

**When other people are heaven, when other people are hell:
How social identity determines the nature and impact of social support**

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When other people are heaven, when other people are hell:

How social identity determines the nature and impact of social support

In the 2009 movie *Up in the Air* George Clooney plays the part of Ryan Bingham, a corporate consultant who is hired to fly around the United States firing company employees whose bosses “don’t have the balls” to do this themselves (Reitman & Turner, 2009, p.13). The film opens with scenes of Bingham reeling off a tried and trusted patter that takes a steady stream of workers through the process of being “let go”. They all react differently (with tears, anger, shock, horror) but in every case their distress is palpable. Bingham by contrast, is measured and unflappable. He is in control and above it all. The scenes are all the more arresting because many of the people seen in the film are not professional actors but ordinary people reliving recent personal experiences of being fired.

We are given some insight into the philosophical basis for Bingham’s equanimity through work he does on the side as a sought-after motivational speaker. In this role his trademark presentation “What’s in your backpack?” invites the audience to set themselves free from the material trappings of domestic life (the contents of the metaphorical backpack) in order to make way for a life of unencumbered freedom:

Imagine for a second that you’re carrying a backpack. I want you to *feel* the straps on your shoulders... You feel them? Now I want you to pack it with all the stuff you have in your life.... This is what we do to ourselves on a daily basis. We weigh ourselves down until we can’t even move... Now I’m going to set your backpack on fire.... Let everything burn and imagine waking up tomorrow with nothing. It’s kind of exhilarating isn’t it? That is how I approach everyday.

(Reitman & Turner, 2009, pp.1-2)

As the film progresses, so does Bingham’s philosophy—to the point where he identifies life’s core problem to be people rather than possessions:

Okay. This is where it starts to get a little difficult, but stay with me. You have a new backpack, but this time, I want you to fill it with people. Start with casual acquaintances and work your way to the people you trust with your most intimate secrets. Now move on to family members... And finally your husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend. Get them in there too.... Feel the weight of that bag. Make no mistake, your relationships are the heaviest components of your life. Feel the straps cutting into your shoulders. All those negotiations and arguments and secrets and compromises. Now set that bag down. You don't need to carry all that weight. Some animals were meant to carry each other, to live symbiotically over a life time.... We are not one of those animals.

(Reitman & Turner, p.54-55)

This rather depressing analysis is taken one step further by Jean Paul Sartre in his play *Huis Clos (In camera)*, written at the height of Nazi tyranny in Europe. Sartre, it seems, is suggesting not only that we have no need for others, not only that others drag us down, but also that others are the definitive source of misery in our lives. The three key characters in the play have all recently died and gone to hell. On arrival, they search in vain for the instruments of torture that they anticipate being subjected to. Over time, however, the characters become tormenters of each other. At the very end of the play, one of the triad, Joseph Garcin, thus comes to the realization that is not “the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, ‘the burning marl’” they have to fear. No, “hell is ... other people” (“l'enfer ... c'est les autres”; Sartre, 1944, p.191).

But surely these claims are overblown. It may be possible to find cases where people compound rather than relieve our misery (see, for instance, Kellezi & Reicher, this volume), where they fail to give us support, where the support they do give is unwanted or even corrosive, or else where the process of providing support is factious and fraught with misunderstanding. But isn't it still fundamentally the case that we are social animals who require and revel in interactions with others? If we are looking for an accurate expression of this in our culture, isn't it found less in Ryan Bingham or Joseph Garcin than in lines from the famous Civil Rights song ‘Eyes on the Prize’:

The only chain that a man can stand
Is the chain of hand in hand!

So are other people heaven or hell? In more sober, scientific and specific terms, do others generally improve or harm our well-being? What does the evidence tell us?

To assess such issues systematically, Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) conducted a meta-analysis looking at the relationship between social support and measures of health and coping in 88 studies involving over 60,000 participants. The majority of studies revealed positive correlations between these variables ($0 < r < .43$) suggesting that support is associated with improved health. However, as Ryan Bingham might have predicted, as sizeable minority (16%) also uncovered negative correlations, suggesting the opposite ($0 < r < -.17$). This analysis also revealed two further facts: first, that the mean effect size was only quite small ($r=.07$), second, that the majority of effects were close to zero (only 21% were stronger than $\pm .10$).

