Urban neighbourhoods and intergroup relations: The importance of place identity

Fátima Bernardo [a, b, *], José-Manuel Palma-Oliveira [c]

[a] Departamento de Psicologia, Universidade de Évora, Portugal
[b] CESUR, CERIS, IST, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal
[c] Faculdade de Psicologia, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring the concept of place identity into the context of intergroup relationships in urban place, using the social identity approach. A field study was conducted in four adjacent neighbourhoods in the city of Lisbon, in order to explore the influence of place identity on the perception of the participants' own neighbourhood and its residents (in-group) and of the other neighbourhoods and their residents (out-groups). The results showed that place identity was highly correlated with neighbourhood satisfaction, relevant out-group differentiation, and favouritism to the in-group and depreciation of the relevant out-group. The results also enabled the identification of three types of possible relationships between the groups: a relevant out-group for comparison, an idealized reference group for approximation, and a devaluated group for avoidance. Moreover, in this study, we extend the predictions of SIA to the comprehension of specific distance estimation distortion patterns.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the importance of the spaces where we live for the identity of the subject has been recognized. First, the study by Fried (1963) regarding forced relocation in the city of Boston, and some years later the introduction of the concept of place identity by Proshansky and colleagues (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983), emphasized the idea that self-identity not only was based on individual, interpersonal and social processes but also included physical environments, making place a fundamental component of personal identity.[1]

Introduction of the Place Identity concept, despite the controversy concerning its conceptualization and operationalization (e.g., Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, & Breakwell, 2003), led to a proliferation of research over the last decades.

However, the concept of place identity from Proshansky and colleagues' point of view, as well as for most of the authors who have used the concept until now, was centred on an individualistic perspective, thus neglecting the social nature of the relations between individuals, identities and place (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2012; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). We define, place identity, as a component of personal and social identity, a "process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place" (Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace & Hess, 2007). Following the tradition of Canter (1977) and Stokols (1981) place is conceptualized as an interchangeable relationship between the physical-spacial and human-social characteristics of space. In this sense, place identity cannot not be understood without including both components (Proshansky et al., 1983). Thus, place identity can be grasped from its multiple components (spatial-physical and social issues) and the multi-place nature of individual and social place experience (individual and social meanings, feelings and experiences) (Clayton et al., 2015; Manzo & Devine–Wright, 2013). A third aspect that will be addressed later, is the multi-scale of places (e.g., Bonaiuto & Alves, 2012; Bonaiuto, Bonnes, & Continisio, 2004; Hernandez et al., 2007).

With the study presented here, we intended to bring the concept of place identity into the context of intergroup

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* Corresponding author. Departamento de Psicologia, Universidade de Évora, Portugal, Colegio Pedro da Fonseca, Rua da Barba Rala, 7000 Évora, Portugal.

E-mail addresses: fatimab@uevora.pt (F. Bernardo), jpalma-oliveira@fp.ul.pt (J.-M. Palma-Oliveira).

[1] That idea was not new. In fact, there are references to the importance of place and things for self-identity in authors such as James (1890), Mead (1934) and Erikson (1956). For instance, Erikson (1946) introduced the concept of "spatial identity", and stated that spatial aspects, such as place status, were important factors in the definition of identity.

relationships, by conceptualizing the urban space as for intergroup relations, based on the subject's sense of belonging to physical spaces (which always included both the physical characteristics of the place and the people who live or use these spaces). In this sense, place identity can also be understood as a particular case of social identity, consisting of aspects of self-identity based on belonging to geographically defined groups, and with which the subjects are identified. Although we did not find a systematic study of the principles and strategies of the social identity approach in relation to places in the literature, some authors claimed that these principles and strategies "look similar to those operating in the case of social identification with a social category or group" (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003, p. 225). In fact, comprehension of place identity in the context of social identity theory is not original. In recent years, some authors have used SIT and SCT to understand the relation between place and the physical environment in a more explicit (e.g., Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996; Ufkes, Otten, Van der Zee, Giebels, & Dovidio, 2012; Valera & Pol, 1994; Valera & Guardia, 2002) or more implicit manner (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2007; Lewicka, 2008).

Thus, we may assume that identification with a place may be understood through the principles defined by Social Identity Theory, SIT (Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner, 1985) and their subsequent developments. This research aims to use the SI Approach[2] to understand neighbourhoods' relations in the urban context and thus contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between place identity and social identity. The aim of this research is to conduct an in-depth study of a particular region to understand the dynamics of their place identity and to contribute to a better understanding of intergroup relations in an urban context.

