

Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory

Denis Sindic

Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon

Susan Condor

School of Social, Political and Geographical Sciences, Loughborough University

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Political behaviour always involves social groups, whether these take the form of concrete networks and gatherings of individuals such as pressure groups, demonstrations, governments, cadres or committees, or whether they are constituted as large-scale institutions or imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) such as polities, states, political parties, interest groups, publics, constituencies or electorates. In so far as social groups are central to politics, it follows that the psychology of groups should be relevant to our understanding of political psychology. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory represent major theoretical attempts to clarify the social psychological processes associated with group membership and action, and should therefore be in a good position to provide a significant contribution to that understanding.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed from Tajfel's work on intergroup processes which focused on the genesis of conflict between social groups, and the factors which influence support for, or attempts to change, established social hierarchies (e.g., Tajfel, 1974, 1978a; 1978b; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Turner (1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) later adopted some aspects of this approach as the basis for his Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) of group behaviour in general. Because the two theories share many key assumptions, they are often discussed under the general label of 'the Social Identity approach' or 'the Social Identity tradition'.

Early research adopting the Social Identity approach to intergroup relations often investigated real world political behaviour, including political party affiliation (Kelly, 1988), trades union participation (Kelly & Kelly, 1994); the Northern Ireland conflict (Cairns & Mercer, 1984), Hindu-Muslim relations in India (Ghosh & Kumar, 1991), and responses to the Sino-British accord in Hong Kong (Bond & Hewstone, 1988). Tajfel's model, which emphasised how intergroup conflict could be rooted in concerns over collective identity as

well as competition over material resources, was especially relevant to the New Social Movements that arose during the 1960s and 70s (Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010; Tajfel, 1978b), and social psychologists subsequently applied SIT to the women's movement (Williams & Giles, 1978) as well as ethnolinguistic minority group movements (Giles, 1977). Later, as SIT came to be increasingly adopted as a general metatheoretical perspective by social psychologists (Abrams & Hogg, 2004), fewer researchers focused on its particular relevance to political attitudes and action (although see Brewer, 2001; Huddy, 2001; Oakes, 2002; Reicher, 2004). However, the past decade has witnessed a renaissance of interest in the ways in which SIT and SCT might enhance social psychological understanding of a range of formal and informal political behaviour, including party identification (Greene, 2004), political solidarity and affiliation (Subašić, Reynolds & Turner, 2008), leadership (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010; Hogg, 2001), political rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a, 1996b, 2001), political participation and activism (Drury, 2012; Muldoon & Lowe, 2012; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009), schism (Sani & Pugliese, 2008), national separatism (Sindic & Reicher, 2009), conspiracy theorising (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013) and extremism (Baray, Postmes & Jetten, 2009; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009; Hogg, 2012).

It is now beyond the scope of a single chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of the ways in which the social identity approach might contribute to political psychology (see Ispas, 2013). Consequently, for the purposes of this chapter we will focus on two general issues. First, we will clarify, and where necessary distinguish, the key theoretical assumptions of SIT and SCT as they relate to political cognition and action. Second, because politics involves both groups and power, we will focus on some of the issues where the dynamics of identity and power intersect. This will include a consideration of the political consequences of identity management strategies, and a discussion of the particular case of politicized identities.

Social Identity Theory: Identity strategies and the dynamics of intergroup relations

Tajfel originally defined social identity as “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978a, p. 63). According to this perspective, group membership provides people with a sense of their distinct place in the social world (where they stand in relations to others) and acts as a practical guide to action by imparting the norms concerning the typical, appropriate or desirable forms of behaviour associated with a particular group membership. More specifically, Tajfel claimed that the processes associated with social (as opposed to personal) identity underpin intergroup (as opposed to interpersonal) behaviour. That is, to the extent that people see themselves and others in terms of group membership, and to the extent that they personally identify with the social group to which they belong, they will tend to act towards others as group members rather than as unique individuals. In emphasising the distinctive character of collective behaviour, Tajfel’s approach differed from existing social psychological perspectives that often sought to explain intergroup behaviour with reference to the personality traits of particular individuals (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950). Indeed, one fundamental assumption that underpins SIT is that groups and not individuals are the main engine of both social conflict and social change (Reicher, Spears, Haslam & Reynolds, 2012).