Schwarzer and Leppin also note that even in the most influential and highly-cited studies that investigate this relationship, the strength of statistical association between support and health tends only to be weak. This is true, for example, of Berkman and Syme's (1979; see Sani, this volume) well-known epidemiological study of the relationship between social integration and mortality (in which it is estimated that $r=-.07$). On the basis of another careful review, Cohen and Syme (1985) thus conclude:

One of the attractive aspects of studying the role of social support in health and health maintenance is its seemingly magic-bullet-like quality. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, this simplicity is more illusion than reality.

(p.9)

For the purposes of the present volume, this might appear to be something of a blow. One interpretation of the findings is that other people are neither heaven or hell. They simply don't matter very much to our well-being. But another, more interesting, possibility is that they do matter very much, but sometimes positively and sometimes negatively—so that, when different

people in different circumstances are lumped together, many positives are cancelled out by negatives thereby concealing their contribution. It is this latter possibility that we explore in this chapter. But such a position does little to clarify our understanding unless we are also in a position to specify what conditions are responsible for these different outcomes. That is, what are the variables that moderate the effect of others on our own well-being?

In attempting to answer this question, our analysis will draw heavily on principles of social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994) and on recent theorizing which applies their insights to issues of health and well-being (e.g., Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009a, 2009b; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). A key point that this approach alerts us to is that the dynamics of support—i.e., giving, receiving, and interpreting help of various forms—are always structured by the identity-based relationships between those who give and receive it. When (and to the extent that) these relationships are grounded in, or help to build, a mutual sense of common group membership (i.e., shared social identity) then support has a greater chance both of being provided and of being effective. Indeed, when parties to the support process share (or come to share) identity, the process can be almost heavenly. However, when they don't—as Bingham and Garcin both anecdotally attest—life can be positively hellish.

Social identity and social support: Theoretical exposition

Definitions and core concepts

Social identity refers to that part of a person's sense of self that is associated with his or her membership in a given social group (Tajfel, 1972). One's social identity as an academic, for example, is constituted by an internalized sense that one is part of a community of academics, and it is a basis for seeing other academics not as "them" but as "us" (i.e., as part of a

psychological *ingroup* or *social self-category*). The notion of internalization is important here, and serves to differentiate the psychological group from sociological notions of a person's reference group. In sociological terms, a person might be deemed to be a member of a group (e.g., an academic, an Australian) by virtue of externally defined properties (e.g., the fact that he or she works as a lecturer in a university; the fact that he or she is born or lives in Australia). Psychologically, though, what is important is that the person *categorizes themselves* in these terms, so that the group serves as a basis for perceiving, thinking and acting in the world (Turner, 1982).

Social support refers to acts in which individuals and groups provide resources to others. Those who provide support are often 'significant others' (e.g., family, friends, co-workers; House & Kahn, 1985), but they can also be unknown to the recipients (e.g., as happens in the case of victims of natural disasters, or when help is provided by passing 'bystanders'). Resources can take a range of forms (House, 1981)—including material (e.g., giving money or goods), emotional (e.g., being sympathetic), and informational (e.g., giving advice). Where successful, this results in an individual or group feeling that they are cared for and valued by others, and that they are "part of a network of mutual assistance and obligations" (Taylor, 2007, p.145; see also Wills, 1991). Nevertheless, it is far from the case that social support achieves positive ends simply by virtue of being provided. As we will explore further below, one reason for this is that its impact depends (a) on the motives and goals of providers, and (b) on the interpretation and experience of recipients. These in turn depend upon the nature of the relationship between donors and recipients as well as features of the broader social context within which they are embedded.

On the basis of the above definitions, one might be forgiven for thinking that social identity and social support have little to do with each other. Moreover, for the most part this

conclusion would also be reached by surveying the relevant literatures to which these concepts are central. For researchers who have been interested in the dynamics of social support (particularly those that determine its effectiveness) have tended to stress the importance of sociological variables (e.g., demographic factors such as a person's age, gender and social class; see Thoits, 1995, for a review). And where they have considered psychological factors these have tended to be individual-level variables (e.g., the personality of support recipients; Delongis & Holtzman, 2005).

