

INTERSUBJECTIVITY, AGENCY AND IDIOSYNCRATIC IDENTITY

GARRIY SHTEYNBERG

Abstract

By juxtaposing Durkheimian sociology and more recent cognitive approaches, I argue that the development of an idiosyncratic identity – a cognitive structure that is not associated with any one social intersubjectivity – exemplifies the functional interdependence between social forces and human cognition in the production of human personhood. The theory attempts to reconcile the possibility of human idiosyncrasy in the face of omnipresent social influence by describing a process where novel self-knowledge is seen as a synthesis in the dialectic of inconsistent intersubjectivities. An instance of idiosyncratic identity formation is illustrated by a case study set in a Lebanese village.

Introduction

One of the few consensual principles of the anthropological discipline is the notion that humans are social beings. Perhaps correspondingly, a perennial debate that engages anthropologists pertains to the precise nature of the relationship between the individual and the social. The tension between social, normative determinism and independent, agentic action has burdened ancient philosophy, as it has twentieth-century social science—Parsons (1977), Giddens (1984), and Bourdieu (1977) have all put forward attempts to provide a synthesis to the paradox. My aim in this work is to contribute to this inspired scholarship yet another possible solution via a theory of idiosyncratic identity. I will argue that the development of an idiosyncratic identity – a cognitive structure that is not associated with any one social intersubjectivity – exemplifies the functional interdependence between social forces and human cognition in the production of human personhood.

To begin, I address the still problematic tendency within the social sciences to explain the human condition from either a social or asocial perspective. Although an iron-clad separation may have been necessary to legitimize early sociological inquiry, there is a growing anthropological consensus that we must juxtapose our sociological understandings with the knowledge of human cognition.

Towards an inextricably social human

Of particular relevance to the development of idiosyncratic identity, Burrige (1979: 114) conceptualizes some modes of human existence as asocial: ‘Individual and person are opposed. The latter is product of [social] conditions, the former exists in spite of them’. Such a view promotes the possibility that the social context is of only occasional importance to understanding the constitution of a person. Burrige seems to suggest that individuality is constituted in the absence of social influence: ‘The person, someone, may strip himself of given roles and statuses...thus losing identity – and, in moving into the unstructuredness of no one, may become an individual by extracting an order from it’ (ibid.: 41). However, the notion that an individual can be a ‘no one’, free of all social context, is only tenable if we treat the individual and the social as functionally separate phenomena. Paradoxically, the ideas of the key advocate for the omnipresence of the social context, Emile Durkheim, may have led to perspectives that allow for the possibility of human asociality. Durkheim’s extraordinarily influential argument for the separation between individual and social phenomena is perhaps partially responsible for the view that the human condition can be fruitfully described from the social *or* purely individual, asocial perspective. It is this latter idea that tacitly allows for Burrige’s argument that the presence of social context leads to ‘personhood’, while its absence leads to ‘individuality’. This work considers an alternative paradigm, one where the human condition, and more particularly the idiosyncratic identity, is only possible via an engagement with extant social potentialities.

Durkheimian thought gave significant academic licence to the fledgling field of anthropology that initially found little use in considering individual actors in their theoretical frameworks. However, as James suggests, there is now a growing scholarly consensus that ‘We need to put the conscious individual back in the center of our inquiries, and not feel shy of moving into fields once monopolized by psychology and philosophy’ (2003: 182). Still, the pendulum has often swung too far where the focus on the individual consciousness has led to the relevance of the social context to certain human phenomena such as human agency and personhood being dismissed. Indeed, James warns that paradigms that exclusively focus on the individual are also lacking as ‘...no one is “free” of their social context, any more than they can be of the specific language or languages they speak’ (ibid.: 182).

Although it is true that the mainstream of modern anthropological thought accepts the idea of the hopelessly social human organism, this acceptance is tenuous due to a deficiency in specific theories that inextricably connect the social to the agentic individual. I believe that the subject of idiosyncratic identity development is well suited to be at the forefront of efforts to connect social and individual paradigms. As such, the task of putting forward a process by which social relations interact with the human cognitive architecture to yield idiosyncratic personhood is the challenge taken up by this work.

First, however, I situate the concept of idiosyncratic identity within the broader personhood debate. I feel that it is important to draw distinctions between individualism, individuality and idiosyncratic identity, as the concepts are often conflated, obscuring their potentially separate streams of understanding and functionality.

Individualism

Rapport and Overing, in their book, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*, define individualism as ‘a particular historico-cultural conceptualization of the person or self’ (2000: 178). According to the authors, the following social understandings are included under the conceptual umbrella of individualism: ‘the ultimate value and dignity of the human individual, his moral and intellectual autonomy, his rationality and self-knowledge, spirituality, right to privacy, self-sovereignty and self-development, and his **voluntary** contracting into a society, market and policy’ (ibid.). Individualism thus defined is a *moral* stance on the concept of self in that it attempts to establish how we *should* view personhood, acknowledging the option of other alternatives (e.g. collectivism). One of the most influential commentators on the historico-cultural development of individualism, Marcel Mauss (1938), explained how Western religious and legal tenets have shaped Western conceptions of personhood. Louis Dumont (1986) provides a similar account of the evolution of individualism, also tracing its origins to socio-religious teachings.

