

## 4.4

### Social identities

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Humans are social beings. In addition to the unique characteristics that define their personal identities, people can think of themselves and others as members of social groups. The groups that we belong to – and the features that characterize these groups – provide us with a sense of who we are, where we belong, and how we are similar to some individuals and distinct from others. Such social identities can be defined very concretely (I am a Londoner) or at a higher level of abstraction (I am a human being). Being included, respected and valued by others who acknowledge who we are and what we stand for is very important. This group-based sense of self – which is referred to as our ‘social identity’ – also functions as an important guideline for individual behavioural choices. Norms and practices that characterize the groups we belong to (‘ingroup’ norms) have a greater impact on our behaviour than those that stem from groups we see as less relevant to the self (‘outgroups’), even if the behaviours they prescribe and the individual gains that can be achieved by behaving in this way are identical.

One illustration of a leader who made this shift is Barack Obama. In his 2008 speech entitled ‘A more perfect union’, he spoke out, for the first time as a presidential candidate, about racial problems in his country. He delved into the anger felt by many black citizens about the social inequality that had formed over the centuries. But he also spoke about the roots of racism among white citizens from the lower socio-economic classes and the (legitimate) anger they felt about their position and their opportunities. According to Obama, these people had just as little reason to feel privileged by their ethnicity. Without legitimizing racism as the outcome, he shifted his analysis from an abstract, moral level to the grassroots level in which racism is rooted. He did not refer to abstract, moral principles (‘thou shalt not discriminate!’), but instead showed sensitivity to the legitimate, everyday concerns of regular citizens from the lower socio-economic classes. Some analysts believe that it was this speech that brought him victory in the elections later that year.