

From Subtle Cues to Profound Influences: The Impact of Changing Identities on Emotions and Behaviors

Vincent Yzerbyt

Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Like all wars, the Kosovo conflict was a terrible one. One night, most Belgian TV stations had agreed to join efforts in organizing a telethon in favor of the refugees. As I watched the show, one thing intrigued me. A few years before, media were quick to emphasize that Bosnian “victims” were Muslims. The atrocities inflicted on Kosovars by the Serbs seemed similar, so why did the reports fail to mention religion as a factor possibly contributing to the present conflict? Did this omission influence viewers to fetch their phone and pledge money? Mentioning this hypothesis would likely have donators jump through the roof. If viewers wanted to give money, they would do it no matter what, right? The total amount collected that evening turned out to reach a historic high. I was left with my questions.

SMALL CAUSES, LARGE EFFECTS

Social psychology offers countless illustrations that people underestimate the impact of subtle changes in their environment (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Alongside well-known studies by Milgram on obedience, a multitude of examples, like Batson’s work on altruism, illustrate how trivial differences in the context dramatically alters people’s behavior. So, helping someone is way less likely when potential helpers are in a hurry. This difference emerges even when people have just been reminded about the tale of the Good Samaritan! Even more fascinating, participants in such studies seldom acknowledge the variability of their behavior in response to a silly variation of the setting. Helpers

help ... or do they? The research tools adopted by social psychologists, and primarily the experimental method, offer a unique opportunity to confront us with this humbling lesson: The situation, often in its tiniest aspects, exerts a huge impact on people's behavior.

My conviction is that we need to export this message to other fields, inasmuch as the temptation to assign large effects to big causes characterizes the vast majority of researchers both within psychology and in related disciplines. This chapter presents an ongoing research program on social emotions illustrating the power of trivial variations in the social context. Another reason for dwelling on this work is that our findings have obvious implications for intergroup relations, making them relevant for anyone interested in and dealing with groups. As much as social psychology may prove helpful for other fields, a full understanding of social phenomena also needs to integrate questions from outside psychology. A key asset of other disciplines is that they remind social psychology about more distal factors contributing to the complexity of reality. A dialogue between approaches that stress a more macro-level analysis and complements the proximal factors and micro-level variables examined by social psychology can only be fruitful.

SOCIAL EMOTIONS AND CATEGORIZATIONS

For more than a century, psychologists have worked hard to understand antecedents, correlates, and consequences of emotional experience. It is fair to say that the dominant perspective is an individual and not so much a social one. Still, we do not need to be affected directly by the events in order to feel concerned and react. Think about workers when they learn about a large number of their colleagues being laid off due to some restructuring in their company. What is it then that shapes our protesting, approving, or ignoring events? These questions, of prime importance to social psychologists, are also relevant in fields such as organizational psychology, consumer psychology, marketing, economics, political science, and so on.

Our work focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that people manifest to events as a function of their wearing one "social hat" rather than another (Yzerbyt, Dumont, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2002). The theoretical impetus came from a chapter by Smith (1993) about emotions in intergroup relations in which, rather than seeing prejudice in terms of positive versus negative affect, he argued that prejudice encompasses the full diversity of emotional reactions as a function of the particular appraisals individuals make in the situation. Smith also noted that people need not be personally disturbed by the events for emotional reactions to emerge. Whatever concerns the group to which they belong affects individual members.

Our interest for social emotions concentrated on the impact of switching identities. According to self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987), once observers divide up the social environment in a series of (usually two) social categories, the category to which they belong exerts a profound impact on their



beliefs and behaviors. Group members forget about their individualities and start thinking and behaving in accordance with the group norms, a process called *depersonalization*. We therefore wanted to see if the very same events could lead to different reactions as a function of the specific hat we constrain people to wear. Also, we were curious to see whether emotions, rather than opinions, were sensitive to changes in the definition of people's identity.

