

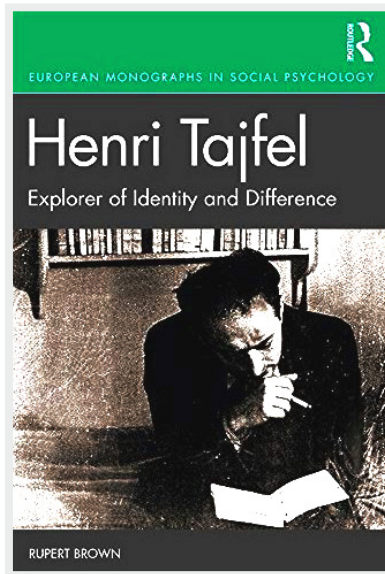
## ‘Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference’

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### Abstract

The year 2019 marked the birth centenary of Henri Tajfel, a social psychologist known most widely for the social identity theory, which he developed with his doctoral student John Turner. Over the years, social identity theory has found relevance in many academic fields beyond social psychology. Coupled with this academic legacy are recently surfaced claims of sexual harassment, particularly during Tajfel's tenure at the University of Bristol. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary provided an opportunity to visit the man beyond his academic contributions and take stock of where his intellectual legacy stands today. In *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference*, Rupert Brown, Emeritus Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Sussex and one of Tajfel's early PhD students, brings to life not only the scientist but the man himself, warts and all. From Tajfel's birth and early life in an environment ripe with interethnic conflicts to his later intellectual achievements (possibly) guided by his own experiences, Brown vividly portrays Tajfel's life. He traces Tajfel's experiences of anti-Semitism and war, post-war work educating and rehabilitating Jewish children and displaced people, unconventional academic journey, and the nagging sense of being an outsider that clung to him for most of his life. Focusing on Tajfel's intellectual contributions, Brown details their emergence and impact on then-dominant social psychology approaches. An

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engaging and insightful read, the book will interest social scientists engaged in intergroup relations research and help them think critically and creatively about their work. To social psychologists, the book also serves as a reminder to do social psychology that truly is social.

### **Keywords**

Henri Tajfel, social psychology, social identity theory, intergroup relations

## **Henri Tajfel at 100: Revisiting the Life and Impact**

Social issues like prejudice, inequality, exclusion, and oppression have long interested social scientists across disciplines. Indeed, any discipline by itself will fail to do justice to the vast complexity of such phenomena. Sociologists, historians, political scientists, economists and psychologists alike have used different lenses to contribute to our understanding of these issues. Social psychology, with its emphasis on the various contextual influences operating upon individuals, offers a unique vantage point for examining these issues: individual personalities and predispositions are considered important predictors of prejudice towards another group, but the variability in the expression of that prejudice is studied as contingent on many other situational and contextual factors.

A key framework in contemporary social psychological work on intergroup behaviours is the social identity approach. Comprising the social identity theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel & Turner 1979) and the self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987, 1994) (e.g., Reicher et al. 2010), the approach emerged out of the work initiated by Henri Tajfel and colleagues in the 1970s. Since its inception about 50 years ago, the social identity theory has significantly influenced many areas of social scientific research, including intergroup relations, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and social change. Its central concepts such as *social identity* (contrasted with one's personal identity) have found resonance in fields beyond social psychology. Political scientists, business and management researchers, and health psychologists draw upon its core premises and find creative ways of expanding its relevance to different domains of the social world. These ideas have made Tajfel and the social identity theory popular among different academic disciplines.

With such a legacy, Henri Tajfel has been one of social psychology's most influential theorists. The year 2019 marked his birth centenary and provided an opportunity for a more in-depth look at the man beyond his academic contributions. In *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference*, Rupert Brown, one of Tajfel's early PhD students and an acclaimed social psychologist in his own right, does just this: Brown paints a vivid portrayal of Tajfel's life, his triumphs and tribulations, successes and failures, strengths and limitations as an academic but most of all, as a human.

Published as part of the European Monographs in Social Psychology, the book can broadly be considered to have two sections. A longer, in-depth section (comprising

seven out of eight chapters) traces the life—personal and academic—of Henri Tajfel from birth to death. A shorter but equally well-researched section (the last chapter) critically evaluates two of Tajfel's contributions to social psychology: the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP), of which Tajfel was one of the founding members, and the Social Identity Theory (SIT), a theory aiming to explain intergroup behaviour. Adopting a chronological order for the former section and drawing upon a myriad of sources, Brown weaves a tale of hardships, creative endurance, intellectual rise, and untimely demise. He does so in a manner suitable to readers from different backgrounds: psychologists and non-psychologists alike can easily follow the book as Brown avoids jargon and, when necessary, goes to great lengths to explain technical concepts, phenomena, and often entire experiments. Those familiar with SIT, however, like Brown himself, may often find themselves pondering over the potential impact of these experiences on Tajfel's ultimate development of the SIT and its key concepts.

