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The Social Identity Approach and Historical Research on the Early Modern Era

Review article

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This review article explores the applicability of the Social Identity Approach (SIA) in historical research, focusing on research and sources from the Early Modern era, particularly the context of the Lutheran Reformation. The study argues that while identity is often treated as self-evident in religious historical research, SIA offers conceptual tools that can enrich historical interpretation. Using examples from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers' texts, the article demonstrates how boundaries of "true Christianity" were negotiated and maintained, and how the conceptualizations of SIA could be used in these discussions. It also highlights methodological challenges: historians lack direct access to human cognitive processes and must rely on mediated, fragmentary sources, which necessitates contextualization and source criticism to avoid anachronism. SIA should therefore be employed as a heuristic framework rather than a predictive model. When applied critically, it enables nuanced analysis of identity construction and group dynamics, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue between history and social psychology.

Introduction

In November 2025, I participated in a symposium entitled Christianity and Education, arranged by the Finnish Theological Literature Society. The topics were both historical and contemporary, discussing Christian upbringing and education from various viewpoints. I detected one theme that characterized many of the presentations: that of defining the borders of one's own convictional group and othering of other convictional or religious groups. Whether in seventeenth-century Catechisms and sermons, nineteenth-century oral-history material or questionnaires concerning contemporary Orthodox catechetical training, the drawing of borders between "us" and "them" or "others" kept popping up. In other words, in many source materials, the aim of creating clear borders between the ingroup and outgroups was evident (cf. e.g. Hornsey 2008, 205–6; Newsom 2008, 13).

In my research, this phenomenon of categorization, or partitioning of the world (cf. Abrams and Hogg 1990, 2), has become apparent when examining sources both from sixteenth-century Germany and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Finland.[1] Although the phenomenon of partitioning the world and of categorizing oneself as part of different groups is familiar to

1 For short discussion on identifying oneself in the group of "true Christians" in sixteenth-century Germany, see Mikkola 2023a, 173–77.

every historian, it is seldom discussed with a theoretical approach. This may have to do with the strong empirical emphasis that has been dominant in the field of history. As the Finnish historians Mirkka Danielsbacka, Matti O. Hannikainen and Tuomas Tepora have noted: "Researchers often focus primarily on accurately describing past events without using difficult concepts or complex theoretical constructs". However, they continue, "historical research also contains a theoretical dimension, which has already been explicitly expressed in some studies" (Danielsbacka et al. 2018, 9).

In historical research, the choice of theoretical framework is guided primarily by the question of which framework is the most fruitful tool for conceptualizing observations drawn from historical sources and for giving meaning to them. As in other humanities, and in contrast to the natural sciences, for example, the order in historical research is that the source material and research questions are considered first, after which a suitable theory is selected heuristically. Consequently, historians often use theories in a rather eclectic manner, selectively and in combination (cf. e.g. Danielsbacka et al. 2018, 11; Lahtinen 2018, 184, 195).

In this text, I will ponder how the Social Identity Approach (SIA) suits research on historical sources. The Social Identity Approach encompasses Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel and Turner 2004) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT, Turner 1987) and is first and foremost an approach concentrating on intragroup and intergroup relations (Luomanen 2021, 88). I will consider both opportunities and challenges that the approach might offer for a historian. To keep the discussion concise, I will delimit my examples to Early Modern German and Finnish sources from the context of the Lutheran Reformation as these are the ones I have worked with most extensively. I will highlight some discussions from my previous research on the Early Modern era, reflecting on them in relation to the conceptualizations of SIA. My highlights are examples only; hence, they are not intended as a comprehensive presentation of the applicability of SIA in historical research. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks of the usefulness of SIA in historical studies and hope that it will inspire further discussion.

