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# Analytical Sociology: Bringing Culture and Identity Back In

by Christofer Edling *and* Jens Rydgren

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is a critique of analytical sociology as presented in Hedström [2005] and further developed in Hedström and Bearman [2009.]<sup>1</sup> We concentrate on the former, which we view as the most comprehensive formulation of analytical sociology so far [cf. Manzo 2010.] It is important to state early on that we view analytical sociology as an important and promising enterprise, and that we are sympathetic toward the emphasis on clarity, precision, and mechanisms-based explanations. Our critique grows from a wish to further strengthen this approach.

We have two main targets. First, we believe that too little attention is being paid to the macro-to-micro link. In Hedström [2005] this link is almost exclusively represented in the form of structures constituted of interacting individuals, and we argue that more than dyadic interactions must be taken into account in order to fully see the importance of the macro level on individual-level actions. To be sure, structures are important, and we would hope to see further development here (on status systems, etc.) However, in this paper we focus on the need to bringing in culture. We argue for

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an expanded and revised version of a book chapter published in German in Thomas Kron and Thomas Grund (Eds.) *Die Analytische Soziologie in der Diskussion* [VS Verlag, 2010.] We thank Gianluca Manzo, Lars Udehn, and three anonymous *Sociologica* reviewers for comments received on the current version. Financial support from Riksbankens jubileumsfond (RJ) is greatly acknowledged.

the importance of macro-level entities such as culture, social categories, and groups – all of which have so far been largely omitted from analytical sociology. Second, we criticize the persistent focus on intentionality as the driving force of social action. We argue that the strong focus on intentionality unnecessarily not only restricts the scope conditions of analytical sociology, but that it also introduces theoretical inconsistencies, by bringing in unrealistic assumptions and as-if theorizing. Drawing on advances in cognitive science, psychology, and social psychology we point to the need for analytical sociology to acknowledge that much human thinking is habitual, unreflective, and automatic. Nevertheless it produces action that needs to be explained within the theoretical framework of analytical sociology. Hedström [2005] has distanced the program of analytical sociology from rational choice theory by down playing the assumption of rationality. However, we argue that analytical sociology is still too closely connected with rational choice theory, and that the assumption of intentionality – that people make reasoned choices – needs to be relaxed. We discuss the ways in which a further focus on social identity would complement analytical sociology by making it more realistic and less restricted.

We proceed by first reviewing the role of social mechanisms in analytical sociology, and their important implications for what constitutes a satisfactory explanation. We conceive of this as the first foundation of analytical sociology. We then set this in relation to the second foundation of analytical sociology, namely Coleman's methodological macro-to-micro-to-macro approach. Our conclusion from this discussion is that the under-emphasis on the macro-to-micro link and the narrow focus on intentionality seriously limit the scope of analytical sociology. In the latter half of the paper we argue that analytical sociology can and should give greater attention to the macro-to-micro link and consider motivational factors for social action that go beyond simple intentionality. We believe that this broadening is perfectly conceivable within Hedström's general vision for analytical sociology.

## **2. Foundation 1. Social Mechanisms**

Analytical sociology is based on the primacy of mechanism-based explanations [Hedström & Swedberg 1998] and a set of strong arguments for why covering law and statistically-based explanations do not adequately clarify what is actually going on in society [Hedström 2005.] A “social mechanism, as here defined, describes a constellation of entities and activities that are organized such that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome” [Hedström 200, 25.] But equally important, as is clarified in an interesting footnote, social mechanisms in themselves are not theor-

etical constructs. Indeed they are the real thing, and refer to “the real and empirical entities and activities that bring about phenomena” [Hedström 2005, 14 fn.6.] In our view, this strong focus on mechanisms has at least three important implications for analytical sociology:

a) First, focusing on social mechanisms implies that analytical sociology is about opening the “black box” and revealing the logic of society, making way for *how*-questions [Hedström 2005, 26.] As for the “final” box to be opened, we think that the answer provided by Hedström [2005, 26-28] is sound, namely that the sociological tradition itself will have to provide the boundary condition.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, it has been pretty clear that the smallest sociologically relevant pieces of the puzzle are the social actors, that is, the entities that are doing the doing. The methodological debate in sociology is still engaged in the question of whether or not this is too fine-grained. There has never been a serious sociological debate over whether it is too coarse. And even today, as we allow for stronger cognitive and genetic influences on contemporary sociology, there is no movement or argument in favor of redefining this lower boundary [see, e.g., Freese 2008.]

