Analysing organisational life

Book review
Haslam, A (2000) **Psychology in organisations: The social identity approach.**
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Psychology in organisations: A social identity approach by Alex Haslam is well written, systematically structured and comprehensive. Yet it is a highly readable, accessible and powerfully argued text. The book, written by one of the pre-eminent theorists in the social identity tradition, provides a social psychological (re)analysis of organisational life. It is a book that challenges many of the central assumptions, and exposes the implicit political implications, of the dominant theoretical models in the field of organisational psychology. In this sense alone it is a controversial and worthwhile read for those with an interest in organisational and social psychology, human behaviour in organisational contexts and the politics of organisational theory.

The book begins by defining the historical development of the dominant psychological paradigms in organisational research and theory. Haslam uncovers their strengths, weaknesses and influence upon research and theoretical development in the domain. In so doing Haslam points toward the inherent limitations of these paradigms brought about by their reliance upon individualistic meta theory and their subsequent failure to adequately specify the psychology through which "group memberships and social relations contribute to organisational life" (p21). This critique captures the central thrust of the book that seems to be to provide a novel, yet timely, application of the social identity approach to the organisational domain while simultaneously integrating the existing research and providing a model for theoretical and practical progress within the discipline.

The book provides a detailed yet concise and easy to read synopsis of the social identity approach (incorporating both Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory) that highlights the intimate relationship between social contexts, psychological group membership and individual self-definition. In so doing one is therefore provided with a clear social psychological framework for understanding the processes through which individual psychology is "transformed" by involvement within organisational systems (in their widest sense). Moreover, that this "transformation" is predictable on the basis of social identity principles and therefore that the approach provides the

theoretical basis from which to understand not only the behaviour of individuals within organisations but the effective (or ineffective) functioning of organisations as a whole.

The book then goes on to demonstrate the explanatory power of the social identity approach by tackling many of the key topic areas in organisational research and theory. This takes the reader on a journey from leadership through a series of issues that range from group productivity and motivation to power, collective action and industrial protest. Within all of the topic areas the book provides a comprehensive and systematic review of the existing research literature provided by each of the major paradigms once again pointing to their strengths, weaknesses and implications. Halsam then draws these sometimes competing views together and integrates them using the "social identity approach", substantiating his arguments through references to large amounts of convincing empirical evidence. Yet while the book treats each of the main topic areas separately there is also an intelligent and continuous integration of key studies both within and across domains that helps to tie up the central theoretical arguments made by Haslam into a clear, coherent and convincing narrative.

Given its strengths and topic areas this book could easily be described, and indeed used, as a comprehensive textbook for those interested in organisations, organisational behaviour, organisational psychology, social psychology and group processes. That in itself would be a notable achievement. But, as the highly complimentary foreword by John Turner points out, this book is so much more than that.

First of all the book represents a significant departure in social identity / self-categorisation research and theory into a domain dominated by a theoretical individualism that to many has become a benchmark of inadequate and ideologically polluted theory. Haslam's work demonstrates the ways in which an individualistic focus has political and social implications, here because it supports particular forms of institutional practice that can be both unjust and counter productive. For example, the chapter on leadership points toward the ways in which dominant theory supports the idea of paying large salaries to encourage "charismatic individuals" to an organisation in the hope of engendering successful leadership. Haslam rejects this idea pointing instead to a large body of empirical evidence that suggests such moves are actually demotivating to the workforce. Instead the evidence Haslam discusses points toward strategies of mutual recognition and reward for their subordinates too since it is the relationship between a leader and a follower that needs to be nurtured for successful leadership to emerge. As Halsam states "to the extent that resources are directed at the leader in isolation, they may not only be wasted but downright counter productive" (p83).

Both those outside and within psychology who are aware of the negative ways in which psychology is used in society and are dismayed by the weak contribution of our discipline to important social issues will be refreshed by the way in which Haslam exposes the inherently political dimensions of our work. As he states "one of the principle achievements of the social identity approach is that it helps understand the interplay between the political and psychological dimensions of organisational life as these are played out and as we attempt to manage them. In this, it makes psychologists' role as political agents explicit, encouraging us both to acknowledge this role and to reflect upon the uses to which it might be put" (p299). Disillusioned by

debates within the abstract, sterile and often pointless confines of social psychology Haslam has chosen to take theoretical individualism on in an arena where it has a direct impact on peoples' working lives. In so doing Haslam demonstrates, clearly and powerfully, that through the social identity approach social psychology does have something very progressive and powerful to offer.

Secondly, the book also serves an important role in clarifying the nature of the social identity approach itself. While the theoretical model is having an increasing impact within the domain of social psychology there are increasingly heated debates concerning its accurate interpretation. Haslam's book, along with Turner's forward, serves as a clear demonstration of the nature of the theoretical model and in particular clarifies the relationship between Self Categorisation Theory and its precursor Social Identity Theory. Such clarifications are important because those who actively misrepresent the approach undermine its development and deny would be users of the analytical tools that will help them to understand and tackle the social issues that are relevant to them.

All in all this is an entertaining and groundbreaking book that serves a multitude of purposes across a wide range of disciplines. I can only hope that it becomes required reading for those charged with structuring the organisational contexts that constitute academia. And that we see more attempts by social psychologists to take the social identity approach out into the world in way that can serve to demonstrate its validity while providing conceptual tools for those seeking to change that world into a fundamentally better place.