

**Understanding Social Identity Maintenance:**  
**An application and extension of the Social Identity Approach**

by

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## Abstract

This paper will use the real-world social identity group of the Menno Colony in Paraguay to illustrate the relevance of the social identity approach for understanding the identity process of groups, especially as it relates to groups striving to maintain a fixed identity. The colony provides a unique setting of a particular cluster of contextual factors lending the group to social identity study. What will also be demonstrated in this paper is the interactive nature of the elements of the social identity approach; specifically as they pertain to a social group's effort to maintain a static identity. Through the interplay and interconnectedness of social identity dynamic elements, in application to the Menno Colony, we see the necessary combination of factors for social identity stability. A model is offered to illustrate the complex relationships involved in the continuum of fluid to fixed social identity.

## Understanding Social Identity Maintenance: An application and extension of the Social Identity Approach

What happens to a group's identity as the group membership expands and as the environment external to the group changes? How does a large group, which strives to maintain a fixed identity over time, deal with the emergence of identity challenging difference and diversity within the group? While these issues are common in large groups and organizations, they are not easily studied due to the complexity in membership and external influences.

In the remote Chaco region of Paraguay a racially and ethnically homogeneous group has been facing these issues in relative isolation for over 75 years. This community, with their devout investment in maintaining a static identity, provides an opportune real-world setting in which to study social identity. In 1927 a group of about 1,800 German Mennonites left Canada to form a new colony in Paraguay, where they were guaranteed autonomy and religious and organizational freedom. Now 10,000 members strong, that same group holds great economic power in Paraguay as a major producer of beef, dairy products, and poultry.

The core identity of this colony centers on religion, language use, community governance structure, and social responsibility. This core identity remains relatively unchanged despite tremendous membership growth and change in internal and external environments. To maintain a stable identity a group must deal with internal and external pressures, influences, and relations that push against the identity definitions and boundaries.

In the relatively brief time that the Mennonites have been in Paraguay, there have been several key contextual changes impacting their efforts to maintain a static identity. Within the colony these factors have grown in influence to the current point where the identity of the Menno

Colony appears to be at a crucial crossroads. In 1962 the Trans-Chaco roadway was completed, connecting the capital of Paraguay, Asuncion, with the Menno Colony. This drastically shortened transport time for goods, making it feasible for the colony to move from subsistence to exportation. Since the completion of the road, the colony has become a major producer of beef, dairy, and poultry products for all of Paraguay. In 1989 Paraguay's dictator was overthrown in a coup and subsequently the Menno were compelled to participate in Paraguayan politics through electing a representative to the Paraguayan congress; something their doctrine had previously discouraged. In 2005 a change in Canadian law required all foreign-born Canadian citizens to live in Canada for one year prior to their 28<sup>th</sup> birthday in order to maintain Canadian citizenship. Many Colony members continue to hold dual Paraguayan/Canadian citizenship, resulting in a mandated year of residency far away from the remote Paraguayan context at a relatively early life-stage. A further, and more incremental change, has been the increased presence of non-colony, non-Mennonite persons living and working within the physical boundaries of the colony. As the colony has acquired more wealth, there has been a greater need for service sector employees. Over recent years this has led to an increase in Paraguayans and Brazilians living and working within the colony. As a secondary result, German is not as pervasive as it once was; Spanish can often be heard in shops and on the streets within colony territory. These changes collectively and over time have radically altered the colony's pattern of intergroup contact and relations. As contact with outgroups has increased, group conditions have necessarily had to change.

### *Level of Abstraction*

The self can be defined on different levels, such as individual or group. What level it is defined at is dependent on context and what level of identity is seen as relevant or salient. When

individual identity is made salient by context, affiliation with a particular social identity group may shift depending on the implications for the individual's self esteem given the comparisons being made (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). When the context makes personal identity salient, group associations will be based on their impact on individual identity within that context (Schmitt, Branscombe, Silvia, Garcia & Spears, 2006). Additionally, the identification with groups can occur independent from interpersonal interactions and cohesion (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Schmitt et al. (2006) make the case that individual and group theories of identity are not actually in competition but rather complimentary when viewed as depicting identity phenomena at different levels of abstraction that are more or less salient depending on the context. In this view individuals are seen to possess both personal and group identities and they will act out of those to varying degrees depending on the contextual dynamics involved. The focus in this paper is on social group identity and what contexts and conditions can be understood as contributing to group-level stability in identity over time.

The above described real-world social group of the Menno Colony is useful for illustrating the points made in this paper; for both the phenomena of interest and the level of abstraction that sheds the most light on the issue. The Menno Colony and the theoretical issue of static social identity are considered at the *group* level of abstraction. The social identity approach explains individual group member perception and action through their affiliation with social groups. Thus a social group can be understood through its relations with other groups and simultaneously through its individual members and their social identifications. As a point of demarcation, I am referring to the individual as an identifier with a group and am interested in their social identification process versus the individual identity of the group member. There are indications in the literature for using an actual group versus a laboratory setting for studying

social identity processes, as well as for approaching the topic at the social group level of abstraction. In discussing rationale for looking at social identity over individual identity, Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (2002) note that laboratory studies use arbitrary and temporary group formations which not surprisingly lead to placing weight on individual identity since insufficient time occurs for development of investment in the laboratory group. In those constructed contexts group commitment remains relatively low and prohibits examination of situations where group-level outcomes would have more prominence or salience for members (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Another possible and well-developed alternative level of analysis is organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006). Organizational identity has been defined as shared beliefs concerning the identity of an organization (Hogg & Terry, 2001), while others have argued for additional consideration of organizational identity having a social actor feature (Whetten & Mackey, 2002), and as being unique from individual and social identities and from the societies in which the organizations are embedded (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006). The Menno Colony presents as a more all-encompassing entity than these definitions of organizational identity indicate. Members derive meaning and value from and their Colony affiliation in religious, social, business, and interpersonal realms. It is more intimately related to by its members, a dynamic addressed by the social identity approach. Further, while the Colony is an organizational structure, it is more accurately a social structure both for its members and for the social context in which it is embedded.

#### *Outline/Paper Plan*

To survive and grow, large groups and organizations invested in a particular identity must incorporate and interact with myriad individual diversity while fostering stable group identity.