(Social) identity and historical sources

In historical research focused on examining religious or confessional groups and identities in one way or another, identity is not often theorized or even defined in detail.[2] For example, in the monograph by Michele Zelinsky Hanson, entitled *Religious Identity in an Early Reformation Community: Augsburg, 1517 to 1555*, the writer notes that "religious identity was dependent on various factors and conditions. Thus, identity is not a simple category" (Hanson 2008, 8). She refers to articulating, constructing and expressing one's religious identity, yet does not offer any theoretical approach to conceptualize her discussion (Hanson 2008, 8, 24). In a similar vein, other studies on Reformation history talk about, for example, "shaping and expressing" identity (Willis 2025, 789), sense of identity (Walsham 2016, 589) or affirming and struggling for religious identity (Backus

2 The same observation has been made with regard to exegetical research. See Jokiranta and Luomanen 2020, 67.

2003, 3). In many religious historical studies, identity—especially religious identity—seems to be considered a self-evident concept, and hence a concept that does not need to be defined. However, all the depictions cited above are ways of defining identity narratively and some of them offer a relational perspective on identity.

In psychological research, identity broadly refers to an individual's perception of himself or herself. However, there are various interpretations of the nature of identity; for example, whether identity is permanent or changeable by nature, or whether it is primarily internal or interpersonal, that is, constructed through social interaction.[3] In SIT, identity is conceptualized on two levels: intergroup and interpersonal, whereas in SCT, identity is divided to three levels: the superordinate, the interpersonal and the intergroup levels (Hornsey 2008, 208; Luomanen 2021, 89–90). The superordinate level means one's human identity: the understanding of the self as human being—in comparison to other creatures. The interpersonal level refers to personal identity, which is based on interpersonal comparisons—that is, oneself in comparison to other persons. Finally, the intergroup level refers to social identity, which, according to Tajfel and Turner means "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 376–77). Thus, it means the self-conception of the person "as a group member" in comparison to other groups (Jokiranta 2012, 78; see also Abrams and Hogg 1990, 2). This sense of belonging includes cognitive, evaluative and affective significance, as Henri Tajfel has described: "The two necessary components are: a cognitive one, in the sense of awareness of membership; and an evaluative one, in the sense that this awareness is related to some value connotations. The third component consists of an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations" (Tajfel 1982, 2; see also Jokiranta 2012, 78; Hornsey 2008, 206). Hence, on all the levels of identity, SIA emphasizes the relationality of identity. Moreover, the three levels of identity are deemed to be activated with varying intensity in different situations (Hornsey 2008, 208).

Let me first consider the issues of permanent/changeable identity and internal/interpersonal identity from the viewpoint of historical research, as I regard it as essential for further discussion. From the perspective of historical research, the question of the internal nature of human identity is particularly problematic. First, historical sources do not provide direct access or an "open window" into the mind of the author of the text: we cannot access the minds of people from the past by investigating written or material sources. To put it another way, historians do not have access to an individual's internal cognitive and motivational processes but work with mediated and often fragmentary source material. Thus, detecting the *sense* of the self in the sources is at least problematic, if not impossible.

Of course, preserved historical sources can be perceived as reflecting the experiences, feelings and thoughts of their authors. However, a characteristic feature

3 For concise presentation of these different interpretations, see Pauha and Haimila 2024, 209–214. See also e.g. Leary and Tangney 2003; Schwartz et al. 2011.

of the majority of source materials—letters, polemical writings and even administrative records—is that they were often written with a specific recipient in mind, and the motives for writing arose from this interactive relationship—whether real or imagined—and the desired outcome. Descriptions of oneself and others were also written to serve these motives. In addition, many texts, such as letters, were governed by certain conventions, such as prescribed formal modes of expression. Autobiographical material, such as diaries, memoirs and chronicles, is also subject to the same source-critical observations, as it does not fall outside the scope of the aforementioned constraints.[4] Hence historians cannot assume that the author's experiences, feelings or thoughts were in fact such as the text suggests. Thus, from the perspective of identity research, historical sources can be analysed to determine what kind of self-image the author—or the person who dictated the text[5]—wanted to give the target readership. The (religious) identities of people in the past must therefore be examined primarily from the perspective of relationality and narrativity, bearing in mind the limitations of historical sources.