SIT proposes a motivational element to intergroup behaviour (see, e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) by suggesting that people are generally concerned to maintain, or to achieve, a positive sense of self, and that when they identify with social groups, this manifests itself in a need to perceive the groups to which they belong positively (for a review, see, e.g., Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Moreover, SIT also proposes that social categories are necessarily defined

and evaluated comparatively. Consequently, in order to achieve a positive evaluation of their group, group members will be motivated to establish, and to maintain, a positive differentiation (i.e., positive distinctiveness) between ingroup and relevant outgroups on valued dimensions of comparison (Tajfel, 1978a). Membership of groups consensually regarded as superior will confer a *positive* social identity, and conversely membership of groups consensually regarded as inferior will confer a *negative* or *unsatisfactory* social identity, which may, under certain conditions, motivate the members of those groups to take collective action towards challenging the existing social hierarchy and the inferior status conferred to their group.

Of particular relevance to political psychology is the fact that SIT provides a model of the ideological context in which the identity management strategies that people adopt to deal with an unsatisfactory social identity may be expected to lead to collective action (for more extended overview of identity management strategies, see, e.g., Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke & Klink, 1998; Brown, 2000; Ellemers, 1993; Haslam, 2001). The most important of these conditions is arguably the perceived *permeability* of group boundaries, that is, the extent to which people believe that it is possible for individuals to move between social groups. In so far as members of socially devalued groups perceive *individual mobility* to be possible, they may respond to their inferior status by attempting to “move up” the social hierarchy and by psychologically dis-identifying with the group to which they currently belong. However, when such mobility is perceived to be impossible or undesirable, people may engage in various forms of collective activity aimed at changing the comparative value associated with their group as a whole.

Tajfel described the latter situation as involving an ideology of *social change*. The term ‘social change’, however, is potentially misleading, since under these ideological conditions members of devalued groups will not necessarily attempt to challenge the existing

intergroup hierarchy directly. According to SIT, the kind of collective activity that members of devalued social groups engage in will depend upon the perceived *security* of intergroup comparisons (Tajfel; 1978a; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Perceived security can be subdivided into two aspects. The first concerns the perceived *legitimacy* of the *status quo* – for example, whether people assume that their inferior status has been justly ordained or deserved. The second concerns the availability of *cognitive alternatives*: the possibility of imagining changes to the existing intergroup *status quo*. Where existing intergroup hierarchies are perceived as legitimate, and/or where cognitive alternatives are not available, low status group members are unlikely to challenge the outgroup directly. Instead, they may attempt to attain a positive social identity by strategically comparing their group with another of lower status, re-evaluating the labels and symbols conventionally associated with their group, or adopting strategies of *social creativity* to forge a favourable identity for their ingroup on new dimensions of comparison. It is only when unfavourable intergroup comparisons are perceived as illegitimate and where cognitive alternative are present that members of devalued social groups will engage in *social competition* and attempt to directly contest their inferior status.

Members of high status groups also have at their disposal a variety of strategies that mirror those of the low status groups, which may be used in an effort to maintain their position in the intergroup hierarchy. For example, they may attempt to make intergroup boundaries *appear* permeable by allowing a few outgroup members to pass, but in proportion that remain largely symbolic (*tokenism*; see Wright & Taylor, 1998). Similarly, in an attempt to maintain existing social hierarchies, members of dominant social groups may seek to legitimate the *status quo*, for example, through reference to innate differences between human gender, nations or races.

