

Social Identification of the Pearson Family in *This Is Us*

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Abstract: Social identification determines one's identities in the approved in-groups and fosters the aggression and disapproval towards the out-groups, based on the social identity theory. The process of self-categorization also categorizes the classifications of one's multiple identities in the society: ethnic identification, interpersonal relationship, vocations and avocations' identifications, stigmatized groups etc. Besides, people's social identities are altering with time and under different circumstances dynamically. Those identities let people know who they really are, so that they try hard to gain their acceptance of the membership, improve their self-esteem, and pursue their physical and mental well-being. It is also true for those ordinary characters in the famous American TV show *This Is Us*. Under the guide of social identity theory, this paper focuses on illustrating the process of social identification of the main characters---the Pearson Family in this TV show, classifies their society identities based on the above four groups, and analyzes the causes of their identities, so as to reveal some implications about people's social identities and importance of those identities to people's life.

Introduction

Social identification matters much in all aspects of people's life. People live in this world with more than one identity. According to Tajfel's social identity theory, consciously or unconsciously, people categorize themselves into different in-groups; the memberships let them share those values, beliefs, culture in those in-groups and at the same time, some personal traits are accepted by the in-group members. Human's actions are also based on those in-group values; however, some distinctive values of others also form the out-groups, which set off people and lead to rivals and conflicts to other groups. It is the desire to be recognized by the society, by the friend's circles, by peers and at workplace that motivates people to improve themselves; it is also the eager of and pride of membership that unifies all the folks to find a cause that they can mold their life to. All the members in *This Is Us*, an American TV shows series, showed their struggles and striving to find their identities in their family, in the society and at the workplace. Based on the social identification theory, this paper will explore the identification processes of the main characters in this show, define their personal identities and analyze the causes of their identities in different groups.

Literatures on Social Identity

Social Identity Theory and Its development. The theory of Social Identity arises from the ethnocentric ethnocentrism, which explains the behaviors between groups. Ethnocentrism refers to in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. In-group behaviors and inter-group behaviors show obvious ethnocentrism [1]. The most influential interpretation of ethnocentrism is realistic conflict theory. However, only realistic conflict is not enough to explain inter-group behavior. Tajfel's later research has done a good supplement to realistic conflict theory, thus gradually defining the concept of social identity. Tajfel and his colleagues began to study in the 1950s and did a series of experiments to study the role of typology and extended the results to human society. The

classification of lines is like dividing human society into different types (such as the French, Germans and Britons); the judgment of lines is like the stereotype held by various social groups [2]. His findings revealed the root of discrimination exists in the inherent common prejudice. Sherif's experiments in the 1960s revealed the effects of objective relationships between groups on attitudes and behaviors among groups. As a result, Sherif put forward the realistic conflict theory, holding that inter-group attitudes and behaviors reflect the objective interests between a group and other groups [3].

Later, Tajfel did a series of famous "minimal groups experiments" to study the intergroup relationship. The study found that the awareness of group membership is the lowest condition for group behavior. Even if people are assigned to a simple, meaningless category, it is enough to produce the perception and behavior of group orientation. When the subjects are simply aware of the classification, they will type themselves according to the social types specified in the experiment. Even if they do not know each other, they will be given more resources and positive evaluation to maximize the in-group interests [4]. This cognitive classification will make us subjectively feel that we belong together with others and produce a sense of identity. The phenomenon of giving more resources and positive evaluation to the in-group caused by this kind of identity is called in-group favoritism. Members of external groups, on the other hand, allocate fewer resources and give negative evaluation, and such a phenomenon is known as out-group derogation [5]. This typing process will enhance the inter-group differences, and the enhancement of the differences is based on the favor of the in-group (which is usually accompanied by discrimination against the out-group), and it is in this process that the individual obtains his or her own identity [6].

"Social identity" was developed by Tajfel in the study of the above-mentioned group behavior, and the term was established in 1978. Later, Turner put forward the theory of self-categorization, which further improved the theory. Tajfel defines social identity as a part of individual self-image and the influence of the group on individual emotion and value, emphasizing the explanatory role of social identity to group behavior, distinguishes interpersonal behavior from intergroup behavior for the first time, and divides identity into two levels of self-perception: individual identity and social identity [7,8]. The social identity discussed in this paper focuses on the relationship between individuals and groups: which groups individuals belong to and what kind of emotion and value they belong to.