Tajfel was born a Jew in Poland in 1919. That was a time of political turmoil in the country and rising anti-Semitism there and elsewhere. World War II and its devastation were to follow soon after. Owing to a lack of official and personal documents, correspondence, and records from the time, Tajfel's experiences of these events would perhaps have been the most difficult to bring to life in a book. Brown, however, does an admirable job of piecing together Tajfel's experiences and thoughts in the early years of his life and during the war. Often, this is done by describing the general political climate of the time, experiences of Jews in general or of Tajfel's other family members, and extrapolating to how Tajfel himself might have lived and experienced, for example, any conflicts pertaining to his identities as a Jew and a Pole. His years spent as a prisoner of war in Germany, too, are mainly described drawing upon what we know about the workings of German prison camps in general. While a needed strategy for when little is known about the particulars of Tajfel's life, such descriptions sometimes feel impersonal and as background information. Wherever possible, however, these general descriptions are sprinkled with personal documents and photographs or anecdotes that give the story some personal touch.

This reliance on the general is no longer a concern in the later, post-war chapters, which focus primarily on Tajfel's various academic engagements: his pursuit of degrees, employment experiences, venture into academia, evolving research interests, and research outputs, among others. An important strength of these chapters is the accessibility to non-expert audiences. Brown explains in detail all psychological phenomena or concepts that Tajfel worked on, providing layperson explanations with real-world examples and detailed descriptions of the empirical studies conducted, thus catering to different kinds of audiences. More informatively, these research undertakings are juxtaposed with the research trends and debates of the time: we understand what dominant approaches to doing social psychology were back then and how Tajfel's work added to the field's advancement. At the same time, only little information about his personal (family) life is strewn in; few sentences about his relationship with his wife and sons find mention.

To cover the chapters in a little more detail, chapters 1 through 7 cover Tajfel's life from birth to death. They are differentiated by different 'transition points' in his life. They follow developments in his personal and academic life while highlighting his intellectual and scientific contributions to the field. The early chapters poignantly describe years spent in a context marred by interethnic conflicts and anti-Semitism and yet calls for assimilation in a nation that also treated its Jewish minority unkindly. Henri's five-year stay at a German stalag as a prisoner of war is a highlight of these early chapters. The shifting nature of identities (from a Polish Jew to a French Jew to a prisoner of war) is beautifully captured in the way Brown refers to Henri at certain points in the story: he starts with Heniek, which later becomes Henri, and during the war, merely "prisoner 14988". In these early years and those of the war, Brown also makes interesting attempts, albeit conjectures, at linking Henri's life experiences to his later work, such as the emphasis he placed on the categorization process or the decision to focus on stigmatized groups. For example, Henri's pervasive sense of being a 'foreigner' or an 'outsider', even after achieving significant academic success, is often highlighted, and its implications for his life's work are ruminated upon.

The book picks up pace with the chapters focusing on Henri's academic career—his stints at Durham, Oxford, Palo Alto, and Bristol, with fellowships and shorter visits to other places. Henri is painted as a visionary interested in a "radical new vision of psychology" that brought the field and its researchers out of their highly controlled labs and into people's everyday lives. Even in his initial work on perceptual overestimation, Henri was attuned to the implications the findings could have for the perception of groups. His propensity for ingenuity in research methodology, theory building, and rejecting reductionism in favour of studying people's environment is evident early in his career. With a later narrowing of interest to more applied or social action-based social psychology, Henri begins to foray into central social psychology areas like conformity, prejudice, and stereotypes. His academic engagements throughout his career portray an almost frenetic man: running to conferences, securing various grants, publishing numerous papers, and engaging in science communication.

A key strength of these chapters lies in the attention they pay to Henri's intellectual contributions before the widely known social identity theory. For example, his work on categorical accentuation is well discussed; Brown traces the path from Henri's early work on visual perception of physical objects to his later theorising on prejudice and stereotyping following the same principles. The *New Look* approach to perception understood perception as going beyond mere objective properties of the stimulus object. Rather, proponents of the approach considered equally important what the stimulus object is, who the perceiver is, and what the perceiver's expectations, social background, values and motivations are. Henri was intrigued by this new vision of psychological theorising—one that was more reflective and cognizant of the real world and that took psychological experiments and research questions out of the constraints of a laboratory setting. A consistent finding in visual perception was that people overestimate physical properties such as size and weight of valuable and culturally significant objects. In his work in this area, Henri proposed and empirically

demonstrated that people do not just overestimate physical properties but also accentuate differences at both ends of the weight/size continuum—that is, among the valued objects, not only are heavy (big) objects perceived as heavier (bigger) than they are, but light (small) objects are also perceived as lighter (smaller) than they are. The *range* of size (weight) estimates is wider in the condition with valued objects. Henri took these findings and theorising outside the lab to the external world and foraying into the areas of prejudice and stereotyping, examined how people make judgements about groups. Viewing categorization as a process that provides the basis for one's social identity and stereotyping as inevitably accompanying categorization, his early work provided emerging evidence for many influential findings, such as people's tendency to accentuate differences *between* groups while minimizing differences between individuals *within* a group.