EMPIRICAL DEMONSTRATIONS

The scenario of our studies is simple. Participants learn about harmful behavior performed by one group against another. The critical feature is to select victims who share some group membership with participants but can also be seen as belonging to a different social category. The twist is then to have participants throw themselves in the same group as the victims or in a different group. Importantly, the identity manipulation remains extremely subtle. Generally, the first page of the questionnaire simply indicates that the study aims at comparing one group against another. The first group mentioned is the one we would like to see endorsed by the participants as their own, the second being a contrast group.

Some studies relied on a crossed categorization paradigm (Gordijn, Wigboldus, Hermsen, & Yzerbyt, 1999). For instance, psychology students of the University of Amsterdam learned that psychology students at the Free University, a concurrent institution, faced serious difficulties because math students from the Free University had misbehaved. To ensure that participants would see themselves as belonging to a different group than the victims, participants read at the outset of the study that we were interested in comparing their reactions as students of Amsterdam with those of students attending other institutions. Alternatively, the study was said to compare psychology students and students in other fields. Other studies used a subgrouping manipulation by which participants were led to think in terms of a superordinate category, one that includes the victims and themselves, or in terms of a subordinate category, one that contrasts participants with the group of victims (Gordijn, Wigboldus, & Yzerbyt, 2001; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). For example, Yzerbyt et al. (2003) informed students from the Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve that students at a different institution, the University of Ghent, faced an unreasonable decision. The goal of the study, participants learned, was to compare reactions of students versus professors (the superordinate condition) or students at the Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve versus students at other institutions (the subordinate condition).

To make a long story short, participants thrown in the same group as the victims reported different specific feelings upon reading these stories: They were more angry, but no more sad, and less happy. They also intended to oppose the perpetrators much more. As expected, the emotional reactions mediated the impact of the identity manipulation on the intentions to react to

the unfair situation. Subsequent work also showed that chronic identification with the group combines with the context in shaping emotional and behavioral reactions (Yzerbyt et al., 2003), confirming the credo of social psychologists that behavior is a function of the person and the situation (Lewin, 1951). More recently, we examined people's reactions not only in contexts where they could be pushed into feeling like victims but where embracing some identity also meant sharing the responsibility of the harmful behavior. Over and over, we found that subtle changes in the social landscape push individuals into totally different subjective worlds, with major consequences on feelings and behaviors.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RELATED FIELDS

The work just described is clearly relevant for neighboring fields. For instance, current approaches of organizational psychology stress the importance of social categorization processes in the regulation of work behavior (Haslam, 2000). The case of the merger offers an easy illustration. When two companies merge, one of the challenges is to have workers start endorsing the more encompassing identity. Being led to experience similar emotions across the fraction line of the former companies can only facilitate the merging operation. As for political science and sociology, the relevance is perhaps most obvious for issues of social mobilization. Indeed, our work touches on several aspects examined in cognitive liberation theory (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). The latter approach stresses the aspects of category formation and brokerage, that is, the way people restructure the social landscape and magnify the divisions between groups. A carefully designed promotion of one way to look on the social world as opposed to another may have definite consequences on the manner in which people react to injustice or deprivation. A straightforward case concerns people's inclination to support or oppose governmental apologies for harm done in the past to disadvantaged minorities such as former colonies or aboriginals. This seems all the more important as people often witness contentious behavior while sitting on some sort of "identity" fence. We think that not much is needed to embrace one identity or another, with all the consequences that follow.

Social psychology tends to examine questions in a systematic and somewhat decontextualized way, with the goal of understanding the abstract principle. For this reason, related disciplines are likely to help social psychologists with their deeper experience regarding the diversity and practicality of real life situations. What is gained from paying attention to related fields is thus a better understanding of the links between more distal factors often at the heart of disciplines such as political science, economics, and the like, and the more proximal variables and psychological processes typically at the heart of psychological approaches. With this idea in mind, we conducted a study that attempted to overcome the limitations of the traditional vignette methodology.



We took advantage of the infamous attacks of September 11, 2001 (Dumont, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). One week after the events, we asked European students about their emotional reactions and observed behaviors, such as the provision of an e-mail address in order to be informed about the NATO and support its operations. Respondents were always addressed as Europeans, but their reactions differed depending on whether they thought their answers would allegedly be compared to Arabs versus Americans. The association of Europeans with Americans should prevail in the first condition, whereas the second condition should favor a distinction between Europeans and Americans. Fear and action tendencies related to fear emerged more strongly when the context put forth a contrast between European and Americans. As for behaviors, 18% rather than 3% gave their private e-mail address to receive documentation about the NATO, to take only this example! Changing *a single word* on the first page of the questionnaire was thus far from trivial.

