# SHARED BELIEFS ABOUT THE PAST: A COGNITIVE SOCIOLOGY OF INTERSUBJECTIVE MEMORY

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## *Introduction*

Together with desires and opportunities, beliefs are fundamental to explaining action (Hedström 2005). In order to assess people's reasons for why they act the way they do, we have to take their beliefs (i.e., their 'knowledge about the world') into account. If these beliefs were always congruent with reality, that is, if beliefs could be inferred from people's structural situation in a perfect way, belief formation processes would be transparent and of little interest to explanatory sociology. On the other hand, if beliefs were always incorrect and flawed in a uniquely idiosyncratic way, beliefs would also be of little interest to analytical sociology because what needs to be explained is not the concrete actions of single individuals but rather the typical actions of typical individuals. This fact points to the need to identify patterns in belief formation processes because although beliefs, as we will see below, are often biased and flawed, these biases are not always random and unpredictable. It moreover points to the usefulness of staking out a middle ground between subjectivist approaches and universalistic ambitions. Although few beliefs are unique to a specific person, most beliefs are not shared by everyone else. A more reasonable assumption is that most beliefs are, to a varying extent, intersubjective, and it is important for sociologists to identify the boundaries of this intersubjectivity. In this paper, culture, structural equivalence, social category belonging, and social network belonging will be discussed as important parameters of such boundaries. It is important—both for consensus-oriented sociology and conflict-oriented sociology—for sociology to understand the reasons for intersubjective uniformities in beliefs: shared beliefs are one important mechanism holding together social entities (e.g., societies, organizations, groups) (Bar-Tal 2000), and differences in beliefs between social entities are an equally important reason for conflict (e.g., Rydgren 2007).

This paper will in particular focus on the importance of beliefs about the past, and *shared* beliefs about the past in particular. People's predictions about future events, and their strategies for dealing with

new situations, are often based on beliefs about similar events and situations in the past. As will be discussed below, analogism plays a crucial role in these processes.

In contemporary sociology, shared beliefs about the past is often, in my view rather unfortunately, discussed in terms of collective memory. In this literature, *autobiographical memory*, *social memory*, and *collective memory* are often confused. First, the concept collective memory is misleading; it is important to emphasize that only individuals, and not collectives, do the remembering. However, this does not mean that memory is "completely personal" and non-social, as Gedi and Elam (1996: 34) have suggested. There is a common misapprehension in the literature that memory is either individual or social (see, e.g., Schudson 1995: 346). This is a false distinction; the real distinction is between individual and collective memory, on the one hand, and between social and anti-social (atomistic) memory, on the other. In my view memory—as other beliefs about the past—is individual *and* social. More specifically, the position taken in this paper is that we all have some autobiographical memories that we do not share with others (which nonetheless may be social in some sense, not the least because they are mediated through language) but that we also have many memories that we share with some people but not with others (see Zerubavel 1996: 284). In this sense, it is more appropriate to talk about *intersubjective* rather than collective memories (cf. Misztal 2003: 11). What we do find are collective *sites* of memory (archives, history books, commemorative rituals, etc.), which people draw upon, and which direct people's memory in certain directions by indicating which past events are considered important. Susan Sontag (2003) calls this collective *instruction*. However, there are no analytical reasons for calling such collective sites or instructions collective memories. Second, the literature on collective memory not only treats autobiographical memories as memories, but also other kinds of beliefs about the past—such as popular conceptions of the French revolution and other historical events of which people lack living memory.[1] This is untenable from an analytical perspective. In this paper both popular conceptions about history and autobiographical memories will be treated as distinct subcategories of the wider category of beliefs about the past. The reason for treating autobiographical memories as beliefs

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[1] In this context we may define autobiographical memory as 'knowledge', subjectively held to be true, about events that individuals 'know' they have experienced personally.

is analytical as well as ontological in that it emphasizes that memories should not be treated as something distinct from beliefs but can be understood by largely the same mechanisms. It is a popular misconception that memory works like a camera, inscribing snapshots of lived reality. However, research in the cognitive sciences, psychology, and sociology shows that this is a false conception of how memory works. Like beliefs, memories are often biased and distorted—indeed, they are often even erroneous—and they are influenced by a large number of social factors (see, e.g., Schacter 1995), including those that will be discussed in this paper.

This paper will be structured as follows: First, I will present the socio-cognitive approach, which constitutes the theoretical point of departure for the following discussion on memories and other beliefs about the past. Second, I will discuss analogism and other mechanisms for explaining the ways in which beliefs about the past matter for action in the present. Together the two first sections discuss typical ways in which beliefs about the past become biased and distorted. In the four last sections of the paper, I will discuss how and in what ways memories and other beliefs about the past become intersubjective: *culture* (collective memory sites as a factor creating intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past), *structural equivalence* (similar experiences as well as interest-driven distortions as factors creating intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past), *social network belonging* (symmetries and asymmetries in information as a factor creating intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past), and *social category belonging* (identity-driven distortions as a factor creating intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past).