b) Second, focusing on social mechanisms means that analytical sociology is chiefly concerned with the empirical. In this respect, analytical sociology is not a theory any more than social mechanisms are theory. On the contrary, analytical sociology stipulates a research strategy by which we construct our theories and models (without pursuing that fuzzy distinction further) in order to open the black boxes [Edling 2012.] Analytical sociology rests upon the assumption that the social world exists, and moreover, that among other things this world consists of empirical facts called social mechanisms.

c) However, there is also a third implication arising from the focus on social mechanisms, namely that analytical sociology is about what Weber [1978, 4] termed *Verstehen*, that is, “the interpretive understanding of social action [...],” where “[a]ction is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” This is to some extent alluded to as an argument in favor of action-based mechanisms because they provide “a deeper and more emphatic understanding of the causal process [...].” [Hedström 2005, 28.] In this statement the idea of intentionality is first introduced, and this is the “crack” from which our further argumentation will unfold. The full sentence reads, “[f]ocusing on actions and explaining actions in intentional terms provides a deeper and more

<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested to us by Filiz Garip that another take on this problem is to consider the lowest level at which we can interfere with social processes in order to reform society. We are not able to develop that intriguing idea further here.

emphatic understanding of the causal process than do other non-action based explanations.” So, while action-based social mechanisms as presented here do acknowledge the fundamental importance of emphatic understanding, the idea, we believe, is brushed aside too quickly. We are not the authors, nor is this the place, to dwell upon the intricacies of Weber’s theory of action, but suffice to say the emphasis that Weber placed on “subjective meaning” seems to get lost in the focus on intentionality.

In the remainder of this paper we will examine what we take to be a particularly problematic consequence of the exclusive focus on intentional action. First, we will argue that this focus is inconsistent with Hedström’s ambition of building explanations around *realistic* (although sometimes simplified) mechanisms. In the cognitive sciences, psychology, and social psychology there is a growing awareness that the human mind works in two different modes. The first is automatic, quick, reflexive, and largely unconscious, while other is controlled, slow, reflective, and conscious [e.g., Evans 2008; Chaiken & Trope 1999; Haidt 2001.] It is impossible to weight definitively the relative importance of these two modes,<sup>3</sup> but it safe to say that a great deal of what individuals do is not preceded by reflection (or reason, in Hedström’s words) and cannot be said to constitute intentional action. There are some attempts to incorporate insights from the dual-process literature into analytical sociology [e.g. Kroneberg 2005; 2007,] but the bulk of theorizing in analytical sociology is locked into thinking about action as intentional, based on reason – that is, slow, reflective, conscious thinking – and has either ignored or disparaged attempts to deal with the quick, reflexive, and unconscious part of individual thinking, the treatment of Bourdieu’s discussion of *habitus* being a case in point [Hedström 2005, 4; see also van den Berg 1998.] We argue that this is unfortunate in several ways: (i) it makes the theoretical tool kit available to analytical sociologists less complete than it could be; (ii) it makes the micro-level foundations less realistic; (iii) it obstructs an important macro-micro link, namely the way in which culture may potentially influence action (e.g., Vaisey 2009);<sup>4</sup> and (iv) it distances analytical sociology from areas that interest a large segment of the sociological community, and thus reduces the attractiveness of the approach.

Second, also within the theoretical universe of analytical sociology, the narrow focus on intentionality creates discord. More specifically, we find this focus somewhat strange given the underlying DBO theory, that is, that individual action should be

<sup>3</sup> Some psychologists, such as Haidt [2001, 820,] argue that “the intuitive process is the default process [...] [and that it] is primarily when intuitions conflict, or when the social situation demands thorough examination of all facets of a scenario, that the reasoning process is called upon.”

