have explored the ways they are made meaningful, developed or contested in different contexts (Howarth, 2009).

Social categorization by research can also interfere with phenomena indirectly. Leaders of social movements, bureaucrats, managers and politicians can utilize the social science's social categories to chilling effect. Much of Foucault's (e.g., 1973, 1975) *oeuvre* is a study of how the ideas and social categories developed by criminologists and psychiatrists re-defined the practices of rehabilitation. People are categorized on the basis of these ideas, and the consequences were real: punishment, incarceration, training, education, surveillance, and regulation.

Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) have pointed out how some of the literature on social cognition reproduces racist themes. For example, the idea that cultures are different and we have a natural tendency to denigrate outgroups has been used to argue against immigration and multiculturalism (Modood, 2007). This 'new racism' does not argue that one group is superior to another, but only that cultural groups are essentially different and thus should not mix (Leach, 2002). Such ideas could have far reaching consequences if taken up by people with more power to institute a social order than academics.

A Clash of Cultures?

Recent scholarship, building on the literature on globalization and fuelled by high profile acts of terrorism, has argued that we are in the midst of a clash of cultures (Moghaddam, IN PRESS). While one could debate seriousness of this clash (terrorism and inter-cultural conflict is a miniscule cause of death relative to automotive accidents or alcohol), we want to focus upon the way in which this literature uses the concept 'culture' as a social category.

Moghaddam's (IN Press) argument is that globalization has led to unprecedented contact between cultures, and that the assimilation and multiculturalism agendas have failed. Moghaddam proposes a clear separation between what is common to all cultures (omniculture) and what is different between cultures. His idea is that children from different cultures should first be educated into their shared omniculture, and then, at about age 14, they would begin to be educated into their respective cultural differences.

Moghaddam's analysis entails social categorization at two levels, to create the problem and then to solve it. First, cultural categories are invoked in order to frame the problem, namely, that people with different cultures are clashing. Second, the proposed solution entails creating a new and inclusive cultural category, namely, omniculture. Let us consider each in turn.

First, the assumption that cultural groups are clearly distinct seems to neglect the perspectival, historical, and disrupted nature of these categories. For example, people move between cultures, becoming socialized into multiple cultures. Cultural differences are thus as likely to be found within people as between people. Many people today feel white *and* black. Even a terrorist remembers life before terrorism, and may be thinking of a life after terrorism (Reinares, IN PRESS). Second generation Turkish youth in London might share certain ideas about music, politics or sex with the so-called native British population, even though those particular ideas are not typically considered part of Turkish culture (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008). Equally, many British people share the Turkish fondness for kebabs, though

kebabs might not be traditionally considered part of British culture; but like drinking tea in fine china (both initially imported from China), it might well become quintessentially British.

The reason for emphasizing that cultural differences can occur within individuals is that it makes visible a very particular commonality, namely, hybridity. If all cultures are changing, and all individuals are moving between different cultural domains (e.g., home, work, friends, online, and Hollywood films) then what is shared is not so much any single set of ideas (omniculture) but rather hybridity itself.

Second, Moghaddam admits that his idea to identify 'omniculture,' that which we share, relies "to some extent" on something like Plato's "external reality" (IN PRESS, p. 12). We agree that there are human universals, for example, all humans have culture, and all culture is hybrid. But it is quite a different thing to try to identify cultural content which is universal. The problem here is one of perspectivism: who defines what is common and what is particular? Moghaddam (IN PRESS, P. 2) states that psychological science will identify the "foundational human commonalities."

But history does not give confidence that science could objectively characterize what is common to all cultures. From the Orientalism of 18th century (Said, 1978), to 19th century research on racial differences (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994), to recent research on intelligence (Sternberg, 2004) and morality (Snarey, 1985), the evidence for trans-cultural objectivity of psychological science is poor.

Moreover, even if psychological science could identify 'omniculture,' it is unlikely that this scientific conception of culture would sweep away existing common-sense understandings of culture based on difference. The social world is pluralistic; it tolerates diverse discourses with potentially contradictory social categorizations. Studies on the public understanding of science demonstrate that science cannot replace common sense (Bauer, Durant & Gaskell, 2002), but rather that scientific knowledge becomes added to and transformed by common-sense (Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Hence any scientific definition of omniculture would simply be another way of categorizing people, and unlikely to supplant the existing social categorizations which are assumed to be problematic.

