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The structure of group identification

Introduction: The ambiguous concept of identification

The notion of identification is widely used in everyday language and in several disciplines and discussions, and it harbors various meanings. The term is generally used as a synonym for perceptual recognition or determination – e.g., “the eye-witness identified the robber”, “the biologist identified the insect”, and so on. On the other hand, the term can also be employed in an “intransitive” sense. Besides identifying something, one may also identify oneself with something. To identify with X is to affiliate oneself to or feel kinship with X – “to be or become the same”, as the dictionary definition holds (Merriam-Webster). The two concepts are related at least in two senses. First, in order to identify with X, one has to identify X, even if not necessarily in a cognitively well-articulated manner. Second, as the intransitive structure of the term suggests, identification with X is a matter of identifying oneself (in the first sense of ‘identification’) as having a certain kind of relationship with X. “Identification with something” accordingly describes a relationship between these two poles.

When speaking of group identification, the term is clearly used in the intransitive sense. It refers to a relationship between oneself and the group. Yet, the nature of this relationship causes some puzzlement. Ontologically speaking, we have a part/whole relationship: the individual is part of the whole group. But what kind of experience is this, and how can we describe best the experiential target?

The concept can be further delineated by distinguishing it from the related concepts of empathy and sympathy. Identifying (or disidentifying) with someone’s way of reacting to stressful situations, for instance, presupposes that one is capable of tracking stressfulness and repetitive patterns of behavior in others – to identify these, and, hence to “empathize” with others at least in the minimal sense. Yet, empathy with X does not conversely imply identifying with X. We may recognize someone’s mental state, thereby engaging in “minimal empathy”, or consider it in light of its motives and locate it in its relevant context, thus engaging in “extended empathy”, without identifying with the other person, with her mental state, or with her patterns of emotional response. Moreover, we may “sympathize” – i.e., “go along” – with the other’s way of responding, while identifying neither with the other’s mental state nor with the way it is motivated. For example, when recognizing that your friend is overly sad over his broken laptop, you may go along with, or feel bad for, his sadness, while at the same time considering his reaction to be excessive or somewhat odd. That is to say: identification with X presupposes empathy but not sympathy, yet neither empathy nor sympathy necessarily imply identification.

Even if identification is distinguished from empathy and sympathy, and understood in the intransitive sense, the concept harbors various ambiguities. Structurally speaking, identification involves three main ingredients: the identifying agent, the target one identifies with, and the act of identification.

When it comes to the agent, the picture seems relatively clear: the one who identifies with X (e.g., a group) is an individual subject.¹ But various ambiguities do emerge with respect to the target and the act as we shall see.

(1) Identification can be at least individual-targeted, member-targeted, or group-targeted, and the question arises whether the concept ought to be understood in one and the same sense in each case. In particular, given that the group-identifying individual does not feel equally attached to all of the group members, the relation between member-directed and group-directed identification remains unclear: what exactly does one identify oneself with when “group-identifying”?

(2) Structurally speaking, “identification with” establishes an experiential relationship between the subject and target of identification – but what kind of relationship? Are we dealing with an identity-relation, a similarity-relation, a combination of these, or with something else altogether?

(3) Does identifying with X necessarily imply that one already finds oneself being X or like X? Or does identification with X allow that one is not yet X or like X, but merely aims at becoming so, thereby taking X as one’s developmental ideal? The given dictionary definition (i.e., “to be or become the same”) leaves both possibilities open. Yet, depending on which one of these one has in mind, the structure of identification looks very different. In particular, does one have to already be a member of a particular group in order to identify with it? Is group identification a temporal pursuit or a realization of something already established?

Leaving aside the question of target for a moment, it becomes clear that the distinctions between realization and pursuit, on the one hand, and between similarity and identity, on the other, create four different senses of “identification”:

- I¹ Pursuit for similarity (I want to be like X)
- I² Pursuit for identity (I want to be X)
- I³ Realization of similarity (I am like X)
- I⁴ Realization of identity (I am X)

These different senses can be illustrated at the individual level. For (I¹) consider the experiential stance of someone who admires another and aims to gain a similar set of skills (or social status, etc.). An example of (I²) could be either a high school student who wants to become a philosopher (and not just like a philosopher); or a small child whose wish might be to not only one day become a caregiver (like her mother or father), but become the caregiver (e.g., fantasizing about replacing the object altogether and taking its place). As for (I³), this would be feeling affiliation with someone at the realization that he or she thinks like you do, respects the same values, or likes (for instance) the same kind of music.