This paper uses social identity theory and social categorization theory to examine and elucidate the processes underlying the Menno Colony's apparent success in maintaining a static identity with strong and sustained member identification. Social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1974; 1982; 1986) and self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) have well-established explanatory significance for intergroup and intragroup behavior and identity processes. An overview is presented of these two related theories, as well as more recent developments of the social identity approach that explore and deepen elements of SIT and SCT. Then, using the social identity approach lens, the necessary components and conditions for maintenance of social group identity are outlined and elucidated. Next, the model is explored through application to the Menno Colony. Through this theoretical application and testing of the model, propositions are developed and articulated as direction for further theory development and testing of the model of social identity maintenance.

### Social Identity Theory

As theory develops, it necessarily increases in complexity as contributors seek to more comprehensively account for observed and experienced phenomena. Social identity theory, with its roots in the early social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), Realistic Change Theory (Campbell, 1965) and the work of Sherif and Sherif (1953), added complexity as well as increased the comprehensive explanatory power of the theory. Much of the theoretical focus of Tajfel and Turner (1986) is on intergroup conflict as it relates to social identity, and on processes of intergroup comparison and maximization of in-out group difference perception. Here, the discussion will move beyond conflict and self esteem maintenance to encompass the dynamics of identity maintenance for social groups. Over the more than 30 years since the introduction of SIT, there has been a rich academic discourse around the theory; testing, questioning, building,

and comparing and contrasting to other related theories of identity from adjacent academic disciplines. It has been compared and contrasted to Stryker's (1980) identity theory (Deaux & Martin, 2003; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000), and applied to organizational identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

As Tajfel and Turner and others continued to test and develop the theory of intergroup relations, the focus broadened to include motivations for social identification, contextual influences on group constructs, and individual social identification processes. Over time a significant amount of work has also gone into deepening understanding of social self categorization. Each of the elements of social identity theory originally laid out by Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1986) have over time been tested, explored, and deepened, and the interaction among them clarified.

#### *Early Development of SIT*

Social identity theory, with its inception in the early 1970's in the work of Tajfel has evolved and broadened in its focus over time. The research and theory began with a focus on individual identification with groups and the apparently related discrimination between groups that was repeatedly observed in research studies. In developing SIT, Tajfel (1974), Tajfel (1978), and Tajfel and Turner (1986), focused on the identification with the ingroup by group members, a piece that they felt was not adequately addressed by the realistic group conflict theory (RCT) of Campbell (1965) or the earlier pioneering group experiments of Sherif and Sherif (1953). RCT and the work of Sherif and Sherif approached issues of group identity from the perspective that social group identification is a process secondary to intergroup conflict, and that this conflict overrides inter-individual affiliations in favor of ingroup identification. While the original focus of SIT was on intergroup conflict, Tajfel and Turner sought to strengthen the theoretical focus

and explanation of the development and maintenance of group identity: not as a process secondary to conflict, but as one that may operate autonomous of conflict in terms of impacting ingroup and intergroup behavior.

A primary gap they saw in earlier models of group identification was a failure to explain adequately the many situations where individuals belonging to distinct groups could be seen as acting out of opposing group memberships when other contextual factors did not sufficiently account for the phenomenon. For example, upon being placed in a “group”, even when only a cognitive construct, in the absence of conflict or pre-existing completion or affiliation, individuals will make decisions directed toward benefiting their “group” over another, and over themselves as individuals. Tajfel and his colleagues sought to more comprehensively explain these situations of extreme group behavior such as the observation of the minimal priming that seemed to be sufficient as an antecedent to self categorization and subsequent discriminatory behavior toward an outgroup, no matter how minimally or strictly cognitively the ingroup or outgroup were constructed (Tajfel, 1974). They sought to understand the psychological aspects of social change through understanding social psychology of social conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Tajfel (1978) postulated that existing social psychology and individual psychology explanations were not adequate to account for the many situations in which the social behavior of individuals belonging to distinct groups can be observed to approach the group extreme in terms of ingroup affiliation and discrimination between the ingroup and outgroup.

A foundational concept of SIT is that intergroup behavior exists within, and is heavily influenced by, a broader social context. This relationship between intergroup behavior and social context is depicted by the interconnected relationships of four social behavior continua as

described by Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Tajfel (1978). These continua, their elements, and the relationships between and among them are the base upon which subsequent researchers and theoreticians have expanded the specificity and scope of SIT. To facilitate understanding of the complex concepts and interconnected relationships of these concepts I have translated them into a model (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 here  
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Figure 1 contains four continua: social behavior frame, belief systems, behavior toward outgroup, and perception of outgroup. Each of these and their embedded concepts are described in turn. The relationships between these continua are also explained. The model allows for visual depiction of the complex social and psychological influences that Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1986) articulated as the social context of intergroup behavior. The continua describe person level phenomena as they relate to social group identification. That is, taken together the continua indicate whether an interaction between persons will be framed by social identity or individual identity. Context is seen to play a major role in determining the salience of level of identity from which an individual will perceive, feel, and act. The theory of SIT and this modeled representation requires conceptual movement between levels of analysis, from person to group to social, while being explicit about what level of analysis is most salient in any given context. The theory acknowledges input from, and interaction of, different levels of abstraction and directs attention to those most pertinent.

The overall construct assumption is that the more intense the intergroup conflict, the more likely it is that members of opposite groups will act toward each other out of their

respective group memberships rather than in terms of their individual characteristics or inter-individual relationships. Again we see that the focus and intended explanatory power of SIT was conflict and differentiating identification in intergroup relations.

The first component of the social context of intergroup behavior is the social behavior frame continuum. This continuum ranges from interpersonal to intergroup and refers to the frame used to guide social interactions. Social interactions can be thought of as ranging from being based on purely individual identity to purely group membership. In any given situation, depending on contextual factors, two individuals will interact with each other out of a frame located along this continuum. It would be rare for extremes in either direction. For the sake of illustration, they could be interacting with each other solely out of their individual identities, such as husband and wife, with no input or influence from their respective group affiliations. At the other end of the extreme would be two individuals interacting with each other solely out of their respective group identifications, such as soldiers engaged in combat. The implication of the later scenario is that they would not perceive the self or other as individuals but rather as stereotyped representatives of groups, acting and thinking out of those generalizations and related comparisons. The assumption with regard to conflict is that with an increase in intensity of conflict one would expect a similar move toward interactions primarily framed by group affiliation rather than members acting toward each other via interpersonal relationships. Conflict then, is seen to increase awareness of group identifications and boundaries, both for the self and toward outgroup members.