## The Socio-cognitive Approach

In contrast to rationalistic micro theories, the socio-cognitive framework does not assume rational actors, but is based on the assumption that individuals are motivated by an "effort after meaning" (Bartlett 1995: 44), or that they strive to obtain cognitive closure by imposing order upon what William James (1890) called the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of raw experience.[2] Not being able to understand what is

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[2] Pages 4–9 are largely based on Rydgren (2004) and Rydgren (2007).

happening in ones surround, including what is likely to happen in the immediate future, results in negative emotions such as stress and frustration, something which most people try to avoid. This attempt to create meaning is mostly unconscious in that adults almost never approach objects and events as if they were *sui generis* configurations, but rather perceive and conceive of them through the lens of pre-existing systems of schematized knowledge (i.e., beliefs, theories, propositions, and schemas) (Tversky and Kahneman 1982a: 117).

Categorization is one important part of this system of schematized knowledge. A category could, in this context, be defined as the "totality of information that perceivers have in mind about particular classes of individuals" (Macrea and Bodenhausen 2000: 96). Once such a particular category has been mobilized in meeting an object, event, situation, or person, further perception of the object will partly be dictated by the characteristics of the category (Kahneman and Tversky 1982).

Moreover, pre-existing systems of schematized knowledge not only influence the ways in which people categorize, but also the ways in which they make inferences. This will be discussed in greater detail below. What has been called *logical a priori* (Rydgren 2004)—especially people's inclination toward simplified and/or invalid (but often useful) inductive reasoning in the form of analogism will be a particular focus of this article. This mechanism is commonly used by people to understand the present and often to predict the future.

These beliefs, theories, and schemas are acquired through a range of different channels such as socialization in childhood, education, the media, and all kinds of social interactions in everyday-life (Nisbett and Ross 1980: 119). Although some schematic cognitive structures are fairly universal, and others are highly personal and thus idiosyncratic, many emanate from group cultures, which to a significant degree make them intersubjective (see DiMaggio 1997: 273). I will come back to this below, in discussing how collective memory sites influence people's belief-formation processes.

At the same time, individuals are assumed to be cognitive misers, that is, motivated by a drive to save time and cognitive energy. This often leads them to use cognitive strategies without much reflection, very often strategies that are readily available and that have proved useful in the past. This more or less unconscious reliance on different cognitive strategies generally serves people well in everyday life—when they typically confront situations that are repetitive, and thus have the chance to continuously adjust their pre-existing systems of schematized

knowledge. Confusion and breakdown in the effort after meaning are most likely to occur in so-called black-box situations, that is, in situations of uncertainty (Boudon 1989) when people face new situations which their standard cognitive strategies fail to handle (whether understanding present situations or predicting future ones). In such black-box situations people are likely either to use schematized knowledge structures that have proved valid in other situations, or to rely on others. As a result, dubious knowledge structures, including myths and rumors, are more likely to become activated in black-box situations.

However, people not only try to grasp what is going on around them, but also to understand the own self: who am I, where do I come from, and what will happen to me in the future, are all crucial questions. As will be further discussed below, much research suggests that cognitive strategies for understanding the social surround are strongly influenced by these particular questions. We may, for example, assume that individuals are motivated to think well of themselves. This may make them update and modify their autobiographical memories in order to make them congruent with the selves they have become in the present (Berger 1963; Rubin 1986), partly as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance (cf. Festinger 1957). Schacter (2001: 9) terms *consistency bias* the tendency to bring memories and other beliefs about the past in line with what one believes in the present, while *egocentric bias* is the tendency to modify memories about the past in a self-enhancing manner. As will be further discussed below, the egocentric bias may also have a group dimension, which we may call the *ethnocentric bias*.

## *Analogism*

Analogism is a fundamental mechanism for understanding how beliefs about the past matter for action in the present. We have an analogism when we draw the conclusion from

1. the fact that Object A (or Event A, Situation A, etc.) has the Properties $p$ and $q$
2. and the observation that Object B has the Property $p$
3. that object B also has Property $q$.

Although it is obvious that this type of reasoning can never be valid from a logical point of view, it is one of the most important and common

mechanisms underpinning beliefs, and it can, moreover, be a useful one (Holyoak and Thagard 1999: 7). The psychological power of analogism is its ability to reduce felt uncertainty in black-box situations by help-ing individuals make apparent sense of what is going on—and what to expect in the near future—but often also by pointing out solutions for dealing with specific problems. Hence, analogism has both a diagnostic and a prognostic function (cf. Benford and Snow 2000).