¹ Here some might insist that also groups and collectives could identify themselves with other groups, societies or collectives; but this possibility will not be examined in the present context.

As for (I⁴), consider how children at play (or adult actors) temporarily assume the habitus of another and momentarily act as if they actually were that person. As for more permanent cases of this, consider the dissociative identity disorder in which individuals believe themselves to be someone they, objectively speaking, are not. In the psychoanalytic tradition, the distinction between similarity and identity also has a part to play in distinguishing between “primary” and “secondary” identification (e.g., Winnicott 1965, 21ff.; Sandler 1989, 13ff.; see also Taipale 2016b).

These distinctions lead us to the main question of this article: in what sense should “identifying with” be understood when speaking of “group identification”? As I will show, group identification involves a complex combination of these meanings and its precise sense can only be clarified after the mentioned ambiguities have been cleared.

My aim here is to solve the three ambiguities, and the text is divided into three parts accordingly. First, I will distinguish group identification from group membership, portray the former as an experience and the latter as an objective fact, and show how the two may diverge from one another. Second, I will argue that group identification has a dual target: actual group member tokens, on the one hand, and the supraindividual group member type, on the other. Third, I will examine the relational structure of group identification and argue that the dual target model allows us to solve the aforementioned conceptual ambiguities.

1. Identification, membership, and affective salience

Group identification is commonly associated with group membership. Some commentators even use the two notions interchangeably (e.g., Salmela 2014, 165). While a synonymous use of the terms may be justified in certain frameworks, there are clearly also crucial differences between two concepts.

Group identification is a subjective experience, while group membership is an objective fact (see Tajfel 1981, 232),² and these may diverge from one another. For one, group membership does not necessarily presuppose group identification. For example, infants are born into various groups and communities (family, kin, city-residents, social class, nation, humanity etc.) and protected by the laws of society. In this sense they are, objectively speaking, members of various groups from the start, and yet they do not identify themselves with any of these groups (see Zahavi 2014, 244 ff.). Likewise, some individuals might “actively disidentify” themselves with a particular group that

² By the objective fact of membership I do not mean to presuppose an explicit agreement, contract, or public documentation of membership. There are, for instance, “ideological” groups which are defined by the shared attitudes of their “members” – e.g., liberals, conservatives, or supporters of a football team – and “situational” groups in which membership is defined by shared experiences – e.g., losing a loved one or surviving a natural disaster. In my use, “objective membership” thus also applies to such “unofficial” groups.

they are in fact a member of (Hogg and Abrams 1998, 153). Equally, group identification does not presuppose group membership; people may identify with particular groups without being, having been, or intending to be members of those groups. For example, a retired person might still firmly identify with a company she has since retired from. Moreover, seeking group membership may sometimes be motivated by (earlier) identification with the values represented by the group in question. Group identification might not even presuppose the existence of the group in question, as the latter can be brought about by joint identification in the first place (see Bacharach 2006, 74). Be that as it may, the experience of group identification and the fact of membership do not necessarily go hand-in-hand.

In the experience of group identification, we can distinguish between cognitive and affective dimensions. In the literature, the relationship between these has been assessed in many ways (see, e.g., Johnson et al. 2012).

Some consider knowledge of membership – i.e., cognitive self-categorization (see Turner et al. 1987) – to be a sufficient condition for group identification, and so allow for purely cognitive forms of group identification. Ellemers, for instance, argues that mere knowledge of one's social category motivates selective prosocial behavior (Ellemers 2010, 798). Hindriks likewise suggests that knowledge of membership in a social group induces communal forms of experience, such as team reasoning (Hindriks 2012, 198-199, 205, 214). Hudin, too, claims that social identification may unfold without any "emotional component" (Hudin 2014, 77).