At the same time, Brown does not soft-pedal Henri's limitations, providing an overall balanced and honest description of his subject. Without any whitewashing, we are made privy to Henri's neglect of his teaching and supervision duties, his proclivity for making unwanted advances towards female colleagues, and his bitter academic rivalries. We are presented with the story of a man at once ambitious and remarkable but not without shortcomings. Interestingly, the idea that Henri is widely credited for—the minimal group experiments—is revealed to have come from prior work of Jaap Rabbie following a similar paradigm and seeking to answer the same question (what are the minimal conditions under which ingroup and outgroup differentiation occurs?). Rabbie's work and findings ignited in Henri a curiosity about the effects of mere categorization. Devising multiple minimal experiments of his own, Henri demonstrated ingroup favouritism due to mere categorization as a robust phenomenon. More than the experimental design that only differed from Rabbie's in some respects, the interpretation of these findings reflected true ingenuity: ingroup favouritism was posited to arise out of reliance on one's social identity to differentiate oneself (and their group) from another in an intergroup situation (Billig & Tajfel 1973). This work marked one of the first allusions to the concept of social identity.

The allegations regarding sexual harassment of women students (see also Young & Hegarty 2019, 2020), in particular, have had implications for how Henri Tajfel's legacy is seen today (e.g., Brown 2020). In light of these claims, the European Association of Social Psychology, which Henri had helped establish and which used to give out the Henri Tajfel medal for lifetime achievement, announced their decision to rename the award (Keil 2019). Opposed by some and lauded by others, the decision generated much discussion in the academic community (for example, on academic Twitter (now called X) and via open letters to the EASP). As a culture, we are still far from resolving the debate about separating the art from the artist (recall the furor over J.K. Rowling's transphobic statements). In the case of Henri, thinking of his life and legacy in light of these allegations proves even more challenging as the man has been dead for decades, and the allegations have come out long after the fact. Due care needs to be taken in applying contemporary social norms to judge academic interactions in the 1960s

and 1970s. Brown makes a valiant attempt at giving due consideration to both the scientist's achievements and the man's failings; neither overshadows the other. He argues that Tajfel's failings do not diminish the value of his scientific contributions; it is still possible to engage with Tajfel as a scientist.

In the book's final chapter, Brown evaluates Henri's contributions to social psychology, including the social identity theory. Social identity theory has its origins in the minimal group experiments Henri had conducted. But it involved him going beyond minimal groups and thinking about how natural groups interact given the realities of power, status, and resources. Here, too, Brown does a laudable job, especially of tracing how the theory evolved between the two publications often cited for it (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel & Turner 1979) and how it has found applicability in originally unintended contexts and fields. Different approaches to the theory are explored and critically examined—SIT as a theory of intergroup conflicts or a theory of identity, for example. Its limitations, the questions it fails to answer, and conceptual and theoretical additions to/extensions of the theory also receive adequate attention. In contemporary social psychology, SIT, along with its 'cognitive extension', the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al. 1987, 1994), has evolved into more of an approach or meta-theory than a theory (e.g., Reicher et al. 2010). Some discussion on SCT, then, would have added to the last chapter.

Overall, the book is a praiseworthy and candid attempt at bringing Henri Tajfel to life. As has happened (entirely unintentionally) with this review, readers start by getting to know Tajfel and come out knowing Henri—a man as inspiring in his personal struggles as in his intellectual contributions. After World War II, Henri returned to France an orphan, "homeless, jobless, and stateless" (p. 44). He spent the early years of his career working different jobs and balancing his studies, work and family. His unconventional (yet ultimately successful) academic journey—one marked by hurdles both personal and political—is testimony to his grit and resolve. Perhaps most striking is the man's response to one of the most harrowing experiences one can imagine—Henri survived the Holocaust not with any bitterness or hatred but with a determination to *understand* such atrocities. In one of his correspondences referred to in the book, Henri notes: "... all or nearly all of my academic work has been based on a simple question: how could people have done that to other people?" (p. 195). In many such ways, Brown weaves a tale of Henri's fortitude and determination. Appreciating these struggles and achievements in no way implies condoning Henri's behaviour towards women. On the contrary, it is rather indicative of people's remarkable ability to see and resist oppression in some cases while ironically playing into the same power dynamics in others.

The book is also a significant contribution in terms of its usefulness to intergroup relations researchers. Regardless of their discipline, such researchers may find Henri's ideas and academic contributions of use to their work. One critical idea captured in the book is Henri's emphasis on social change (e.g., Tajfel 1972) and his view of humankind as agentic and active as opposed to passive recipients of the fate of their group. Social identity theory addresses questions such as: Under what conditions do

disadvantaged groups resist their oppression? What are the various ways in which they do so? The theory, thus, also functions (partially) as a theory of power and provides an avenue for exploring collective action for social change among minority group members. Furthermore, Henri was a keen advocate for interdisciplinarity in studying intergroup behaviour: he did not believe that psychology alone could explain prejudice, for example. Brown touches upon an unwillingness in Henri to draw boundaries between disciplines. In today's time of specializations in niche disciplines, often at the cost of even cursory knowledge of related ones, it will perhaps not be a bad thing to (sometimes) experience a "crisis of identity" like Henri and consider just how far psychology (or sociology or political science) alone will take us in understanding the social world.

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