The second continuum, belief systems, ranges from social mobility to social change. This continuum is about the perception of social structures and systems, ranging from open and flexible society contexts where social mobility is perceived possible, to contexts characterized by

intergroup stratification where social change is the mechanism through which social group status changes. These perceptions may be individual or collectively shared. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Tajfel (1978), social structures can be characterized by a number of key features; permeability of group boundaries, stability of group statuses, and the legitimacy of current status relations. These factors are also important determinants of whether individuals will identify at the individual level or at the group level. Individuals are more likely to identify at the group level when their group's status is unstable. In a pure setting this would then promote intergroup competition and social change. The individual level of identification is more salient when group boundaries are more permeable or inclusion in the group is perceived as illegitimate.

The belief systems continuum is connected with the social behavior frame continuum such that movement occurs in a corresponding direction simultaneously on both continua. However, as Tajfel (1978) explains, this is not a perfect one-to-one relationship due to other social contextual and social psychological factors which affect movement along the continua. Social mobility, at one extreme of this continuum, is described as a belief system that one can change group membership if not satisfied with their present group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Conditions for this extreme have inherent flexibility of social structures which allow for changing one's social group membership. Movement from one group to another is possible as an individual, not as a group. At the other end of the continuum, social change implies that the nature and structure of social groups is characterized by marked stratification. Under these conditions it is impossible or very difficult to change group membership without changing the social structures.

These first two continua are connected such that, in settings where there are perceived strong elements of social stratification, social behavior moves away from interpersonal and

toward intergroup patterns. In these intergroup settings individuals will not act like individuals but will act on the basis of their group membership. They can be thought to act out of their own group membership in relation to other groups. This scenario could be manifested by groups accentuating their differences. Tajfel and Turner (1986) note that explicit intergroup conflicts combined with settings of stratification, where social change is believed to be the only path for change, yield situations where there is a very high interpersonal price to be paid for defection. With movement on the belief systems and social behavior frame continua, the next interconnected elements of this model emerge.

The two above discussed continua of the social context of intergroup behavior yield consequences along the interpersonal-intergroup continuum. As depicted in Figure 1, the top two aspects then yield down to the interconnected and conceptually overlapping continua. These are concerned with behaviors and perceptions, related to relevant outgroups, that range from variability to uniformity.

The first variability-uniformity continuum is labeled behavior toward outgroup in Figure 1. Along this continuum, individuals will demonstrate uniformity in behavior toward members of the outgroup or greater variability of behavior toward members of the outgroup. When social contexts are closer to the social change extreme of belief systems, and the intergroup extreme of the social behavior frame continuum, there will be more uniformity in behavior toward outgroup members.

Perception of outgroups, the second variability-uniformity continuum, depicts a within-group measure of attitudes concerning the relevant outgroups. When social contexts are near the social change and intergroup end of the model continua, individuals will tend to treat members of the outgroup as undifferentiated in terms of their individual characteristics. Ingroup members

will tend to interact with outgroup members as stereotypic and undifferentiated members of a unified social category. Approach toward the opposite extreme of both variability-uniformity continua is associated with greater variability in behavior and attitudes toward outgroup members. Likewise, social contexts to the left of the model will lead to greater variability in ingroup behavior toward relevant outgroup members.

The above modeled approach to intergroup relations takes into account social realities as well as their reflection in social behavior through the mediation of socially shared systems of beliefs. It illustrates how social group interrelations reflect social realities. Groups interact with one another and behave, mediated through socially shared systems of belief. Intergroup behavior is both socially constructed and mediated by social structures (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1978). Building on this foundation, the concepts of social categorization, social comparison processes, and social identity as conceptualized in SIT are now introduced.

### *Social Categorization*

According to SIT, people are motivated to align with social categories by the desire to enhance self esteem (Tajfel, 1978). If a social category is perceived as psychologically real then an individual can identify with the category per se. The social category is seen as embodying characteristics through its prototypical members. This process of identification allows members to continue to identify with the group entity despite observations of non-stereotyped group behavior from ingroup members because the group is the level at which the identification occurs, while relevant individuals for the association process are those exhibiting prototypical ingroup behavior. One makes a choice in perception in associating with a psychological group and seeks reinforcing, stereotypical, esteem enhancing information from in-member behavior observations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### *Social Comparison*

The tendency to favor the ingroup over the outgroup in evaluations and behavior is the definition of ingroup bias. This tendency toward evaluative comparison has been shown to occur even in the absence of incompatible group interests (Tajfel, 1978). The mere perception of belonging to one of two groups is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This is self-categorization in its simplest form. Social categorizations are cognitive tools that classify and order the social environment. They provide a knowable and predictable structure of orientation and are relational and comparative. They allow the individual to know their relative place in society (Tajfel, 1978).

### *Social Identity*

Social groups provide members with an identification of themselves on social terms. Group membership is seen to come out of an individual's definition of self and others as parts of groups. These identifications are relational and comparative in nature. A group then is a collection of individuals who consider themselves to be part of the same social category, share an emotional connection in that common definition, and achieve social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1982). Social identification is essentially a process whereby an individual seeks to maintain a positive self-esteem through association with particular relevant social categories and subsequent relevant and favorable outgroup comparisons. When this is not possible, when the salient social identity is not favorable, members will either leave the group for a more positive one, or seek to redefine the ingroup in more positive or distinct terms (Tajfel, 1978). Social categorization serves two main purposes. First, it provides cognitive order to the social environment, giving a means for the systematic defining of others. Second, it provides a means for locating the self in relation to

the social environment. SIT further posits that the self is made up of a personal identity and a social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1986) define social identity as “consisting of those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging (p. 16).” It is this social identity that encompasses salient *group* classifications. It follows that social identification is the perception of oneness with some human aggregate. A person who defines himself/herself in terms of the group(s) to which he/she belongs will see himself/herself as a symbolic member of that group and will perceive the fate of the group as his/her own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

With this picture of SIT, its foundations, assumed conceptual relationships, and postulated motivational processes in mind, discussion now turns to subsequent developments of the theory.

### Self-Categorization Theory

Turner (1987) differentiates Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) from SIT by noting that the latter assumes an interpersonal-intergroup continuum of social behavior, and that intergroup comparisons focused on the achievement of positive ingroup distinctiveness are a major explanatory notion. By contrast, SCT makes *social identity* the social-cognitive basis of group behavior. It asserts that self-categorizations function at different levels of abstraction. This essentially means that both group and individual behavior can be seen as acting in terms of the self versus an either/or conceptualization of self *and* group. Turner (1987) also acknowledges the intimate connection between SIT and SCT, the former being foundational for the latter, and notes the high degree to which the two are incorrectly lumped together in literature. SCT explores the group as a collection of individuals sharing distinctive cognitive or psychological characteristics; a social categorization of themselves (Oakes & Turner, 1990). With this understanding of the

foundational differentiation between SIT and SCT, the SCT concepts of social identity, psychological group, and categorization are now discussed.