My worry with respect to these accounts is the following. If simply awareness of present membership to a community is enough, where does one then draw the line between devoted group members and people who are strategically exploiting the group? Both indeed know that they are members of the group, but saying they both identify with the group seems wrong.

In this sense, many scholars have underlined the wide behavioral-normative effects of group identification, and firmly associated the concept with a sense of commitment, loyalty, and in-group favoritism (e.g., Tajfel 1970; Dovidio 1984; Marques et al. 1988; Stern 1995; Bacharach 1999; Jetten et al. 2000; Zdaniuk and Levine 2001; Tuomela 2007, 14, 62; cf. Leach et al. 2008; Smeeke and Verkyuten 2013). As Hogg and Abrams put it, group identification "constrains and guides behavior" (Hogg and Abrams 1998, 113). It should be emphasized that the "in-group favoritism" entailed by group identification is not simply a cognitive, strategic, rational or calculative issue. What is altered is also our affective, emotional, and "more implicit responses" (Hall and Crisp 2008). People have long been known to favor others with a similar taste in music, from a similar family setting, and so on. Recently, Thibault and Hackel with their research teams have established that group identification lowers the threshold for mind perception, gesture recognition, empathy, and perspective-taking across group members (Thibault et al. 2006; Hackel et al. 2014; see also Kaiser et al. 2009). Yet it has been argued that this threshold-lowering does not always mean a positive evaluation (see Ellemers 2010, 801; Hindriks 2012, 206; cf.

Kessler and Holbach 2005). Regardless of how we value the group of which we are members, we nonetheless tend to be more interested and affected by what happens to them. Approaching the affective dimension in group identification in terms of an “individual’s positive feelings about being one with a group” (Johnson et al. 2012) is thus misleading. For example, natural disasters in Asia or terror attacks in Africa are usually a lesser news item in Western countries if there are no Western casualties, but not because people would necessarily entertain more positive emotions about people from their own region.

As central consequences of group identification, Bacharach highlights “we-talk”, “group thinking”, and “team reasoning” (Bacharach 2006, 76). Tuomela occasionally distinguishes between group identification and commitment (e.g., Tuomela 2007, 36), but defines group identification in terms of functioning, thinking and acting “in the we-mode” (Tuomela 2016, 270). Uncovering the sense of commitment enables a distinction to be made between devoted and exploitative group members, suggesting that only the former truly identify with the group. But cognitive self-categorization on its own is hardly enough. Knowledge that someone belongs to a particular group indeed tends to give rise to expectations concerning their normative commitments (see Sugden 2003, 178-179), but our anticipations in this respect are also often disappointed. After all, we frequently discover that people, for instance, remorselessly break the laws, norms, and moral codes of their own society. In so far as such people know that they are members of the community, knowledge of membership alone is thus not enough to entail normative commitment.

Moreover, we are often simultaneously members of several groups. If mere knowledge of our various “memberships” would be the sole guide for our normative actions, life would be overly chaotic. Fortunately this is not the case as, depending on the circumstances, particular “memberships” usually make themselves felt more “important and central” than others (Hogg 2010, 802), while others recede experientially into the background.³ For instance, my “work identity” more or less recedes into the background when I am at home, just as my “family identity” recedes when I am at the office. Both identities are known by me – i.e., if asked, I will categorize myself both as a researcher and a family man – and yet, in the present circumstances, these “identities” do not feel equally important, even if they do equally guide my behavior (e.g., my ways of moving and talking). If cognitive self-categorization would in itself suffice for behavioral orientation, regardless of my present situation, my behavior would blur elements of the researcher and family modes (e.g., I might talk to my children like a researcher, or to my colleagues as if I was their dad). And this, clearly, is not the case.

³ People join forces for various reasons and the motives for group identification are multifarious. These include primal emotional needs, safety measures, common threat, discrimination, attachment and affiliation needs, conflicts between individual and collective interests, discrimination by the mainstream, calculative-utilitarian “payoff”, and intellectual-strategic deliberations (see, e.g., Fisher and Wakefield 1998; Jetten et al. 2001a).