The supreme difference between the concepts of individualism and idiosyncratic identity is that the former refers to a societal ideological stance on personhood, while the latter refers to a particular cognitive structure. Moreover, the key thinkers in the individualism tradition emphasize its purely social origins and maintenance, while, as I will argue later, idiosyncratic identity is best viewed as an interaction of multiple intersubjectivities and human

cognition. Lastly, as argued by its critics (cf. Rapport and Overing 2000), personhood research in the individualism tradition unsavourily associates a particular ideology with the possibility of human agency. As I argue later, human agency in the idiosyncratic identity paradigm is not linked to a belief system, but rather to a process that generates revolutionary self-knowledge.

Individuality

The concept of individuality has its roots in the existential or phenomenological approach to selfhood. As Rapport and Overing cogently put it, ‘individuality is tied inextricably to individual consciousness, to that unique awareness, and awareness of awareness, which is the mark of human embodiment’ (2000: 185). Existentialism’s rich, but ultimately straightforward message is that human beings can only come to know the world through their distinct perceptual points of view, and as such, each human inevitably originates and inhabits a unique world.

While individuality is thought to be a universal, absolute condition of being human, idiosyncratic identity is a cognitive structure that is a consequence, in part, of specific social circumstances and as such can vary in the degree of its existence. Moreover, individuality and idiosyncratic identity differ in their conceptualization of human agency. For existentialism, human agency is a necessary part of all experience, as all experience is borne out of human perception – the seat of human autonomy. Although perhaps liberating, seen from this perspective human agency has limited import for accounting for the displacement of old self-knowledge by new.

Idiosyncratic identity

The concept of idiosyncratic identity, which is the focus of this work, can be defined as a cognitive structure that is not associated with any one social intersubjectivity. Although defining a concept by what it is not seems counterintuitive, in the case of idiosyncratic identity, definition through exclusion provides for a unique conceptual space and its associated theoretical utility. First, grounding idiosyncratic identity within the purview of individual cognition should make it clearly distinct from the historico-cultural concept of individualism. However, one can argue that the social ideology of individualism also has a cognitive individualistic analogue in the form of individualistic values or beliefs. Here, the second part of the idiosyncratic identity definition is crucial: whereas individualistic values and beliefs can be traced to a given social, intersubjective

ideology (e.g. Christianity), the content of idiosyncratic identity cannot be traced to any one such social influence, which is not to say it is not, in part, a product of social forces. This point is critical. I will argue that social influence is instrumental in the formation of idiosyncratic identity, and yet the resulting cognitive structure does not mirror the content of the intersubjectivities that gave rise to it. As such, idiosyncratic identity can be regarded as a personal standard that is altogether distinct in its content from that of any social group.

It is also important to differentiate the concept of idiosyncratic identity from Georg Simmel's (1908) process of 'individualization'. As the reader will soon notice, Simmel's ideas on contradiction as the basis of social phenomena is very much appreciated in this work. However, with reference to the development of a unique individual, Simmel is not concerned with a discrete cognitive structure but with an individual's personality in its entirety. For Simmel the 'individualization' process results in an assortment of beliefs associated with multiple 'group-affiliations'. In Simmel's words, 'an infinite range of individualizing combinations is made possible by the fact that the individual belongs to a multiplicity of groups' (1908: 155). Hence, for Simmel, each individual's originality is a product of the unique compendium of characteristics expressed in an analogous collection of 'group-affiliations'. In the idiosyncratic identity perspective, however, individuals are distinguished by novel cognitive structures that originate from, *but* are not analogous to, the content of a unique set of 'group-affiliations'. Although both perspectives have their distinct utilities, their divergence has significant ramifications when accounting for the destruction and creation of self-knowledge.

Idiosyncratic identity, although ultimately a cognitive structure, has its origins in the social system as much as it does in the human cognitive system. Hence, it is a paradigm defined by a fusion of the social and cognitive determinants of the human condition. Finally, equating human agency with the creation of new knowledge, *as well as* the destruction of the old, the idiosyncratic identity perspective depicts human agency as the very human ability and compulsion to reconcile contradiction, with the potential to create the individual 'new' out of the social 'old'.

Disassembly and reassembly

I propose that the genesis of idiosyncratic identity requires a fusion of particular human (a) systems of social relations, and (b) cognitive universals. A comprehensive account of the

development of idiosyncratic identity requires a description of both of these foundational dimensions, as well as of how they interact to produce distinctive personhood. Accordingly, I begin by disassembling the whole, describing its social and cognitive constituents, and conclude with its reassembly, culminating in the theory of idiosyncratic identity.