<sup>4</sup> Culture influences action not only through cognition [e.g. DiMaggio 1997] but also by shaping emotions [Vaisey 2009, 1685.]

explained by a person's desires, beliefs, and the opportunities they meet. As was argued by Elster [1983, 70,] people's "beliefs and desires are themselves in need of explanation," and intentional explanations are not likely to be very effective in explaining beliefs and desires. As was also noted by Hedström [2005, 43,] desires and beliefs are usually the result of unintentional and often even unconscious processes; however, these processes are not incorporated into the theory [see Kaidesoja 2012, 316; Hedström & Ylikoski 2010, 60.] Two things follow from this: First, we need to know more about how desires and beliefs are formed. Although this is an integrated part of Hedström [2005,] we point to some limitations of this discussion, which in our view is caused by the underemphasis on macro-to-micro factors. Second, we need to know more about what exactly social actors, that is, individuals, bring to the decision-making process that goes beyond the sum total of desires, beliefs, and opportunities. In order to speak of intentional action, social actors should not be conceived of as containers of desires and beliefs; these must make a difference for the actions undertaken. Otherwise, it would make more sense to speak of causal explanations of action. Hedström [2005] does not discuss this question explicitly, and below we argue that this fact is likely to be the result of the implicit reliance on theorists firmly rooted in the rational choice tradition, in which interests are assumed to be the driving force of individuals' actions. We claim that interests are only one driving force of action, and that we also need to consider identity. Doing so will open analytical sociology to social action that is not intentional, but still highly relevant for sociological understanding.

Returning to the question of how desires and beliefs are formed, we need in some important ways to go beyond analytical sociology as formulated by Hedström [2005.] Foremost, we need a more serious focus on the macro-to-micro link, which Hedström clearly underemphasized while privileging the micro-to-micro link. Individuals' position in the social (macro) structure, culture, as well as their identification with groups, social categories, and collectives, shape their beliefs and desires, and action, in important ways. In this paper we focus on the importance of social identity and identification, aspects that have been largely left out of analytical sociology so far. Introducing questions of identity and identification, we believe, will make analytical sociology better equipped to open black boxes. The reason is that it helps us to identify social mechanisms outside the rather limited confines given by the canon of analytical sociology, which in our opinion is still too closely tied up with rational choice theory. We also see additional gains by bringing concepts such as identity and culture into analytical sociology. Analytical sociology provides a solid foundation for explanatory social science. By stressing high scientific standards and conceptual rigor, analytical sociology purposely distances itself from a large body

of sociological theory and has alienated many sociologists. Although we fully agree that high scientific standards and conceptual rigor are something that all sociology should strive for, we see a more serious side effect that could develop from such a self-marginalizing analytical sociology. Sociology has developed around a core of key unresolved issues that we want and need to understand. Even though they intuitively make sense, some of the issues and concepts that arise from theorizing about them are inherently difficult to approach, and one is sometimes tempted simply to steer away from them and dispose of the concepts. We argue that in order to prove itself, analytical sociology will have to take seriously some of the “soft” ideas that are at the (mainstream) core of sociology such as culture and identity. We claim that there is no lack of sources of inspiration in the literature, and that culture and identity can be dealt with within the confines of analytical sociology and in fact serve to improve it.

### **3. Foundation 2. The Macro-to-Micro-to-Macro Approach**

The object of sociological theory is to explain the social by linking it to the action and interaction of social actors. This involves “explaining behavior of a social system by means of three components: the effects of properties of the system on the constraints or orientations of actors; the action of actors who are within the system; and the combination or interaction of those actions, bringing about the systemic behavior” [Coleman 1990, 27.] As was effectively illustrated by Coleman [1990, 10,] this involves the isolation of three causal steps: 1) from macro-to-micro, 2) from micro-to-micro, and 3) from micro-to-macro.

According to Hedström [2005, 115,] we should pay particular attention to the third step, which he claims is under-researched in sociology, while the first two steps are well covered. As a result, Hedström has tended to underemphasize the first step; the macro-micro link. This is a deliberate choice in order to concentrate on the two others – the micro-micro link, and in particular the micro-macro link – while still keeping the theory as clear and transparent as possible: “To allow greater complexity in the latter two components, which are typically of greater sociological interest, one must keep the action component as simple as possible by abstracting away all elements not considered crucial” [Hedström 2005, 36.]