What allows for the needed “compartmentalization” of our social identities, and thus a flexible social life full of diversity, is affective salience of membership (Brewer and Kramer 1986, 545). To be sure, cognitive self-categorization modifies the emotional responses of individuals but this is only in situations where the respective group membership becomes affectively highlighted or emphasized due to the nature of those circumstances (e.g., Smith and Mackie 2008). At a given time, some memberships are salient and some dormant, and individuals will define themselves and be normatively guided by their salient group membership (see Fisher and Wakefield 1998, 24).

The affective salience of memberships may be triggered by “backward-looking” factors, such as common fate or history; “contingent” factors, such as falling within the same social boundary (e.g., being residents of the same town, students, or elderly); “situational factors”, such as being stuck in an elevator together; and “forward-looking” factors such as common goals and interests (see Bacharach 1999, 133; Bacharach 2006, 75-76; Hindriks 2012, 210). Some of the “saliences” arise from free choice, while others we have involuntarily grown into. Thus when Brewer claims that “social identities are chosen” (Brewer 1991, 477), I think she is only partly right. Insofar as social identities are built upon category salience – and insofar as the latter is also regulated by our history, our vocations, our temperament, and so on – social identities are not fully something chosen: we may choose how to go forward, but we cannot choose where we have already come from. As the saying goes, sometimes professions, vocations, and fates choose us – not the other way around.

In this sense, the affective component seems necessary for group identification. Unlike group membership, group identification involves a greater or lesser “feeling of belonging” (see Zahavi 2016) and is “phenomenologically real” (Abrams and Hogg 1998, 7). What leads people to pursue the goals of their group, what drives them to cooperate and coordinate, what motivates them to act according to the group norms, and what promotes and fosters group conformity and in-group favoritism, is the affective salience of the ‘we’ in question (Stoel et al. 2004, 158; Bacharach 2006, 76; Tuomela 2007, 258; Hindriks 2012, 198, 207). Whereas cognition categorizes and represents people as group members, it is affective salience that leads them to feel, think, and act as group members.

Group identification is thus, in the full-blown sense, also an affective experience. As a consequence, it occurs at different levels. One might identify oneself with a family, a society, or a nation intensively and intimately, to a greater or lesser extent, and this depends on the group’s degree of salience.

With this in mind, we can tentatively define group identification as an affectively salient experiential relation between oneself and a particular group. It appears that it is the persistent association between group membership and group identification that has favored portraying the latter in terms of a realization. Distinguishing the two concepts, and emphasizing that objective membership is not presupposed, enables an analysis of group identification as a dynamic pursuit.

2. The dual target of group identification

In its intransitive structure, identification establishes a relationship between oneself, on the one hand, and the target of identification, on the other. In individual-directed cases, the target is usually unambiguous. Saying that a child identifies with her caregiver is to say that the child wants to be (like) the caregiver; to say that a reader identifies with a character of the novel is to say that she fantasizes being that character; and so on. In the case of groups, the issue is more complicated. Saying that someone identifies with 'a religious congregation', or with 'academia', with a 'community of researchers', with 'the Labor Union', with one's 'company', etc. does not literally suggest an identity or similarity relation between oneself and the institution in question (cf. Tuomela 2016, 270). In this respect, "identifying with a group" must be understood as a figurative expression.

At this point our eyes naturally turn towards individual group members. Group identification clearly does not target just any group member, but nor does it target all of them. Saying that individual researchers passionately identify with academia does not mean that they feel they have lots in common with either lazy professors or bureaucracy-oriented administrative staff, even these are members of academia too. Equally, a religious person identifying with a church does not automatically feel attached to the local priest, the press officer of the congregation, or the person using it just to organize her wedding. Commitment and membership do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, and group identification selectively targets the group-committed members.