SOCIAL SYSTEM AND SOCIAL POSITION

The discussion of ‘the social’ can be broached from at least two distinct analytical levels: (1) a description of the inter-individual social system, or (2) an account of the individual’s social position (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 193). While ‘social system’ describes the overall structure, ‘social position’ describes an individual’s place in that system. However, the knowledge needed to *produce* a description of the general social system and an individual’s social position is the same and correspondingly requires an analysis of social relationships. For instance, the social system of a bee colony cannot be understood without a focus on the social relationships between the queen, the workers and the drones. Similarly, an understanding of the social position of the queen can only be grasped in the context of the same relational analysis. In fact, since the analysis of social relationships is crucial for the understanding of both social system and social position, the couching of social relationship knowledge at the systemic versus individual level of analysis is largely a matter of whether the researcher is interested in the group or the individual condition. I will focus on the basic types of human social relationships, using them to theorize on the possibilities of distinct social systems and their associated social positions.

Reduced to its essentials, Durkheimian sociology maintains that there are two types of social relationships: those resting on similarity or congruence of roles as exemplified in mechanical solidarity, and those pertaining to the complementarity of roles as exemplified in organic solidarity. Durkheimian solidarities are central to my discussion, since social cohesion, I will argue, is a necessary constituent of human identity. The reason why mechanical and organic relationships epitomize social cohesion is also the reason why they shape personhood: mechanical and organic roles are collectively endorsed, that is, a person perceives them to be *intersubjective* or *shared*. In Durkheim’s words, ‘since these sentiments, because of their collective origin, their universality, their permanence over time, and their intrinsic intensity, are exceptionally strong, they stand radically apart from the rest of our consciousness, where other states are much weaker. They dominate us, they possess, so to speak, something superhuman

about them' (1893: 56). To reiterate, I believe a discussion of social relationships is fundamental to the constitution of idiosyncratic identity as it is the social role's supra-individual, collective endorsement that makes for a powerful imprint on human psychology. However, my ultimate goal is to illustrate the criticality of such Durkheimian notions as mechanical and organic solidarities in the process of self-constitution.

Experiencing multiple solidarities

Starting with the assumption that all individuals are enmeshed in both mechanical and organic solidarities, I examine the implications of a co-existence of such social relationships for the individuals that hold them. I argue that a multitude of possible combinations of mechanical and organic relationships may exist for any given individual, and, moreover, all the possibilities reside between two polar potentialities. One pole is exemplified by a person engaged in a single, mechanical solidarity and one or several associated organic solidarities. The opposite pole is exemplified by participation in distinct mechanical relationships and a multitude of associated organic role structures.

More fundamental to the theory of idiosyncratic identity, however, is the notion of yet another dimension associated with the two defined polarities: a person's level of role consistency or contradiction. For a person engaged in one or several organic solidarities originating from a single mechanical intersubjectivity, coherence of role requirements, although not guaranteed, is more likely, as the organic role structures are associated with the dialectic of a single mechanical intersubjectivity. As we move towards the other end of the spectrum coherence of role requirements is less likely, as distinct organic solidarities borne out of distinct mechanical solidarities suggest the existence of separate mechanical and organic role structures of uncommon intersubjective origin. From a person's perspective, the potential level of embedded role inconsistency is of critical importance to the constitution of identity due to the universal properties of human cognition discussed in the next section.

Durkheim's notions of mechanical and organic solidarity, though at first sight basic, can lead to fruitful analysis of the social. I agree with James when she suggests that '...anthropology still owes a prime debt to Durkheim's view of the core aspects of what we would today call sociality' (2003: 14). However, even given the professed utility of the Durkheimian analytic to the development of idiosyncratic identity, I do not wish to depart from methodological

individualism. The social positions discussed are only relevant to the extent that they are adopted by the individual. However, Durkheim's genius lies in the recognition that such individual adoption of meaning is, more often than not, a consequence of an experienced consensus.

COGNITIVE UNIVERSALS

None of the cognitive universals I broach are novel as all have their proponents in anthropology, psychology and philosophy. I focus on two distinct cognitive universals: (1) the human cognitive propensity for sociality, allowing for the possibility of varied social relationships; and (2) the cognitive propensity for non-contradiction¹ that is foundational to all human choice and action.

Sociality, language and intersubjectivity

In his the book *Why Humans Have Cultures?*, Michael Carrithers offers a comprehensive account of the inborn human potential for sociality. Carrithers argues that '...the basic scaffolding, which consists of intensively attending to and responding to others, is given at birth' (1992: 57). Rooting some of his analysis in developmental psychology, Carrithers reports that 'newborns, even 10 weeks premature, can achieve direct engagement through hearing and seeing an affectionate "other", and by feeling body contact and gentle movements...the infant makes orientations, expressions and gestures and moves in concert with the sympathetic partner. Development of the baby's brain [benefits] from emotions generated in such communication, the existence of which proves that the baby has a dual "self + other" organization in its mind...' (ibid.). This suggests that humans are born with the universal cognitive ability to *make* their world social by arranging it along the self versus other dimension. Toren makes a similar point: 'It can be argued that babies are born with a body scheme, a scheme for human voices, for human faces—all of which seem reasonable enough, given that sociality or intersubjectivity must, in some minimal sense, be given if its particular forms are to be achieved' (2001: 158).