In our opinion, too much is abstracted away in this move, and as a result the underlying assumption of the macro-micro link is left implicit. While it might be true for sociology and the social sciences at large that the last step has attracted the least theoretical interest, focusing only on sociological theory and research that take the Coleman approach to sociological theory seriously, we doubt that this is a valid

claim.<sup>5</sup> And moreover, if we take the program seriously it follows that all three components are of equal importance. While analytically dissecting the social, we need to make sure that we do not invite theoretical fallacies by losing sight of any of the three steps in the Coleman schema. For instance, while we might be able to argue with Hedström (2005, 154) that we can define culture “as a cluster of desires and beliefs shared by a collectivity,”<sup>6</sup> it remains central to acknowledge that culture so defined is produced by particular patterns of individual action and interaction, and simultaneously produces particular patterns of action and interaction.<sup>7</sup> In other words, if we accept the idea that culture is an outcome of social action, we also have to accept the idea that culture causes social action, partly by influencing actors’ desires, beliefs, and (beliefs about) opportunities. Considering the example of Mr. Smith, who decided not to take an umbrella because he enjoys singing in the rain like Gene Kelly, we note that Hedström [2005, 40] is sensitive to the importance of culture in the macro-to-micro-link [Østerberg 2009.] But while this particular example ends by taking note of Mr. Smith’s desire, we believe analytical sociology should not shy away from the task of explaining either why Mr. Smith came to hold this desire, or why particular collectivities share specific desires and beliefs. In other words, analytical sociology also needs to reveal the social mechanisms at play as we move from macro-to-micro.

From its firm footing in Coleman’s schema for sociological theory, it is clear that analytical sociology starts with the idea that action is the key theoretical mechanism; that is, that sociological explanations draw upon accounts of the action of ideal-typical actors [Hedström 2005, 38.] However, analytical sociology seems to be concerned only with *one* particular type of action theory. “The concept of *action* refers to what actors do intentionally, as distinct from mere ‘behaviors’ such as snoring during the night or accidentally tripping over a stone” [Hedström 2005, 38.] What this means is that intentional action is *the* theoretical building block of action. All “actions” that are non-intentional are conceived off as unexplainable and therefore of no interest to analytical sociology. We would certainly agree that sociological theory need not concern itself with snoring and tripping per se, but it appears to us that the slip into intentionality is a bit too hasty.

Firstly, it seems unclear why social action is reduced to intentional action. There are convincing arguments, by Weber for instance, that all types of social action are

<sup>5</sup> Coleman talks about social theory. We prefer the term sociological theory, but believe that we mean the same thing.

<sup>6</sup> The problem with this definition, however, is that it leaves the potential influence yielded by cultural artifacts such as books and monuments aside.

<sup>7</sup> This is a major insight of both Giddens’ [1984] theory of structuration and Bourdieu’s [1984] treatment of *habitus*. Even if these are sometimes put forward in impenetrable style, we believe the insight is difficult to refute.



not really what we would call intentional. Indeed traditional social action in Weber's [1978, 24-26] terms, appears to be an utterly important aspect of social life, and it should be fully possible to explain it by the desires and beliefs held by social actors and the opportunities they meet. And as is forcefully argued in the pragmatist tradition [Gross 2009,] habits play an important role in explaining action. Secondly, it is not clear what is achieved by the sharp distinction between social action and behavior. We would be the first to acknowledge the relative success that a discipline such as economics has achieved by cutting out all unintentional and unconscious socially-oriented actions and behaviors from its models. At the same time, it is safe to say that this was done in an attempt to achieve predictive power at the cost of explanatory power. If by this we mean explanatory in the analytical sociological meaning of the term, namely the practice of opening black boxes and renouncing as-if theorizing. Analytical sociology needs to pay closer attention to the dual mode in which human thinking works, and to incorporate automatic, unconscious thinking into its theory of action as well. Currently it rests squarely on the assumption that all action is based on controlled, conscious thought; that is, that people actually choose to act in certain ways rather than others. Although Hedström's [2005] theory of action is more realistic than rational choice theory, we question also the universal primacy of assuming that people makes choices. To be sure, in some situations people make conscious choices about how to act, but in many others they certainly do not; and we need to know more about the boundaries between these two modes.<sup>8</sup>