In fact, targeting group members is selective in two further senses. (i) People commonly host several intersecting social identities, or "multiple 'selves', corresponding to their memberships in various groups" (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Self and Chatman 2010, 413; Bacharach 2006, 74). While our "work self", "family self", or "football fan self" becomes affectively salient, our other social identities recede to the background, but they do not altogether disappear. In this sense even the committed group members are targeted selectively: their other social features are overlooked and they are considered solely as members of this or that group. For example, identifying with a certain political way of thinking targets the other individual thinkers exclusively as representatives of this way of thinking, thus overlooking the individual's marital and occupational status, city of residence, socioeconomic class etc. (ii) Moreover, people "implement" their group membership differently and manifest group member typicalities in different ways, levels and domains. Besides further social roles, therefore, group identification also overlooks irrelevant peculiarities in the target members' group membership (e.g., their partial deficiencies, unique stylistic features, and so on). For instance, a person might identify with a certain political way of thinking (X), without comprehensively identifying with any of the individual ways of bringing it about (X_1 , X_2 , X_3 , [...]). In this case, one selectively targets the specifically

typical way of thinking, and accordingly considers the individual tokens (X_1 , X_2 , X_3 , [...]) in the light of the type (X).

More generally put, in group identification group member tokens are targeted selectively, insofar as they manifest group member typicalities. Group identification is therefore irreducible to what I termed above "member-directed identification". On the other hand, typical member features are only introduced or instantiated in and through the individual tokens, and member-directed identification is thus an inseparable ingredient in group identification. Differently put, member-directed identification is necessary but not sufficient for group identification.

On the other hand, given the structural necessity of member-directed identification, group identification is bound to be and remain "perspectival" in nature. What matters is not only the ultimate target of identification, but also the route to the target. Individuals identify with the one and the same group differently depending on the members or subgroups through which this happens. For example, when thinking of "philosophers", we necessarily have particular exemplars or subgroups of them in mind (e.g., Aristotle, Wittgenstein, Beauvoir, Husserl, Butler, the phenomenologists, the philosophers of language, post-structuralists, and so on), and this significantly colors our grasp of "philosophers" and hence our identification with them. To give another example, the group of "Europeans" is viewed rather differently depending on whether you are from Greece, Great Britain, or Finland.

Accordingly, group identification has a dual structure: it targets both the group member type and the actual individual member tokens. On the one hand, individuals serve as relevant targets in group identification, only in so far as they demonstrate typical member attributes, and hence they are viewed in light of the type that they instantiate to greater or lesser degrees, in this or that respect, and so on (see Hogg 2010, 802; cf. Taipale 2016a). On the other hand, the type is targeted in and through the individuals, and this always colors one's grasp of the type in question (e.g., "a philosopher", "a European", etc.). That is to say, group identification is not just selective but also "perspectival" in nature.

Finally, besides being selective and perspectival in the above senses, group identification is characterized by idealization. While none of the group member tokens exhaust the group member type, grasping the latter is only enabled and facilitated by highlighting typical features which are only "imperfectly" demonstrated in the actual tokens. In this manner, the perspectival nature of group identification also leaves room for imagination and fantasy. It seems reasonable to assume that the less actual tokens there are available for group identification, the more elements are smuggled in from imagination and fantasy.

These considerations serve to clarify the sense in which group identification is a figurative expression, and enable us to define group identification in greater detail as the individual's affectively salient experiential relation to the actual group member tokens and the group member type. The dual target model, as introduced here, thus enables us to resolve the second ambiguity in defining

identification – between similarity and identity. Group identification allows for both: with the group member type, there is (pursuit for) identity, and with the group member tokens, there is (realization of) similarity. This will be clarified below.

3. Balancing between individuality and social conformity

- Brian: “You've got to think for yourselves! You're all individuals!”
 - Crowd (in unison): “Yes! We're all individuals!”
 - Brian: “You're all different!”
 - Crowd (in unison): “Yes, we are all different!”
- Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979)

Group identification either plays down or highlights, but always includes member-directed identification. The different weight assigned to each of the target poles of group identification – namely, the member type and the member tokens – is a matter of degree. In this regard, a lot depends on the nature and structure of the group in question, and not just the personality of the identifying individual (see Johnson et al. 2012). In rigorous-normative units, like the military, the role of member-directed identification is kept to a minimum by a rigorous code of conduct, a uniform external appearance, and so on. Consequently, a typical soldier is anonymous, no one in particular, and hence easily replaceable. By contrast, in extremely hierarchical totalitarian systems, the type may take the form of an actual individual (usually the leader), who stands out as a kind of prototype against the background of the group, inherits the features of the member type, and hence tends to be more or less glorified, idealized, or even considered divine. In more democratic social units, by contrast, people are encouraged to find their own way of doing things within relatively loose normative boundaries: while member-directed identifications are thus reserved a bigger share, the member type is likewise more heterogeneous and rich, thus allowing greater variation among the individual members (see also Jans et al. 2011).