The result of our cognitive propensity for sociality is our unique ability for engagement with and the maintenance of wide-ranging and multiple intersubjectivities. Moreover, the human

¹ Logicians tend to distinguish between 'contradiction' and 'inconsistency'. According to Wolfram (1985: 72-3), two things are 'contradictory' when, if one of them is true, the other becomes false, thus making it impossible for both of them to be false. However, two things are 'inconsistent' when both of them cannot be concurrently true, though both may be concurrently false. In the present work I use both terms interchangeably to connote the logician's definition of 'inconsistency'.

potential for complex communication, verbal and otherwise, allows for an intensification of social relations and the shared meaning they produce. In her book *The Ceremonial Animal*, Wendy James cites Toren in agreement: '[Toren] makes the pointed observation that "intersubjectivity" is the primary condition of human being in the world', and regards as micro-history the way that forms of sociality are transmitted through interaction between generations' (2003: 196).

Notably, the human cognitive propensity for sociality is what lends modern relevance to Durkheim's social concepts. Although discussed at the social level of analysis, mechanical and organic solidarities are maintained through human psychological attachment to collectivities. As already mentioned, but worth repeating: '...these sentiments, because of their collective origin, their universality, their permanence over time, and their intrinsic intensity, are exceptionally strong, they stand radically apart from the rest of our consciousness, where other states are much weaker' (Durkheim 1893: 56). That being the case, there is no contradiction in marrying Durkheimian social logic to more recent cognitive approaches.

Non-contradiction, choice and action

'Human beings are condemned to choice and action,' states Korsgaard (2009: 1). What are the implications of such a view? For Korsgaard, the fact that people are continuously making up their minds is the essence of self-constitution. Arguably, making up one's mind, making choices and taking actions often involve the *cognitive work of resolving contradiction*—an activity that is common to our shared cognitive architecture. Durkheim again: '...we should react vigorously against...the representation of a feeling in contradiction to our own...as if a foreign force had penetrated us' (1893: 53). Furthermore, Durkheim argues that contradictions are necessarily disturbing to the human mind, as 'every strong state of consciousness is a source of life...[and] all that tends to weaken it diminishes and depresses us...it is therefore inevitable that we should react vigorously against the cause of what threatens such a lowering of consciousness' (ibid.). Such incisive mentalist analysis coming from a supreme sociologist is surprising, and incredibly precedes similar conclusions from experimental psychology (cf. Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, 1957) by half a century.

The importance of contradiction is also focal in the expositions of Lévi-Strauss, according to whom binary oppositions are fundamental to the functioning of the mind (Deliège, 2004). As

Lévi-Strauss explains, '[the] purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction' (1963: 229). Indeed, as I argue in the next section, Lévi-Strauss' use of the thesis, antithesis, synthesis dialectic to account for mythical structure is directly parallel to the dialectic of idiosyncratic identity formation.

To conclude at this point, two cognitive universals were offered: (1) the propensity for sociality, and (2) the propensity for non-contradiction. While the former allows for the possibility of varied social relationships, the latter makes the world intelligible and human choice and action feasible. In the next section, I examine how peoples' particular social positions interact with their cognitive structures to make idiosyncratic identity possible.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDIOSYNCRATIC IDENTITY

The foregoing discussion of the social and cognitive constituents of the idiosyncratic identity has probably provided a substantial glimpse into my central argument. I suggest that at the root of the idiosyncratic identity lies a 'web of group-affiliations' (Simmel 1908). This web of associations may vary in a vast array of characteristics, all of which are worthy of serious study, but most of which will not be addressed here. Notably, it is this variability in group associations that allows the universal process of idiosyncratic identity formation to produce locally patterned identities. Of principal interest, however, is how such associations or solidarities develop and why they are foundational to idiosyncratic identity formation. For ease of exposition, I will refer to group associations as *group identities*, that is, cognitive structures that are subjective understandings of perceived intersubjectivities. I believe that this framing of person-group associations at the cognitive level allows for a more transparent connection, as well as distinction, between group² and idiosyncratic identities.

Group identity

Christina Toren argues that we are a product of the intersubjectivities in which we take part: 'Mind is the fundamental historical phenomenon because each of us, over time, in inter-

² What I term 'group identity' is most commonly referred to as 'social identity' in the psychological literature (Tajfel 1981). I choose to use the 'group identity' term due to the possible misinterpretation of the 'social identity' term as referring to a phenomenon existing at the social level of analysis. In fact, 'group identity' as used in this article and 'social identity' as used by psychologists both refer to an individually held cognitive structure that loosely refers to an individual's subjective understanding of his or her group's intersubjective beliefs and values.

subjective relations with particular others in the environing world, constitutes mind anew and manifests it' (2001: 157). The idea is reminiscent of Durkheim's collectivity yielding normative power over individual, except that Toren introduces the individual mind into the discourse. The change is subtle but weighty, as it shifts the focus to the discussion of *how* such intersubjectivities engage and are engaged by our cognitive make-up. The formation of a group identity can be seen as a specific consequence of particular social and cognitive inputs in such an engagement. Before addressing group identity formation, however, I turn to its description.