One can easily think of numerous examples of how this mechanism works in everyday-life. If one does not know much about wine, for example, and is going to have some friends over for dinner, it is likely that one follows the line of reasoning that

1. since the bottle I bought last time (A) was a Bordeaux (p) and tasted good (q)
2. among all the possible alternatives in the store, bottle B which also is a Bordeaux (p)
3. ought to taste good as well (q).

Although this decision-making mechanism is error prone, the likeli-hood of making sound predictions is likely to be higher than when no heuristic is used in such black-box situations. Moreover, this likelihood grows with increases in relevant knowledge. If one learns to discern other properties of the wine (through practical experience or theoreti-cal learning), the chances of finding a wine one likes when using this heuristic mechanism will increase.

Yet, the psychological power of analogism may make it a threat both to logic and to empiricism. Indeed, as Fischer (1970: 259) has demonstrated, many "bad ideas have had a long life because of a good (effective) analogy." There are a variety of fallacies associated with analogism, of which only a few will be mentioned here.

First, we have the problem of selection bias. For the first step of the analogism, that is, historical events with which to compare the pres-ent, people tend to select events that are easily accessible to memory (cf. Khong 1992: 35). In the terminology of Tversky and Kahneman (1982b), people use the *availability heuristic*, which is often useful because people tend to remember significant events better than insignificant ones. However, there are a variety of factors affecting availability that may lead to bias. For one thing, studies have shown that vivid information is better remembered and is more accessible than pallid information (Nisbett and Ross 1980: 44–45). Events that are unique

and unexpected and that provoke emotional reactions are more easily remembered than other events (Paez et al. 1997: 150). A particular type of pallid information, which people consequently tend to overlook, is null information about potential events that did not occur. For most of us, events that take place are more concrete and immediately real than the nonoccurrence of potential events. This type of memory bias may, for example, be one reason why a history of intergroup conflict may make conflicts more likely in the present (or future). Because people are more likely to recall instances of conflict than instances of peace, as the former are more salient than the latter, they may overestimate the likelihood of future conflict, which may lead them to mobilize in order to defend themselves and/or to take preemptive actions in ways that actually foment conflict (Rydgren, 2007).

Second, memories or other beliefs about the past that are selected for analogism tend to be highly simplified and sometimes inaccurate. To begin with, the very fact that memories are stored in some conceptual form implies a simplification compared to the full representation of the event that actually occurred (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 32). Like other cognitive schemas, analogism imposes itself upon the new information, and often fills in missing data, while ambiguous and discrepant information is denigrated or ignored (see Khong 1992: 38). Over time, memories and other beliefs about the past are likely to become simplified and condensed, as details—in particular subtle connections—are reduced or lost (Bartlett 1995; Belli and Schuman 1996: 423). In Maurice Halbwachs's (1992: 183) words, "we distort the past, because we wish to introduce greater coherence." Moreover, it has often been observed that because they are intrinsically social in character, memories and other beliefs about the past adapt to socially shared stereotypes and conventions within the group, that is, memories tend to converge to "what is common in the group" (Allport and Postman 1947: 60). Finally, psychological and social psychological research has convincingly shown that memories are often inaccurate, often grossly so, and that this is also the case for vivid, "subjectively compelling memories" (Schacter 1995: 22), including emotionally traumatic ones (Schacter 1995: 27).

Third, analogical inferences are at best probabilistic and always unacceptable from a logical point of view. Because analogism is often applied to non-repetitive events, which makes it difficult for people to falsify them within the realms of everyday epistemology, people tend to rely on analogisms more uncritically than they should.

Fourth, as a result of people's innate tendency to evaluate their in-group membership positively as a way to enhance their self-esteem, they tend to select analogies that absolve the in-group from any responsibility for negative events (often by attributing blame to the out-group), while taking credit for positive ones (e.g., Tajfel 1981). We may call this the *ethnocentric bias*. It is also common to underestimate the influence of situational or structural factors, and to overestimate the influence of actors and their intentions. This tendency is commonly referred to as the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross 1977). Taken together, therefore, analogism may promote scapegoating and underpin inter-group conflicts (see Rydgren 2007).