Social Identity Theory and the psychology of politics

How can the model of social identity strategies proposed by SIT contribute to our understanding of political psychology? In general terms, the need and ability of humans to actively distinguish themselves from each other, which lies at the core of the theory, can be seen as both the condition of possibility and the very *raison d'être* of politics, if we define politics as that paradoxical human activity that both promotes differentiation between human beings and aims to deal with its problematic consequences (e.g., Arendt, 1958). However, a more restricted definition of politics is that it concerns the dynamics of power, and more specifically the processes of obtaining and using that power in public life. From that point of view, SIT's focus on the social-psychological evaluation of identities may appear to downplay the political aspects intergroup relations, since the ultimate goal of identity management strategies has conventionally been understood as being about status rather than power. In so far as they have addresses issues of power, Social Identity theorists have tended to focus on the ways in which power may impact upon the quest for positive social identity, rather than focussing upon political power as a key problem in its own right (e.g., Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991). Moreover, there is a large proportion of SIT research that tend to treat power and status as synonymous, using terms like 'dominant/subordinate groups', 'high/low status groups' or 'majority/minority' interchangeably (for classic discussions of the distinction between the constructs of status and power, see Goldhamer & Shils, 1939; Weber, 1958).

Nevertheless, the potential relevance of SIT to political psychology becomes apparent once we appreciate how status and power are often related in practice. Changes in group status can act as catalyst for, or constitute an outcome of, political change, and conversely status inertia often go hand in hand with maintaining the political *status quo*. In practice, the success of the various identity management strategies adopted by members of low status

groups is likely to depend on the groups' access to power. Similarly, the extent to which a high status group may be able to (for example) convince others of their innate superiority is likely to depend on their effective control of media of education and communication as well as their privileged status *per se*. Conversely, the identity management strategies adopted by members of low status groups may not simply enhance the subjective value of their identity, but may also affect power relationships. In fact, there are always political consequences associated with the different strategies for achieving a satisfactory social identity, whether or not these are imagined or intended by the social actors concerned. For example, when individuals pursue a strategy of individual mobility, their choice makes it harder for other members of their group to organize any form of political or social resistance. In contrast, strategies of symbolic social competition (e.g., challenging existing group stereotypes) may help to mobilise group members to political action (Reicher, Hopkins & Condor, 1997). Overall, the identity dynamics described by SIT can therefore be said to be political in the sense that they both shape and are shaped by power dynamics.

However, there are also limits to the contribution of the theory to our understanding of political dynamics. First, as Rubin and Hewstone note (2004), although SIT does not preclude considerations of power, and indeed invites a more detailed analysis of power dynamics and their interaction with identity processes, such analysis generally remains to be developed (but for recent developments in that direction, see Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010; Simon & Oakes, 2006; Sindic, Barreto & Costa-Lopes, in press; Turner, 2005).

Second, although most work adopting SIT has focused on struggles over status rather than conflicts over political power, there have been (as we noted earlier) notable exceptions as well as a recent revival of interest in applying SIT to political behaviour. However, any thoroughgoing attempt to apply SIT in this area requires a consideration of group behaviour which is directed at political goals in their own right. For that reason it challenges what has

for some become a key assumption of the theory, namely that all group action can necessarily and ultimately be understood as a quest for status. In that respect, it should be noted that the message in Tajfel's original writing was not that intergroup conflict could be reduced to social competition over status, but rather that this struggle should be understood as an intervening mechanism in conflicts over other type of goods (e.g., those who accept their negative identity are unlikely to challenge their political disadvantage since they see such inequalities as legitimate on the basis of their lower status). That is, Tajfel's primary concern was for the ways in which group identification provides the psychological basis for collective social action designed to challenge concrete economic and political as well as social inequalities. In that context, the struggle over status can represent but the means towards other ends, including political ones. This political preoccupation of Tajfel is apparent if we consider, for instance, his views that stereotypes "cannot be understood without a consideration of the functions they serve in the competitive and power relationships between the groups concerned" (Tajfel & Forgas, 1982, p.133). It is true that the function of *social differentiation* (the role of stereotypes "in helping to preserve or create positively valued differentiations between one's own and other social groups") centres on questions of group status. However, the functions of *social explanation* and *social justification* (the role of stereotypes "in contributing to the creation and maintenance of group "ideologies" explaining or justifying a variety of social actions") are clearly oriented towards political goals (p. 134).