In *The Category of the Person*, Carrithers, Collins and Lukes (1985: vii) summarize Mauss's view of 'personage': 'each role was in daily life the locus of different rights, duties, titles and kinship names within the clan...' As Allen argues, the role concept is synonymous with group membership and identification: 'the prototypical personage for Mauss would seem to be a member of a totemic clan' (1985: 32). Mauss refers to the Zuñi clan's social organization as 'being made up for a certain number of persons, in reality of "characters"...the role of all of them is really to act out, each in so far as it concerns him, the prefigured totality of the life of the clan' (1938: 5). It is with reference to group identity that Read (1955: 193) positions the Gahuku-Gama's personhood, arguing that individuals' statuses or roles are synonymous with their identities.

Thus congruent with prior anthropological perspectives, group identity can be viewed as a cognitive structure that reflects the values, beliefs and norms of a perceived intersubjectivity. More precisely, holding a specific group identity implies that one's expectations of personal behaviour closely match one's understanding of the group's expectations of one's behaviour. Key to this insight is that, at its inception, our distinct notion of self is necessarily group linked. A person's first sense of the 'I' is acquired through his or her perception of his or her group's intersubjective discernment of his or her distinct role.

Contradiction and the genesis of idiosyncratic identity

Toren dispenses with the possibility of asocial personhood, arguing that 'we can only become ourselves in relations with others: from my very beginning the process of my self-making necessarily co-opts, as it were, all those others alongside whom I live and so my eventual idea of myself as the object of my own actions is founded in inter-subjective relations' (2001: 157). Carrithers is even more direct in his statement: 'people are so deeply engaged with each other

that we can only properly understand them if we understand even their apparently private notions and attitudes as interpersonal ones' (1992: 11). If we agree with Toren and Carrithers that humans as inextricably *social* beings, we cannot also maintain that our idiosyncratic identities are borne through time spent in some asocial void or via a magical fount of creative inspiration, or even through an intuition of 'reality'. At the same time, how can a set of ascribed-to intersubjectivities reach beyond a mere collection of group identities and result in a revolutionary cognitive identity? In other words, how is a socially rooted, yet idiosyncratic self possible?

The genesis of idiosyncratic identity involves two elements that are now familiar: the social potentialities that are present, and the dynamics of universal human cognition. I will first define the fertile social environment in which idiosyncratic identity may take root. In Durkheim's terms, such a social system would contain multiple organic solidarities that are born out of distinct mechanical solidarities. Simply put, in situations with a greater number of organic role and mechanical role networks, people are more likely to adopt disparate intersubjectivities. In terms of the relevant human cognitive architecture, our capability for sociality is as operational here as it is in the production of group identities. In fact, as I alluded to earlier, the first step in the origin of idiosyncratic identity is engagement in multiple collectivities containing contradictory role requirements. Finally, it is the human cognitive compulsion for non-contradiction to reconcile inconsistent group identity requirements that has the *potential* to constitute an idiosyncratic cognitive structure.

I have sketched out the creation of idiosyncratic identity structure in very general terms. Many important questions remain, not all of which I am able to address in this brief article. However, I will elaborate on a few of the most pressing issues that are at the core of the theory's logic.

Why adopt contradictory group identities

Since I argued that humans have a cognitive compulsion for non-contradiction that allows for choice and action, why would people engage in collectivities that offer incongruous intersubjectivities? The answer is two-fold: a) cognitive processing limitations, and b) dynamic intersubjectivities. Given the limited capacity of human cognitive processing during the adoption of intersubjectivities, potential contradictions may not be apparent and only become so when the individual is faced with a particular situation that elicits the contradiction. Secondly, people can

engage in intersubjectivities whose shared understandings and prescriptions change with time. Thus, while the beliefs and values of multiple intersubjectivities may cohere initially, in time new situations and intra-group change may bring forth contradiction where none has existed.

What is contradictory in a group identity contradiction

I feel it would be useful to consider group identity structures as acquired logic systems. Or more precisely, a group identity is an individual's subjective adaptation of his or her group's intersubjective logic system. If we see group identity as a logic system, then the values and beliefs that comprise a group identity are the assumptions of this logic system. Then, group identity contradiction is an inconsistency between *assumptions* that are original to distinct group identities borne out of separate intersubjectivities. It is important to note that at its inception the contradiction need not be larger than an inconsistency between two such assumptions. Regarding a group identity as a logic system makes it relatively clear that a contradiction between group identities may be isolated to two assumptions, or several assumptions; however, the entire group identity need not be implicated.