### *Mapping the Boundaries of Intersubjectivity*

Above I have outlined the ways in which memories and other beliefs about the past matter for action in the present. Such beliefs, activated by the availability heuristic and inferences based on analogism, are often of fundamental importance. However, as should be evident from the discussion above, memories and other beliefs about the past are often flawed. Most events never enter into people's memory, and the details of events that are remembered are often lost or distorted over time. There is a tendency to forget events that are seen as insignificant, or that are less flattering for one's self-esteem. As was argued in the Introduction, moreover, there are good reasons to assume that various social factors create systematic uniformities in people's memories and other beliefs about the past. I will below argue that culture, structural equivalence, social network belonging, and social category belonging are important social factors in creating intersubjective uniformities in people's memories and other beliefs about the past. As a result, they also create some uniformity in present action. These factors should not be viewed in isolation, however, as they overlap in important ways. As shown in Figure 1, some people share both culture and social category belonging (or network belonging or structural equivalence, etc.). We may assume that the more these four categories overlap the more intersubjective will people's memories and other beliefs about the past be—and the more likely they will be to act in similar ways and, indeed, to engage in collective action. In Figure 1, this is illustrated by color: the darker the shade of gray the stronger the intersubjectivity.
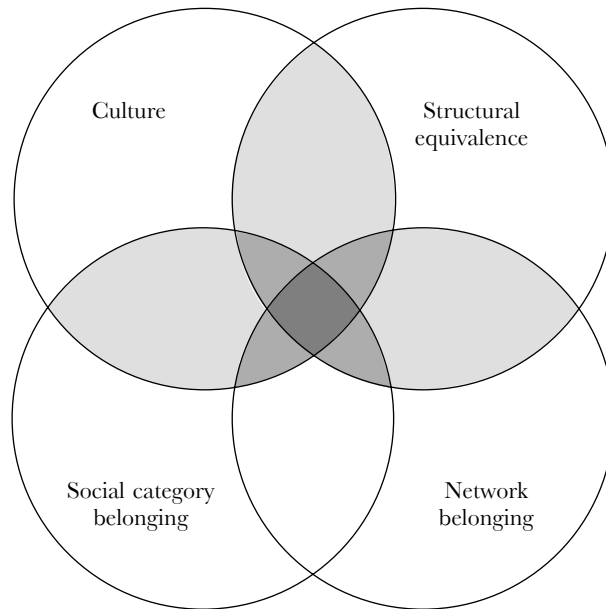
*Figure 1*. Intersubjectivity.

## *Culture*

As stressed above, a position that holds that cognition plays an important role in the understanding of social action should not be seen as a plea for an atomistic approach. Individuals are socially situated, thinking and feeling beings with personal biographies who live embedded in certain material and historical conditions. The conceptual schemes, knowledge, and information that shape our view of the world are socially mediated and always shared to some extent. As Mannheim (1936: 3) noted, growing up in a society provides "preformed patterns of thought and of conduct" that profoundly influence our thinking. With language, for instance, various interpretive schemes are internalized and institutionally defined (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Hence, it should be noted that beliefs, categories, and schemas are essentially social and always culturally shared to some extent.

I will in this paper follow Swidler's (1986: 273) well-known definition of culture as "the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience meaning." Such symbolic forms include language,

rituals, ceremonies, stories, art forms, various informal practices, and so on. Culture, so conceived, should not be understood as "a unified system" that determines action in certain directions once and for all, but rather as a tool-kit or repertoire that offers a variety of relatively fixed alternatives from which people can chose (Swidler 1986: 277). Nations, organizations, families, and other kinds of groups may espouse distinct—albeit overlapping—cultures according to this definition. People are born into some of these cultures, and are thus likely to take them pretty much for granted, whereas they more or less actively choose to join others at various stages in their lives.

Cultures also provide collective memory sites that instruct people's beliefs about the past by indicating which events are worth remembering and how they should be evaluated. For families, for instance, the family photo album and amateur video archive constitute important collective memory sites, as do family traditions, anniversaries, etc. (see Zerubavel 1996: 293). In nations, commemorations (including national holidays), school curricula, museums, and archives, play the same role. To commemorate a particular event is to constitute it as "an objective fact of the world," to mark it out as a true historical event; as a significant event (Frijda 1997: 111; Schwartz et al. 1986: 148). Commemoration also serves a legitimizing function by signaling to people that it is legitimate to remember and express this memory in certain fashions. Cultures may also have established taboos, which pattern the avoidance practice of group members by influencing which events one should not discuss (Olick and Levy 1997). Also the mass media, television in particular, instruct people's beliefs about the past in patterned ways. Events that are given extensive media coverage are more easily remembered than those that do not pass the news hole. In the logic of the mass media, this implies that events that contain a certain degree of drama (Schudson 1992: 56), get more immediate notice, and are more easily remembered, than other events.