1.1. Social identity approach

The Social Identity Approach, which includes the concepts and principles contained in Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self Categorization Theory (SCT), is one of the most widely diffused and extensively used approaches in social psychology (Brown, 2000), particularly in recent years (see Postmes & Branscombe, 2010). One of the reasons for this was the scientific utility of the concept in explaining inter-group relationships in general, the relation between the individual and the group in particular, and comprehension of the individual cognitions, emotions and behaviours, influenced by group phenomena (Capozza & Brown, 2000).

SIT considered that people defined themselves in terms of social categories (e.g., women, Portuguese) and that self-categorization provided them with social identities (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities were defined in an intergroup context through social comparisons between our group and another relevant group. The central hypothesis of this theory was that social comparison aimed to produce intergroup differentiation to achieve a positive self-evaluation of that identity. To obtain that positive distinctiveness, group members could use several individual and group strategies that could include in-group bias such as in-group favouritism and out-group depreciation.

SCT (Turner, 1982, 1985) was developed in the tradition of SIT and "represents a major expansion in the range of applicability of the social identity tradition, from intergroup relations and social conflict into the realm of group processes, stereotyping and social cognition" (Turner, 1999, p. 6). At the centre of SCT was the comprehension of processes through which people came to conceptualize themselves in terms of social categories. The basic process postulated was self-categorization, i.e., in some circumstances, people could define themselves more in terms of social category membership than in terms of individual characteristics. Each person could define him/herself in terms of different social identities that could become salient or not depending on the context in which a person found him/herself, and the person acted in conformity with that self-categorization. To summarize, "self-categorization is seen as a dynamic, context-dependent process, determined by comparative relations within a given context" (Turner, 1999, p.13).

Taking into account the aim of the study presented here, it is important to explore some aspects of the SI approach more carefully.

1.2. In-group identification and in-group and out-group-bias

In-group bias was a central issue in SIT. In fact, Tajfel, Flament, Billig, and Bundy (1971, Tajfel & Billig, 1974) verified with the 'minimal group paradigm' that the mere perception of belonging to one of two distinct groups was sufficient to initiate intergroup discrimination favouring the in-group. Due to the relevance of this issue, several authors (Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Kelly, 1993) considered that a basic proposition of social identity theory is the causal link between in-group identification and in-group bias. However, SIT never advanced this causal relationship (Brown, 2000; McGarty, 2001; Turner, 1999). Instead, Tajfel and Turner (1986) clarified that at least three types of factors influence in-group bias in real intergroup situations. First, identification with the group, second, the existence of relevant aspects for intergroup comparison, and third, the existence of similarity or proximity, makes comparison with the out-group relevant. In fact, several studies supported the idea that the degree of bias varied with the magnitude of group identification, both in laboratory studies (e.g., Jetten, Spears, Hogg, & Manstead, 2000; study 1; Grant, 1993) and field studies (e.g., Abrams, 1994; Jetten et al., 2000; study 2; Nigbur & Cinnirella, 2007; Smith, Giannini, Helkama, Maczynski, & Stumpf, 2005). For instance, concerning national identity, Nigbur and Cinnirella (2007, study 1) verified that British high national identifiers differentiated the in-group more strongly from others than did low identifiers. Also Smith et al. (2005) showed in a cross-national study a significant correlation between national identification and positivity of the national stereotype.

Likewise, several studies found a positive relationship between place identity and positive perception of place and its residents. This was shown, for example, in relation to perception of the space as being more civilized (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Félonneau, 2004), less dangerous (Billig, 2006), less polluted (Bonaiuto et al., 1996; Gifford et al., 2014), and a better place to live (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2013; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010).

1.3. Social comparison and relevant out-group

Social comparison was a core concept in SIT, but perhaps one of the most difficult due to the dynamic and contextual character of social identity. In fact, the theory was not clear in relation to how group members choose the relevant out-group (Turner, 1999), and there is a lack of systematic work on the assessment of comparison choice (Brown & Haeger, 1999). Furthermore, the majority of social comparison studies were conducted in a laboratory when the necessity and direction of social comparisons were assumed in advance by the researchers. Understanding and testing the choice of out-group for comparison in field studies is more difficult because frequently other variables interfere in the process (Brown

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[2] We use the term "Social Identity Approach" to refer to both social identity theory and self-categorization theory, as used by Turner (1999).