Intergroup Cognition

YARROW DUNHAM
Yale University, United States

The study of groups has a long history within the psychological sciences, reflecting the intuition that the natural ecologies within which humans exist are in large part social and cultural. Indeed, the variety of social distinctions our species uses to divide the social world far outstrips what is seen in any other species, with each individual belonging at once to dozens of social groups. Due to the large number of influential early researchers who came of age in the aftermath of World War II, group polarization, prejudice, and intergroup hostility have been major foci. Other well-traveled topics include the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves via their membership in social groups and how groups become the locus of cooperation and other forms of normative behavior. The breadth and depth of research in this area precludes easy characterization and the present review will be thematic rather than thorough, using the lens of intergroup bias (i.e., the tendency to positively or negatively evaluate social groups) as an organizing tool. For a more comprehensive treatment, access the original sources cited throughout this entry and see the list of other related entries in this volume.

A categorization perspective

Intergroup cognition only arises when we begin to sort individuals into kinds. It follows that the psychology of intergroup cognition is parasitic on the psychology of categorization, a psychology we deploy with respect to nearly everything in our world, social and nonsocial alike. Categories can be thought of as primary constituents of mental life, atoms from which communication and culture are composed. Their power lies in downplaying superficial variation while emphasizing the causal or functional roles we deem vital. The category *chair*, for example, is useful precisely

because it is silent about many details—plastic or wood, three legs or four—but loud about function—useful for sitting on. Understanding categorization requires focusing on two complementary questions: First, what features are used to pick out category members; that is, what properties must an entity have for me to conclude that it is a chair? Second, once I know that the object in the next room falls under a particular category, what do I think this entails; that is, what features do I expect it to have? These questions are not as symmetrical as they first appear: we have no trouble identifying a mid-century modern clear plastic wave as a chair but would be unlikely to expect a chair we have not yet seen to possess those idiosyncratic features. These same considerations arise for social categories. Consider an ethnic category widely identified in my society. How do I decide if someone belongs to this group? Do I attend to dress, adornment, accent? And if I know that someone belongs to this group, what else do I think is true of them?

Focusing on categorization reminds us that some notable features of social categories are derived from the fact that they are *categories*, not from the fact that they are *social*. A central example is the tendency to underestimate variety within social groups ("they are all the same!") and the parallel tendency to overestimate the differences between social groups ("they are very different from us!"). While real and robust, these phenomena appear just as reliably in completely nonsocial contexts, when the entities being categorized are not people at all, but rather stimuli such as lengths of lines arbitrarily divided into a set of longer and shorter lengths. In such cases, perceivers learning the category boundary begin to recall lines belonging to different sets to be more different in length than they are and lines belonging to the same set to be more similar than they are. Thus, some of the most important consequences of carving the world into kinds are not social in origin, though of course they might play out in particularly problematic ways in the social domain.

Thinking in terms of categories also reminds us that things could have been different: for every seemingly meaningful feature we use to

categorize others, there are numerous equally meaningful features we do not use. For example, skin color is frequently meaningful as a marker of social difference in the United States but height or hair color is not. It is not obvious that skin color is *in fact* or *intrinsically* more diagnostic of important differences than these other dimensions and the genetics of racial variation show that contemporary racial categories are more cultural than biological. Further complicating matters, no individual belongs to *just one* social category; rather, they belong to many, dozens even. This multiplicity implicates another level of choice: which of those myriad identities will I focus on in a given moment? The answer to this question will have important consequences for how I see the person in question because there is abundant evidence that the categories I deploy affect how I interpret events in the world. For example, perceivers frequently see the same actions in different ways when performed by bodies that are gendered or racialized in particular ways. Certain gestures are perceived by many Americans as more furtive, suspicious, or hostile when performed by bodies classified as *black* and *male*; certain behaviors appear more vigorous versus graceful when performed by bodies classified as *male* versus *female*. These effects can be particularly pernicious because the process of seeing others *as* members of social categories frequently occurs outside of conscious awareness, subtly structuring how we make sense of the social world.

Social identity and the roots of intergroup bias

Within the universe of categories, why are we so drawn to categories of people? The obvious if initially unsatisfying answer is that we care because they are *about us*. From this simple observation influential theories of social identity have arisen, in which group memberships are or can be means of defining and bolstering the self. In describing group membership in this way, an account of ingroup bias (i.e., the tendency to prefer the group to which one belongs) also begins to emerge.