Finally, one can question the extent to which SIT is able to deal with the specific phenomena of *politicized* identities, that is with collective identities that are normatively defined in terms of an explicit political commitment and where group members are consciously aware of being part of a power struggle (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). At present SIT remains somewhat unclear on the extent to which the eventual political consequences of identity management strategies can be traced back to the deliberate intent of

the social actors concerned. For example, a White comedian making a joke about Black people may very well contribute to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Black people and thereby help to maintain their lower status and subordinate position in society. However, the immediate goal of the comedian might really be only to make other people laugh (Condor, 1990). That is, there may not be any explicit political intent behind the joke, nor any awareness by the comedian of 'White people' as a politicized identity, involved in a power struggle with 'Black people' – contrary to, say, the case of a White supremacist making the exact same joke (Billig, 2005). At present, SIT does not really allow us to differentiate clearly between those two cases, despite the fact that they do differ in important respects.

Thus, despite their pervasive political consequences, it is not clear whether the social identity dynamics described by SIT can be called political in the full sense of the term. This, of course, does not mean that such identity processes are irrelevant to our understanding of politicized identities, but rather that the generic focus of the theory may need to be complemented by other approaches tailored to tackle this more specific issue. There are in fact other specific characteristics of politicized identities that the theory has difficulties with, which will be addressed after we review Self Categorization Theory.

Self-categorization Theory

As noted above, SIT proposes that people act in terms of their social identity whenever they see themselves and others in term of group membership rather than as particular individuals. Another way to put this is that social identity processes come into play when people categorize themselves (and others) as group members. Self-Categorization Theory focuses on the nature, antecedents and consequences of this psychological process of self-categorization.

In terms of the nature of the process, SCT postulates that when we self-categorize as group members we come to see ourselves as similar to (and interchangeable with) other ingroup members on the key stereotypical aspects that define the group, a process termed *depersonalization*. This does not involve a loss of selfhood (as is the case in *deindividuation*, see Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995), but involves the experience of the self as defined by group membership rather than by unique individual characteristics. This is very close to SIT's notion of social identification, but one key difference is that in SCT social categories are always part of a hierarchical structure as a function of their level of inclusiveness. For example, Simon may see himself as a unique individual when amongst friends, as a political psychologist when comparing himself to cognitive psychologists, as a social scientist when comparing himself to natural scientists, and all the way up to defining himself as a human in comparison to other species. Thus, the choice is not between different unrelated identities but between different identities nested into each other.

One implication of this hierarchical structure is that a particular category or identity is not solely defined by its comparison with another group situated on the same level of categorization. Its definition also depends upon its relation with the level of categorization immediately above it. In particular, the superordinate category that encompasses both ingroup and outgroup(s) provides the specific dimensions of comparisons along which the groups are contrasted. This is because the superordinate category defines the prototype of what the groups should be like. For example, members of national groups will not compare themselves along any random dimension, but along the prototypical characteristics of a great or a good nation. This factor may help to explain why groups often choose to compete on the same dimension of comparison. It also alerts us to the ways in which political arguments often relate not only to the outcome of intergroup comparisons (e.g., whether "our" political party is better or worse than another), but to the prototype of the superordinate category (what

political parties, in general, should be like). Consequently, group members may be inclined to define superordinate categories in such a way as to favour their own group over relevant outgroups in the ensuing intergroup comparisons (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999).

In terms of the antecedents of the self-categorization process, the main question addressed by SCT relates to the question of why any particular categorization should be psychologically salient in a particular context. Following ideas first outlined by Bruner (1957), SCT proposes that the psychological salience of a particular level of self-categorisation is determined through an interaction of *accessibility* and *fit* (Oakes, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994). Accessibility, or *perceiver readiness*, refers to an individual's readiness to use a given set of categories as a function of past experience, present expectations, motives, values, goals and needs (which includes all the factors contributing to long-term social identification). The concept of fit concerns the relationship between the nature of categories and external reality, and can be divided into two aspects. *Comparative fit* refers to the relationship between categories and the distribution of intragroup vs. intergroup differences: the set of categories that maximize the ratio of intergroup differences compared to intra-group differences will be most salient. *Normative fit* refers to the fact that the specific content of these differences should match the stereotypical expectations associated with these categories. For instance, if a group discussion is split on a question of welfare spending, with some people arguing for more support for unemployed people and others for less, political orientation is likely to become salient and participants are likely to categorize themselves as liberals vs. conservatives, because the categories account for the differences in orientation adopted by individuals, and because such differences are in line with existing stereotypes concerning political ideology.