Aside from television, the educational system offers the only information most people have about historical events (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 155). This gives the state great influence over how people's beliefs about the past are shaped (Wertsch 2002: 10), and one would expect stronger and more far-reaching intersubjective uniformities (i.e., more homogeneous beliefs) in societies in which the state has a monopoly over the production of knowledge, including over the mass media.

Symbolic forms that influence people's beliefs about the past are occasionally created purposefully, and in fact sometimes also destroyed

purposefully. As Baumeister and Hastings (1997: 280) have noted, the "easiest and most obvious way to distort collective memory involves the selective omission of disagreeable facts" (see also Devine-Wright 2003: 12). This implies that elites may play important roles in shaping people's beliefs about the past, and not least in influencing the selection of what historic events will enter into analogical reasoning. As Schuman and Reiger (1992: 316) have argued, most "people do not spontaneously dwell on historical analogies when attempting to understand a present problem. Instead analogies to past events are often made salient by those who attempt to shape support for a particular policy." After the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990, for instance, both leading advocates for and against sending American troops to the Gulf used analogism to win over public support. Those who advocated sending troops relied on the World War II analogism, comparing Saddam Hussein to Hitler and arguing against "appeasement" (comparing war opponents to Chamberlain and others during the 1930s, who refused to act against Hitler up until the invasion of Poland). Those who were against sending troops to the Gulf, on the other hand, relied on the Vietnam War analogy (Schuman and Rieger 1992).

It could thus be argued that people's beliefs are not always fully articulated until they are confronted with the ready-made explicit lines of thought presented by elites (cf. Bourdieu 1984: 459–460). Yet, in order to be successful such elite propaganda must be sufficiently attuned to people's preconceptions, and be in line with their emotional disposition and/or interests (Merton 1968: 572–573). It must resonate (see also Schwartz 1991: 222; Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 71). In the example above, both analogisms were highly resonant; however, the former resonated more strongly among the older generations, whereas the latter more among the younger generations.

Nonetheless, elites and other key actors tend to have a stronger influence than others on people's belief formation process. This is not only because people receive most of their information from these sources, but also that information from certain key actors is seen as more authoritative. We not only see this phenomenon within national cultures, but within other group cultures as well. Kruglanski (1989) has termed these actors *epistemic authorities*. People have greater confidence in information coming from epistemic authorities. They also consider beliefs espoused by these actors as truth; they rely on them and tend to adopt these beliefs as part of their own repertoires. The authority of epistemic authorities often derives from the social role the actor

occupies, a social role often associated with a position of power. Political, intellectual, and religious leaders are typical examples of epistemic authorities (see Bar-Tal 1990: 71). However, epistemic authorities may also be more local, such as the family eldest. There will be reasons to come back to the concept epistemic authority below when discussing social category belonging and catnets.

## Structural Equivalence

There has been an almost single-minded focus on culture in the sociological literature on memory. As implied above, culture is an important factor in creating intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past, but far from the only one. The fact that some people have similar memories and form similar beliefs about the past that are distinct from those formed by certain other individuals can also be the result of structural equivalence. We may say that two persons are structurally equivalent when they occupy the same social position. We may also assume that individuals in a similar position will have similar experiences and form similar conceptions around those experiences (Lorrain and White 1971). People may occupy the same social position in different ways. They may share institutionalized roles (e.g., fathers), which means that they "do similar things in relation to similar others," or by occupying equivalent positions in the distribution of resources, which results in similar opportunities and interests (e.g., blue collar workers) (see e.g., Scott 2000: 124). Structural equivalence thus captures the phenomenon that Marx talked about in terms of "class-in-itself" (see also Bearman 1993: 79). In this respect it should be noted that structural equivalence is a relational concept: people share social positions vis-à-vis others.

Structural equivalence may create intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past for two reasons: because of shared experiences and because of interest-driven distortions. Let us start with the former. Although shared experiences result in intersubjective patterns in belief formation, they do not, per se, lead to biased beliefs. However, many people are largely unaware that they engage with specific but limited slices of reality because of their location in the social structure. As Nisbett and Ross (1980: 262–263) put it, people tend to be insensitive to the fact that "their particular niches in the universe may funnel unrepresentative evidence or information to them

in a thousand different domains." This leads to biases when using the availability heuristic (see above) and, thus, to biased inferences when using analogism as a guiding principle. Currently unemployed workers, for example, tend to overestimate the rate of unemployment, while currently employed workers tend to underestimate it (Nisbett and Ross 1980: 19).