### *Social Identity*

SIT attempts to explain why individuals in certain contexts will act primarily out of group affiliation instead of from an individual perspective. It also focuses on how group members can respond to social-group status stimuli in interaction with perceptions about social structures. These then lead to collective strategies as predicted by SIT. So SIT looks at conditions under which the individual responds to social status information and social structures out of a social group identity and subsequently applies collective strategies, rather than interacting with social contexts from an individual self frame of understanding and acting. Social-categorization theory advances the theory via its elaboration on the role of group identification. It says that *salience* determines whether a person acts and perceives out of individual or group identity at any given time. As an example, consider the context of a university department faculty meeting. In one instance, the discussion is about university administrative mandates for departments to submit competitive bids to secure limited university funds. Department identification will be made more salient by the intergroup competitive frame of the context. Now consider another meeting of the same faculty where the discussion is about coordinating vacation schedules. Here, the individual level of differentiation made salient; one person's needs and schedule is positioned in contrast to another's. SIT posits that people will tend to not associate with a group that does not support a positive identity, when they have a choice in affiliation. This will be especially true when group boundaries are seen as permeable, when movement is possible by members. When this is not seen as possible, when boundaries are seen as fixed and movement prohibitive, individuals and

groups with low status must resort to other means to support a positive sense of identity (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997).

Social identity is a lens through which individuals enter into interactions with their contexts. One's social identity indicates the relevant self for a situation and this then interacts with the context. It is the context which influences saliency of a particular social self. That is, a given context will either enhance or diminish the social identity through which one is engaging in that given context. Social identity is not as easily defined and delineated as identity of the self. Each person has a range of social identities, cross-cutting, and also often from clearly distinct group affiliations. A consequence of this is that different perceptions of self and others emerge dependent on which social identifications are made salient by contexts. Social identity can have a powerful impact on people's perceptions, emotions, and behavior. The common Western notion is that the individual self holds primacy over the collective self or selves. The social identity approach posits that *context* is integral in determining the degree to which individual and social identities are salient and relevant for informing perception, affect and behavior.

### *Psychological Group*

Turner (1984) proposed the existence of the psychological group whereby individuals consider themselves a part of a group who share the same social identity but the basis for identification is not relations or connections with other members but rather his or her perception of fitting the criteria for inclusion in that social categorization. The member is effectively in relationship to the psychological identity of the group apart from his or her relationships with its members. There is an inherent difficulty in attempting to quantify or fully capture this process, in that by definition, the social group is a cognitive construction to which the individual forms an attachment or connection. The referent for a social group is not a concrete specific person or

thing, but rather a prototypical member which is also a cognitive construct. Further complicating the matter, individuals typically have multiple social identifications which may or may not be activated at the time of observation. Additionally, the social identity approach acknowledges the existence of personal identity and articulates that this activates in relationship with social identities based on contextual cues and prompts for relevant levels of comparison and categorization.

### *Categorization*

Social categorization of self and others generates a sense of ingroup identification and belonging, and regulates perception, affect, and behavior. This enables the categorized to conform to prototypical knowledge about one's own group and relevant outgroups. Social categorization creates the perception of predictability of behavior of the self and other, and allows one to avoid harm, plan effective action, and know how one should feel and behave (Hogg, Sherman, Dieselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007).

Haslam and Turner (1992) looked at under what conditions individual or social identity is likely to take precedence and with what effect. We all belong to a variety of social groups, ranging from clearly delineated groups (e.g., teacher) to those that are more abstract and ambiguous (e.g., fellow Southerners). As a consequence of this, differing perceptions of self and others emerge depending on which identity is most salient. Similarly, Ellemers et al. (2002), in looking at the self and identity in relationship to group membership, argue that "when collective identities are concerned, the level of commitment to a particular group or category determines how group characteristics, norms, or outcomes will influence the perceptual, affective, and behavioral responses of individuals belonging to that group" (p. 164).

A good example of shifting relevance and implications of contextual differences impact on social identification processes is in the work of Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers (1997). They found that psychology undergraduate students could establish a positive identity when comparing themselves to physics students on *creativity* but not when comparing themselves to the same group on the criteria of *intelligence*. A change in the context can cause a shift in the favorability of identifying with a particular group, one that may be more or less favorable in other contexts. It is the context rather than the inherent qualities of the group that determines the evaluative value of any group membership. Context provides feedback about social position that can either provide security, or engender a source of threat to self, whether at the individual or social identity level of abstraction.

At the group level, information about intergroup distinctiveness and social status are the main contextual factors informing this threat to the social self. Context also dictates possible responses to this threat. Stability, permeability, legitimacy and the validity of comparison information are all examples of contextual factors that can be used to develop and choose feasible strategies designed to address self-relevant concerns such as identity threat. Context then, is both the source of threat and the provider of potential resources to respond to threats. In turn, commitment to the group is an important moderating factor in determining the impact of, or response to, the threats and the use of the available resources.

According to Turner (1985) and Hogg and Turner (1987), the self-stereotyping occasioned by psychological grouping causes one to expect attitudinal and perceptual agreement with group members, such that disagreement triggers doubt and, in turn, attitudinal and perceptual change. Thus newcomers' perceptions gravitate toward those of the group. Identification with the organization provides (a) a mechanism whereby the individual can reify

the organization and feel loyal and committed to it per se (i.e., apart from its members) and (b) an indirect path through which socialization may increase the internalization of organizational values and beliefs. Given that individuals tend to belong to a variety of groups, their social identity is likely made up of an amalgam of identities. Ashforth and Mael (1989) maintain that multiple social identities are cognitively resolved through ordering, separating, and buffering the identities. This in turn leads to a potential change in primacy of referent groups as well as change in importance of identity-group associated attitudes and behaviors, that is, member reliance on a particular set of prototypical affect, cognition, and behavior.