The problem of the historical nature of social categorizations is evident at a number of points in Moghaddam's formulation. Will the scientists be able to accurately describe cultures as they are now, without the benefit of hindsight? What will happen when the scientists' own understanding of what culture is changes? What if, for example, they decide that the important cultural differences are not based on geography but on income or professional domain? And, finally, the omnicultural intervention, if it succeeded, would significantly change the cultures which it attempts to describe. If children up to the age of 14 could be educated into 'omniculture' and only then introduced to their differences, arguably an entirely new culture would have been created, and by implication, the identified omniculture would become historical.

This leads to the problem of social categories interfering with their phenomenon. What sort of social world would be constituted by the omnicultural imperative? Would it be the outcome envisioned? The proposed educational curriculum will, arguably, reify cultural

differences. First, it is difficult to imagine how the discussion of what is shared will not be accompanied by a discussion of what is not shared. Second, the curriculum will reinforce the idea that there are clearly bounded cultures, and clearly defined differences between cultures, which, despite the emphasis on a core commonality, will risk reproducing the very differences which are seen to be problematic.

Instead of attempting to reconcile diverse cultures through the identification of that which is common, we favor a critical analysis of all essentializing social categories. Whether conflict is based on the categories of race, culture, ideology or nationality, researchers can benefit humanity by questioning the construction and mobilization of these social categories. Dangerous social categories are those which have become essentialized and naturalized, because those are the social categories that people get committed to. If, however, social categories are seen to be perspectival, historical, intersected by movement and reactive, then they lose some of their power. An education which shows that social categories come and go, would make mobilizing those categories for war, terrorism, social control, or inter-cultural conflict much more difficult. Once the social categories are seen as temporal, they are destabilized, becoming peculiar, something to be interested in, but not something to be taken too seriously.

Social Categories and Human Agency

There has been a lot of good research on social categorization. The literature clearly shows how social categories simplify the social world, homogenizing intra-group differences, accentuating differences between groups, and are resistant to falsifying evidence (Brown, 2000). Accordingly, it is ironic how frequently and easily social scientists invoke social categories. The literature abounds with unreflective studies of 'the unemployed,' 'the homeless,' 'criminals,' 'terrorists,' 'immigrants,' 'prostitutes,' 'tourists,' 'students,' and a whole host of geographical, cultural and radicalized groups.

We are not arguing against the use of social categories. Thinking is a process of making distinctions, and it can be useful to distinguish one social group or culture from another. Rather, we argue that an unreflective use of social categories by social scientists results in the same risks as those evidenced in lay thinking. A more sophisticated utilization of categories would be premised on recognizing that social categories are human constructs, that they vary depending upon one's perspective within the social field, that they change and have history, that people move into and out of social categories, and that the way in which we utilize social categories interacts with the phenomena we seek to understand.

Not to problematize social categories, especially when they are used to explain behavior, is to undermine human agency. Humans are not dupes carrying out prescribed roles (Davies & Harré, 1990) or pushed into the future by a social category. Humans, to a large extent, lead themselves into the future on the basis of their ideas – sometimes idiosyncratic, silly or even dangerous ideas. This is why ideographic analysis will always be the bedrock of psychology (Valsiner, 1998).

James, in the opening quotation, recognized the problem of agency when he categorized his audience as an audience, acknowledging that they would disagree. From their point of view

their participation in the audience was transitory, inconsequential and “accidental.” From their point of view the only “permanently real” things were their own “individual persons.” To tell any one of them that they clapped at the end of James’ talk *because* they were a member of the audience would be insulting and undermining. Although we may know that an individual hearing the talk alone would not clap, we also know that asking any member of the audience why they clapped would lead them to point, not at the audience, but at the content of James’ talk. We are not advocating a resolution to such perspectival divergences. Rather, we have argued that researchers should recognize this perspectivism and become more self-reflexive in their mobilization of social categories.

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