Structural equivalence also yields shared interests. Shared interests, in turn, are an important reason for uniformities in social action. As Weber (1978: 30) noted, "[m]any of the especially notable uniformities in the course of social action […] [depend] entirely on the fact that the corresponding type of social action is in the nature of the case best adapted to the normal interests of the actors as they themselves are aware of them." Interests, of course, often determine action more directly by influencing people's desires; but they also determine action more indirectly by influencing people's beliefs. This also holds true for people's beliefs about the past. As Bartlett (1995: 256) demonstrated in his pioneering work on memory, interests, which "very often have a direct social origin […] may decide what it is that a person remember." As was discussed above, at an individual level interests may lead to egocentric biases, and to ethnocentric biases at a group level.

*Social Networks, Social Categories, and Catnets*

I have so far discussed how culture and structural equivalence, and therefore interests, create intersubjective patterns in memories and other beliefs about the past. In the last section, I will discuss two factors that are of even greater importance: social network belonging and social category belonging. The former is important primarily because it structures people's information; the latter because it is a vector for social identity and because it influences the ways in which information is validated. The reason for bringing social network belonging and social category belonging together in this section rather than giving them separate sections is that they sometimes give rise to emerging properties when they are brought together. So called *catnets*, that is, networks that are homogeneous in terms of social category belonging, are likely to cause far stronger and more extensive intersubjective uniformities in beliefs about the past than are both social network belonging that is heterogeneous in terms of social category belonging and social category belonging among people who are not interlinked in a social

network. In fact, one definition of a *social group*, in the strong sense, is that it constitutes a catnet (Tilly 1978: 63). If structural equivalence, as discussed above, comes close to Marx's class-in-itself, the connectivity and identity provided by catnets potentially yield class-for-itself (cf. Bearman 1993: 79).[3]

The social network approach is a way of conceptualizing interpersonal relations. The focus is on relations that link individuals. Such a connection can be directed or undirected, and direct or indirect—that is, individuals A and C can be linked directly or indirectly through individual B (Scott 2000). Such interpersonal relations, in turn, are important as they are simultaneously channels of information, sources of social pressure, and sources of social support, and are thus likely to influence people's beliefs—including their beliefs about the past—and actions in fundamental ways (see Katz 1957). Information is particularly important for understanding intersubjective patterns in memories and other beliefs about the past. Information is not only diffused by mass media, nor does it emanate solely from the tool-kit offered by culture. People also receive much information from persons with whom they interact. People interlinked in a network, and in particular those who find themselves in close-knit networks, are thus likely to share information about various domains. This may, in turn, promote intersubjective beliefs (see Bar-Tal 1990: 9), in particular in black-box situations when people are more likely to rely on information received from others. However, uniformities in memories may be created not only in the process of *receiving* information, but also in *sharing* it. With whom you talk about your experiences is important. Most experiences that enter into working memory are forgotten within a few seconds; they never enter into long-time memory. Cognitive research has shown that experiences that one not only shares with others but also *talks* about with others are less likely to be forgotten—they are partly protected from this kind of transience (Schacter 2001: 31).

A *social category* may be defined as a group of people who recognize their own common characteristics, while other people recognize these

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[3] As a result, a group of people who constitute a catnet is more likely to engage in collective action—because the chances are greater that its members share a social identity—than is a group of people who only comprise a network *or* a social category (cf. Tilly 1978). This likelihood, of course, will increase to the extent that catnet-members are also in structurally equivalent positions in which they are more likely to mobilize around common goals because they are more likely to share or believe they share interests.

specific shared characteristics as well (Tilly 1978: 62; White 1965: 4). A social category is thus both ascribed and self-understood, and although its distinguishing characteristics can be real enough, social categorization ultimately depends on people's perceptions, interpretations, and cognition (cf. Brubaker et al. 2004). In addition, social category is a relational concept; social categories do not exist in isolation but are social categories in relation to other social categories (e.g., Hogg and Abrams 1988: 14). We all belong to a multitude of different social categories (based on gender, occupation, class, religion, ethnicity, life styles, etc.). The extent to which social category belonging promotes intersubjective uniformities in beliefs about the past depends on two main factors: first, the extent to which social category members belong to crosscutting social categories or overlapping social categories (cf. Simmel 1955). In the first case—when two people are similar across one or two social categories but dissimilar across several others—the intersubjectivity will presumably be rather limited and weak, whereas it will be strong and extensive when two people are similar across a large variety of social categories. As Bar-Tal (1990) has argued, only in really strong cases of overlapping social category belonging—such as in traditional tribal societies—does it make some sense to talk about *collective* beliefs and *collective* memory. However, because of increasing role differentiation, such strong cases of overlapping social category belonging are extremely rare in modern societies (cf. Durkheim 1984; Simmel 1971). Second, the extent to which social category belonging promotes intersubjective beliefs about the past depends on how salient the social category is for the people involved. Salient social categories are likely to yield stronger identity and therefore stronger and more extensive intersubjectivity. Although the salience of social categories is always bound to vary according to context (being Swedish is likely to be a more salient social category when traveling abroad than when staying in Sweden, for instance), two things in particular are likely to influence the salience of a social category: First, social categories that have crystallized "around markers that have systematic implication for people's welfare" (Hechter 2000: 98), or are at least believed to have such implications, can be assumed to be of higher salience than other social categories. Second, social categories that are difficult to wish away—mostly *ascribed* rather than *achieved* social categories, that is, social categories one was born into, such as ethnic or racial belonging—are likely to be more salient, and thus yield stronger social identity and intersubjectivity.