For instance, one's religious group may conflict with one's professional group in its respective intersubjective views of the importance of spending time with one's family. To the extent that individuals are participants of both intersubjectivities, and thus have adapted to analogous cognitive group identities, they will encounter an inconsistency in their view of family time. Such a contradiction between two assumptions about the value of family time may not influence the rest of the group identity logic. However, depending on the particular assumption and the logic system involved, it is also possible that what starts as a single inconsistency can have disastrous consequences for the group identity in its entirety. Since a system of logic has a certain coherence, a religious group's assumption of the importance of family life is one jigsaw puzzle piece of a wider intersubjective logic. In the intersubjective logic of the religious group, the view of the importance of family time is likely to cohere with the concepts of marriage, children, and so on. For the logic system of the professional group, the importance of family time may be linked to the concepts of a loyal employee, leadership potential, etc. In this way, a crack at one intersection of two intersubjectivities can spread and put into question a wider net of cherished beliefs. For example, in the United States the intractable opposition of some religious groups to same-sex marriage often defies outsiders' understanding. Why should such a religious

group care about whether marriage rights are extended to same-sex couples? After all, how do the same-sex marriage rights that seemingly only effect same-sex couples negatively impact heterosexual marriage in middle America? The answer lies in the idea that the importance of beliefs cannot be ascertained without tracing the surrounding logical net. In the intersubjective logic of some religious groups, the concept of marriage is interwoven with that of sexuality, family and moral authority, among many others. Indeed, it seems that the more cohesive a logic system is, the more potential damage a single inconsistency can set in motion. It would be a worthwhile project to investigate this idea more fully; however, what is more central to the present article is the idea that a contradiction between group identities may either damage a few of their assumptions, or, if the damage to their logical coherence is great enough, destroy them in their entirety.

Driven by considerations of expositional economy and clarity in the examples above, I have discussed contradictions between logic systems as if these logics are actually held by groups, not individuals. Ontologically speaking, logical contradictions are of course restricted to individual cognition, and perceived discontinuities between two intersubjectivities are ultimately rooted in the individual's mind. However, individuals do *experience* such logic systems to be held by their social groups, and it is that experience of an intersubjectivity that is the all-important foundation of a group identity.

Already discussed is the idea that, when such intersubjectivities contradict one another, the formation of idiosyncratic identity is possible. However, the formation of idiosyncratic identity is not certain at this juncture. In what follows, I address why a contradiction between two perceived intersubjectivities is necessary but not sufficient for the creation of an idiosyncratic identity.

Why group identity contradiction is not sufficient for idiosyncratic identity formation

Contradictions do not necessarily lead to the process of idiosyncratic identity formation. Before discussing the other alternative ways of dealing with contradiction, I should clarify that the idiosyncratic identity process as defined in this article would involve the creation of new knowledge structures in place of old ones. While both the creation and destruction of knowledge are implicated in the process of idiosyncratic identity formation, this is not the case for the other

two potential consequences of group identity contradiction. I will call these two possible routes (1) avoidance and (2) inference.

The individual always has the option of doing nothing. Although not in possession of confirmatory evidence, I would speculate that the simple avoidance of an inconsistency is overwhelmingly the most usual method of dealing with contradiction. However, the avoidance may not be so simple, as it involves continual escape from the spotlight of the consciousness and acute discomfort when such spotlight illuminates. In the example of a person caught between the standards of his religious and professional groups in respect to family time, the avoidant solution would consist of not making a firm decision about the importance of family time. In this particular example, it is difficult to see how the individual can continually avoid the issue, as the conceptualization of the importance of family time is likely to be persistently confronted. This brings me to the second option available to the individual when faced with a contradiction of group identities.

This option involves attempting to resolve the contradiction by augmenting the existing group identity assumption by logical inference. This solution to the contradiction underscores the idea that the group intersubjectivity is adopted as well as *adapted* by the individual and as such can potentially be elaborated upon by that individual. As already discussed, an individual's cognition integrates perceived intersubjective understandings, resulting in a group identity that consists of a coherent system of assumptions. When faced with a contradiction between two such coherent systems of assumptions, the individual may attempt to find a resolution through the expansion of one or both of the logic systems through inference (e.g., given A and B, deduce C). Going back to the example of the importance of family life, the individual may elaborate on the perceived assumptions of the religious intersubjectivity in such a way that it no longer contradicts the injunctions of the professional intersubjectivity. Limitations of space prevent a more detailed exposition of the example; however, the principal feature of this solution is that, via inference, the individual creates new assumptions without displacing any of the original ones. Notably, this process is perhaps the closest to Simmel's (1908) concept of 'individualization', where a set of 'group-affiliations' are juxtaposed within one individual, enabling original deductions.

There is a key difference between 'individualization' and idiosyncratic identity formation processes. Whereas 'individualization' resolves the contradiction by constructing new

assumptions on the foundations of the group identity logics involved, idiosyncratic identity process resolves the contradiction by constructing new assumptions through a partial or full, but in any case certain destruction of the foundations of the group identity logics involved.

The cannibalization of the self and the creation of the idiosyncratic identity

I want to be explicit about what has tacitly been conveyed earlier. A specific idiosyncratic cognitive structure is not aimed at encompassing a reconciliation among all contradictory group identities held by the individual. Rather, a specific idiosyncratic identity should correspond to an equally specific group identity dialectic. In fact, two particular assumptions derived from separate group identities can be thought of as the thesis and antithesis producing a particular idiosyncratic identity that is the synthesis. In this way, one mind may contain many idiosyncratic identities.