Secondly, and related to the previous constraints, the fragmentary nature of historical sources makes it impossible in most cases to assess the changeability of identity of people in the past. Some historical figures, often belonging to upper social strata, such as the reformer Martin Luther, have left behind a vast number of textual documents, including autobiographical ones (Mikkola 2014, 76–7). On the basis of these, it may be possible to observe to some extent the changes in his identity narrative. Only a small amount of material has survived from other historical figures. For example, only a single letter has survived from the martyr Maeyken Wens and the noblewoman Elisabeth Cruciger left behind a single hymn.[6] Many people from the past, especially those from the lower classes, have been forgotten because they left no written documentation behind, or because such documentation has been lost or destroyed. For example, only a few letters have survived from the probably quite extensive correspondence of Martin Luther's wife, Katharina von Bora (Jurgens 2022, 53). In many cases, therefore, the limited amount of source material, or other constraints related to its nature, does not allow us to analyse the identity narratives of people from the past from the perspectives of change and continuity.

When a historical text containing either self-narrative or descriptions of people and groups of people is under investigation, it is of course possible to examine, for example, whether writers' descriptions of themselves relate to interpersonal or intergroup comparisons, and thus make interpretations about personal and social identity. However, one must be careful when drawing conclusions from different source materials. For example, court records may not directly reveal the social identity of a

4 For these source-critical questions, see, for example, Mikkola and Räisänen-Schröder 2022, 21–22 and the literature cited therein.

5 In the Early Modern era, it was common to employ scribes, and members of the upper estates regularly made use of their services.

6 For Maeyken Wens, see e.g. Räisänen-Schröder and Mikkola 2023. For Elisabeth Cruciger, see e.g. Haemig 2022.

person accused of being an Anabaptist, if and when social identity is understood as an individual's own experience of belonging to a particular group, since the records were written through intermediaries. In the case of autobiographical sources of narrative content that reveal personal experiences, it is possible to examine the identities of people from the past, but one must carefully bear in mind the identities' performative or narrative nature, which was always determined by the historical and personal circumstances and the context in which the text was written. These basic elements of historical research—such as source criticism and contextualization—must therefore always be exercised when testing and applying new theoretical frameworks such as SIA.

Self-categorization as a true Christian: reflections on the ingroup/outgroup divisions

Bearing in mind the above considerations, the Early Modern era and the context of the Reformations may prove to be a fruitful period for applying the Social Identity Approach. This is because the period is characterized by disputes, divisions and drawing of borders between different groups. Thus, one of the questions that constantly arises in the sources is that of who represented "true Christianity". The division between true and false Christians could be made in the personal or group level.

For example, in the letter of the Bavarian noblewoman and lay reformer Argula von Grumbach (1492–1557), explication of the levels of both personal and social identity can be detected in the following remarks: "I am called Lutheran, but I am not. I was baptized in the name of Christ; it is him I confess, not Luther. But I confess that as a faithful Christian, Martin also confesses Him" (Grumbach 2010 [1523], 121, transl. Peter Matheson). On a personal level, von Grumbach compared herself to Martin Luther, whom she nevertheless at the same time categorized together with herself as belonging to the group of followers of Christ. The letter was addressed to von Grumbach's relative Adam von Thering, who opposed the evangelical movement and whom von Grumbach tried to convince that she was on the right path in her faith. Therefore, it was important to emphasize to the recipient, who represented a different interpretation of faith, that it was neither a new doctrine nor the worship of Luther, but rather the traditional faith in Christ that all true Christians throughout history had confessed.

In another letter, which was directed to the University of Ingolstadt, von Grumbach noted:

> And even if it came to pass—which God forfend—that Luther were to revoke his views, that would not worry me. I do not build on his, mine, or any person's understanding, but on the true rock, Christ himself […]. [I write] as a member of the Christian Church, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. (Grumbach 2010 [1523], 74–75, transl. Peter Matheson)

The Christian Church was von Grumbach's ingroup, a member of which Luther also was, and the group was grounded in Christ himself. Her own as well as Luther's views were based solely on Christ, as von Grumbach seems to argue, which could

perhaps be understood as minimizing intragroup differences (cf. e.g. Hornsey 2008, 208). Thus gender, social position, education or other personal features of the like were not important in this group of "Christian Church" but joint interpretation of faith. Indeed, von Grumbach cited in other contexts biblical passages, such as Galatians 3:28, that underlined the irrelevance of possible differences within the ingroup of true believers.