In terms of the consequences of self-categorization processes, the principles outlined by SCT have been applied to many different areas (e.g., see Turner et al., 1987; Haslam,

2001), but there is one area in particular that has perhaps received the most attention and that is also directly relevant to our understanding of politics, namely the processes of social influence (Turner, 1991). Social influence is key to many political processes, including the spread of political ideas, elections and voting, political mobilization, and the very nature of political power (Lukes, 2005). For SCT, social influence does not depend solely on the characteristics of the message, the messenger and/or the audience (see Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953). It also depends on the relationship between messenger and audience that is established by the self-categories employed in a particular social context.

Specifically, the consequences of the process of self-categorisation on influence are threefold. First, the nature of the salient self-categories will determine who we can influence and who we should be influenced by. That is, the process of self-categorization creates the expectation that we will agree with other ingroup members and disagree with outgroup members (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg & Turner, 1990), so that social influence should only take place in the former case since only people sharing a common group membership will try and reach a consensus. Second, the specific content (i.e. stereotypes, norms and values) associated with the salient self-category will determine who, amongst ingroup members, will be seen as prototypical (i.e. embodying the groups' spirit and values) and is therefore more likely to be influential. Finally, the specific content of ingroup identity also sets limits on the nature of the messages that can be influential: influence will be limited to messages which are seen to be consistent with the group stereotypes, values and norms.

These processes are also important for the related phenomenon of leadership. SCT focuses not merely on the personal qualities that make a good leader, but also on the relationships between leaders and followers (e.g., Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010). According to SCT, effective leaders need to present themselves as embodying the group's identity and will, but followers are not passive in that process since they help define the

dimensions along which the prototypicality of a potential leader will be assessed. Thus followers 'make' the leader as much as the leader 'attracts' followers.

The social identity tradition and the psychology of politics revisited

By way of conclusion, we return to the issue of how the Social Identity approach (this time with the inclusion of SCT) might help our understanding of politicized identities. We have already suggested that politicized identities possess specific features that make them more than just one type of identity amongst many. One important factor is that the power dynamics in which politicized identities are involved can only make sense in the context of a common superordinate group. A political protest for equal rights between Blacks and Whites, for instance, can only make sense if we invoke a superior category that provides the framework within which judgments about the existing (in)equalities between groups and their legitimacy are made (e.g., Black people deserve the same rights as White people because they are all human beings). SIT's focus on the nuclear situation of two group in a dyadic relationship, apparently isolated from their relationships to other groups and the rest of society, might lead to disregard this aspect. However, SCT's tenet that the relationships between groups is always mediated by their common membership into a shared superordinate category (which provides the dimensions of intergroup comparisons) highlights this important aspect of political cognition and rhetoric.

The relationship of groups to a superordinate category can also help to account for two supplementary and related facts about political behaviour. First, a great deal of political action is not (or not only) simply directed at the outgroup *per se* but at a more general audience (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Those who argue for the extension of rights for ethnic minority groups, for instance, have probably little hope to be heard by those against whom

they protest. Rather, their call for justice may be directed towards fellow ingroup members (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), but also towards the larger public who may possibly be won to their cause (Condor, Tileaga & Billig, 2013). This is illustrated by protesters all over the globe using protest signs written in English, even when the protest is taking place in a non-English speaking country. The attempt to mobilize a “universal audience” (see Condor et al., 2013) only makes sense if protesters assume that, because of their common superordinate membership, people from other groups may share the same dimensions of judgment and thus should be able to assess the legitimacy of their claim.

Second, political groups do not always act in terms of the interest of their own group defined in narrow terms. Political parties, for instance, do not claim to act solely for the benefit of their own party, but for the benefit of the country as a whole. Conflict between parties, then, is shaped not only by the relation of one group to another but by their common relationship to a superordinate category. The latter not only defines the ‘rules of engagement’, but the possibility to steer its direction and fulfil its interests may be what is ultimately at stake. This is why claims about the prototypicality of the ingroup in relations to the superordinate category (e.g., that ‘we’ better represent what our compatriots are like and what they want) can be made for political reasons (Sindic & Reicher, 2008).

