An Exploration of Social Groups in Today’s World

A Review of

Social Categories in Everyday Experience

by Shaun Wiley, Gina Philoène, and Tracey A. Revenson (Eds.)


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Reviewed by

Annie Lee Jones

The edited volume Social Categories in Everyday Experience is a broad-spectrum survey of a subfield of social psychology. It explores the creative use of qualitative research methodology to illuminate the multiple ways social representation and social categories operate within and across groups and cultures. The contributors to this volume dedicate their work to Kay Deaux, her work on gender discrimination, and the political implications of the intersectionality of racism and gender. The book is also a tribute to the multifaceted way that individuals and groups are perceived within and across cultures, with a particular emphasis on the immigrant’s experience (Deaux, 2006).

This book is dedicated to Deaux’s perspective that “person and context are inextricably linked and that social psychology should address ‘hot’ social issues” (p. xv). Several chapters examine women’s issues as they are embedded in sociopolitical contexts across culturally sensitive hot button issues such as women in leadership roles, long-simmering questions regarding feminism and the Black woman’s role in society and political movements, and the matrix of experiences of people who migrate across cultures and nations.

Social Categories in Everyday Experience has particular salience for me because I have struggled with the issue of how individuals manage to repetitively communicate and incorporate particular racial and disparaging stereotypes about themselves and others so effectively. In particular, I am interested in the mechanisms by which political, historical, and economically situated power brokers or legislative leaders establish metaphorical contexts that empower them to stigmatize others they despise (individual, group, or oppositional political entity) in ways that draw forth repressed hatreds and biases in the national psyche. This can be seen most vividly in the attempts by various groups in the United States to attach meaning to the election of the country’s first Black president (Jones, 2009).

Although the book discusses social psychological topics, my review will examine the book from a more clinical and counseling psychology perspective. In examining the discursive space occupied by the analyst in classical or traditional psychoanalytic theory, Megan Obourn and I (Jones & Obourn, 2004, p. 246) found no room for transferenceal experiences of analysts of African American descent in the way psychoanalysis is located in the culture. Of course, there have been several efforts by Black and White analysts to theorize the presence of race in the treatment dyad, but generally there is no social category that includes non-Whiteness as a basic feature of the social construction of psychoanalysts (see Altman, 2010; Leary, 1995; Suchet, 2004; Thompson, 1987, for notable exceptions).
In psychoanalysis racial, social, and cultural dimensions of the *imago* (idealized concept of a loved one formed in childhood) of the analyst have to be tacked onto its construction in treatment. Black analysts must work within the treatment frame without benefit of the traditional culturally sanctioned "licensing stories" (Eubanks, 2000) that locate authority with the analyst to narrate and reconstruct the patient’s internal world. Works by Deaux and Philogène (2001) support attempts by Black analysts, such as Janice Gump (2010), to theorize the metaphorical possibilities of a Black presence in psychoanalysis. They held that “any interaction, whether between two individuals or two groups of individuals, presupposes shared representations which enable us to name and classify the various aspects of our social identity . . . shared reification of objects that make up their reality” (Deaux & Philogène, 2001, p. 5).

Basically, the work of Deaux and the authors of *Social Categories in Everyday Experience* support the clinical observations by psychoanalysts that social categories matter. Not only do they matter, but social categories along with social representations in all cultural forms intersect with each other in varying degrees and make experiences of groups both within and outside their normative and culturally sanctioned context understandable and communicable on multiple levels to others.

In her chapter for this book, Gina Philogène points out that “identity, in the sense of Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory, moves from the individual out into their web of in- and out-group relations whereby the object of that identity, the individual as social actor, becomes collectively represented” (pp. 36–37). She further states that

> we can look at the whole sequencing from single social category via the model of cross-categorization to intersectionality and beyond that to social positioning to highlight an interactive process of identity formation as a socially communicated and collectively represented sense of who you are for yourself and in the eyes of others. (p. 37)

Philogène further holds that social identity is an amalgam of different social categories that are stabilized in the culture by presumed shared knowledge, which gets elaborated in a given societal context as points of reference (e.g., God, America), . . . and carriers of action galvanizing individuals (e.g., the political activism of the Tea Party in response to President Obama’s health care reform initiatives). (p. 37)

Identity, its content, and what it means to be socially identified by others are constructed by social representations on the level of the dyad as well as of larger groupings. These representations structure our belief systems that are the underpinnings of the way we think. This brings me to the major contribution of this book for mental health professionals in all fields. Practitioners in fields as varied as cognitive behavior therapy and classical psychoanalysis will find each chapter of *Social Categories in Everyday Experience* illuminating. In addition, I strongly recommend this book for use in multicultural studies, but students in all types of psychology courses would benefit from this impressive social psychology book.

**References**


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