A passage from von Grumbach's contemporary, the lay reformer Katharina Schütz Zell (1498–1562) from Strasbourg, is worth quoting when discussing the influence of personal and social identities in the context of defining true Christians. Schütz Zell narrated her religious identity in a letter in 1553:

> with His [God's] help that is what I will do: I will demonstrate my love and service everywhere to whoever seeks it, but I will not give myself as a prisoner to anyone. […] for St. Paul said, "Why is one an 'Apolloian,' the other a 'Paulian' or a 'Peterian'? Were these men crucified for you? Was not Christ crucified for you?" [cf. 1 Cor 1:12–13]. Neither Schwenckfeld nor the dear Dr. Luther nor any devout minister, none of them ever sought that; I also will not do it. I do not want to be theirs, but with them I want to be Christ's. (Schütz Zell 1999 [1553], 128, 131, transl. Elsie Anne McKee)

I have formerly argued that

> Schütz Zell acknowledged her uncomfortable position in a situation where a host of interpretations of right faith and living were competing and positioned herself on neutral ground, as it were, thus reinforcing her religious identity as a seeker of reconciliation […]. Hence, her narration can be understood as emphasizing her independent status as a religious and theological thinker, though firmly basing her faith on Scripture and Christ himself. (Mikkola 2023a, 174–75)

From the viewpoint of SIA, it could perhaps be argued that Schütz Zell narrated first and foremost her personal identity as a follower of Christ and renounced all groups, including those led by the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld and Luther. This interpretation seems to be justified in light of other passages in her production, in which she strongly emphasized her unique position among Christians as the one to have received a special calling from God to be a mediator between other people and God, that is, His prophet (cf. e.g. Pak 2015, 104–5; Mikkola 2021, 300).[7]

The salience of her personal identity can be detected from her wording of offering her "love and service *everywhere* to *whoever* seeks it". Thus, in the quoted passage she quite straightforwardly rejected intergroup differences. She did not communicate emotional bonds or awareness of belonging vis-à-vis any particular contemporaries (cf. Jokiranta 2012, 78, 218), though she referred to Luther as "dear". Her evaluation of herself vis-à-vis others

7 The other passages could perhaps also be interpreted to reveal a sense of belonging to an ingroup that included Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, the New Testament's Paul, and Schütz Zell herself. Cf. Mikkola 2023b, 133–35.

emphasized differentiation. However, when rejecting ingroups and outgroups, she could be interpreted as having at the same time narrated a sort of a wide ingroup that included, in addition to herself, all the other followers of Christ, such as Paul, Luther and Schwenckfeld, despite their differences in theology, periods they lived in or other features. This could perhaps be called a "superordinate ingroup identity in Christ" to borrow Jutta Jokiranta's (2012, 86) wording, or common group identity, which contains the idea that a person redefines the boundaries of ingroup and outgroup, and embraces the idea of an inclusive group (cf. Gaertner et al. 1993). Both of these explanations correspond also to Argula von Grumbach's identity narrative described above.

Schütz Zell's way of narrating her identity is at least partly explained by the historical situation. She was at the time in the middle of a conflict between the Lutheran pastor Ludwig Rabus, the successor to her late husband Matthew Zell, and the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld and his successors (Mikkola 2023a, 174). Her emphasis on independence especially vis-à-vis Schwenckfeld could be deemed strategical as Lutheran orthodoxy gained more ground in Strasbourg.[8] To avoid being identified with one group or the other, and to maintain the position in Strasbourg she had achieved with her husband—which had been characterized by interaction with representatives of different interpretations of faith—Schütz Zell's strategy was to reject groupings.

However, if we examine her other writings from different contexts, we find very explicit ingroup self-categorization and defining of outgroups. To put it another way, in this passage Schütz Zell acted first and foremost as an individual but in other contexts she could also narrate herself as a member of a group (cf. Abrams and Hogg 1990, 4; Jokiranta 2012, 79–80). In this case as well as in many others, it becomes evident that categorization may change, and most often changes, as the context changes (cf. e.g. Hogg 2016, 9). This premise resonates well with the general principles of historical research, which place a key emphasis on examining the source material in its context at all times.

