

# How Can Anyone Support Trump? There Is an Answer<sup>1</sup>

*June Sandra Neal*

Three years ago, I sat in a sociology class at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem atop MT Scopus, fighting to stay awake. Exhausted from the tortures of a double-booked graduate class schedule and my 5:00 AM alarm, I wondered how long it would take for me to simply keel over. Then, the professor turned to some guy named Tajfel and it was an injection of caffeine.

A Polish-born Holocaust survivor, Henri Tajfel went on to become one of the world's preeminent social psychologists, known especially for his classic work, "Social Identity Theory," which demonstrated that our sense of who we are is based, not on our individual traits, but on our group memberships.

His findings were profound. The central hypothesis of the social identity theory is that members of an "in-group" will attempt to search for negative qualities of an "out-group" to enhance their self-image.

Tajfel, who lost his entire family to the Nazis, also demonstrated that intergroup conflict is not required for discrimination to occur. In fact, no dispute is necessary. It's simply that our desire to fortify our own group's worth causes us to deny the value of the other group. This prejudice turns to racism, and racism results in a desire to demean, even destroy, the "others," often to the point of genocide. A zero-sum game.

It is terrifying how little it takes to turn us into irrational actors. Young gang members murder rivals simply for wearing a color they feel is proprietary. In countries where football (soccer) is a national obsession, people kill one another, and themselves, over the score.

Throughout the world, wearing a team shirt can be as provocative as waving a pistol. The power of group identity is as primitive and tenacious as jealousy, greed or fear.

The important takeaways are 1) blind group identity quickly devolves into prejudice in an attempt to maintain our own sense of superiority and 2) it is never rational.

In *Why We Are Polarized*, the new bestseller by Ezra Klein, editor-at-large and cofounder of Vox news, the author turns to Tajfel for explanation of this phenomenon, noting those identifying with a particular cause, group or leader will rationalize anything to maintain the integrity of their group.

Thus, it is folly to argue facts with the Trump cohort; facts are perceived as threats to those convinced their very identity depends on their group. Statistics only ricochet off MAGA hats. Trump's popularity remains at 46% despite his lying, corruption, and pathological thirst for power.

Only a Democratic win in November can save us. Yet, in the meantime, perhaps we can grab at opportunities for communication. The American narrative is powerful. When Trumpers rage about immigrants, instead of debating, we can evoke stories of their—and our— immigrant

ancestors who contributed enormously to this country. And leave it there.

When they brush off Trump's embrace of Putin and Kim, route the conversation to our veterans who paid the ultimate price for fighting against communism. And leave it there.

Such anecdotes of a shared American history, without any attempt at refutation of the Trumpers' beliefs, have a way of penetrating our consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Delray Democrat*, March 2020, p. 2.