The formation of an idiosyncratic identity may be viewed as a cannibalization of the self, as by definition it involves self-defining group identities to be partially or wholly sacrificed to the new, group-independent standard of the idiosyncratic identity. Put differently, the process of idiosyncratic identity formation is defined by the construction of novel self-knowledge in the wake of the destruction of old self-knowledge. When does this happen? Much of this question has already been addressed in a piecemeal fashion, but in light of everything I have put forward, idiosyncratic identity forms when the individual cannot ignore the paradox created by contradictory group identities (i.e. practice avoidance), nor can he or she infer new assumptions based on old knowledge that would make the paradox disappear (i.e. practice inference). The reasons behind exactly when the above two options would not suffice is beyond the immediate scope of this article. What I do want to explore next, however, is why the third and final option involves *necessary damage* to the group identities that are involved in the original inconsistency.

Some may argue that, when faced with a contradiction, the person can remove it by simply abandoning one of the intersubjective understandings. Note that, while one group identity is destroyed in this case, no new self-knowledge is gained. If this option were indeed available, it would put into question the very possibility of idiosyncratic identity formation. However, this solution to contradiction is untenable due to the nature of group identities already outlined. As Durkheim would have noted, a simple decision to forget the ontological and normative imperatives of a group identity is akin to a decision to forget that the earth is round for a scientist,

or that killing innocents is wrong for a Buddhist. These examples, although extreme, are also imparted by particular intersubjectivities that afford group identities. I would posit that, in cases of irreconcilable contradictions, binding intersubjectivities are not simply dispensed with, but are recycled into new understandings.³ Still, there is another reason why the mere abandonment of one of the inconsistent group-identities is out of the question. Simply put, there is no criterion by which a person could choose which group identity to dismiss. Group identities are borne out of intersubjectivities that create the very standard by which they are judged. Consequently, the choice between two contradictory group identities cannot be made, as the criterion is not available. I suppose one may argue that some supra-criterion may exist, perhaps as a function of an overarching intersubjectivity that imparts an overarching group identity. However, the notion of an arbitrating group identity disregards the self-sustaining nature of all the disparate intersubjectivities involved. The consideration of yet another intersubjectivity in the discussion cannot mitigate the individual's internal conflict, but, on the contrary, increases the potential for contradiction.

I hope I have sufficiently introduced the idea that the three options presented for dealing with contradictory group identities are exhaustive. All three processes are likely to occur in all individuals at all times in a myriad of combinations that reflect the unique social circumstances of each person. I realize that, judged by the established methodological canons of the anthropological discipline, I have not presented sufficient historical or ethnographic evidence that would begin to prove the detailed theoretical account offered in this article. Unfortunately such an undertaking is impossible in the space provided. In lieu of a comprehensive defence, therefore, I offer an ethnographic account of a response to a group identity contradiction via the formation of an idiosyncratic identity.

'Coping with the loss of honour'

Gilsenan presents us with the following puzzle: 'How does one who in fact lost out in the competition for prestige and regard cope with his devalued situation when the code retains its social power and importance to him?' (1976: 202). Gilsenan proceeds to recount the story, set in a village in the north of Lebanon, of a man that has suffered a loss of honour due to a public

³ Also, philosophical thought and psychological research both suggest that, once acquired, normative meanings are never completely erased, but are rather cognitively transmogrified.

insult by Muhammad, a distant relative. The unnamed man is caught in between a normative standard that requires him to take *public* revenge in order to restore his honour and another normative standard, advocated by senior men who implore him to forgive Muhammad. Gilsenan is not explicit about why contradictory normative standards would be cultivated by the elders in opposition to the general population, but he does refer to the senior men as ‘ a generation [that] shares a keen sense [for]...ranking groups as opposed to the ‘peasants’...’ (ibid.: 196). As such, Gilsenan views the elders as ‘more committed to the perpetuation of the structure of domination’ (ibid.). Given the above reference, it would not be an extraordinary leap to surmise that the elders and the rest of the villagers form somewhat distinct intersubjectivities that are driven by different historical allegiances and concerns. Indeed, given the elders’ greater preoccupation with social stratification, it makes sense for them to urge forgiveness instead of revenge, as the former would maintain the social distinction between Muhammad and his victim, while the latter would close the gap in social honour. Having established the possibility of contradictory, yet binding intersubjectivities, how did the insulted man resolve the contradiction? The man did not take public revenge, nor did he forgive his assailant. Rather, he befriended Muhammad only to take *secret* revenge through discreet betrayal. From his field notes, Gilsenan recounts the man’s vengeance: ‘At the trial, Muhammad was sentenced *in absentia* to fifteen years, and I to ten...that’s Muhammad settled. I’ve finished off his children’s future as well. But I keep up a show of friendship and sincerity. Yet in my heart, that’s another thing. Now he’s an outlaw and has no way out. That’s what I call real vengeance’ (ibid.: 203).