In multiple contexts, the positive distinctiveness of one's ingroup was accentuated. For example, the Lutheran bishop of Turku (Åbo) diocese Ericus Erici Sorolainen (1546–1625) named several outgroups in his book of homilies in the 1620s. The outgroups were heathens and other sects, Catholics and Sacramentarians, including Calvinists and Zwinglians. The bishop defined heathens and sects as blind and stupid. Catholics, or as the bishop expressed it, "the pope in Rome and his lot", lived in darkness since they had abandoned Christ and lived according to human decrees. The distinctive marks of their mistakenness were, among others, veneration of saints, pilgrimages and rosaries. The Reformed had also, according to Ericus Erici, abandoned God and begun to follow their own reason and "fleshly wisdom". In this way, the Reformed were like Catholics, as the bishop noted. In the very same context, he elevated his own ingroup by reminding his readers to thank God for "bringing us to the brightness of the gospel / through that holy man Martinus Luther". Not only Luther and the gospel but also the

8 For the situation in Strasbourg in the 1550s, see McKee 1999, 149–51.

purity of the preached word were distinctive to his own ingroup, the true followers of Christ (Ericus Erici Sorolainen 1621, Epistola Dedicatoria; see also Ericus Erici Sorolainen 1621, 284; 1625, 185, 843).

In this example, it becomes evident that "groups are not islands; they become psychologically real only when defined in comparison to other groups", as Matthew J. Hornsey (2008, 207) has remarked. Bishop Ericus Erici categorized himself as belonging within "us", those illuminated by the gospel, and—in my interpretation—offered Luther as an exemplar of his ingroup. In Ericus Erici's text, the emphasis on intergroup differences between his ingroup and those defined as outgroups is also markedly present. The intergroup differences were accentuated, perhaps even maximized. Moreover, the outgroups were portrayed very stereotypically, and the ingroup's positive distinctiveness—or positive social identity—was highlighted (cf. Abrams and Hogg 1990, 3; Jokiranta 2012, 80–5, 147–8; Hornsey 2008, 207–8). From the bishop's narrative, it can be noticed that social group defines for its members "who they are, what they should believe and how they should behave" (Hogg 2016, 6). When investigating Ericus Erici's book of homilies more closely, these models of behaviour, virtues and correct content of belief can all be found (see e.g. Ericus Erici Sorolainen 1621, 21, 652; 1625, 473 *et passim*). In all this, Ericus Erici's rhetoric was similar to that of many other writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, consequently, investigating those texts with SIA would probably produce similar findings.

When analysing the bishop's text, it is again essential to consider the historical context. Lutheranism had become the state religion of the Swedish realm and thus also of Finland at the end of the sixteenth century, and Catholicism was banned in 1617, a few years before the publication of Ericus Erici's book of homilies. The beginning of closer cooperation between the church and the state and the preservation of Lutheran doctrinal purity meant a separation not only from the Catholic Church but also from Calvinism, the influence of which did not actually reach its peak until the 1660s (Laasonen 1998, 215). In addition to this general situation, Ericus Erici himself was accused of supporting the policies of the previous Catholic-leaning ruler, John III, and even dismissed from office for a while for it. The bishop, in fact, changed his stance more than once, always in accordance with the conviction of the ruler in power (Kouri 2012). In the preface to his book of homilies, he clearly seeks to position himself within the dominant confessional ingroup of the realm, which was obviously essential in his episcopal office. By doing so, he not only categorized himself within this group but also participated in maintaining the group's status quo.[9]

Exemplary figures and prototypes

I noted above that for Ericus Erici Sorolainen, Martin Luther seems to have been an exemplary individual. Luther's position as a true follower of Christ also emerged in the short text samples from Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Schütz Zell. For my other theme, I will examine exemplary figures and prototypes vis-à-vis my previous research on Reformation and gender history.

9 For the general notion of maintaining the status quo, see Abrams and Hogg 1990, 4.

Petri Luomanen has convincingly distinguished between the concepts of prototype and exemplar. Prototype refers to "an abstraction of group features" (Luomanen 2021, 92). It is a construct to which certain features are attached, and which changes in content depending on the context. The set of attributes is most often fuzzy and mirrors what is considered as representative within the group. Most importantly from the viewpoint of historical research, a prototype is an abstraction in the person's mind. Consequently, it is impossible to access prototypes from textual records, and Luomanen's central argument is that "textual phenomena should not be termed as prototypes" (Luomanen 2021, 92–93, 98, 103; see also Hogg and McGarty 1990, 13–14). However, he has also noted that "as far as the texts signal normative perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviours—by showing these to be desirable through the narrative—*these likely reflect prototypicalities and prototypes in the minds of their authors*" (Luomanen 2021, 103).

