

A LINE ON LIFE

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In-Groups and Out-Groups *

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Many of us are concerned about the hostilities between various racial, religious, ethnic and national groups. These hostilities lead to much bloodshed and death. Separating ourselves into in-groups and out-groups contributes to this hostility. **In-groups** are our groups – we are members of these groups. All other groups are **out-groups**.

A social psychologist, the late Henri Tajfel, wanted to discover how the positive feelings toward in-groups evolved and how this leads to negative feelings toward out-groups. He wanted to find a social situation that was so insignificant – so trivial – that in-group feelings would not develop. Then he would try to include various factors to find what would influence the development of in-group feelings.

In 1981, Tajfel used teenage British boys from Bristol as subjects. They were shown a screen filled with dots and were asked to estimate how many dots were on the screen. Tajfel told them that nobody could accurately estimate the number of dots – they would tend to be either *overestimators* or *underestimators*. After making a guess, each boy was randomly assigned to an overestimator group or an underestimator group.

In the second part of his experiment, the boys – now members of either an overestimator or underestimator group – had to assign points worth small amounts of money to boys other than themselves. At this time, all they knew about the other boys was that they were underestimators or overestimators. Each boy was sitting in his own compartment, unseen by anyone.

The results demonstrated in-group favoritism. Underestimators awarded more points to underestimators, and overestimators did the same for other overestimators. At the end of the experiment, when each subject was identified by his group label, the fellow "*group members*" cheered for him!

Tajfel repeated his experiment with different variations. In every experiment, an in-group social identity was formed. In fact, Tajfel's work has been repeated many different times with a variety of subjects in many different countries. These experiments have consistently shown that only the minimum of labeling is needed to create in-group favoritism.

Although we don't know if it is due to biology or our culture, we seem to have the need to belong to groups. In addition, we express favoritism toward our groups. We tend to view our groups – and their members – as more worthy than others. Unfortunately, there is only one small step from favoring our own groups to becoming hostile toward out-groups. This leads to viewing relationships as "*us*" against "*them*."

Rather than accentuating our differences, it is better to emphasize our similarities.

Even with this tendency to form in-groups, our perception of "*us*" and "*them*" varies with the situation and our mood. Each of us can choose the boundaries we make between in-groups and out-groups. At one extreme, a person with **paranoia** – suffering from delusions of grandeur and persecution – limits in-group membership to one person. The whole world is the out-group.

With a more positive view, those at the other extreme can classify all humanity as the in-group. When we are in a good mood and in a non-threatening situation, we are likely to define a larger, more universal in-group.

There is a major difference between these two viewpoints. The person with paranoia emphasizes the differences between others and himself. On the other hand – if we emphasize the similarities between others and ourselves – this makes it less likely that we will classify them as out-group members. It also reduces the likelihood that hostility will arise. It is very difficult to hate "*them*," if we understand how much they are like "*us*."

* Adapted from Irwin A. Horowitz and Kenneth S. Bordens, *Social Psychology*, Mayfield Publishing, 1995, page 17.