For example, it should be emphasized that it is only in rather uncertain situations that people glance at others in order to know which fork to use, which is mentioned in Hedström [2005] as an example of how social influence works. More commonly, people follow behavioral scripts in restaurants or in other easily identified social situations [Hirt *et. al.* 1998; Schank & Abelson 1977, 41,] and people often do what they can to avoid getting into precarious situations (i.e., situations in which they cannot rely on available scripts.)<sup>9</sup> People are seldom aware of these scripts or schemas, which can be seen as systems of desires and beliefs. Therefore their behavior is hardly intentional in any conventional sense of the term. Yet, we would argue that

<sup>8</sup> Note again that intentionality does not limit analytical sociology to a strict version of rational choice theory but that it can encompass drivers such as reciprocity [Fehr and Gächter 2002] and recognition [Honneth 2001.] See also next section.

<sup>9</sup> According to cognitive psychology, in their drive to gain an understanding of their surroundings, people tend to stop at a "working understanding" [Keil 2006, 241.] People are likely to stick to this working understanding as long as it fulfills its purpose. Moreover, "although much of our behavior is unconsciously controlled, 'we' (conscious beings) are not aware of this fact and may live with an illusion that we are much more in control of our behavior than we actually are" [Evans 2008, 270.]

they engage in social action, and that it is important for sociologists to study such social action. Such scripts, partly acquired in early childhood, are highly influenced by cultural patterns, and hence are likely to differ between different social groups or other collectives [e.g. Strauss and Quinn 1997.] To us it seems that a one-dimensional focus on intentional action entails the risk of succumbing to as-if theorizing about *how* the social actors who are doing the doing are *actually* doing it.

If we were to try to explain the origin of this limitation of analytical sociology, we would first look at the apparent roots of analytical sociology itself or, to be more precise, at its modern branches. We suggest that the recent strong bias toward rational choice theory has led analytical sociology to narrow its scope (and attraction) in unnecessary ways. As far as the roots go, Hedström [2005, 6-9] named Weber and Tocqueville as early proponents of an approach similar to analytical sociology [see also Edling & Hedström 2005,] and Parsons and Merton as intermediaries. Even though both Weber and Tocqueville are sometimes evoked as forebears of rational choice theorizing, we believe that such an argument is based on a rather unimaginative reading of their works. For sure, rational action played an important role for both. But it is beyond doubt that their impact on the social sciences had little to do with them having one idea of social action dictating every analysis. Instead they stayed theoretically attuned to the real-world mechanisms that they were studying, working with various motivational factors when analyzing social action. And while no sociologist would seriously argue that Parsons or Merton restricted themselves to one singular type of action mechanism, we get a completely different picture with the contemporary influences – Boudon, Coleman, Elster, and Schelling – all of whom are closely affiliated with rational choice theory.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that when discussing the implications of their work for analytical sociology, Hedström [2005, 6-8] does not discuss their conceptions of social action. Instead Boudon is mentioned for his focus on generative models, Coleman for contributions to the methodology of explanatory theory, Elster for analytical realism, and Schelling for his work on the micro-to-macro link. But central to the work of all four is, of course, their attention to intentionality and instrumentality, which is part of the bargain when you adopt their ideas. Despite the fact that Hedström [2005, 60-66] wants to distance analytical sociology from what he has called the instrumentalism of rational choice theorizing, because of these contemporary foundations analytical sociology remains situated in the rational choice tradition [see e.g. Opp 2007.]

<sup>10</sup> Of course, all of them are also well known for their path-breaking work on revealing and trying to account for the limits of rational choice from the perspective of socially embedded action. Nevertheless, they do form a body of well-known rational choice sociologists.

#### 4. Interests and Identities

Related to the strong focus on intentionality, analytical sociology has been pre-occupied with interest while largely ignoring other motivational forces such as identity. Clearly, social actors act out of interest, and this type of action has been carefully detailed by analytical sociologists [see contributions in Hedström and Bearman 2009.] However, social actors also act out of identity, which comprises shared action potentials neither reducible to individual interests nor, in fact, to intentionality. Social identity may be defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” [Tajfel 1981, 255.] Hence, although social identity ultimately starts with categorization and is defined and asserted through difference, “objective” categorization is not a sufficient condition for identity: people also have to understand themselves to be part of a particular category. The social world consists of a multitude of social categories, some of them large, like class, religion, ethnicity, and gender, some of them smaller, like hobby groups. Each individual belongs to, and identifies with, several groups and categories simultaneously, which makes it possible to speak about an overlapping system of identifications. However, these identifications do not have the same degree of salience, and therefore the same influence on social action; nor is their salience stable over time. Sometimes identity is reinforced by shared interests (i.e. Marx,) but at other times a person’s interests may be best served by an action that is in conflict with her identity.