Participants' responses were in line with expectations but also more complex and more powerful than what we usually observed in the laboratory. Precisely because of their relevance to the world out there, these findings provide a striking illustration of the power of small alterations in the environment, one that people hardly notice and indeed tend to minimize in its implications when informed about it. This example of using more ecological political events is only one way to stress the importance of paying attention to questions typically asked in related fields. Numerous variables examined in the context of other fields would seem to be likely moderators of the basic phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

In a fascinating essay, Maalouf (1998) proposed that the multiplicity of identities would lead people to adopt more encompassing and hopefully moderate views. We suspect that people often put on only one hat at a time and forget about the others caps they could wear. As a result, their reactions hardly show any sign of restraint but rather demonstrate a fair degree of one-sidedness. In the public broadcasting (PBS) program *The Eye of the Storm*, Jane Elliott, a famous schoolteacher who taught generations about racism, quoted the Indian saying: "You can't really know what's a man's life until you walk in his moccasins." We agree that providing people different pairs of shoes leads to dramatically different reactions. We doubt, however, that people are quick to learn lessons from such experiences. Our data suggest that people are hardly aware that they would have reacted differently had subtle aspects of the context made some other identity salient. Such blindness constitutes a fascinating topic for future research.

The questions raised here concern issues that extend beyond the borders of our field. The rich repertoire of identities available in the external world and the flexibility in the identity people may endorse at any given moment open a

number of interesting possibilities with respect to social change and mobilization. At the same time, our work needs to be complemented by including questions and causes typically studied in neighboring fields. Increasing our knowledge about the critical factors involved in people's emotional reactions to social events is of importance because emotions are among the most potent fuel for behavior. This should help us better appreciate why it is that viewers may or may not take their phone and donate money for victims of war. That the tactics evoked here be used exclusively for the promotion of positive behaviors is of course our strongest hope.

REFERENCES

- Dumont, M., Yzerbyt, V. Y., Wigboldus, D., & Gordijn, E. (2003). Social categorization and fear reactions to the September 11th terrorist attacks. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *29*, 112–123.
- Gordijn, E., Wigboldus, D., Hermsen, S., & Yzerbyt, V. Y. (1999). Categorisation et émotion: L'influence de l'impact de l'outgroup [Categories and anger: The influence of the impact of outgroup behavior]. In D. Von Knippenberg, C. K. W. de Drué, C. Mortyn, & C. Rutte (Eds.), *Firoudieude Sociale Psychologie*, *13*. Telburg, Telburg University Press.
- Gordijn, E., Wigboldus, D., & Yzerbyt, V. Y. (2001). Emotional consequences of categorizing victims of negative outgroup behavior as ingroup or outgroup. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *4*, 317–326.
- Haslam, S. A. (2000). *Psychology in organizations*. London: Sage.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theories in social science*. New-York: Harper.
- Maalouf, A. (1998). *Les identités meurtrières*. Paris: Grasset.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Smith, E. R. (1993). Social identity and social emotions: Toward new conceptualizations of prejudice. In D. M. Mackie & D. L. Hamilton (Eds.), *Affect, cognition, and stereotyping: Interactive processes in group perception* (pp. 297–315). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Turner, J. C. (1987). A self-categorization theory. In J. C. Turner, M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher, & M. S. Wetherell (Eds.), *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory* (pp. 42–67). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Yzerbyt, V. Y., Dumont, M., Gordijn, E., & Wigboldus, D. (2002). Intergroup emotions and self-categorization: The impact of perspective taking on reactions to victims of harmful behavior. In D. Mackie & E. Smith (Eds.), *From prejudice to intergroup emotions* (pp. 67–88). Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Yzerbyt, V. Y., Dumont, M., Wigboldus, D., & Gordijn, E. (2004). I feel for us: Preferences may well need categorization. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *42*, 533–549.