From my viewpoint, the idea of a prototype is somewhat reminiscent of the concepts of representation, stereotype and norm, which are often used in gender-sensitive historical research. The fundamental idea is that a general stereotype or representation of, for example, a man or a woman is constructed, which reflects the ideas of a community, a particular group or a particular individual in regard to what is typical, desired or undesired, but which no real person necessarily corresponds to in all respects. This sort of representation of a man or woman is an abstraction, much like the prototype (see e.g. Mikkola 2024, 233–34). Thus, SIA could also be of use in gender-sensitive historical research in conceptualizing normative perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviours from the viewpoint of group sociology.[10]

Whereas a prototype is an abstraction, an exemplar is concrete: an exemplar is a person who is regarded as best representing the ideal member either of the ingroup or an outgroup. Thereby, an exemplar can also be a historical or a fictive figure (Luomanen 2021, 92, 98, 103–4). Individual exemplars or exemplary characters can readily be examined from historical source materials. In the sources from the Reformation era, a host of exemplars can be found. They may be, for example, leading figures of the Reformation movements or figures from the past who are referred to as prime examples of true faith. In many of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, Luther is referred to as a prime example, among other means by naming him "the loyal worker for the gospel", preacher of the gospel or apostle and a confessor of faith, as in Argula von Grumbach's and Katharina Schütz Zell's writings (Grumbach 2010 [1523], 67, 87, 121; Schütz Zell 1999 [1524], 29; 1999 [1548], 82).

One example of constructing an exemplar outside one's own ingroup could perhaps be Luther's discussion on the exemplary cloistered individuals. Of course, the question of whether those leading a contemplative life belonged to Luther's ingroup or outgroup can be answered differently, depending on the text, its timing and context; Luther's motives and the audience to whom he was writing. In any case, in his texts calling for the reform of monastic life,

10 For discussion on gender stereotyping and social identity, see Condor 1990, 237–38 *et passim*.

Luther highlighted people whose exemplarity would have been sufficient to preserve the whole monastic institution. For Luther, Bernard of Clairvaux was one of them, and he pondered, for example, how

> with pure faith, you are miraculously saved by taking the vows and living according to them, just like Bernard and many others […] have been saved. […] Therefore, it is inevitable that how Bernard was, all the saintly and devout people must have been […]. And if there were [men] in the monasteries of Bernard's caliber, they [the monasteries] could be tolerated. (Luther 1889 [1521], 600, 602, 622)

The textm quoted from Luther's treatise *On Monastic Vows*, was written to summarize his views on monastic life, and especially to provide advice to those nuns and monks who were leaving the cloister. Luther's aim was to endue them with his argumentation that they could act with a clean conscience in the decision to leave. Thus, Bernard was an exemplar to the (very small) group of cloistered people who possessed the true and rare gift of chastity and, hence, could remain cloistered. Everyone else should leave and get married (cf. Mikkola 2024, 12–13, 48, 148).

Similar making of an exemplar of a member of one's outgroup's can also be found in other contexts, such as the Catholic abbess Caritas von Pirckheimer's (1467–1532) letters, wherein she exalted Luther's co-worker Philipp Melanchthon (Pirckheimer 1962 [1525], 103, 136). Drawing attention to the processes of constructing exemplars that transcend the boundaries of confessional groups, for example, could perhaps bring new perspectives to such historical research that is focused on time periods characterized especially by intergroup division.