Any consideration of our general orientation toward groups must begin with a hugely influential body of work suggesting that the tendency to prefer groups to which we belong springs into existence from the most humble of origins. In what has come to be called the "minimal group" effect, researchers have shown that ingroup preference emerges even when individuals are placed into previously unfamiliar and arbitrary social groups, such as those based on preference in art, tendency to over- or underestimate dot arrays or even random assignment (Mullen, Brown, and Smith 1992). This implies that many factors thought critical to the emergence of intergroup bias, such as competition, unequal status, or specific cultural input, are strictly speaking not necessary for its formation. Thus, the striking tendency for young children to manifest ingroup bias with respect to race, nationality, and so on (reviewed in Raabe and Beelmann 2011) does not necessarily require a rich learning-based account. Indeed, the tendency to prefer arbitrarily assigned groups is robustly in place by the age of five and children in minimal groups also tend to remember more ingroup-favoring information and to construe ambiguous situations in ways that favor the ingroup. Taken together, a picture emerges in which children seize on whatever social distinctions they come across and begin to generate ingroup bias in earnest, even absent any specifically biasing input.

The minimal group effect provides a compelling origin story for intergroup bias, suggesting that the role of social learning is limited. Prominent theories seeking to clarify our proclivity toward ingroup bias argue that individuals are highly motivated to enhance and positively construe the self and they see membership in groups as a means by which to do so (most prominently, *social identity theory*: Ellemers and Haslam 2011). This leads individuals to seek out or emphasize membership in socially favored groups but also to focus attention on or even fabricate positive aspects of their existing group memberships (including experimenter-imposed minimal groups). In short, inflating the worth of ingroups bolsters the self. Another class of theories runs the causal arrow in the other direction. Rather than suggesting that positivity associated with the group gets transferred to the self, these theories begin with the observation that most individuals have a highly, even unrealistically, positive

view of themselves, revealed by (for example) overestimating their skills or preferring the letters in their own names (reviewed in Greenwald and Banaji 1995). When an individual learns that they belong to a particular social group, self-related positivity might spread quite naturally to that group. In short, an already inflated self bolsters the worth of ingroups. In fact, there is evidence consistent with both of these processes.

The pervasive nature of ingroup bias can also be placed in the context of a major shift in social–psychological research over recent decades. Prior developments in the science of memory revealed that previously encountered information could have an impact on cognition and behavior even when the information could not be consciously recalled. In the social domain, researchers wondered if self-reports of group attitudes might be missing an important if subtle dimension of intergroup cognition. Might respondents be self-censoring or, more profoundly, be unaware of a dimension of their own group attitudes (Greenwald and Banaji 1995)? If so, cultural portrayals of groups might leave a subtle but important trace on how groups are conceived, of which the respondents themselves might be unaware. Researchers have developed a number of tasks to explore this possibility. For example, priming tasks ask if exposure to stimuli representing ingroup or outgroup members facilitate faster responding to positive and negative words, respectively. Other tasks use categorization speed to measure subtle evaluative associations between concepts. In one widely used measure (the implicit association test [IAT]; demonstration site: https//implicit.harvard.edu), participants rapidly categorize four kinds of stimuli using only two response keys. In one block, ingroup faces and positive words share one response key while outgroup faces and negative words share the other. In a second block, the pairings are reversed such that ingroup faces share a response key with negative words and outgroup faces with positive words. The logic of the task is that responses will generally be faster when a positively evaluated group (usually an ingroup) shares a response with positive words. The upshot of research in this area is that asking participants to report their intergroup attitudes or stereotypes cannot be taken to exhaust the attitudes and stereotypes they actually hold and

that a large number of individuals who claim not to hold prejudice show evidence of this more implicit form of intergroup bias (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). These implicit forms of ingroup bias also appear in minimal group settings, suggesting that it too can be considered a basic consequence of social identity.

Dimensions of variability

While ingroup bias might have a claim to being a statistical universal true of most humans in most settings, it is also widely variable across many levels of analysis. Some individuals are more biased than others or biased toward some groups but not others; some entire groups manifest more or less bias toward some other groups; and some cultures carve up the space of groups, and the evaluations associated with them, in different ways. Accounting for this variability remains a major focus of much research in intergroup cognition.