#### Toward a Social Identity Approach Model of Identity Maintenance

Having discussed the social identity approach at length, this section will focus on specific elements involved in the social identification process: perceived threat to social identity, level of identification with one's group, degree of differentiation between ingroup and outgroup, group member perception of intragroup diversity, and boundaries and entitativity, or the degree to which something is perceived as being real (Campbell, 1958). The model is applied to the Menno Colony and integrated with the theoretical discussion. This paper proposes combining these previously researched elements of the social identity approach into a conceptual model of social identity maintenance. These concepts are collectively depicted as a model in Figure 2. While each of the concepts has been the subject of theorizing and research as separate concepts and in various combinations, they have not previously been integrated as a model to explain social identity maintenance. The concepts are not new to the social identity approach, however their proposed collective interactions are. The concepts underlying the continua are not wholly independent. As graphically shown in the model, and as will be discussed here, these elements are in relationship to each other. The continua of boundary and entitativity can be thought of as

conceptually connected and overlapping outcomes of the other four continua. That is, the combined location on the four axial continua, yield a particular boundary and entitativity characteristic for a social group. The four axial continua of the model interact with each other to create conditions of the outcome continua. Taken together, the continua of the model depict a complex interaction of social-contextual elements which are theorized to be significant determinants in the maintenance of social group identity. These relationships are not linear, unidirectional, or necessarily dyadic and so the discussion will move between concepts even as they are being laid out.

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#### *Perceived threat to social identity*

In Figure 2 perceived threat to social identity is placed as a continuum with high threat at the center end and low threat at the outer end of the continuum. The same factors involved in motivating social identification and self-categorization also underlie perceived threats to social identity. They are, possible loss of status, perceived lack of possibility to improve status, or if there is self-conceptual and social uncertainty hinging on indistinct intergroup boundaries, low entitativity, or a poorly defined and unclear ingroup prototype. These possible threat conditions can more concisely and generally be summarized as boundary and distinctiveness insecurity, and status loss or instability. Under these conditions, previous structural and cognitive stability is disrupted and replaced with insecure transition and change, with self conceptualization, status and related self-esteem at stake. Hornsey and Hogg (2000) argue that threats to identity may be an elemental cause of subgroup conflict within superordinate group contexts. Threats to social

identity will provoke behaviors aimed at enhancing or protecting social identity. Perceived threat accentuates subgroup solidarity, sharpens intergroup boundaries, accentuates ethnocentric attitudes and behavior, inhibits superordinate group identification, and produces a more focused and polarized ingroup prototype that renders the subgroup more orthodox with a more hierarchical leadership and power structure. We can understand this to mean that intergroup boundaries are strengthened, and perception of ingroup and outgroup members is more homogenous and stereotyped. Beyond perception, this logic also predicts an increase in stereotyped ingroup behavior both within group and toward members of the comparison outgroup. The stronger the threat to the social group identity, the stronger will be the defensive bias (van Knippenberg, 1984).

Ellemers et al. (1997) looked at group identification as a determining factor in member response to group identity threat. They found that low identifiers are more likely to see the ingroup as heterogeneous when under attack. They are more likely to exhibit individual level responses, distancing themselves from the group. High identifiers were more disposed to display a group-level reaction when their identity was threatened. The social identity approach argues that the group is more than simply a vehicle for self promotion or enhancement. This assertion points to a need to explain why then members would be so quick under some scenarios to leave the group when under threat; to utilize a member-level solution. The concept of degree of identification provides addresses this issue in that within this context the low identifier would be basing a relatively low amount of his/her sense of self on the group-level outcomes and would likely have another, more salient, identity from which he/she is acting.

In general, high status groups are less likely to feel threatened in comparisons with low status groups and therefore less in need of positive affirmation (Tajfel, 1982; van Knippenberg,

1984). There exists less need to differentiate the *in* from the *out* in this social situation; it is possible that the high status ingroup will have no strong impression of the outgroup. An interesting byproduct for the respective low status out group is even greater threat, rooted in the invalidation of identity stemming from the high status group's apparent indifference toward the low status group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

We can now look at the Menno Colony in terms of perceived threat to social identity to better illustrate the continua. The Colony in its remote Paraguayan location likely perceives low intergroup threat due to its high status in comparison to the Paraguayan and Indigenous groups which are generally less educated and of substantially lower socio-economic status. There are two other Mennonite colonies nearby in the Chaco region but due to the structure of the Mennonite system, different groups are allowed to develop independently without constraint from some central authority. This group autonomy likely minimizes any competitive sense between Mennonite groups. Further, it is predicted that their stark intergroup differences with their host context, Paraguay, serves to make salient the superordinate Mennonite identity. Again, the Menno colony occupies a high status position without direct competition from Paraguayans.

It is more likely that a significant source of social identity threat occurs related to self-conceptual and social uncertainty hinging on indistinct intergroup boundaries and potential for diminished entitativity for the Menno Colony. More simply, intragroup changes and increased presence of previously “outgroup” ideas and practices post the most likely threats to Menno social identity. As the Colony has become more successful in its agricultural efforts, it has engaged in business contact far outside of Colony borders and has increased in its need for labor sources outside of Colony members. This has included a small but growing number of Paraguayans who have moved into the Colony to live and work. These outsiders bring their

language and culture with them, as well as their physical differences. The differences between Colony member and Paraguayan resident (ingroup to outgroup) would serve as reinforcing of the boundary and distinction between groups. The interactions with outgroups can serve to heighten awareness of the ingroup. Because these outsiders bring with them their language and religious and cultural practices that are in stark contrast to those of the Menno Colony, it can be seen as a type of threat to identity that pushes toward the center of the model along the intragroup differentiation and perceived threat continua, with a respective enhancement of boundary and entitativity as mentioned earlier. The element of threat comes via a dilution of the saturation of Menno cultural artifacts within the Colony. While non-Colony members cannot own property within the colony, they can live and work within the borders. Along with their labor and services, they bring their sharply contrasting language and culture. The historical physical isolation of the Colony is undergoing rapid change and rapid increase and frequency of intergroup contact is now underway. As diversity increases within the Colony's physical borders, it is predicted that group distinctiveness, boundaries, and self-concept will be threatened. The latter element, self-concept, can be seen to be under threat as Colony members increasingly have contact and exchanges with members of outgroups. Over time it is likely that outgroup culture will become part of what is experienced within Colony borders, thereby lessening the distinctiveness between Menno and relevant other, and pushing against the previously held Menno Colony self-concept.

#### *Level of identification with one's group*

Social contexts have the potential to pose identity threats to individuals, and how individuals respond to these threats will be moderated by their level of commitment to the group. That is, differing levels of commitment will yield differing responses to the same contextual threat (Ellemers et al., 2002). Here we are concerned with the individual whose contextually-

driven salient identity is at the group level, and hence their response to the perception of threat will be moderated by the strength of identification with that salient group identity.