In the Reformation era texts, exemplary characters are often biblical figures, as active use of biblical passages was very typical among both theologians and lay theologians (for the latter, cf. Chrisman 1996, 9–10 *et passim*). Using von Grumbach and Schütz Zell as my examples again, they used figures particularly from the Old Testament as ideals and exemplars with whom they identified and created an ingroup of prophets. Schütz Zell and von Grumbach constantly placed themselves alongside male prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, and thus firmly in the same ingroup with them, as in this remark of von Grumbach's: "I cry out with the prophet Jeremiah […]" (Grumbach 2010 [1523], 73). Also, in Schütz Zell's description can be found, among others, identification with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul—albeit implicitly: "Since then the Lord drew me from my mother's womb and taught me from my youth (cf. Isa 49:1; Jer 1:5 ; Gal 1:15), I have diligently busied myself with His church and its household affairs, working gladly and constantly" (Schütz Zell 1999 [1557], 168, transl. Elsie Anne McKee).

Schütz Zell and von Grumbach both referred to Paul as a point of identification many times in their works. Powerful female figures such as Esther and Judith are also to be found as role models. These features we find among other active women of the day as well; their role models were not just biblical women, but often biblical men. Thus, self-categorization with biblical characters in the same ingroup signalled the legitimacy and long roots of one's own actions

and beliefs. Indeed, one direction that could be explored with the help of SIA is the significance of (the explication of) long, shared history as a factor creating boundaries between groups and bringing forth intragroup connectedness and solidarity. The use of the idea of a shared past, and the cultivation of historical myths in particular, has been found to strengthen the social cohesion of an ingroup in previous research, which, however, generally focuses on the present day (cf. e.g. Sijilmassi et al. 2024). It would, however, be one fruitful perspective—in addition to investigating past exemplary characters, for example—for research into historical social identities as well.

Conclusion

The Social Identity Approach offers an interesting perspective on understanding group dynamics and identity formation. Although it was originally developed in social psychology to explain contemporary intergroup behaviour, its conceptual tools can also be of heuristic value for historical research. However, applying SIA to historical contexts requires both theoretical sensitivity and methodological caution.

On the one hand, SIA allows historians to formulate questions and hypotheses about how collective identities were constructed, maintained and contested. Historical sources often reveal processes of ingroup and outgroup differentiation, status negotiation and boundary setting. Concepts such as personal and social identity can open new interpretative horizons for historical identity research; and the concepts of prototypicality and exemplar can shed light on why certain individuals, literary characters or practices came to embody the essence of a group, and how leadership emerged within these dynamics. Similarly, the emphasis on social comparison and the pursuit of positive distinctiveness resonates with historical conflicts and reforms, and the defence of identity. Hence, SIA can provide a tool for a more analytical structuring of research findings.

On the other hand, when theories based on experimental psychology are applied to the study of past societies, some important limitations emerge. Historians do not have direct access to the cognitive and motivational processes required by SIA but work with mediated and often fragmentary source materials. This increases the risk of anachronism: modern concepts of identity, individuality and group behaviour are used in contexts in which these concepts function differently. For example, historical actors may have experienced identity in ways that were more hierarchical or collective than SIA typically presumes.

Consequently, SIA should not be regarded as a predictive or explanatory model in historical research, but rather as an interpretative framework that raises new questions. The use of its conceptualizations can be particularly fruitful when investigating times of change, such as the Reformation era, when the need for self-definition of individuals and groups was acute, and the creation and preservation of boundaries between different groups was particularly important. This does not mean that I would limit the use of SIA to historical examination of times of change. All in all, the value of SIA lies in drawing attention to patterns of (self-)categorization, boundary-making and intragroup and intergroup relations, but the researcher must at the same time remain grounded in the specific features of

historical sources and contexts. To achieve this, reflexivity is essential. Historians must reflect the vocabulary of SIA in relation to the context of their sources, acknowledging both the insights of the theory and its limitations. Therefore, SIA must always be applied in conjunction with basic historical research methods such as contextualization and source criticism, not separately from them.

In sum, the Social Identity Approach can enrich historical research when used critically and contextually. It encourages researchers to examine how identities were negotiated and enacted in the past, without assuming that the psychological mechanisms underlying these processes mirror those observed today. Used in this way, SIA offers not a rigid model but a flexible heuristic method,[11] which can open space for interdisciplinary dialogue between social psychology and historical research.

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11 For similar notions of the heuristic value of SIA, see e.g. Abrams and Hogg 1990, 9; Jokiranta 2012, 87–88.

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