Individual variability

The perspectives already discussed begin to offer an explanation for variation at the level of the individual. For example, individual differences in the need to self-enhance, or in the extent to which the self is positively evaluated, do predict levels of intergroup bias. But another class of theories places individual variation front and center, considering bias an outgrowth of personality. Perhaps the first modern elaboration of this idea is the *authoritarian personality*. Originally framed in psychodynamic terms, allegiance to strict group hierarchies and derogation of other groups was considered a means of resolving intrapsychic conflict by imposing a rigid stability on the external world. While this interpretation has waned in popularity along with its Freudian foundation, the broader notion of personality types given to greater prejudice remains current. For example, *social dominance orientation* (SDO: Sidanius and Pratto 2011) refers to an individual's tendency to prefer hierarchical systems and to seek out power and domination over others; individuals high in SDO generally express more prejudice. Relatedly, individuals may vary in their need to believe the world orderly and just. Preserving

the belief that the world is just requires believing that social inequities reflect just desserts; thus individuals high in this tendency might be more inclined to internalize intergroup status hierarchies. In a more existential spin on this general idea, another view suggests that fear of death represents the ultimate uncertainty, which belief in a just and well-ordered society offers a hedge against (Greenberg and Arndt 2011). These views represent forms of motivated social cognition in which individuals seek to defend a view of the world that they find psychologically palliative.

Variability between groups and contexts

By emphasizing social inequities and how they are understood or defended, some theories of individual variation also provide a critical reminder that intergroup phenomena do not exclusively reside "in the head." Groups and group-based inequities have material reality and their hierarchical arrangements structure many aspects of social life. But the preceding accounts still say little about how that external reality affects the emergence and unfolding of intergroup bias. Realistic conflict theories (e.g., Stephan and Mealy 2011), as their name implies, focus on the real or perceived presence of material conflict, generally over scarce resources. Competition, for example, generally increases intergroup bias and can transform outgroup *neutrality* to outgroup *negativity*. Theoretical extensions have focused on incorporating not just *material* but also *symbolic* threats, usually challenges to a group's core values, or have sought to place conflict in the context of intergroup hierarchies (Stephan and Mealy 2011).

Social and material inequality also raises the question of between-group variability in intergroup cognition and in particular how it varies as one travels up or down a status hierarchy. In this light the critical observation is that among the group attitudes of individuals who occupy lower status social positions, such as racial or sexual minorities in the United States, black or colored individuals in South Africa, and lower caste individuals in India, intergroup bias frequently does not emerge or in some cases emerges in the form of preference for the higher-status *outgroup*. In general, as status disparities grow stronger, members of disadvantaged groups grow less likely

to manifest ingroup positivity. A straightforward interpretation of this pattern is that negative cultural portrayals of their group reduce the positivity they would otherwise associate with their ingroup and work with children suggests that this occurs quite early, perhaps as young as the age of three (Dunham and Olson 2008). A critical question emerging in the wake of these findings is what cues children are drawing on to form representations of their own group's social status. One emerging suggestion is that children use cues denoting economic status and positively evaluate groups associated with greater wealth. It would be fascinating to determine whether status cues of other sorts, such as those that are more common outside contemporary Western cultures, also exert these early effects.

Cross-cultural and developmental perspectives

A final key element of variation occurs across cultures, which construct the social order out of different social categories entirely and may also reason about groups in different ways. As already seen, work on the relationship between social status and intergroup attitudes has incorporated data from multiple cultural settings and represents one attempt to capture cultural variation. But perhaps the more pressing question is whether theories that were generally developed to account for race attitudes in North America can reliably be extended to other cultural settings. While space precludes detailed treatment here, one prominent debate has centered on whether self-enhancement can be a viable general origin of intergroup bias given evidence that "interdependent" or "collectivist" individuals such as East Asians self-enhance considerably less but show equal or perhaps even greater degrees of ingroup favoritism. Other notable work has sought macrolevel cultural correlates of intergroup bias such as the strength of social institutions (which could reduce the need to rely on group affiliation). Despite these few areas of work, however, investigation of cultural variation in intergroup cognition is still at an early stage.

A quite different approach to cultural variation, or at least to *enculturation*, is provided by developmental research. How does the cultural raw

