

Attitudes, identity and intergroup relations

HABILITATION THESIS

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Habilitation thesis- Abstract

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Abstract

This thesis presents the most important professional accomplishments and future plans of career development after receiving the PhD title in 2006.

The main focus of my PhD thesis was a socio-cognitive approach to the study of attitudes and attitude change. My interest for the study of attitudes continued in following years, after my doctoral thesis, remaining one of my main research topics.

However, my research interest diversified and I become increasingly interested by the topic of identity, both personal and social identity, but also with the role that social identity plays in self and intergroup perceptions and intergroup attitudes.

Also, I'm interested in the topic of identity change or identity transformation under threat and the identity processes in groups with higher social vulnerability. Bringing together identity, intergroup relations, and intergroup attitudes allowed me to successfully combine the two main topics of interest in my research.

Teaching developmental psychology and psychology of attitudes, my research includes the study of development of intergroup attitudes and social development in different age groups. The first part of my thesis is divided into three thematic sections: a) *attitudes' functioning and attitude change*, b) *personal and social identity processes*, and c) *intergroup attitudes*.

a) Attitudes' functioning and attitude change.

There are many models of attitude function seeking to optimize the prediction of behavior from attitudes. Recently, the authors of the socio-cognitive model suggest that attitudes are cognitive representations with a social function, mainly the social integration (Greenwald et al., 2002). From this point of view, attitudes can predict some cognitive processes, such as inferences and judgments, but also behavior in some situations. In this case, the behavior is the source and the attitude is the outcome. But not even in this situation the consistency between attitude and behavior is not high. The attitude-behavior relation is also influenced by personality factors and situational factors. A personal look on the topic of attitude structure, function and

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change could take into account the existence of three categories of factors: a) *priming/ activation factors*, b) *structuring factors*, and c) *consistency factors*.

This perspective was used to build and test a new dual model of attitude change taking into account the cognitive- affective factor and the behavioral component. There is a lot of evidence as to the influence of behavior on attitudes (e.g. cognitive dissonance) and the influence of attitudes on behavior (e.g. theory of reasoned action), but there is no previous model that combines the three aspects.

b) Personal and social identity processes.

Identity researchers have shown that certain context changes lead to identity transformation: identity can shift due to marriage, career and family development, specific and intense life events, or living in a new country. *Identity negotiation theory* refers to the processes through which people receive input from their environment in order to maintain their identities (Swann & Bosson, 2008; Brewer, 1991). Within *identity control theory* (Burke, 2006) identity is viewed as a set of self-relevant standards for a particular identity, a dynamic, self-regulating control system that operates when that identity is activated. Identity change may occur when people have multiple identities, related to each other, in the sense that they share meanings and are activated at the same time. *Identity change model* (Sussman, 2002) asserts that people successfully adapt to a host country by changing behaviors, thoughts, and even identity. Moving across cultures leads to change: some changes appear on the surface, other changes may influence an individual's perception of his or her values and beliefs. Sometimes, the question of right/wrong in a foreign country as compared to one's country of origin may affect individuals to the point that they question their choices and even their own identity. Answering to questions such as "Who am I" "Who am I in this place/country/context?" or "Who will I be there?" may help a person reframe their identity in a new context or regain the perception of control over one's sense and meaning of personal or social identity.

My research on this topic focuses on the identity under threat in situations of migration, social comparison with a group of higher perceived status or identity of a person belonging to a socially less desirable status (e. g. smokers).

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c) Intergroup attitudes.

Social identity theory and self-categorization theory state that personal identity is linked to a group and that sometimes salient self-images may be based primarily on our group memberships (Turner, 1984). Self-categorization theory emphasizes that people try to join groups they regard as positive and that compare favorably with relevant out-groups. The need for self-esteem derived from group membership may lead to prejudice and discrimination towards out-groups. The *essentialist* approach of continuity is based on the belief in some stable and enduring, essential core of identity; thus, continuity is maintained by denying change (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner & Moffitt, 2007). Essentialism also fosters negative attitudes towards out-groups perceived as having a “bad essence”.

Another line of thinking is that social identity processes are driven mainly by interplay of motives for *distinctiveness* and for *belonging* (Brewer, 1991). *Optimal distinctiveness theory* proposes that the belonging need can be met through inclusion in groups, and the distinctiveness need is met through differentiating one's group from other groups. People increase identification with smaller (more distinctive) groups when their sense of distinctiveness is threatened and with larger (more inclusive) groups when their sense of belonging is threatened.

My research focuses on intergroup attitudes related to intergroup essentialist or prototypical perception, intergroup cooperation and identity content.

The future directions in career development include these main directions of research but also some new topic such as cognitive bias, seen as a more general framework in which we can find prejudice and other partisan thinking, leading to improper social and personal functioning.