Most commentators agree that in group identification, the terms of self-reference more or less shift from “I” to “we” (e.g., Kelman 1961, 63; Brewer and Gardner 1996, 87; Fisher and Wakefield 1998, 24; Bacharach 1999, 134; Hindriks 2012, 207). This is another way of saying that group identification involves a sense of collectivity (Pacherie 2013, 1834). When it comes to the details, however, the available literature hosts a large variety of accounts. Roughly put, two basic views dominate the discussion, individualist accounts where the “we” is subordinated to the “I”, and collectivist accounts where the opposite applies. In light of the twofold model for group identification introduced in the preceding section, these two – namely, I/we differentiation and I/we undifferentiation – can be viewed as being at opposite ends of a continuum. Group identification is thus a matter of balancing somewhere between the two extremes.

The individualist end considers group identification in terms of the in-group becoming part of an individual's self-representation (Smith et al. 2007, 431); in terms of the self seeing itself as a distinct individual influenced by the group (Sugden 2000, 184; Self and Chatman 2010, 413; Ellemers 2010, 798); or as an extension of the self beyond the individual level (Brewer 1991, 476). Meanwhile, in "we"-experiences, despite various nuances, the "I" is considered as a differentiated center (see Hobson 2002, 105, 108, 180).⁴ While emphasizing differentiation between oneself and the other members, individualists therefore tend to view group identification as a similarity relation.

The collectivist end in contrast suggests that proper we-experiences obliterate or at least silence individuality, hence challenging or even undoing differentiation between the self and group. There are levels to this. Turner claims that "social identity is sometimes able to function to the relative exclusion of personal identity", so that "we perceive ourselves primarily or solely in terms of our relevant group memberships rather than as differentiated, unique persons" (Turner 1984, 527). Meanwhile, Self and Chatman have claimed that "increasing the salience of in-group membership causes a depersonalization of the self, which refers to perceiving oneself as an interchangeable exemplar of a social category" (Self and Chatman 2010, 413; cf. Brewer 1991, 477). When a particular social identity becomes salient, Brewer claims, "the collective self dominates the individuated self" (Brewer 1991, 479). The claim is that the first-person perspective is replaced by a first-person plural (see, e.g., Konzelmann Ziv and Schmid, 7-8). In the collectivist account (e.g., in Bacharach, group identification makes the individual's "self-conception" into "a component part of the group" (Bacharach 1999, 134), thus portraying group identification in terms of an identity relation.

The claim is that I understand myself as being not just similar in varying degrees to the other group members, thus experientially holding on to my personal identity, but that I see myself primarily as a member of the group, thus defining myself emphatically in terms of it.

In attempting to reconcile these two ends, Brewer's account is helpful. She claims that group identification is motivated by both the need to belong to a group and the need to distinguish oneself from others: "social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)" (Brewer 1991, 477). In Brewer's account, social identity is viewed as a "reconciliation" of, or "compromise" between, the opposing forces of "assimilation and differentiation from others" (Brewer 1999, 475, 477, 480); she seeks to explain how group identification is a matter of finding a balance between the two, a state of equilibrium that she calls "optimal distinctiveness" (Brewer 1991, 478; cf. Jetten et al. 2001b). The more comfortable we are with the balance between differentiation and assimilation,

⁴ In methodological terms, Tuomela defines individualism as a "social ontology consist[ing] solely of the activities and properties (including mental activities and properties) and interactions (including mental interactions and relations) between individuals" (Tuomela 2016, 10).

both of which have their benefits, the more strongly we identify with the group in question: “[s]ocial identification will be strongest for social groups or categories at that level of inclusiveness which resolves the conflict between needs for differentiation of the self and assimilation with others” (Brewer 1991, 478).