There are conditions that can create change in member level of identification with their group. Glasford, Pratto, and Dovidio (2008) looked at dissonance experienced when group members were faced with value discrepant behaviors. In scenarios where the discrepant behavior was from an ingroup member, members were shown to engage in disidentification with their ingroup as a coping strategy for cognitive dissonance reduction. Subjects experienced greater dissonance when value discrepant behavior was coming from an ingroup member than when from an outgroup person. This study also demonstrated that stronger endorsement of a value led to greater dissonance when that value was violated by an ingroup member. However, ingroup violation of *personally* held values did not produce negative ingroup directed emotion. Further, subjects in these conditions employed value-adherence activism, working to change group behavior to be more in line with one's own values, as means of mediating psychological discomfort, negating the need to engage in disidentification as a coping mechanism. So clearly the relationship is not without condition. This can help to explain how there can be member divergence from group values and yet ingroup members are able to persist in identification. It also suggests that in the case of the Menno Colony, perceived value discrepant behaviors of fellow members would be met with pressure to conform to group values. It can also be understood that if a significant amount of Colony members developed low identification with the group, then, all other factors held constant, there would be increased possibility of member disidentification with the group in the face of value discrepant behaviors.

The type of group, collectivistic or individualistic, has also been found to interact with group member identification level. Results of a study by Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, and Hogg

(2006) showed that concordant group members were more positively evaluated, especially in groups that had collectivist norms, and even more so when the evaluator was a fellow group member having a high level of identification with the group. Even in groups with individualistic norms, members exhibiting concordant behavior were more highly rated than those having independent behaviors. These results point to the importance of the context in which the dissent occurs. Brotherhood and community stewardship are strongly held values in the Mennonite culture. Assuming that the Menno Colony members would behave similarly to the above results, their collectivist group culture, along with member-to-member interactions, would direct and reinforce concordant collectivist behaviors. In this way, greater density of highly identified Colony members would serve a maintenance function, exerting social pressure to conform to social group values.

*Degree of differentiation between in- and out- groups*

Intergroup differentiation, a core concept of the social identity approach, has implications for both intergroup relations and intragroup life. Awareness of outgroups reinforces awareness of one's own group. It reinforces the conception of a boundary separating one's own group from another. The simple presence of an outgroup has been shown to increase ingroup perception of ingroup homogeneity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Pressures to evaluate one's own group positively through intergroup comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). There are three classes of variables that influence intergroup differentiation in concrete social situations: (1) the member must have internalized group membership as an aspect of his/her self-concept, (2) the degree of member identification with the ingroup, and (3) the social situation must allow for intergroup comparisons that enable the selection and evaluation of the relevant relational attributes. Additionally, the outgroup must be

perceived as a relevant comparison group; having similarity, proximity, and situational salience. Pressures toward ingroup distinctiveness should increase as a function of this comparability. That is, the closer that two groups are along relevant comparisons, the greater the social-contextual press for intergroup differentiation.

In the case of the Menno Colony we can see presence of each of the identified preconditions for intergroup differentiation. Because of the encompassing nature of Colony membership, as seen through it being present and influential in all parts of members' lives, we can reasonably conclude that members have internalized group membership as part of their self-concept; membership to the Colony is a choice and some degree of active participation and adherence to group norms is required. The degree of member identification is the component of intergroup differentiation that is least knowable without further direct investigation. It is likely that this varies with factors such as member age and social or economic position within the Colony social structure. Lastly, we can examine the larger social situation in which the Menno Colony is embedded and from which comparisons are likely to be made. In terms of similarity, the most relevant comparison groups would be other Mennonite colony members in Paraguay, or other Mennonites living in Paraguay but not affiliated with colonies. If proximity factors prominent in the comparison process, then Paraguayans living within and adjacent to the Colony would also become relevant comparison groups. Again this illustrates the importance of social context in the overall process of social identity and in the more specific process of intergroup differentiation. Social context will determine the relevant groups for comparison as well as the criteria along which the comparison is made. For example, the comparison criteria could include the following: religious practice, language, morality, work ethic, economic prosperity, social responsibility, etc. Accordingly, we can see how certain comparisons would lead to greater or

lesser degrees of intergroup differentiation, thereby influencing the overall process of social identity maintenance.

The aim of intergroup differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an outgroup on some dimensions. Prejudice, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and other aggressive intergroup behaviors form a subset of strategies that are capable of maintaining or achieving positive distinctiveness (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000). There are also other less aggressive strategies for achieving distinctiveness, such as ingroup solidarity; the use of totems, icons, and symbols; or gentle, benign intergroup competition. One group of behaviors is characterized by fear, anxiety, and destructiveness. The other group of behaviors is relaxed and celebratory. The authors posit that the determining factor in whether a group uses aggressive strategies or not may be the presence of threat to identity. In the absence of identity threat, distinctiveness can be maintained through more benign measures (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

The social context of the Menno Colony is one in which their intergroup distinctiveness is readily apparent and in which their superiority over comparison groups is easily established. Hornsey and Hogg (2000) would identify this as a context with minimized intergroup threat to identity which would lead to less aggressive strategies for achieving distinctiveness. Cultural traditions and distinctiveness is indeed highly valued in Menno society; it is a core part of daily life as evidenced through practices such as language, governance, business practices, and ingroup solidarity.

#### *Group member perception of ingroup diversity*

The perception of the level of intragroup differences has been shown to be connected to intergroup differentiation processes as discussed previously, to member level of group identification, and to the perception of threat to social identity. The definition of others and self

is largely relational and comparative (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Ellemers et al. (1997) discuss the degree to which the group is important to members' identities. This will affect their predisposition to use individual or group level responses to identity threat. To test this, they performed a study measuring perceptions of ingroup homogeneity and self-stereotyping and individual mobility as a management strategy. They measured ingroup identification as an input, not only an output, with acknowledgement that it is likely both. Among their findings was that priming for salience will enhance the effect of increased perception of ingroup homogeneity. That is, one's level of identification is directly related to the perception of homogeneity, and this relationship is even further strengthened when salience of the categorization is enhanced.