Interest is clearly related to social position in the way that actors in structurally equivalent positions are likely to share the same interest. But there is a more direct influence from position on interest in that a person’s interests are a function of both her personal social network and her affiliations to social categories [White 2008.] If this is accepted, it is clear why analytical sociology must broaden its conception of the macro-level and of the macro-micro link so that it encompasses social relations beyond the interactions between individuals. Furthermore, a person’s affiliations to social categories and her social ties to other social actors are the basis for identification that can and will influence her actions. These notions form the basic prerequisites for the next section, in which we close in on the nuts and bolts of action theory, namely DBO-theory.

## 5. Desires, Beliefs, and Motivations for Action

Social category belonging is important primarily because it is a vector of social identity, and because it influences the ways in which information is validated [see Rydgren 2009b.] Belonging to a social group or category, or wanting to belong to a social group or category, often influences people's desires and beliefs. By interfering with the way individuals influence one another in various forms of interaction this effect may be both direct and indirect.

Schelling's [1978, ch. 4] well-known segregation model is exemplary for analytical sociology in demonstrating how the micro-macro link should be modeled. In brief, Schelling's model shows that segregation patterns may evolve even in situations where only a weak preference for the in-group exists. Still, it is assumed that people prefer to live close to at least some people who are similar to themselves, that is, *to people who belong to the same social category*. This is an intuitively plausible assumption. Yet, because analytical sociology does not take social identification into account, it is unable to explain why this is a plausible assumption. More specifically, it fails to explain why groups or social categories exist prior to the situation, that is, why actors' desires are not blind to extra-individual properties. It moreover fails to explain why even a weak preference for living close to members of the same ethnic or racial group (i.e., social category) is seen as a plausible assumption, whereas living close to members of the same category of taller than average or red-haired people is seen as a less likely desire. We argue that to understand this, we need to account for how salient the social category is for the people involved. Salient social categories are likely to yield stronger identity and are therefore more likely to have an effect on people's desires and beliefs and actions. As a result, conformity is likely to be stronger and more extensive among people belonging to highly salient social categories.

Although the salience of social categories is always bound to vary according to context, three things in particular are likely to influence the salience of a social category. First, social categories that have crystallized "around markers that have systematic implications for people's welfare" [Hechter 2000, 98] by affecting the allocation of rights, resources, and risks, or that are at least believed to do so, 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 that one was born into – are likely to be more salient, and thus yield stronger social identity and conformity in beliefs and desires. Third, the salience of social categories is likely to depend on the density of social relations within the category – that is, to what extent a social category also constitutes a group [cf. White 2008; Tilly 1978] – and the degree of closure, that is, to what extent the group

excludes outsiders. As a result, the salience of particular social categories is likely to increase in situations of strong polarization, and it is a reasonable assumption that the effect of social identification on desires and beliefs – and on social action – is stronger in such situations. Group mobilization preceding ethnic conflicts is a case in point. These are some examples of the ways in which an awareness of the role of social identification with groups and social categories can help us identifying explanatory mechanisms (i.e., macro-micro mechanisms). Without them, we would hardly be able to explain in a coherent way why desires and beliefs and social action often conform within social categories and differ systematically between them.

No matter how important social interaction is for belief formation in uncertain situations, the arguably largest influence on people's desires and beliefs take place through socialization processes in early childhood, that is, at a stage when people have not yet become fully bloomed social actors. Therefore it is important to look at people's social background in order to assess the beliefs and desires they have.