I largely agree with Gilsenan’s characterization of the man’s actions: ‘he has constructed a valued self “that no one knows” which he defines as his *real* self. This self is constituted out of a manipulation of what is secret, not by a public performance of place-claiming, for this is denied him...’ (ibid.: 204). In fact, Gilsenan’s analysis penetrates to the core of my general argument of idiosyncratic identity formation: ‘Out of such a contradiction, generated in a specific set of social relations and meanings, is born an ideology, a “superstition” about self and others...an ideology which inevitably reflects the contradictions that generated and maintained it...’ (ibid.: 205). In facing the contradiction between a social requirement to recover honour in a public manner and another social requirement to forgive, the man was subversive of both intersubjectivities by recovering honour through *private* revenge. In Gilsenan’s words, ‘he has constructed a private rationalizing ideology’ (ibid.: 204), or what I have referred to as an idiosyncratic identity.

Gilsenan's analysis stops short of describing how the man's newly created idiosyncratic standard impacts on his wider identification with the two intersubjectivities (i.e. the two group identities). Unfortunately, this article is guilty of the same limitation. The investigation of the relationship between idiosyncratic identity formation and the consequent extent of group identity destruction has been given limited light, comprising a promising avenue for future thought. Moreover, I am well aware of the fact that I have not been explicit about the metamorphosis of two intersubjectively endorsed assumptions into one novel understanding. I see no alternative to its existence; however, the full articulation of its dynamics escapes me. This is yet another way forward for future research.

Martin Hollis, in his strikingly insightful essay *Of Masks and Men*, suggests that, 'when the actor is trapped in conflicting roles, the self is exposed' (1985: 227). Hollis proposes that, in such a state of conflicting roles, 'each must resolve not merely what to do but *what to be*' (ibid., my emphasis). Also important is Simmel's observation: 'The ego can become more clearly conscious of...[its] unity, the more he is confronted with the task of reconciling within himself a diversity of group-interests' (1908: 142). Clearly, conflict between group identities has a deep intellectual tradition; however, my aim has been to outline the involvement of such conflict not in the revelation or unification of identity structures, but in the production of *novel* identity structures through the cannibalization of the old. It is because of such self-destruction that the idiosyncratic identity can accomplish highly useful conceptual work if seen as the embodiment of human agency. Since the idiosyncratic identity represents the disjuncting of individual self-knowledge from perceived intersubjectivities, it uniquely allows for the creation of revolutionary self-knowledge, which I believe is a precursor of all substantial human progress. Human agency cannot find a better name.

IDIOSYNCRATIC IDENTITY AS HUMAN AGENCY

'Much of the literature on agency since the time of Weber and Durkheim has sought to...explore the limits of individual capacities to act *independently* of structural constraints' (Rapport and Overing 2000: 1, my emphasis). My aim in this article has been to convince the reader of the utility of asking the near opposite – how is human agency born out of its *dependency* on social relations? Unlike past solutions, I have not resorted to treating independent acts and social relations as phenomena *sui generis*, where agency is functionally divorced from the social

Shteynberg, Intersubjectivity, agency and idiosyncratic identity

context; nor, unlike past solutions, have I argued that agency and social constraints are interchangeable analytical frames, which can be viewed in terms of one another. Finally, I have not treated agency and social potentialities as forces competing to influence individuals' behavioural patterns. Opposed to all such solutions, I argued that it is the social intersubjectivities we engage in that allow for the very possibility of agency.

References

- Allen, N. J. 1985. The Category of the Person: A Reading of Mauss's Last Essay, in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Burridge, K. 1979. *Someone, No One: An Essay on Individuality*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Carrithers, M. 1992. *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carrithers, M., Collins, S. and S. Lukes 1985. Preface, in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deliège, R. 2004. *Lévi-Strauss Today: An Introduction to Structural Anthropology*, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Dumont, L. 1986. *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, E. 1984 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*, New York: The Free Press.
- Festinger, L. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilsenan, M. 1976. Lying, Honor and Contradiction, in B. Kapferer (ed.), *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

Shteynberg, Intersubjectivity, agency and idiosyncratic identity

- Hollis, M. 1985. Of Masks and Men, in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James, W. 2003. *The Ceremonial Animal: A New Portrait of Anthropology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1963. The Structural Study of Myth, in C. Jacobson and G. Schoepf (eds.), *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.
- Mauss, M. 1985 [1938]. A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; The Notion of Self, in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parsons, T. 1977. *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, New York: Free Press.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London: Cohen & West.
- Rapport, N., and J. Overing. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge.
- Read, K. E. 1967 [1955]. Morality and the Concept of the Person among the Gahuku-Gama, in J. Middleton (ed.), *Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism*, New York: The Natural History Press.
- Simmel, G. 1955 [1908]. The Web of Group-Affiliations, in E.C. Hughes (ed.), *Conflict*, New York: The Free Press.
- Tajfel, H. 1981. *Human Groups and Social Categories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toren, C. 2001. The Child in Mind, in H. Whitehouse (ed.), *The Debated Mind: Evolutionary Psychology versus Ethnography*, London: Berg Publishers.
- Wolfram, S. 1985. Facts and Theories: Saying and Believing, in J. Overing (ed.), in *Reason and Morality*, London: Tavistock.