In general, whereas individuation and differentiation increase multiplicity and polyphony, assimilation and depersonalization generate conformity (Hogg 2010, 802) and increase one’s perceived similarity to other group members (Zdaniuk and Levine 2001, 503; cf. Stoel et al. 2004, 169). Excesses are possible in both directions. In general, extremely large and heterogeneous communities do not so easily hold together because they are already harder to represent as unitary entities (see Ellemers 1997; Castano et al. 2003; Hogg, et al. 2007; cf. Salice and Taipale 2015). Very small and homogeneous communities, again, tend to hold together by emphasizing rather than playing down the similarities between members, thus sharply delineating group identity and excluding those who differ from the detailed norm (cf. Wright et al. 1986). Moreover, while group identification is known to promote the members’ devotion to collective tasks (Tajfel and Turner 2004 [1986], 382; cf. van Zomeren et al. 2010), recent empirical studies have suggested that the group may also be emphasized at the expense of individual motivation. Gockel and colleagues, for instance, have linked a sense of individual “indispensability” with the “level of effort” in joint tasks, and suggested that the more the individual member feels replaceable, the less effort he or she tends to put into a collective project at hand (Gockel et al. 2008). To be sure, personal preferences are also a factor in this respect: some people feel more comfortable in groups where they can more comprehensively lose themselves, whereas some other people prefer groups in which their individuality may be emphasized. Sometimes strong group identification may also be indicative of individual insecurity (see Hogg et al. 2007; Grant and Hogg 2012). Spears and colleagues, for instance, have argued that underlining one’s similarity with other group members, i.e., self-stereotyping, may sometimes be understood in terms of a psychological defense triggered by a threatening situation (see Spears et al. 1997) – for example, consider how people sometimes refer to the group, i.e., “everyone”, when being blamed or accused.

Brewer’s interests lie elsewhere, but her account is nonetheless useful for our purposes. Her suggested search for equilibrium between differentiation and undifferentiation handily corresponds with the distinction between group identification as an identity relation and group identification as a similarity relation. Both are structurally involved in group identification. With group member tokens, we pursue not identity but similarity, thus maintaining our individual identity and the I/we differentiation, whereas with member type, we pursue identity. In other words, we want to belong to a group, but we do not want to be equated with any one group member. In optimal cases, our group identifications “allow us to be the same and different at the same time” (Brewer 1991, 477).

With these considerations in mind, we have thus described a scale between “individualistic” and “collectivistic” group identifications. In this respect, the task

of communal life becomes a matter of emphasis rather than choice: to find the right balance somewhere between differentiation and undifferentiation.

This also sheds light on the third ambiguity in the concept of identification – between pursuit and realization. With the member type, identification is a never-ending task, rather than something that can be finished. In other words, one never realizes that one is already identical with the type in all instances. With actual members, however, group identification seems to require that at least some degree of similarity has already been established – it seems counter-intuitive that one could be identifying with a group without readily finding oneself to be, in some respect or degree, similar to the other members of that group. Whereas in relation to the member type, identification is an aim, in relation to the actual member(s), identification is necessarily realization. In this fashion, the account proposed here reconciles individualist and collectivist accounts of group identification.

Conclusions

What has been suggested in this article can be summarized by looking at the dual targets of group identification in terms of the four kinds of identification outlined in the introduction. Thus, with respect to the actual member tokens, group identification refers to the realization of similarity (I³). It would be hard to come up with a case where one could be said to identify with a group without readily finding any kind of similarity whatsoever with anyone in it. With respect to the member type, group identification refers to a pursuit for identity (I²). The pursuit for similarity (I¹) with other members is a kind of by-product of I². When it comes to the realization of identity (I⁴), however, this does not seem to be necessary for group identification – either with respect to member type or individual member tokens. That is, we may “identify” with a member type (and, in this sense, the group) without readily finding ourselves comprehensively representing or even sufficiently exemplifying the member type. Moreover, identity with the group member type is something that must be pursued over and over again, and targeted member typicalities fluctuate along with the fluctuating affective salience of our different memberships. In this respect, what matters is how devoted the aim is, even if in the end the goal is never fully reached.

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