Nevertheless, there are at least two other issues related to politicized identities with which the Social Identity tradition currently struggles. First, although both SIT and SCT assume that the ideological/political/cultural context and the specific contents of identities play a key role in determining the outcomes of psychological processes, the psychological processes themselves are assumed to remain invariate. Certainly, there may be common psychological processes that characterize all types of social identities, but there may also be specific processes associated with different types of identities and their specific contents and ideological framework. For instance, the adoption of a particular ideological frame of

reference (e.g., communitarian vs. liberal; see Condor & Abell, 2006) about national identities may lead people to embrace different reflexive stances towards their own identity, and to develop complex relationships with that identity that go beyond the simple identification/dis-identification dichotomy.

The particular content and ideological context of politicized identity may well vary, but must necessarily be related to principles of a political nature, such as legitimacy, justice, fairness, the right to self-determination, etc. To express this argument in the terminology of SCT, the dimensions of intergroup comparison provided by the superordinate category must be relevant to the political claims— in the same way that, for instance, moral categories must be based on dimensions that can inform moral claims. The fact that the SI approach has tended to assume that identical processes underlie all forms of social identity means that it cannot enlighten us about the differences between (to pursue the example) political and moral identities.

Second and finally, another key characteristic of politicized identities lies in their ‘essential contestedness’ (Gallie, 1956; Swanton, 1985), i.e. the fact that they are not only open to contestation, but that they will inevitably be contested since that contestation is a natural correlate of the political dynamics in which they are involved. Any definition of European identity, for instance, is bound to have implications for the (il)legitimacy of political integration at the European level (Duchesne, 2008; Sindic, 2010), and it is precisely because of those political implications that it is actively and consciously contested.

This essential contestedness can be seen as a logical consequence of the processes described by both SIT and SCT, but also as a factor that they are somewhat ill-equipped to handle. On the one hand, since both theories emphasise how identities have key consequences for social influence and political mobilization, it is only logical to infer that those who wish to shape the political opinions and actions of others will attempt to formulate and disseminate

particular definitions that suit their specific political purposes. Put differently, it is the various attempts to create political consensus that gives rise to political contestation over the meaning of politicized identities (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Reynolds, 1998). Empirically, studies show that those who attempt to mobilize support for a political project use argumentative principles that are remarkably in line with SCT's principles, such as maximizing the scope of the ingroup, minimizing the scope of the outgroup, and defining the content of ingroup identity in order to make it normatively consonant with their message (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a, 1996b).

On the other hand, the way in which both SIT and SCT describe the contextual antecedents of identity contents leaves little theoretical room for such purposeful contestation. In SIT, perceptions of permeability, legitimacy and stability are typically taken for granted as a point of departure from which questions as to their consequences are being addressed (Reicher, 1996), and the question of what, in turn, shape those perceptions, is often deferred to other disciplines such as sociology or social history (Tajfel, 1979). This suggests a view where the contents of social identities are the results of sociological and historical forces beyond purposeful human agency. In SCT, this is even more apparent since the perceived content of categories is almost entirely and mechanically determined by the immediate comparative and normative social context. Yet, it is a key part of the political process itself – perhaps even one of its most essential characteristic and purpose – to contribute to the elaboration of the meaning of social and political realities, such as who we should compare ourselves with and on what dimensions, what is and what is not legitimate, and what can or cannot be changed.

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Biographies of authors

Denis Sindic is research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. He did his Ph.D. under the supervision of Stephen Reicher at the University of St Andrews, on political attitudes towards national separatism and supra-national integration. His current research focus on the political psychology of immigration and the role of national and European identities in attitudes towards the European Union.

Susan Condor is professor of social psychology at Loughborough University, UK. Her PhD thesis, supervised by Henri Tajfel, considered how political ideology renders social identities personally and politically meaningful in different ways. Her subsequent work has focused on national ideologies and identities in the UK, the relationship between social identity and citizenship, and dilemmas of everyday liberalism.