However, the links between the two start to become apparent once one recognizes, as the above definition implies, that social support is always an aspect of a *relationship* between two (or more) parties, and that its *meaning*—for both provider and recipient—will always depend on the nature of this relationship. Importantly too, social identity theorizing provides a basis for understanding the psychological nature of this relationship and its implications for the experience of giving and receiving social support.

More specifically, self-categorization theory suggests that one of the critical factors which defines the relationship between any two parties is the degree to which they perceive each other as members of the same social category (Turner et al., 1987). Indeed, in this regard, one of the theory's important predictions is that social support will tend to be expressed and experienced much more positively if those who are party to the process define themselves as members of same social self-category (i.e., if they see themselves to share social identity as members of the same ingroup, "us") than if they define themselves in terms of different self-categories (either as members of in-group and out-group, "us" and "them"; or as disconnected individuals, "me" and "you").

Theoretical elaboration and core hypotheses

To understand why and how the nature and experience of social support is structured by patterns of shared social identity, it is necessary to flesh out the underpinnings of the social identity approach in a little more detail. In this regard, two fundamental assumptions of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) are (a) that people are motivated to define the self positively and (b) that there are many contexts in which the self is defined, not in personal terms (as ‘I’ and ‘me’), but in collective terms (as ‘us’ and ‘we’). Self-categorization theorists have sought to specify the nature of these contexts through a formal analysis of *social identity salience* (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). Broadly speaking, their research supports claims that individuals come to define themselves in terms of a given social identity (e.g., as “us Manchester United supporters”; “us Americans”) to the extent that this identity has both historical importance for them (e.g., because they have been members of a given group for a long time) and it is an appropriate way of understanding the self in the situation at hand (e.g., because the identity has been primed, or the environment is one in which there are striking differences between ingroup and outgroup members). Putting these assumptions together, it follows that in those contexts where people do self-categorize, and act, in terms of a particular social identity then (a) they will be motivated to try to achieve positive outcomes for their ingroup, and also (b) they will understand other in-group members—who are not now external to self, but who are defined as *part of the self*—as having an important role to play in this process.

These arguments can in turn be fleshed out in terms of two hypotheses that are central to the present chapter (see also Haslam, 2004) and which are represented schematically in Figure 1. The first is that, when (and to the extent that) a given social identity is salient for perceivers, the process of seeking to advance the interests of their ingroup will motivate them to *provide support* to fellow ingroup members (H1a). Under these conditions they will want to help those recipients

in whatever ways they can because by doing so they are promoting the interests of the collective self (“us”; Turner et al., 1987). As a corollary of this, it follows that individuals are more likely to *be given support* by others with whom they share social identity (H1b).

— Insert Figure 1 about here —

Significant as these outcomes are, bearing in mind that *perceptions* are so central to the support process (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Taylor, 2007), a second, equally important hypothesis is that shared social identity should provide a basis for providers and recipients to *interpret support* in ways that are mutually beneficial. This is the case for a wide range of reasons. One is that a sense of shared social identity provides parties to the support process with a common interpretative framework that facilitates processes of communication and coordination (Haslam, 2004; Postmes, 2003). In effect, this means that those parties have a sense of ‘coming from the same place’ or ‘singing from the same song sheet’. In this way too, shared social identity provides a basis for shared expectations (e.g., as to what level and form of support is appropriate and reasonable) and shared emotion (i.e., empathy), as well as for mutual trust and respect (Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009; Tyler & Blader, 2000). This in turn provides a basis for accommodating the inevitable shortcomings and failings that arise as support is rolled out—as people generally find it far easier to forgive and live with the mistakes of ingroup members than those of outgroups (Wohl & Branscombe, 2006).

A wealth of previous research suggests that these various elements of social relationships—expectation, empathy, communication, trust, accommodation—are all vital to the success of support efforts. Without them it is all too easy for the process to be derailed (e.g., see Taylor, 2007). Accordingly, it is the fact that these elements are all contingent upon the self-

categorization process that makes this process so central to the dynamics of social support. This, then, is the theory, but is there any evidence to support it?

Social identity and social support: Empirical evidence

Experimental evidence

Imagine that you are in a hurry. You are running along, but you trip and fall awkwardly to the ground. You clutch your ankle in agony, and let out a cry of anguish. In this situation, it would certainly be helpful if any passers by were to stop and take the time to see if you were alright and needed any assistance. But would they? This is a question that Levine, Prosser, Evans and Reicher (2005) addressed in a series of experiments that involved precisely this scenario. Critically, though, in order to examine whether people's willingness to provide support to another person varied as a function of that person's status as an ingroup or outgroup member (i.e., H1), this was something that was manipulated experimentally.