Using the concepts of the social identity approach and the findings of Ellemers et al. (1997) we can extrapolate to the Menno Colony. Social contexts and interactions that prime members for salience of their Menno social identity will enhance the degree to which they perceive the Menno Colony to be homogeneous. In reference to the proposed model of social identity maintenance, this dynamic would be illustrated by a move toward the center of the model along the intragroup difference perception continuum. In contexts that prime for the group level of identity, Menno Colony members will see their group as more homogenous and will be more likely to respond to identity threats using group level responses. An example of this is in the increased amount of non-Colony members living within Colony borders. The presence of outgroup cultural differences would prime Colony members for their distinctive group difference. As a result, the increased presence of Spanish being spoken within the colony, a potential threat to Menno social identity, would prime for Colony identity and minimize the degree to which intragroup differences are perceived by the Menno members. Further, it would result in person to person interactions that are framed and experienced as intergroup rather than

interpersonal. In support of this prediction, Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggested that identification may also engender internalization of, and adherence to, group values and norms and homogeneity in attitudes and behavior. Identification with a group often leads to stereotypical perceptions of self and others. It is a depersonalization of the self and increases the perception of intragroup homogeneity as well as the likelihood of conformity to group norms.

### *Boundary and Entitativity*

The model of social identity maintenance depicted in Figure 2 demonstrates how the illustrated concepts interact and interrelate to create the necessary conditions for maintenance of social group identity. The four axial continua of the model interact to yield conditions of a particular boundary and entitativity group profile. The model can be thought of as having two extremes. At the periphery of the circle are diffuse group boundaries and conditions of low group entitativity. Moving toward the center of the model approaches rigid, well defined boundaries and conditions of high entitativity.

Intergroup boundaries define where the ingroup ends and the outgroup begins, and they provide information about normative and acceptable intergroup and intragroup interactions (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Boundaries are related to the process and strength of member identification with a group. A particular classification is seen as positive to the degree to which a person invests self-conceptualization in the identity of the group. A person belonging to a socially undesirable group may distance themselves from the implied identity of the categorization. The degree which this is possible is also dependent on the nature of the categorization; what Tajfel and Turner (1986) refer to as boundary permeability or flexibility (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The character of an intergroup boundary, conceptualized in the proposed model as ranging from diffuse to rigid, provides information about the group as well as

how others will interact with it and how ingroup members will self-conceptualize. For illustration, in situations of group boundary permeability and threat to identity or status, members will opt for social mobility. Research indicates that in these scenarios an individual level strategy is more likely as a response versus a collective effort to deal with the status threat (Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; Ellemers et al., 1997). As indicated by the model in Figure 2, flexible group boundaries correspond to low member identification with the group, and with low group entitativity.

Entitativity, a concept first discussed by Campbell (1958), is that property of a group that enables it to be perceived as real; resting on clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, social interaction, clear internal structure, common goals, and common fate. Hogg et al., 2007 found that group identification was strongest when members faced uncertainty and the group was perceived to be highly entitative. Entitativity moderates the relationship between self-uncertainty and identification. People prefer to identify with high versus low entitative groups. Identification via self-categorization, a strategy for reducing uncertainty, is governed by a prototype that prescribes cognition, affect and behavior. Further, clear, precise, well defined, unambiguous and prescriptive prototypes are more effective at reducing uncertainty than those that are vague, ambiguous or unfocused (Hogg et al. 2007).

The Menno Colony has a rigid intergroup boundary and is highly entitative. When inside the physical boundaries of the Colony, the differences between it and the remainder of Paraguay are stark and palpable. Visitors easily notice contrasts such as roads and buildings are in good condition, cars are well maintained, and the majority of Colony members are fair-skinned and speak a German dialect. On a deeper, more systemic level, social and administrative structures are well organized and maintained, administration and governance of all Colony affairs are

conducted using a Mennonite religious philosophy, and ownership of land and membership to the Colony is restricted to Mennonites. The high entitativity of the Menno Colony is related to this clear and rigid boundary and its maintenance. Even from an outgroup perspective there appears to be a high degree of internal homogeneity, clear structure, and common goals and fate. Menno Colony members are clear about their membership and their intergroup distinctiveness. Their norms and religious prescriptions for thinking, behaving and interacting are clear and precise and well known. As noted earlier, the boundary and entitativity conditions depicted in the proposed model are conceived as outcomes rather than inputs, which help to elucidate the interactions of the other four modeled continua as well as the overall suggested process of social identity maintenance.

#### *Model Predictions*

The proposed mode of social group identity maintenance is useful for describing the identity climate of social groups. However, it also provides information about predicted changes in the event of contextual shifts in intergroup and intragroup factors. The model shows that location on any continua toward the outer bounds will decrease the ability of a group to maintain a static social identity. Again we can use the Menno group as an illustration of potential changes in the face of effort to maintain a static social group identity. This will be undertaken by looking first at the most likely areas for a change in the present balance of elements contained in the model: internal stratification and subgrouping, lowering of group status, and lessening of intergroup differentiation.

#### *Internal stratification and subgrouping.*

Static social identity requires, in part, that there be the perception of intragroup homogeneity. At times this perception is an outcome of other factors such as perceived threat to social identity and/or a high degree of member identification with the group, as well as a high

degree of intergroup differentiation. However, the Menno Colony appears to be on the cusp of changes that have the potential to directly shift the perception of intragroup differences. As the Colony continues to have more economic success, greater differences in wealth distribution within the community will follow. Related to this, there is an increasing difference in education levels within the community as increasing numbers of young persons continue past secondary education, outside of the Colony and many times outside of Paraguay. Where recently the vast majority of the Colony members were engaged in subsistence, economic progress and success have enabled some access to increased resources and education. As these trends continue, all other factors held constant, the perception of intragroup homogeneity is likely to shift toward greater heterogeneity.

This outward shift on this continuum will potentially impact the continua of member identification and perception of threat. Greater perception of heterogeneity allows for formation of subgroups within the Menno community. If identification with these subgroups solidifies, it is possible that identification with the superordinate Menno identity will wane. This in turn has potential to impact the perception of threats to social identity. An example scenario can illustrate this. A more affluent and highly educated subgroup of Menno members could develop. This group would strengthen its subgroup ties and engage in disidentification from the larger Menno community who have less wealth and education. Subsequent events that in some way threaten the Menno superordinate identity would then be responded to out of the subgroup identity and likely not interpreted as directly threatening. The overall impact, again with all other factors held constant, would be a group climate that possessed more flexible boundaries and lower entitativity; a more flexible social identity.

Proposition 1: Increased intragroup differentiation will lead to subgrouping and disidentification with the superordinate social group identity.

