Exploring Social Identity and Group Membership Changes During Adulthood: How do they influence self-perception?

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Abstract
Social identity research suggests that being part of a group which we perceive to have high value is vital for our self-esteem, and that how we view our social identity ultimately influences how we view ourselves. Identification with smaller social groups has been shown to have psychological importance and influences levels of stress and well-being. It is understood that changes to social identities occur throughout the life-span but much of the research into the effect of these changes focuses on adolescence and old age. In addition, the methods used are often quantitative with an aim to measure an overall population. With reorientation of work and family life, along with migration, becoming increasingly common, insight into the impact of these changes is important. The present study explores how changes to social identity and group membership during adulthood influence self-perception, using thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview. Three emerging themes are identified as; 'desire for intimacy group', 'effect of social identity' and 'Influence on self-perception'. Implications of these findings and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Introduction
Social Identity can be defined as the way an individual perceives themselves based on their membership of particular groups (Burr, 2002). Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) theory involves three fundamental processes, which serve to maintain or enhance a positive social identity and therefore influence self-perception and self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Firstly, they argue that, as humans are inherently driven to organise and structure our perceived world, we create classifications or categories for ourselves as well as others (Wetherell, 1997). This categorisation process involves placing ourselves within certain categories or groups which can be large

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scale (such as race, gender or nationality) or small (such as sports groups or occupation), and then distinguishing these groups from others by accentuating intergroup differences and intragroup similarities (Capozza & Brown, 2000). The social identification process involves the individual’s knowledge of the emotional and value significance attached with their membership of a particular group (Wetherell, 1997). In order for the high value which we place on our group membership to appear significant, it is often necessary for the third process of intergroup comparison to take place, in which the value attached to an ‘out-group’ is lessened (Burr, 2002).

Groups that we associate ourselves with are often simply social categories, of which not all members are known to us personally and therefore, the value attributed to them comes from culturally and historically formed stereotypes (Gross, 2010). However, smaller face-to-face groups may emerge from the wider group membership (for example, students of a large university coming together to form a study group), and these have been shown to have more psychological importance, even when there is no objective reason for the group formation (Wetherell, 1997). For example, Bettencourt and Sheldon (2001) suggest that an individual's identification and their psychological well-being was related to: how much they perceived that they could act authentically and be accepted; how much they felt they contributed in a way that was valued by other members; and how meaningful they perceived their intra-group relationships to be. Similarly, high levels of identification with small social groups has been linked to lower levels of personal stress and increased life satisfaction (Haslam, O’Brien, Jetlan, Varnedale & Penna, 2005). It is suggested that this positive impact may be a result of the opportunity to benefit from the support of fellow group members (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2005).

While the literature reviewed suggests that social identity and group membership are important for maintaining positive self-identity and self-esteem, much of the research into the effects of changes to social identity has used quantitative and statistical methods, focusing on an overall measure of a population (Amiot et al., 2010). The findings from these types of studies have suggested, that when faced with a life change (such as a transition into university), individuals are more likely to report positive health, well-being and self-esteem if they identify as a member of a social group (Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle & Chang, 2016). In addition, research is often concerned with the social identity changes of adolescent or elderly people (Tanti, Stukas, Halloran &
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Method
A female participant aged 30-40 was recruited from the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) population. A semi-structured interview guide was developed (Appendix 1), informed by a review of literature relating to social identity theory and group membership. This form of interview was used as it allows for modification to questions and probing based on responses from the participant (Smith, 2015). Examples of interview questions are; (Q2) 'How have you found the experience of relocating and making new friends?', and (Q6) 'To what extent do you feel these social groups influence how you see yourself?'. The interview took place in a quiet area on university grounds and was audio recorded for later analysis. A 'playscript' style transcript (Appendix 2) was created from the audio-recording and served as the data set for thematic analysis, this transcription was done by the researcher to allow familiarisation with the data (King & Horrocks, 2010).

While interview questions were broadly informed by the literature relating to social identity, an inductive analysis of the data was carried out with an aim to ensure the original meaning of the data was captured (Smith, 2015). In order to ensure a solid foundation for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), familiarisation formed the first step of this process. A second phase of 'coding' took place, identifying and labelling any features of the data which appeared meaningful. Following this, themes were identified, reviewed for relevance to the coded data, leading to the final stage of defining and naming of themes (Appendix 3).