The first stage of this process involved selecting as participants individuals who were fans of Manchester United football club and making this social identity salient by asking them questions about their support for the club. After this, for every participant in turn an accident was staged in which a male actor ran in front of them and then tripped, seeming to fall to the ground in agony. The manipulation of shared social identity was then achieved by having this actor wear either a Manchester United shirt, the shirt of a rival team (Liverpool), or a plain shirt. As predicted, the actor's shirt had considerable impact on the level of help that participants extended towards him. When he was wearing a Manchester United shirt (i.e., when he was an ingroup member), the typical response (shown by 92% of participants) involved stopping to ask if he needed help or directly helping him. However, when he was in a Liverpool shirt or a plain shirt, the typical response involved either 'not noticing' the accident or merely glancing in his direction. On average, across these two conditions, only 32% of participants offered any form of

help. The level of support that was provided in this situation was thus very much dependent on the extent to which the two parties to this process shared a salient social identity.

One of self-categorization theory's important assertions, however, is that the nature of the social identities that inform perception and action are not fixed. As noted above, social identity salience is partly determined by historical factors, but also varies as a function of context (Oakes, et al., 1994). This means that sometimes self-categories are defined narrowly and exclusively, but sometimes they are defined more broadly and more inclusively.

To explore this point, and its implications for social support, Levine and colleagues conducted a second experiment, again involving Manchester United fans. This was similar to their first study, but here, prior to being exposed to the person in distress, the experimenters asked participants questions that made their social identity as *football fans* salient (rather than their identity as fans of a particular club). When the actor wore a Manchester United shirt or a plain shirt, responses were very similar to those in the first experiment (80% of participants offered help in the former case, but only 22% did in the latter). Now, though, the support given to the actor in a Liverpool shirt was elevated to the same level as that given to the one wearing the Manchester United shirt. Thus where in Experiment 1 only 30% of participants had offered him help, now 70% did. Here, then, because participants' social identity as a football fan was salient, support was given to all other football fans not just those who supported their own team.

These findings are also consistent with those from programmatic experimental work conducted by Dovidio, Gartner and colleagues (for a review, see Dovidio, Gaertner, Schnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010). To the extent that ingroup social identity is narrowly defined, help will be provided to a relatively select subset of people; however, assistance will be offered more widely when identity is more inclusively defined (i.e., to the extent that people self-categorize at a higher, more abstract level; Turner et al., 1987; see also Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011).

One might object, however, that in Levine et al.'s studies and in other work, the forms of assistance and support that are provided are not those that really matter in society. They are relatively trivial and demand little of those providing support. So do the same processes apply to the forms of social support which (at least potentially) involve serious costs to the donor?

To address this question, Levine and Thompson (2004) looked at British students' intentions to provide financial and political support to victims of floods and earthquakes in Europe and South America. These students were generally more willing to provide support for those victims who were closer to home (i.e., in Europe rather than South America). However, the researchers also showed that this depended upon the specific social identity that was salient for the students. In particular, when the researchers had made respondents' European (rather than British) identity salient, then the tendency to give more support to Europeans than to South Americans was much more pronounced (for related findings, see Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; Drury, this volume).

Experimental evidence thus supports the idea that people are more likely to give support to, and be given support by, those with whom they share common group identity (i.e., H1a, H1b). But is there any evidence that self-categorization affects the perceptions that surround the support process (i.e., H2). Levine and Thompson provide some additional data which begin to address this question. This arose from looking not just at how much aid people indicated they would donate in response to disasters, but also measuring participants' emotional reaction to the disasters in question. So, amongst other things, they asked participants to what extent they were moved, sympathetic, upset and distressed. Responses on these measures followed the same pattern as did those on primary measures of support. The overall pattern of findings thus indicated that people's greater willingness to support members of their (contextually defined) ingroup is associated with greater emotional empathy for their plight, and thus reflects genuine

concern to look after and protect them. Extrapolating from this, it suggests that people might also see the help that they receive from fellow group members as deriving from a genuine sense of care and hence respond to it more favourably.

Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien and Jacobs (2004) conducted a study which speaks more directly to this point. This built upon a paradigm previously used by Lazarus and colleagues to show that the experience of stress depends very much upon the way that people *appraise*—and are encouraged to appraise—a given stressor (a point that is central to the transactional model of stress; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; see also van Dick & Haslam, this volume). For example, watching a film of mutilated bodies is typically less stressful if the viewer is first informed that the film has been made for the purpose of training doctors (Lazarus, 1966). However, in line with H2, we reasoned that the positive impact of such informational support might be attenuated if the person who provided it was a member of an out-group rather than an ingroup.

To test this idea, undergraduate students were asked to perform a task that involved performing a number of demanding mathematical exercises in a limited amount of time. Before doing these exercises, they watched a video-recorded interview in which a woman who had supposedly performed the task previously recounted her experiences for the camera—focusing on how stressful she had found it. In one version of the video she described experiencing a high degree of physical and mental discomfort, and her comments thus primed a negative appraisal of the exercises; however, in a second version her reactions encouraged participants to construe the tasks much more positively (as character-building and challenging).

In addition to this manipulation of informational support, we also manipulated the identity of the person providing that support. Specifically, half of the students who watched the video were led to believe that the woman providing the feedback was a fellow student (i.e., an ingroup member), while the other half were led to believe she was someone suffering from a

stress disorder (an outgroup member). In a subsequent study the support provider's ingroup–outgroup status was manipulated by making the informational source either another woman (an ingroup member) or a man (an outgroup member; see Jetten, Haslam, Iyer, & Haslam, 2010).

After they had watched the video and performed the tasks themselves, participants then indicated how anxious and stressed the tasks had made them. As expected, and consistent with previous work informed by the transactional model of stress, the students reported having been much less stressed when they had found out from the person on the video that the exercises were nothing to worry about. Importantly, though, a pattern of statistical interaction indicated that this was only true when the person providing these words of comfort was understood to be a fellow ingroup member. If support was provided an outgroup member (either a stress sufferer or a man), the message had no impact—presumably because it was no longer trusted or taken at face value.

Archival Evidence

Experimental research of the form discussed in the previous section is useful because it allows us to examine the role that social identity plays in the provision on support in controlled settings and thereby isolate the distinctive impact of this variable. The findings consistently show, not only that there is an effect of the level of shared identity between support provider and support recipient but also that these effects tend to be large (e.g., in the two experiments by Levine et al., 2005, the effect sizes were .59 and .51). Nevertheless, the rational sceptic might ask whether these effects hold up, or are quite so impressive, when they are tested in less contrived settings.

As a starting point for deliberating on this point, it is instructive to reflect on the way in which funding for disaster relief is conditioned by the geographical location of victims relative to donors. At a policy level, it is clearly the case that governments devote a far greater proportion of their budgets to dealing with disasters that occur inside rather than outside their borders.¹ Of

course, one might argue that this is to some extent mandated by law, but the pattern is no less evident when aid is discretionary. For example, Muller and Whiteman (2009) recently investigated patterns of philanthropic response to three major disasters amongst the world's top 500 companies. Their analysis showed that companies were more likely to give money, and gave more money, if disasters occurred on 'home' soil. For example, 61% of 214 North American firms gave aid to victims of Hurricane Katrina, but only 23% gave aid to victims of the Kashmiri earthquake; while for 170 European firms corresponding figures were 29% and 16%. This effect was also conditioned by whether the companies in question had a local presence in the affected country: if they did, philanthropy was far more apparent.

Overall, then, it appears that although charity may not end at home, it certainly begins there—noting of course, along with Levine and Thompson (2004), that 'home' varies with identity. It could be our town, our region, our country—and it could be still narrower or still wider—depending upon how we define ourselves. But, by the same token, exactly who we help at home depends upon who we see as belonging to our neighbourhood, town, region, or country. In Nazi Germany, for instance, Jewish people were explicitly rejected from the Nazi's definition of the national ingroup and hence could be treated as legitimate targets for persecution. By contrast, in those countries under Nazi occupation where a definition of national identity which excluded Jews was not widely accepted (e.g., Denmark; see Oliner & Oliner, 1988), Jewish people were much more likely to be protected. Within different countries too, people's willingness to help Jews varied as a function of their own acceptance of particular definitions of national identity.

Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins and Levine (2006) use the example of Bulgaria to drive home this point that there is a link between ingroup inclusion and solidarity. Twice in that country, mass movements thwarted plans to deport the Jewish population to the extermination

camp. Analysis of the key texts that were used to mobilize people (see Todorov, 2001) suggests that a key factor that motivated and made possible these courageous acts of support was the success of efforts to define Jews, not as an outgroup, but instead as an essential part of the national ingroup. Indeed, for the most part, this involved avoiding all references to Jews as a distinct social category (i.e., as “them”)—with political mobilizers preferring instead to identify them as “Bulgaria’s Jews” or “Bulgarian citizens of Jewish origin” or “a national minority” (Reicher et al., 2005, p.58; see also Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011).

In this, the gravest of circumstances, we thus see again that the dynamics of support are bound up with, and predicated upon, perceptions that those who will receive it are not “other” but rather are contained within the boundaries of the psychological ingroup, “us”. Where this is the case, advancing the cause of one’s neighbour never comes at cost to self—for the simple reason that *they are self*.

Supporting the outgroup

Up to this point, our theoretical and empirical considerations have focused largely on the ingroup—showing that there is a greater likelihood that social support will be given, received and taken on board if those who are party to the process perceive themselves to share social identity. As a corollary of this point, in several of the studies we have reviewed it is also clear that those who fall outside the boundaries of the ingroup tend to receive less support and that the interpretation of support across social category boundaries tends to be complicated by lower levels of empathy and trust.

Nevertheless, one might object to these claims by pointing to a range of social contexts in which people *do* provide support to outgroups, and argue that this undermines our general argument. In this regard, the first point to make is that while we assert that shared social identity provides a cognitive and motivational basis for successful support efforts, we are not suggesting

that support will only ever be offered to ingroup members. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that there may be a range of *strategic* reasons why ingroups will want to support outgroups. In particular, this may be a way of increasing ingroup influence and of demonstrating the ingroup's power over outgroups (van Leeuwen & Tauber, 2010). It may also be a way of repairing the reputation of the ingroup in the eyes of outgroups. Proof of this point comes from a study that Hopkins, Reicher, Cassidy, Bull and Levine (2007) conducted with Scottish students. They asked students to provide financial support for an outgroup cause (buying raffle tickets to support victims of crime in Wales), but made some of the participants aware that English people endorsed a stereotype of the Scots as mean. In the condition where this negative stereotype was made salient, the participants went out of their way to give more support to the outgroup than they had to the Scottish ingroup as a way of disconfirming the negative stereotype—leading them to buy more than twice as many tickets as they did otherwise and more than twice as many as they did to support the ingroup.

A second reason why support is sometimes given to outgroups is that, while social identification always provides a basis for supporting fellow ingroup members, it does not necessarily dictate a failure to support others (Turner, 1999). Amongst other things, this is because a group's orientation towards any outgroup will always be structured by both the context of intergroup relations and the *content* of the ingroup's social identity (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). This means, for example, that if the ingroup has norms (e.g., of charity or solidarity) such that it prides itself on helping those who are in distress, then the conformity to ingroup norms that is associated with identification with that ingroup will tend to be translated into motivations to support outgroups. Indeed, within such groups (e.g., medical practitioners, aid workers), codes of conduct, ethical guidelines and other normative frameworks (e.g., the Hippocratic oath,

religious commandments) will often *prescribe* outgroup helping as an aspect of idealized ingroup behaviour.

Nevertheless, even though there may be a range of reasons why support is offered across intergroup boundaries, there are still dangers that this will lead to suboptimal outcomes. To help us consider some of the issues involved, it is interesting to look at some of the patterns that emerged from some classic research by Pendleton and Bochner (1980) which looked at patterns of patient consultation among General Practitioners. Despite the fact that GPs' code of practice instructs them to deliver health care impartially, analysis revealed (a) that GPs spend more time in consultation with patients who have high socio-economic status (SES) than with those who have low SES (on average, the former patients were seen for 7.3 minutes the latter for 5.3 minutes), and that this reflected the fact (b) that GPs give high-SES patients more information than those who are low-SES (3.2 vs. 1.6 units), and (c) that GPs get more information back from high-SES than low-SES patients (2.5 vs. 0.7 units).