Social category belonging is important for many reasons, one of them being identity-driven distortions that create intersubjective patterns in memories and other beliefs about the past. As discussed above, because people's social identities largely derive from their social category membership, people tend to evaluate such membership positively to enhance their self-esteem (Tajfel 1981). One important strategy is to glorify the history of one's social category by selecting the events that are remembered (or commemorated) and/or by embellishing the memories of these events (see Baumeister and Hastings 1997: 283).

A catnet, finally, can be defined as "a set of individuals comprising both a [social] category and a network" (Tilly 1978: 62; cf. White 1965, 1992). Catnets are common because of the tendency to homophily. People tend to develop relationships with people who belong to the same social category (e.g., Blau 1994; Marsden 1987; McPherson et al. 2001). This has several causes. First, socially similar people may share similar interests. Second, even when they do not share common interests, they tend to spend time in the same place (housing area, clubs, work place, etc.). Third, most people tend to find people with similar tastes to be attractive (Burt 1992: 12). Finally, there are sometimes taboos against intimacy (e.g., in marriage) with people of other groups (Zerubavel 1991).

As was discussed above, people tend to rely strongly on information received from epistemic authorities. Social psychological research has demonstrated that information is ascribed stronger epistemic authority when it comes from in-group members than when it comes from out-group members: people are more likely to view somebody belonging to the same social category as themselves as an epistemic authority (Hardin and Higgins 1996: 65; Raviv et al. 1993: 132). This strongly suggests that information within catnets is more likely to yield intersubjective beliefs than does information within ordinary networks.

It should be emphasized that catnets can be of different degree of closure, that is, to varying extents connected to individuals belonging to other social categories. Catnets that are effectively decoupled from others are isolated from information from the outside. This will increase their intersubjective uniformity in beliefs. One reason for such decoupling is physical, geographical distance—either self-selected (such as religious sects that choose physical isolation from non-believers) or not (such as people born on small islands). Another reason for decoupling is insulation, that is, isolation as a result of shared beliefs that nothing good comes from outsiders (e.g., 'infidels') and that interaction with

out-group members should be kept at a minimum. Sometimes organizations may also actively try to create overlapping social category belonging in order to reinforce homogeneity of belief. Church groups, for instance, may try to involve their members in various time-consuming voluntary organizations in which they are unlikely to form network ties with people not belonging to the same church. Because it is time-consuming, participation in these organizations "precludes participation in associations that transmit other beliefs" (Borhek and Curtis 1983: 106–107).

The degree of closure of catnets has important implications for the intersubjectivity of memories and other beliefs of the past because it structures social reality testing (Festinger 1950) or social comparisons (Festinger 1954). As discussed above, information from other persons is likely to influence people's beliefs much more strongly in black-box situations—in situations of subjective uncertainty—and in particular when people lack objective reference points for their beliefs and cannot directly check their beliefs against physical reality, or when they lack confidence in such objective reference points (Hogg and Abrams 1988: 167). In such situations of uncertainty, people tend to compare their beliefs to those of significant others, that is, to those of fellow catnet members. The more their beliefs harmonize with those of significant others, the more valid the beliefs are judged to be. In fact, in cases in which people discover that their beliefs harmonize with those held by most others in the group, they tend to become confident in their rightness and they seldom change their opinion (Bar-Tal 2000; Hogg and Abrams 1988). However, situations in which people's beliefs harmonize poorly with those held by significant others—that is, with the general opinion within the catnet—tend to aggravate the feeling of subjective uncertainty. In order to remedy this situation of acute uncertainty, people may either try to change the beliefs held by the others in the group or change their own beliefs "so as to move closer to the group" (Festinger 1954: 126), which is far easier. Processes of social comparison or social reality testing thus often follow catnet-boundaries and are likely to lead to increased belief conformity as a result of a convergence of subjective beliefs toward the general opinion within the group. There are good reasons to assume that such tendencies toward convergence and conformity are particularly strong in the case of memories and other beliefs about the past. For such beliefs there are seldom objective referents with which to verify the beliefs directly, which is why we may assume that social comparison and reality testing become even more

common in these cases. Although people are always more likely to compare themselves to similar than to dissimilar persons in social reality testing, an effective decoupling of catnets makes it more difficult—or even impossible—to check ones memories and other beliefs about the past against the opinions of network contacts across social category belonging. This is likely to increase intersubjective uniformities.