Certainly, individuals also influence one another in various forms of social interaction. As mentioned above, social identity matters here as well, but more indirectly by interfering with the way individuals influence one another in various forms of interaction. We argue that social interaction is more likely to have an effect on actor's beliefs and desires – and social actions – in situations of uncertainty when people face new situations that their standard cognitive strategies fail to handle, and/or when a person's beliefs and desires deviate from those held by most others in his or her social surrounding, especially when the person identifies with the group constituting the significant others and wants to belong to the group or remain a member [Rydgren 2009a.]

a) First, it needs to be underscored that people do not navigate haphazardly through uncertain situations; they are influenced by social factors. And all information is not validated equally; information received from others is likely to be assessed differently depending on who the sender is. More specifically, whom you rely on in situations of uncertainty largely depends on who you trust and who you acknowledge as an authority. Group belonging is fundamental to both of these factors. Psychological research has demonstrated that we tend to view information coming from certain sources and actors as more trustworthy and authoritative than others [Kruglanski 1989.] People have more confidence in information coming from such so-called epistemic authorities, and are more likely to adopt beliefs espoused by epistemic authorities belonging to the same group or social category as themselves [Hardin & Higgins 1996, 65; Raviv *et. al.* 1993, 132.] In addition to group belonging, the authority of an epistemic authority derives from her social role, which is often associated with a

position of power. Elite actors, such as political, intellectual, and religious leaders, are typical examples of epistemic authorities [see Bar-Tal 1990, 71.]

b) Second, it is not only in situations of uncertainty that people are particularly receptive to social influence, but also in situations in which they discover that the beliefs they hold deviate from those of most others in their social surrounding. Here we see a strong influence of group belonging and identification on social influence. As noted by Festinger [1950; 1954,] in situations of subjective uncertainty in which people lack objective reference points for their beliefs, they tend to compare their beliefs to those of significant others. The more their beliefs harmonize with those of significant others, the more valid the beliefs are deemed to be. When people discover that their beliefs harmonize with those held by most others in the group, they tend to become confident in their rightness and seldom change their opinion. Situations in which people's beliefs harmonize poorly with those held by significant others, on the other hand, tend to exacerbate the feeling of subjective uncertainty. To remedy this situation, people may switch group membership, and thus significant others; or try to change the beliefs held by the others in the group, which is difficult; or change their own beliefs to better reflect those of the group, which is often far easier.

This kind of conformity process was famously demonstrated by Asch [1956] in a series of highly influential experiments. Individuals were asked to match the length of a line with other lines of different length. All but one of the individuals in the group was instructed to make a match that was obviously wrong. When the last uninformed individual in each group was asked to make a match, one third of them yielded to the obviously erroneous judgment of the majority. Among the conforming subjects, a majority said they conformed because they lacked confidence in their own judgment and concluded that they must have been mistaken and the majority correct. The second most common reason was to persist in the belief that the majority was wrong, but to suppress this knowledge because of an unwillingness to deviate from the group.<sup>11</sup> Further research has shown that people tend to conform more when the majority consists of ingroup members, that is, of people belonging to the same social category, while they conform less when it consists of outgroup members [see e.g. Bond & Smith 1996, 115.] As argued by Turner [1991,] this fact indicates that group identity is a salient factor for understanding conformity in beliefs and action.

As demonstrated in Asch's study, it is important to distinguish between belief conformity, on the one hand, and conformity in action, on the other. In order to escape sanctions, or seek rewards, people may change their actions to conform with the

<sup>11</sup> Asch showed that a majority of three persons was sufficient to have this effect. However, it is of crucial importance that the majority be unanimous, otherwise conformity decreases dramatically.

group (see, e.g., Deutsch and Gerard 1955,) without giving up deviant beliefs held privately. Festinger [1953] emphasized this distinction by distinguishing between *internalization*, that is, both belief conformity and conformity in action, and *compliance*, that is, conformity in action but not in beliefs. According to Festinger, compliance is more likely if a person is restricted from leaving a group or society, and when there is a threat of social, economic, or physical punishment for non-compliance. The likelihood of internalization, on the other hand, increases if the person is attracted to the group and wishes to remain a member, that is, strongly identifies with the group.