What this research shows is that patients have very different experiences as a function of their identity. Low-SES patients not only receive less attention and less information from doctors, but it is clear that this increases the potential for misunderstanding and hence for recrimination. The obvious question is what lies at the root of these problems? There are several possibilities, of course. One has to do with shared social stereotypes of working class people as less intellectually able and hence less worth talking to. But another, that speaks to the topic of this chapter, is that it derives from a sense of shared identity between doctors (high-SES professionals) and their high-SES patients (see St Claire & Clucas, this volume).

The data provided by Pendleton and Bochner themselves does not allow us to settle the matter. So we can do no more than advance level of shared identification as a plausible contributor to the success or breakdown of communication in clinical settings. However, much

clearer and stronger evidence of this link comes from programmes of research conducted by Nadler and his colleagues (e.g., Nadler, 2010), and Stürmer and Snyder (e.g., 2010). Nadler's work examines instances of outgroup helping in situations of intergroup conflict (e.g., between Israelis and Palestinians; between conservative men and feminists), and shows that rather than ameliorating difficulties, attempts to provide support can often exacerbate them. Amongst other things, this is because— in line with the strategic reasons for support being given (see above)— those who receive support often interpret this as an attempt to manoeuvre them into a position of weakness and dependency that serves to consolidate the donor's privileged status. This failure to respond in ways that the donor expects can then be used to justify discrimination in the future and thereby set in train a vicious spiral of increased intergroup hostility.

In a related vein, the work of Stürmer and Snyder looks at subtle differences in the ways in which help is given to “them” rather than “us”. This suggests that, whereas support for ingroup members is generally underpinned by high levels of empathy, that which is provided to outgroups is much more likely to be based on a strategic analysis of costs and benefits. In this way, it appears that people help outgroups “as long as they feel they get something out of it” (Stürmer & Snyder, 2010, p.55). Unsurprisingly, support of this form tends to be seen by recipients as relatively insincere, and rather than simply saying ‘thank you’ they may be motivated to look the gift horse in the mouth (i.e., to interrogate the donors' motives as well as the quality of their gifts). In situations where short-term material outcomes are all that matter, this may not be a problem. However, because it lends itself to support that is more fragile, more conditional, and less enduring, in the long run it has a far greater chance of breaking down. Amongst other things, this is because such support (and the process of monitoring the costs and benefits that it entails) will generally be seen as “very hard work”.

Conclusion

We started this chapter by observing that there are a range of contexts in which other people—and the social support they provide—prove to be more hellish than healing. Because it is so central to the purposes of this book, our goal in the remainder of the chapter has been to provide a theoretical framework that provides insight into some of the reasons for this. In this regard, our central conclusion is that the dynamics of social support are always conditioned by the social identities that inform this process (in ways specified by both social identity and self-categorization theories). This means that where parties to the support process perceive themselves to share social identity (i.e., where they define themselves in terms of the same social self-category) then, generally speaking, not only will more support be more forthcoming but it will also tend to be interpreted in ways that allow it to achieve its intended effect. However, in the absence of this shared identity, this is less likely to be the case. This is because here those elements that contribute to successful support—shared expectations, empathy, communication, trust, and accommodation—will all tend to be in relatively short supply.

In this way, the impact—and the curative potential—of social support is heavily conditioned by its psychological partnership with social identity. This does not mean, of course, that all support that is founded on shared identity is ‘good’ or even desirable. For example, if the social identity in question is in some sense toxic (e.g., as a function of its content or exclusivity) then support may take forms and sustain activities that ultimately compromise the health and well-being of both outgroup *and* ingroup (e.g., see Tarrant et al., this volume). Moreover, this point will generally be less apparent to ingroup members than it is to outgroup observers, and it is something that members of that ingroup may have difficulty acknowledging.

Returning to the examples that we started with, one of the key implications of our analysis is that providing people share identity with others then they are not routinely condemned

to finding their company—and the process of supporting them—onerous, burdensome or tiring. Indeed, quite the opposite. In *Up in the Air* this is seen once Ryan Bingham is induced out of his cocoon of personal self-absorption and allows others to become part of his self-definition. At this point, he loses faith in his “What’s in your Backpack?” routine, and starts to aspire to the various things that group life can bring: companionship, a sense of ‘home’, love. Likewise, we see that it is these same things that provide those who have been victims of the corporate axe (that he and others wield) with a basis for support that allows them to rebuild their lives.