*Lowering of group status.*

High status is afforded to the Menno Colony related to their success in the face of great adversity. This is further protected and reinforced through their unique arrangement with the Paraguayan government. This seemingly secure high status rests on two basic social contextual assumptions: (1) continued agricultural growth and success, and (2) continuation of the protections and exceptions afforded the Colony by the Paraguayan government. These areas are also potential foci for a potential downward shift in group status. Agricultural success is fragile and susceptible to environmental conditions as well as continued interest by younger generations of Menno members. Politically Paraguay has undergone recent changes that have potential for alteration of the Menno context. A new President was recently elected, ending over sixty years of single party rule. That previous party was created by the dictator who originally penned the agreement with the founding members of the Menno Colony. The new President is thought to have more socialist/populist intentions. The Menno arrangement with the Paraguayan government assists them in maintaining the physical boundaries of the Colony and in communally allocating resources in a manner that clearly benefits members more than outgroups.

A decrease in group status would be a direct threat to Menno social identity. The group level basis for understanding the Colony and its relevant outgroups would be disrupted by this loss of status. The model illustrates that with static identity there is a related high perception of threat. It appears that initially these potential changes to Menno status would serve to intensify

member identification, perception of intragroup homogeneity, and intragroup differentiation, while also intensifying boundary rigidity and perceived Menno Colony entitativity. However, if these threats to identity were accompanied by sustained loss of status and actual social structural changes, then the model would predict respondent shifts. Perceptually the Colony could alter its criterion for relevant comparison to maintain self-perception of status. Structural changes hold greater potential for change in this scenario. If Paraguayans become more able to own land and resources within the Colony, the social climate will necessarily diversify. It will become more challenging for Menno members to live lives distinct and removed from Paraguayans. With lowered intergroup differentiation there occurs a corresponding increased perception of intragroup difference. The social group climate would then further be potential impacted as described in the previous change scenario; resulting in decreased ability of the Menno to maintain static social identity.

Proposition 2: Changes in social structures that lower group status and reduce protections will lead to decreased ability to maintain static social identity.

The caveat for each of the hypothesized areas for change in the Menno Colony climate is “all other factors held constant.” With this key assumption in place the model predicts an eventual movement away from the ability of this social group to maintain a static social identity. Actual intragroup and intergroup contexts never hold “all other factors constant.” One implication is that while theoretically grounded, this proposed model has not accounted for some aspect(s) of the Menno Colony. It could be that without holding other variables constant the system will seek to self-correct and other variables will shift toward the center of the model in compensation for another that pushes outward. Even in this scenario, it would be important to

discover more about that self-correcting group identity mechanism. Clearly the Menno have been able to successfully maintain a fairly static identity over their eighty years in Paraguay. Using this proposed model to come to a deeper understanding of the Menno and their ability to maintain a static social identity can advance the social identity approach and stand to benefit businesses and organizations invested in creating and maintaining static social identities.

### *Conclusion*

The bulk of this paper focused on explicating Social Identity Theory and the related Self-Categorization Theory, together known as the social identity approach. This was then used to construct a model for social identity maintenance; a previously underexplored area of social identity. These concepts as developed and represented here have significant potential import and utility for the business world in areas such as mergers and acquisitions, attempts to change corporate culture, and strategic corporate identity development as integral part of business development plans. What the Menno Colony offers is not its similarity to any business organization, but rather its unique context and makeup that present a relatively controlled set of variables that allow for lab-like isolation and simplification of variables while maintaining the depth and richness of a live social group whose identity is a real and integral part of members' lives. It is through study of this type of more extreme setting and group that we stand to learn a great deal for application to business and organizational settings.

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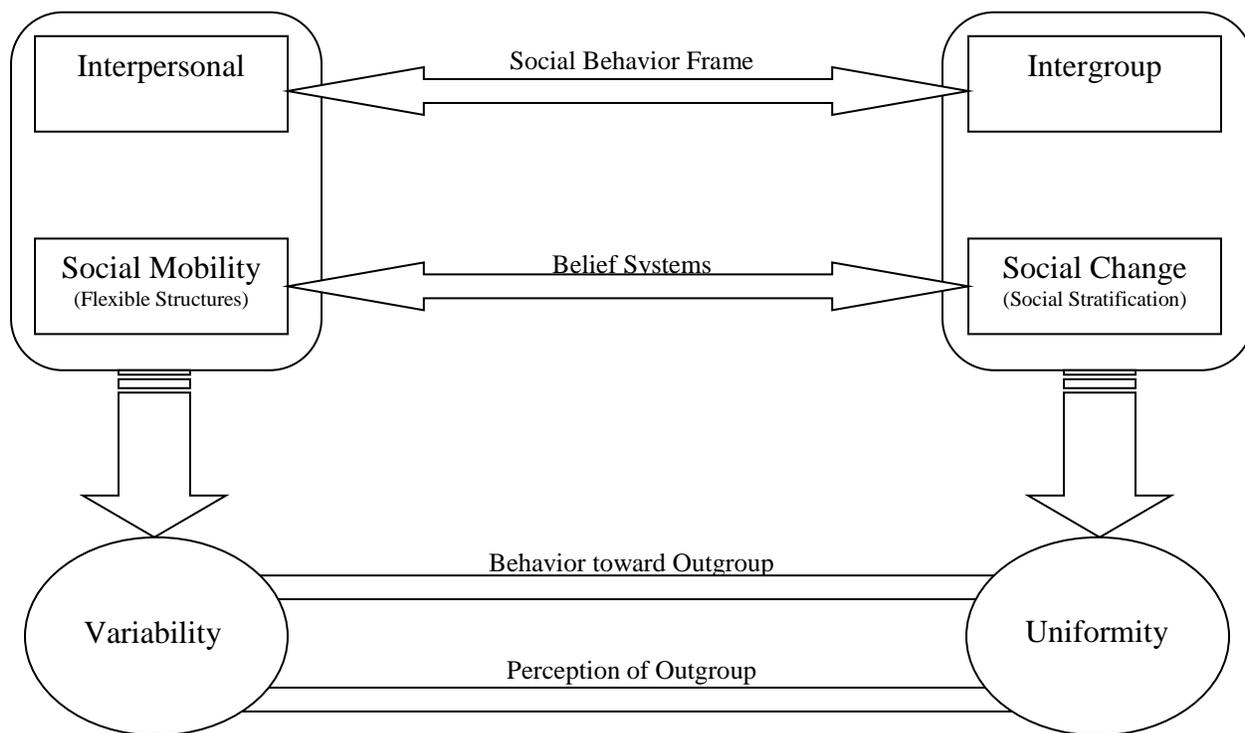
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Figure 1: Model of the Social Context of Intergroup Behavior



Note: Model developed from concepts in Tajfel and Turner (1986).

Figure 2: Model of Social Group Identity Maintenance