Hence, people sometimes experience dissonance when they compare their beliefs with those held by significant others. Hedström [2005, 52-53] notes that the degree of dissonance – as well as the likelihood that it will result in changing beliefs and/or desires – depends on how strongly the actor's desires differ from the significant others in her surrounding. In this discussion, Hedström implicitly acknowledge the importance of social identity, although the concept is not used and the full implications are not drawn from his argument:

If a focal actor's desires differ markedly from those of individuals with whom he or she interacts, dissonance is likely to arise. For example, if I have been brought up in a working-class environment, this is likely to have influences my cultural preferences. If my friends and colleagues come from a more 'highbrow' cultural background, this may be socially and psychologically stressful for me, and may therefore set in motion dissonance-reduction processes that operate behind my back. If these processes are successful, my desires will change in the direction of those with whom I interact, and this would then be another way by which actions of some can influence the desires and subsequent actions of others [Hedström 2005, 53.]

However, it is not fully noted here that (1) the very fact of growing up in a certain neighborhood is also a potential mechanism, and that there are no a priori reasons to consider this mechanism any less important for explanatory purposes than the mechanism of dissonance reduction; and (2) that identity is likely to reinforce or weaken the effect of this mechanism. If the "I" in the example above identifies strongly with the working class, that is, feels strong emotional bonds to the working class and is committed to membership in this social category [cf. Sayer 2005,] she is less likely to identify with (i.e., wanting to be alike) the middle-class people in her present social surrounding, and thus less likely to both experience dissonance and to conform. Moreover, as indicated above, we argue that the strength of social identification with former or current groups and social categories is not random, but influenced by social factors [see e.g. Bearman 1993 and Gould 1995 for social factors that reinforce or weaken identity.] These social factors are potential social mechanisms.

Moreover, in understanding belief conformity we should be aware that the pressure to increase consistency between oneself and others is likely to vary between different structural situations. Foci of activity [Feld 1981,] such as workplaces or neighborhoods, are important because they bring people together in repeated interaction and thus organize people's social relations. We may assume that people will feel less pressure to increase consistency between oneself and others when interacting with people with whom they share only one or two foci, as compared to people with whom they share many foci. In the first case, more inconsistencies may be allowed for. Here it is important to emphasize that social identification is often tied to foci, and reinforces the effects of foci on consistency-seeking.

Even more generally, the extent to which social category belonging promotes intersubjective uniformities in beliefs depends on two main factors: first, the extent to which social category members belong to crosscutting social categories or, second, belong to overlapping social categories [cf. Simmel 1955.] In the former 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, in really strong cases of overlapping social category belonging – such as in traditional tribal societies – it may even make sense to talk about *collective* beliefs. However, because of increasing role differentiation, such strong cases of overlapping social category belonging are extremely rare in modern societies.

## 6. Concluding remark

Our study of the foundation of analytical sociology reveals a narrow focus with respect to the overarching schema proposed by Coleman as well as limiting assumptions with respect to the nature of social action. In this paper, we have tried to argue that these are not only unnecessary constraints, but also that they remain uncalled for even after a careful assessment of the two foundations of analytical sociology. We have implied that a literal follower of analytical sociology runs the risk of regressing to “as-if” theorizing rather than diligently opening black boxes. By arguing at some length for a broader and more unbiased perspective on social action and interaction that incorporates social identification processes, we have tried to imply that analytical sociology can stay true to its mission, while at the same time integrating significant research findings about the nature of human social behavior. We claim that such a



synthetic – if the expression is permissible – approach to analytical sociology is required for us to be able to honor its grand vision.

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## **Analytical Sociology: Bringing Culture and Identity Back In**

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**Abstract:** This paper is a critique of analytical sociology as presented in Peter Hedström's book *Dissecting the Social*. Our critique has two main targets. First, we believe that too little attention is being paid to the macro-to-micro link, and we argue for the importance of macro-level entities such as culture, social categories, and groups – all of which have so far been largely omitted from analytical sociology. Second, we critique the persistent focus on intentionality as the driving force of social action. We argue that the strong focus on intentionality unnecessarily restricts the scope conditions of analytical sociology, and that it also introduces theoretical inconsistencies, by bringing in unrealistic assumptions and as-if theorizing. Hedström has strived to distance the program of analytical sociology from rational choice theory by relaxing the assumption of rationality. However, we argue that analytical sociology is still too closely connected with rational choice theory, and that the assumption of intentionality – that people make reasoned choices – needs to be relaxed. We discuss the ways in which a further focus on social identity would complement analytical sociology by making it fundamentally more realistic and less restricted.

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*Keywords:* Analytical Sociology, Culture, Identity, Macro-Micro Link, Social Mechanisms.

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