Analysis
Three themes emerged from the data which have been labelled as; 'Desire for intimacy groups', 'Effect of Social identity' and 'Influence on self-perception'.
Desire for intimacy groups:
The participant has moved home, changed address and also moved from a self-led degree course to enrolling in a 'brick' university. She suggests that her change in studies was informed by a desire for contact with others, particularly face-to-face, as despite having support available via email and telephone there is still a sense of being alone:

"It was hard ‘cause you’re [pause] working on your own and the fact that we were on the [location anonymised] meant that I couldn’t, there are groups and stuff like that, but, erm [pause] they’re all located in mainland so I came over a couple of times to Southampton for a couple of like revision seminars and revision days and stuff like that but generally speaking I was on my own over there." (Line 25-29)

The experience of relocating and forming new friends has been difficult, as friendship groups are already established, and the participant expresses feelings of loneliness and isolation as a result. Previous friendships appear difficult to maintain from a distance, despite their long duration, with the participant expressing the need for regular contact in order for these friendships to continue. There is an assumption that without maintaining regular and close contact, friendships will deteriorate:

"people that I’d been friends with for a very long time that I thought I would always maintain friendships with, it’s not that I’ve fell out with them or I’m not friendly, but over the years the contact that was once every, well beginning with once every week and then it’s once every month and then suddenly." (Line 53-156)

Despite this difficulty, and the fear and anxiety that the participant associates with being 'new' and trying to make new friends, there is still a desire, if not a need, to belong to a group. There is a consistent acknowledgement that forming and maintaining friendships is difficult and requires effort, yet the participant considers this something that she 'has to' or 'needs to' do;

"it’s something that I do need to, and I will need to address, not that my life’s, I feel empty without groups of friends, but it’s nice to have people around, locally." (Line 229-231)
Effect of social identity:
The friendships and social groups described by the participant are all informed by her social identities of either 'student' 'professional' or 'mother'. Each of these friendship groups have developed out of opportunity and the perceived similarities between group members, based on their categorisation and identification as a member. In addition, the shared social identity within each group, remains the foundation of such friendship, with conversation and friendship rituals being structured solely around social identity which is active within the group. For example, when with 'student' friends, time is spent with them only within university and conversation is structured around studies. While, when with 'work' friends, time is spent with them in work, discussing work issues:

"Be able to discuss what we’re learning, and amongst other things, y’know but discuss what we’re learning, what they’re doing for their, erm projects and assignments and revision for their exams." (Line 187-189) […]

"I’ve got my work group, erm [pause] and that’s not dissimilar in the fact that it’s nice to have people to talk to about what work we’re doing and about different cases that we’re working on." (Line 193-198)

The opportunity to make new friends appears to be attached to the social identity of the participant. She discusses her difficulties in forming new friendships now that her children are getting older, as she no longer spends time in the playground with the "other mums".

"there’s no playground anyway to stand in, and [second child] very much the same it’s kind of "drop me off" and all the other parents of that age do that they’re all, lots of them are working or they’re doing their own thing they literally drop them at the gates, they run into school and, they don’t stand around in the playground and have a natter and so, I’ve found that quite difficult." (Line 108-112)

Influence on self-perception
The social identities adopted by the participant have influenced the way in which she perceives her personal identity and her abilities. Even more apparent though, is the influence that her group membership and the exclusion or isolation that she feels from other groups, has on the way in which she views herself. Having other students around at university and being included within the small
social group of mature students creates a sense of belonging and appears to confirm or validate this sense of identity as a student.

"I'm part of this group of mature students that are in my degree programme, so yeah I suppose they kind of [pause] don't know would you say [sighs] validate it? In the fact that, I know I'm a student 'cause im coming in doing it but they make it more [questioning tone] real?" (Line 281-284)

However, the difficulty experienced in forming new friendships has created a sense of insecurity and self-doubt:

"when I struggled to make friends when I first got here, before I started uni, you kind of look at yourself and think why, why are people not being that friendly? I'm trying really hard here and they're not, kind of is there something about me." (Line 269-272)

Discussion
It's unsurprising that the theme of social identity is apparent throughout the data set, as the semi-structured interview was informed by social identity theory and research literature. Nevertheless, the findings appear to support Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) suggestion that social identity influences our self-perception. Social support as a benefit feature of smaller social groups is also evident in line with previous research (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2005). In addition, there is support for the desirability of 'intimacy group' membership throughout the emerging themes and the difficulty of gaining membership to these already established groups supports the idea that they are impermeable (Lickel et al., 2001; Madler & Hanon, 2013).

Limitations of the present study should be considered when interpreting these findings. Firstly, with only one participant, while the data collected provides a real insight into the lived experience of someone trying to break into new social groups, it is not possible to generalise this insight to any wider population. Despite efforts by the researcher to ensure that the analysis conducted was grounded in the data, it is reasonable to observe that all analysis will be shaped, to some extent, by theoretical assumptions (Smith, 2015). Similarly, the process of thematic analysis is complex and interpretive, therefore the final themes are not the only ones evident throughout the data, rather they are perceived to be the most relevant to the research question. Interestingly, the three themes identified within
the study are not mutually exclusive themes, instead they overlap and inform each other. For example, the desire for intimacy group membership appears to inform the individual’s self-perception, as does her social identity and group membership.

Overall, the study provides an insight into the complexity of social identity, particularly in the context of a generation experiencing reorientation and migration more than any before. Forming new social identities and friendships during adulthood is an experience that many of us may indeed face, with very little understanding of how to go about it.

*The full length article can be found on the website www.saijournal.co.uk from February 2017.*

References