material a child encounters interact with basic learning processes to produce adult-like intergroup cognition? For many developmentalists, the question is *how constrained* the learning process is: Do children simply absorb their culture's values in a sponge-like manner? Or do they transform the input in particular ways, leading particular forms of group cognition to emerge with greater regularity than they might otherwise (Dunham and Olson 2008)? Supporting the latter view, children appear to hold some basic assumptions about how groups function. For example, they expect members of the same groups to preferentially interact and expect individuals to avoid directing negative behavior at ingroup members (Rhodes 2012). Further, they also expect intergroup interactions to deteriorate under conditions of resource scarcity or competition (Rhodes 2012). Another oft-discussed aspect of early intergroup cognition is *essentialism*—that is, the belief that group differences are underwritten by an invisible but causally powerful essence that predicts numerous observed and unobserved similarities among category members. Such psychological essentialism is usually examined by assessing whether children expect category membership to be enduring, unchangeable, and hereditary. Interestingly, children do not essentialize all social categories but, rather, are sensitive to features of the groups themselves as well as patterns of adult input that signal special status. For example, Western children essentialize gender more than race and race more than occupation, which some have interpreted as evidence that children reason about social kinds by analogy to biological kinds (Hirschfeld 1998). Further, there is evidence that children essentialize at least some social groups even if their cultural elders do not, suggesting they are not merely imitating adult conceptions, though some specific forms of linguistic input appear to trigger essentialist construals of groups. Taken together, these tendencies can be interpreted as a *naive sociology* that characterizes early social cognition and serves as the child's attempt to identify the most meaningful or "deepest" social distinctions in their cultural milieu (Hirschfeld 1998).

Lurking in the background of this discussion is the question of whether social categories are intrinsically equal prior to being emphasized or privileged in a given culture or if some kinds of social categories are special—for example, because they are supported by specialized, presumably evolved, cognitive machinery. This suggestion has most frequently been made about biological sex because of its role in sexual reproduction (Sidanius and Pratto 2011). Others have suggested a privileged role for kinship on similar grounds and for age as well as language or accent because those distinctions were plausibly present across human history and so could have served as stable factors over which selection could have operated. While there is no clear consensus on these questions, the framing of the problem as an effort to distinguish "arbitrary" from "natural" social categories parallels other work in the cognitive sciences which seeks to uncover natural structure in the child's attempts to generate rational models of a complex external world. In any case it is clear that, given their variability across history and culture, the vast majority of social categories are cultural constructions.

From groups to norms

As life unfolds in small collectives, numerous behavioral routines will emerge and develop, constituting the conventional aspects of everyday life. How is food prepared? How does one dress? How do men and women interact? An individual growing up in a given culture tacitly internalizes a host of such cultural norms and they become the familiar and comfortable backdrop against which life exists. Further, young children frequently consider cultural norms and rituals not merely descriptive but actively proscriptive; that is, as having normative force as what one *ought to do* and merely engaging in shared novel rituals can enhance ingroup preference. These tendencies plausibly support intergroup bias by painting conventional ingroup actions as laudable and, at least where those conventions diverge, painting outgroup actions as blameworthy. Thus, considering groups as containers of normative behavior offers insight into how familiarity and proximity produce similarity, which can in turn drive preferences.

A norm-focused perspective also offers a window into a related topic of cooperation. Individuals will typically be more comfortable

interacting with those with whom they share norms and perhaps also be better able to identify reliable partners by accurately interpreting past patterns of behavior and other reputational cues. Thus, shared group membership might come to serve as a heuristic cue to a cooperative partner, shifting the calculus of cooperation and defection in risky economic games such as those modeled by prisoners' dilemmas or public goods games in which long-term payoffs are heightened by cooperation (sometimes referred to as "tag-based" cooperation). On this picture, groups move from containers for norms to containers for generalized reciprocity (Yamagishi and Kiyonari 2000). This special role for shared norms and cooperation within the group also dovetails with theories that assume the human ancestral past to be warlike and therefore that group cohesion would be a critical element of survival.

Conclusion

Research on intergroup cognition is broad and deep enough to resist easy characterization. This entry has used the tendency to prefer ingroups as an organizing framework because our species seems inexorably given to not just *form* social categories but to render them deeply *evaluative.* This "first fact" of human intergroup cognition is a pillar that supports much of intergroup cognition, from our tendency to preferentially interact with, learn from, and cooperate with those we consider an "us" over those we consider a "them."

SEE ALSO: <DRAFT: Social Categories>; Race and Racisms; Categories and Taxonomies; Genocide; Interethnic Friction; Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and Transnationalism; Transnationalism; Purity, Pollution, and Systems of Classification; Intergroup Conflict; Gender, Nationalism, and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

Intergroup cognition has been among the central topics of social psychology since its inception and research has recently surged in allied fields such as developmental and cognitive psychology. Cognitive anthropology has also offered unique contributions, especially by drawing attention to commonalities as well as differences across cultural settings. This review places the study of intergroup cognition within a broader categorization framework, asking how categorical thinking about people affects social judgment and interaction. The ease with which intergroup bias emerges, its close connection to intergroup status hierarchies, the many dimensions along which intergroup bias varies (between individuals, groups, and cultures), and the connection between groups and norms are highlighted.

KEYWORDS

cognition; cognitive anthropology; cognitive science; intergroup cognition