Although these victims are not actors, one might, nonetheless, be forgiven for dismissing this as just another Hollywood ending. So let us return to the altogether more erudite *Huis Clos*. As we intimated earlier, this play (and much of Sartre’s existential philosophy) is generally remembered for its stark four-word conclusion. It is notable, however, that Sartre himself spent much of his life trying (largely in vain) to challenge popular interpretations of this text. Thus, twenty years after writing it, he complained:

“Hell is other people” has always been misunderstood. People thought that what I meant by it is that our relations with others are always rotten or illicit. But I mean something entirely different. I mean that if our relations with others are twisted or corrupted, then others have to be hell. Fundamentally, others are what is important in us for our understanding of ourselves.

(Sartre, 1965; cited in Contat & Rybalka, 1974, p.99)

Ultimately, then, whether we find the company and support of others to be a source of torment or of solace depends to a considerable extent on the way that we relate to them social psychologically. More importantly, though, understanding how we regard others also tells us a lot about ourselves (Reicher & Haslam, 2010). In this respect, possibly the most fundamental benefit of supportive relations with others is not that it allows us to help them (important as this may be), but that it allows human beings to formulate an understanding of “us” that has the potential to be better in every sense.

Notes

1. For a discussion, see <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2006/06/nationalanxieties>
2. Sometimes too, this effect will be predicted by the fact that erstwhile outgroups come to be recategorized as part of a very broadly defined ingroup (e.g., all humans).
3. Full transcript retrieved from: http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/u/up-in-the-air-script-transcript.html

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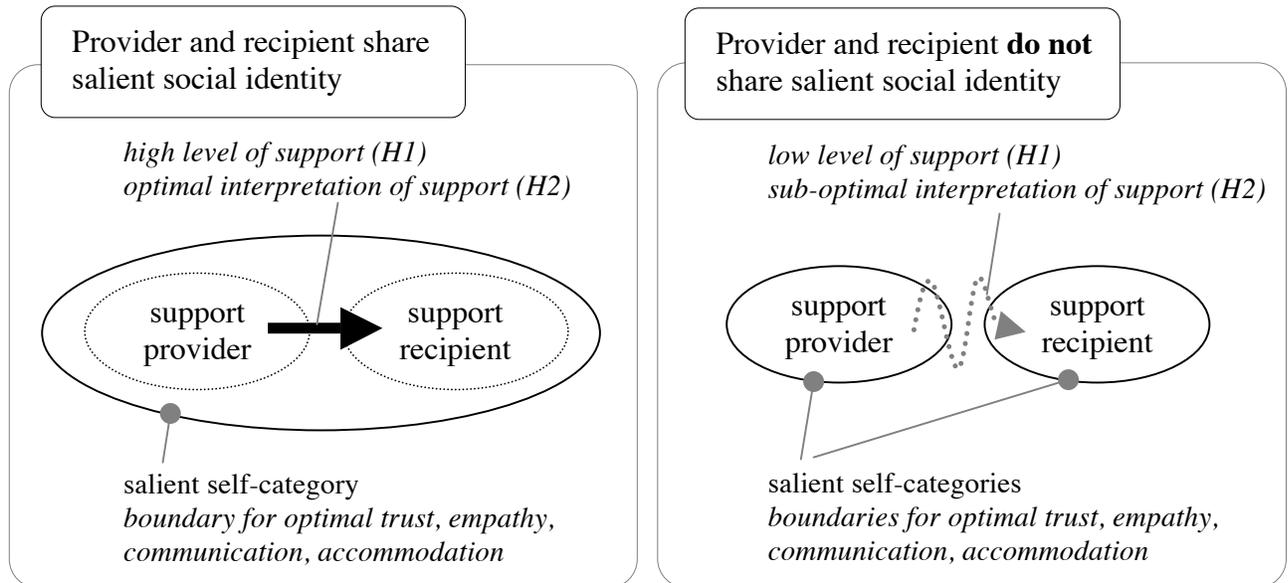


Figure 1 The role of shared social identity (salient self-categories) in determining the level (H1) and interpretation (H2) of social support