Categorization in Social Psychology

Craig McGarty
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Preface

I have been planning a book about categorization for most of the last decade. However, the actual serious end of the writing started in 1997. This late start was probably fortunate given that developments in the field, and some changes in my own thinking, would have put earlier drafts out of date.

I have long been a big fan of short books. For this reason I feel I need to explain why the reader is now confronted with a tome of this length. The book is 50 per cent longer than the one I had intended to write, but contains approximately two-thirds of the material that I had intended to review. The explosion of interest in the topic of categorization has meant that I have not been able to review many topics as thoroughly as I would have liked.

Instead what I have tried to do is lay a path for the reader who wants an overview of the relevance of categorization for social psychology, from what can be termed an intergroup approach. Indeed if I had included a subtitle such as ‘an intergroup perspective’ this would not misrepresent the finished work.

I have reduced the scope of the work in two other ways. The first is that I have decided to restrict the pool from which I have sampled representative work to that by researchers (chiefly in social and cognitive psychology) who define the area of their work to be categorization. If I had instead sampled from research that could be said to be ‘about categorization’ or to ‘involve categorization’ I think my task would have been unmanageably large.

The second restriction that I have placed on the work is that I have largely made it a book of ideas rather than of empirical results. When I do deal with empirical results in some detail it is normally because I am attempting to make a particular point (often one quite different from the major focus of the original paper) or to show a representative example of research. My justification for this strategy is that our science has many avenues for the publication of empirical results: it has many journals that publish empirical research almost exclusively and some journals that mainly publish summaries of empirical results, and where edited book chapters are commissioned they often rely heavily on summaries of empirical results.

For reasons relating to lack of space and the inclination of authors and editors, empirically based papers often do not include much explanation of the ideas that provide the basis for the research. Furthermore, the interpretations of those results (even by the original authors) frequently change over time. The best place for providing a commentary about these changes in interpretations is in a monograph such as this one, and that is why I have devoted so much space to commentary here.
Many readers will note that my discussion of some widely accepted views in social psychology is, at times, vigorous. This stems not from any lack of respect for other workers in the field, but from my view of the duty that the author owes to the reader. No commentator on the literature can guarantee that s/he has adequately covered all relevant details. However, the reader should expect the author to present his or her views on the material that is covered in the clearest possible terms. I have tried to express my own views at this time as accurately as I can reflect them. If I had deeper or more serious reservations about the work of other researchers then I would have included those too.

My strategy for developing the content of this book has actually been rather simple. I have assumed that, apart from a few foundational assumptions that I present in Chapter 1, most of the key social psychological ideas about categorization are potentially deficient in important or interesting ways. Readers of Part II of the book will note that my own work, and that of colleagues with whom I have worked closely at various times, does not emerge unscathed from this critical process. Nevertheless, because I have cast a critical eye across the field it is easy to get caught up in the points of difference. I believe that the big picture shows that the study of categorization in social and cognitive psychology has made remarkable progress, that progress continues to be steady, and that much excellent work has already been done from many different approaches.

Part I of this book is the part that will be more suitable for advanced undergraduate students and graduate student courses. If the book is to be used for this purpose I strongly recommend that the text be supplemented by selected articles and chapters (some suggestions are included below). Readers will find a glossary of key terms embedded in the text for Part I. Although this form of glossary might be expected in a book aimed at a less advanced audience, I have decided that it is nevertheless very useful as a way of avoiding definitional imprecision and as a guide for navigating through the material.

Part II is my attempt to state and resolve a set of related problems in the field. To do that I open up some other larger and deeper problems. To make much progress it seems to me to be necessary to provide serviceable answers to those problems, and I also attempt that here. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 therefore may be of interest to those readers who might not otherwise be attracted to a book on the categorization process in social psychology. Given that reviews inevitably become out of date, Part II also provides a strong justification for the lasting value of a book of this type. In one sense a clear statement of answers to scientific problems never becomes out of date. Aspects may be accepted or rejected, perhaps in time the entire enterprise may be rejected, but it nevertheless stands as an alternative, providing at the very worst a guide as to what has been tried in the past and found to be unsatisfactory. This then is what I have tried to do in Part II: to provide as clear as possible a statement of my ideas (at least where those ideas are themselves reasonably clear) and the reasons for them so that you can accept or reject them as you see fit.
I accept that this is not as conventional or orthodox a practice in social psychology as it should be (except perhaps in anonymous journal reviews where much of the field’s best and worst work is actually done). Much of the public discourse of social psychology today seems to me to follow the catch-cry ‘Can’t we all be right?’ My answer is ‘No, we can’t’ and I explain why in Chapter 9 (though this picture is qualified somewhat in Chapter 11).

My commitment to a conflictual approach to science owes much to my work with John Turner and I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to him and to other colleagues at the Australian National University including especially Alex Haslam and Penny Oakes. I trust that regardless of whether they find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the details of my arguments they will recognize the approach.

Without in any way detracting from his great intellectual contribution to so many of my ideas here I must also single out Alex Haslam’s influence in a different vein. The extent to which I have been able to manage a project of this size on my own reflects the beneficial influences of having previously worked with Alex on two books and a study guide.

Although much of the work that has provided the inspiration for this book has been collaborative in the most positive sense, the version of the views stated here is my own (with the exception of Chapter 9 which involves a collaboration with Diana Grace). The dangers in generalizing my current views to the numerous colleagues involved in that joint work more or less increase the further one goes into the book.

I would like to thank Mark Nolan, Alex Haslam, Wendy van Rijswijk, Mike Smithson and Michael Cook for commenting on sections of the manuscript or certain ideas contained herein. I would point out that in each case these people commented on an early draft: I had plenty of time and opportunity (if not motive) to introduce new errors of my own after they had looked at it!

I would like to thank those colleagues, students and friends at ANU and elsewhere who have helped me clarify my thinking about categorization over the years. Most of these individuals are referred to in the pages within, but I would like to thank Lyndon Brooks, Brenda Morrison, Peter McMahon and Mark Scarborough here and to thank Sam Penny for starting me off on categorization. Thanks also to Ziyad Marar and Naomi Meredith at Sage for their help and encouragement and to Brian Goodale for copy-editing and Seth Edwards for managing production.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Fiona Lynn, for her support throughout the writing of this book – even though this was somewhat tempered by her suggestion that I didn’t appear to be a sufficiently ‘tortured author’!

Using Part I for teaching purposes

Instructors of advanced undergraduate or graduate students may wish to consider some of the following papers as a minimum set of supplementary
materials. I have selected the papers on the criteria that they strike a balance of theoretical innovation and empirical developments and that they have appeared in a wide range of readily available journals. For each section I have nominated two papers differing in approach or in a span of years to highlight developments in the field. In most cases I have selected the papers from social rather than cognitive psychology. In no case are the two papers addressing identical questions, but they provide good examples of research for instructors who will need to leaven theoretically focused seminars or lectures with empirical details.

Chapter 2

Section A: The functions of categorization

Section B: Category structure and representation

Chapter 3

Section A: Similarity-based approaches to category learning

Section B: Theory-based approaches to category learning and use

Section C: Categorization effects

**Chapter 4**

**Section A: Categorization as biased stimulus processing**

**Section B: Categorization as the activation of stored knowledge**

**Section C: Affective, evaluative and motivational influences on categorization**

**Chapter 5**

**Section A: The social categorization tradition**

**Section B: Self-categorization and categorization**
Chapter 6

Section A: Coherence-based approaches

Section B: Explanation-based approaches

Section C: Assimilation and contrast approaches

Chapter 7

Section A: Limits on capacity

Section B: Error and biases

Section C: Stored categories