Social Identity Types. In the process of social identification, each individual is associated with different groups or social types, and a person often belongs to a different group so as to obtain the identity attribute of that group; that is to say, a person can have multiple social identities. Moreover, the multiple social identities are not mutually exclusive, but only part of the group qualities is meaningful; at the same time, social identities are not immutable: it is dynamic with the increase of new social identity and the decline of existing social identity. Many scholars have made a detailed and specific classification of the types of social identity based on different criteria. Among those classifications, according to Deaux's theory, social identity can be divided into five categories: ethnic and religious identities, political identities, vocations and avocations, personal relationships, stigmatized groups. Ethnic and religious identities may include Asian American, Jews, Southerner, West Indian etc; political identities divide people into groups of feminism, Republican Party, Democratic Party, Environmentalist...; in vocations and avocations group, there are people from all walks of life: psychologist, artist, athlete, veteran, teacher...; personal relationships can include mother, father, parents, youngster, widow...; stigmatized groups may contain AIDS patients, the homeless, the obese... [9].

Social Identification in This Is Us

Overview on *This Is Us*. Everyone has a family. And every family has a story. *This Is Us* pictures a typical ordinary American family with the growth of triplet children, the successful parenting of a young couple, and the struggles of their social identifications to the family, the society and to themselves. *This Is Us* chronicles the Pearson family across the decades: from Jack

and Rebecca as young parents in the 1980s to their 37-year-old kids, Kevin, Kate and Randall searching for love and fulfillment in the present day. This grounded, life-affirming dramedy reveals how the tiniest events in our lives impact who we become, and how the connections we share with each other can transcend time, distance and even death [10].

Everyone in the Pearson family is a unique individual with his/her values, beliefs and comprehension for life, and they are working hard in quest for their own identity in the family, their targets in their career, and their achievements in life.

Social Identifications of the Family. The whole process of social identification goes through three stages: social-categorization, social comparison and positive distinctiveness according to the social identity theory, while the first stage of social-categorization is supplemented and developed by Turner's self-categorization theory, which advocates that people will sort out things consciously so in the same way they classify people into in-group and out-group, which also includes categorizing themselves. They believe they are also characterized by and sharing those qualities of in-group members, which can be regarded as a self-categorization process.

As individuals, everyone in society cannot separate from his/her socializing circles and his/her in-groups; everyone wants to be accepted and recognized by the identified in-group. It is not only true with all people in reality, but also with those characters in TV shows. The main characters in the popular American episodes *This Is Us* best illustrates their relentless struggles for their own social identities, so the following part will analyze the social identifications of the triplets and their parents through the above mentioned three stages in their ethnic identities, interpersonal relationships, vocations and avocations and stigmatized groups.

Ethnic Identification. Race/color discrimination has been existing for a long time, even though the Federal and most states' laws prohibit racial discrimination in workplace, schools and other public places, and such laws has been on the book for more than 50 years. The typical stereotype for skin color complexion can group people into different classifications. For Randall, the only black boy among the triplet and adopted by Jack and Kate, felt different from his other two siblings since he was young. Gradually his realized that his skin color separated him from the whole white family, which means he didn't belong to their racial group, and he knew he would face the potential racial discrimination. Despite the fact that the black liberation movement led to legislations of elimination of racial discrimination since the 1950s, racism still happened more often than people believed in 1980s in workplace or at schools. Young Randall comprehended such a bias from an early age. His self-categorization for his racial in-group has finished at an early stage. In skin complexion, he did belong to the black people, but he endeavored to please everyone in the family and struggled to be part of them. Randall always wanted to prove to others that he was the same as the white siblings in terms of intelligence, even better than them. The motivation of his actions can be attributed to his self-esteem. Through better performance, he expected to obtain much the same respect from the out-group of the white family, which in turn promoted his hard work and persistent progressing in his academic performance and his future career development.