As social psychological research in the tradition of Sherif (1936) and Asch (1952, 1956; 1958) has indicated, people are particularly likely to conform to the beliefs held by fellow catnet members when they are faced by a unanimous majority of significant others. As a result, once shared beliefs have been established within catnets, they are rather difficult to change (cf. Hardin and Higgins 1996: 33). Given the strong influence of majorities on individuals' beliefs and action, it is crucial to discuss how likely different forms of ego networks are to produce situations in which persons are faced with unanimous majorities of significant others. One way of doing this is to distinguish between interlocking and radial ego networks (see Figure 2).

In an interlocking network, Egos B and C are not only related to Ego A but also to each other. This is not the case in a radial network. As a consequence, in interlocking networks, Ego A must confront at least two significant others "who are likely to be in communication with one another concerning his manifest behavior and attitudes" (Laumann 1973: 115), and who thus are in a position to form majority coalitions against Ego A. In radial networks, on the other hand, the potential for such coalition building is practically nonexistent, because the relevant others (Egos B and C) lack direct ties to each other. We may as a consequence of this fact assume that beliefs about the past will show stronger intersubjectivity among persons who are interconnected in interlocking than in radial networks, and in particular among those interconnected in interlocking catnets.

There are good reasons to assume that structural situations characterized by decoupled *and* interlocking catnets are more common in
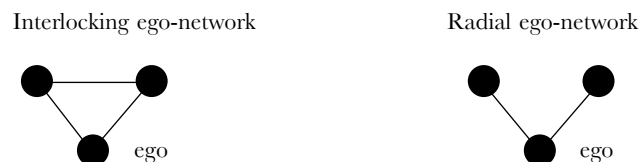


*Figure 2.* Network forms.

rural areas, especially in traditional societies, whereas integrated *and* radial catnets are more common in urban areas, in particular in the big cities of modern societies—and that the intersubjective uniformities in beliefs about the past therefore tend to be stronger in rural than in urban areas. There are several reasons for this. First, multiform heterogeneity, that is, heterogeneity that penetrates more deeply into substructures (Blau 1977), is more common in urban areas. Second, organizational brokers with the capacity to bridge catnets, that is, organizations that are heterogeneous across a large variety of social categories, are more common in urban areas because the division of labor is more developed and because there is a greater variety of civil society organizations. In rural areas, kin—which tends to be strongly homophile—is more likely to be the dominant organizational principle. Third, geographically and socially mobile persons are more common in urban than in rural areas, and such persons are more likely to be embedded in radial networks, whereas interlocking networks are more common in rural areas where "everyone knows everyone else" (see Laumann 1973: 115–116; cf. Coser 1991).

*Conclusion*

In order to explain action we have to take people's beliefs, not the least their beliefs about past events, into account. As sociologists, however, we are not primarily interested in explaining the concrete actions of single individuals, but in explaining the typical actions of typical individuals. Weber (2001), for instance, was not interested in explaining why any particular Calvinist or Capitalist believed in what they believed, but why typical beliefs common among, or even constitutive of, Calvinists prepared the ground for the ethos or spirit of capitalism. Hence, most of the time, we are interested in finding patterns in beliefs and actions: why are certain persons (sometimes constituting a group, social class, nation, etc.) more likely to act in a specific way and/or to share specific beliefs? In approaching such questions, I have in this paper argued that culture, structural equivalence, social category belonging, and social network belonging promote intersubjective uniformities in memories and other beliefs about the past.

Culture provides symbolic forms which may direct people's memories and other beliefs about the past in certain directions by indicating which events are considered important and legitimate. To name but

a few, archives, educational systems, history books, commemorative rituals play this role. Structural equivalence implies that persons in similar positions will share experiences and will form similar memories and beliefs around these experiences. These persons are also likely to share interests, which may distort their beliefs in important ways. Social networks may create intersubjective uniformities in beliefs about the past because they structure the information that people receive, and also because they channel the social pressure and social support that people feel from significant others. Social networks tend toward social homophily, and also social category belonging may contribute to intersubjective patterns in memories and beliefs about past events. This is primarily because they constitute a basis for social identity, but also because they influence the ways in which information is validated. People are more likely to trust and rely on information received from people belonging to the same social category. It should be emphasized, moreover, that these four factors overlap, and that memories and other beliefs about the past are more likely to be shared when several of these factors overlap.

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