On the other hand, his adopted parents, Jack and Rebecca, also helped Randall finish his self-categorization and his social identification. Given the racial discrimination the black boy would face, the thoughtful parents were protective towards him, and gave their special concerns on him, in the hope that the young boy would be not despised and bullied by others. On the contrary, it was their very cautiousness towards skin color and sensitiveness to racial discrimination that aroused Randall's inferiority to his own race. Externally Randall was a black boy, while in his inner heart he was one member of the white family. Such confusion has been haunting him until he grew up to be a successful security broker. Finally he was proud of being a black man as his ethnic identity and of being a member of the white family.

Social Identification in Interpersonal relationship. Everyone's socializing circles, associates and families interweave with life itself, just as Randall strived so hard to gain recognition of the whole family. Interpersonal relationships in the family seem tangled yarn balls. Randall was aware of his adoption identity from his affliction and unfavorable attitude of his white brother and sister, so he felt puzzled and frustrated in the family. But the love from his foster parents could gratify him

in a great sense. The relationship between them seemed harmonious. But the desire to seek for his own biological parents became stronger and stronger. After he found his own birth father who, to his dismay and his astonishment, turned out to be bisexual, his interpersonal relationship went more complex sentimentally. But finally he forgave his biological father with compassion, understanding, and most of all, love. Besides, Randall had notable work performance as a broker in stock market to sell commodity futures based on weather patterns. The decent job brought Randall superiority, respect and wealth as a middle class in society, and he got on good terms with his colleagues. All the misunderstanding between him and his mother was dispelled through communication.

Vocations and Avocations' Identifications. In the Pearson family, Rebecca's vocation identification represents the most common woman's choice. She was born in a middle-class family, and used to be a beautiful singer in a bar, popular in her small circle. She might become a famous singer and form a band to attend a world tour. That was her ideal vocation. But as she became a mom of triplets, she had to give up her career and went back home to bear the responsibilities of a family. Although the shift from a glamorous performer to a full-time housewife did drive her crazy sometimes, her fruitful transformation in vocation defined her new identity. She also took pride in her parenting method and three successful children. For Kevin, it is rather challenging to shift from an influencing star to an ordinary actor in a new city. However, vocational change for him was subtle, since he showed a keen interest and a talent in performance in his childhood, which contributed to his success in acting. In order to stand out in his own field, he took no pains in his performance.

Stigmatized Groups. People's aesthetic perspective and appreciation is determined by the traditional principles. It cannot be deniable that people value physical attractiveness when it comes to dating, love and relationship; so women are supposed to be pretty and looked at; they are expected to be thin and graceful. Those are the female gender stereotype [11]. There are also stereotypes about obesity in our culture, and research has shown that people believe overweight and obese people are lazy, less intelligent, not successful, unattractive, not likely to be in a relationship, so it is almost a tragedy for an obese girl. Based on those fixed beliefs on obese women, Kate consciously took herself as the stigmatized group, self-abased and humbled by consciousness of the inferiority to her slim mother. In order to lose weight, she signed for some training center and tried hard to look as ordinary people, but all the efforts went nowhere. Fortunately, she met her true love, an overweight man like her, which helped her overcome her low self-esteem and regain her confidence. She accepted her social identity in the stigmatized group and was never troubled by the obesity problem again.

Conclusion

All the characters in *This Is Us* bear different social identities, each of whom has multiple identities in their life. Some of them have been suffering racial discrimination from childhood to adulthood, while some of them survived out of the stereotypes of others and eliminated the shackles that people inflicted on them. They succeeded in handling the complicated and tangled interpersonal relationships, forgiving each other, cherishing each other, loving each other, and supporting with mutual respect and everlasting affections within the family. Their identity in-groups endowed them with courage and pride, while those who despised and bullied them made them more powerful and more unified. Although in the process of social identification, lack of awareness of identity threw them into confusion, frustration and misunderstanding, they still pulled themselves together with love from family. Through the analysis of the social identities of those characters and their growth in recognition of their identities, it can be seen that each individual in the society possess more than one social identities, which define his/her positions and roles, impact his/her actions and personality, and guide the directions of one's life. In-group favorability improves people's well-being and self-respect, whereas the out-group discrimination may also be regarded as a motivation to propel people to move forward.

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