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Culture, Family, and Selfhood

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Some dilemmas are productive, if only for the research and speculation they generate. I want to talk about one such, one that has me in its grip.

I

It concerns the relation between culture in its large generality and selfhood in its small and intimate particularity. To an astonishing degree our identities, our very selfhood – the most intimate and private aspect of our being – seems to be a product of the social roles we play, of the society to which we belong, of the circle of friends with whom we travel. Even in so private and personal a matter as courtship, our most intimate, self–related choices seem culturally "determined". We typically end up marrying spouses who come from the same social class as our own, and even take them "home" beforehand to visit our parents, and enjoy a certain "self–fulfillment" for having done so. Our individual identities seem tied up with belonging to some family, practicing some profession, being a New Yorker, something "out there" in the world.

Yet, it would be absurd to say that we are simply pawns or reflections of the culture. Indeed, we even protect officially against that being so. Our famous Bill of Rights and the First Amendment of the United States Constitution expressly guarantee the freedom of the self: freedom of thought, choice, and expression. Yet we know full well that while selfhood and identity are always in jeopardy from outside, they could not develop without an "outside" to relate to.

Janus–like selfhood even gets itself represented in the academic disciplines we have established for the study of human nature – psychology and cultural anthropology, for example, one looking at us from inside, as it were, the other from outside. We think we need them both: who would claim, for example, that a successful individual psychology is achieved only at the cost of a failing cultural anthropology, or vice versa? They are surely not in a zero

– sum game, even when they study so intersecting a topic as child–rearing, one focused on cultural patterning, the other on the emergence of individuality.

There is something dilemma–like here. Consider it more closely for a moment.

When, for example, you ask people who they are, what they are like, how best to describe themselves as selves, they seen unable to proceed without telling you where they fit in the social/cultural scheme of things - like "I am American" (or Cretan or a San Franciscan), even though they very soon add the "buts" and "howevers" of their uniqueness. How could this be when, presumably, they are telling you about the most private recess of their being, their selfhood, never mind that they end up telling you in rich detail about their unique, autonomous innerness. Yet, few find anything contradictory or anomalous about all this. Two different "perspectives", we say rather lazily, and let it go at that. And perhaps that is alright as a first approximation.

For you can, indeed, look at selfhood and identity from the outside in, or from the inside out. And as legitimized by the academy, outside–in is the stock in trade of staid historians and old school anthropologists, inside–out of psychologists and their ilk. For the outside–inners, selfhood is "the subjective side of culture", like the great Gibbon attributing the fall of Rome to the self–indulgence of a luxury–loving ruling class created by the uneven distribution of wealth and privilege in ancient Rome. At least Gibbon, given that framework, felt compelled to give us an exquisitely rich account of Roman life, including the presumed self–indulgence–creating orgies of its leisured class. But his knowledge of Roman selfhood, even among the patricians, was all from the outside in.

We forgive him: historians of Rome are in no position to know from inside out about the nature and growth of Roman selfhood and patrician selfishness (though there are personal documents to look at, which the Annales school of French historians insist on examining). So, by academic courtesy, we accept Gibbon's late 18th century, rather priggish outside–in version of things: that self–indulgent selfhood reflects a rotten lop–sided society. It is pretty loose talk, even if it were true.

Alas, inside–out efforts to characterize selfhood fall equally short, though in a different way. They concentrate so exclusively on the internal, close–up workings of the individual, that they ignore the culture in which their "subjects" are caught. They decompose culture into its isolated stimuli and responses and reinforcements and it gets lost. Indeed, it you took only microphotographs of Cambridge, Massachusetts, you would never discover the Charles River running through its heart.

Let me offer an example - the young Floyd Allport. In his 1920s account, humans are said to conform to norms, whose existence we discover by tallying individual agreement on commonplace issues. If there is high agreement on an issue, then a norm must be involved. Where such is the case, the distribution of responses departs from the normal bell–shaped curve (in the statistical sense) and the famous J-curve or conformity, the behaviorist's version of "culture". The distribution of individual responses was the hard fact, culture an artifact, a fictional "group mind".

Both approaches – outside-in and inside-out – fall short. Neither comes to terms with how human being maintain some crucial degree of autonomy and individual identity, while still being creatures of their culture.

And that poses the Big Question to which we must now address ourselves.

II

There must be something wrong about how we conceive of both culture and individuality, and then differentiate them. To begin with, a crucial characteristic of any and all cultures is that they are constructed, not simply given, not simply there. They are constructed and are constantly being reconstructed in the minds of people who live together and carry out a culture's various modes of exchange – economic, marital, deferential, whatever.

Cultures, plainly, are not constructed out of whole cloth. For one thing, they are constrained by the need to maintaining communal systems of exchange and to shape their beliefs and discourse

practices to be congruent with those systems and roles in these exchange (or discourse) systems. Sons and fathers construct their versions of the self and world in different ways.

Moreover, nobody ever knows everything there is to know about their culture or about those presumed to share it. It could not be otherwise. It is in this sense that a culture is an imagined community shared in large part in the minds of its members. The nationality stamped on my passport is a small part of being "an American". President Kennedy did not need one when he said, famously, at The Wall, "Ich bin ein Berliner". His compassion touched some canonical beliefs in the West, whose existence was a feature of an existent imagined community.

What do we mean by shared, canonical beliefs. Recall Emile Durkheim who, early in the last century, noted that a culture's system of beliefs had to have exteriority and constraint in order to create a community. To be binding, beliefs had to be seen as independent of the individuals who profess them and, at the same time, must limit the permissible range of individual action and thought. Durkheim was, of course, thinking principally of religious belief system – for he first presented these ideas in Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse. But the corpus juris of a legal system has exteriority and constraints in much the same way, the exteriority testified by ignorance of the law being no excuse for disobeying it. It is this seeming exteriority that lends legitimacy to canonical beliefs: honor thy father and thy mother is inscribed upon the Ten Commandment and the privacy of your home in the Fourth Amendment prohibitions on search.

Legitimacy requires continuity: it cannot be arbitrary. It invokes "history". But history is also constructed – "invented" as Eric Hobsbawm puts it more bluntly. Benedict Anderson, in his brilliant and original study of national identities (entitled Imagined Communities) illustrates by tracing how bits and shards of a largely fabricated past were used to authenticate the historically dubious "anti–colonialism" of many newly emerging Third World states. And our own common law, creates and then change the past by reinterpreting precedent – while proclaiming stare decisis.

Imagined communities, once established, do not change easily, and for obvious reasons both institutional and psychological. For one thing, cultures create institutions to create continuity: economic, legal, religious, governmental. Institutions, moreover, develop "procedures" for controlling and standardizing continuities. In the common law, judicial decisions must be based on precedent. In commerce, debts are contracted for a "due date" and must be paid by then or one's credit is in jeopardy. Institutions, moreover, assure the maintenance of the familiar: they reduce and delimit surprise. We do not understand well our human distaste for surprise – save as it occurs in drama and fiction – but we know it is not to be tampered with. Indeed, our narrative gifts also aid in domesticating surprise: "Plus ca change, plus ca reste la meme chose"[1].

III

Entering a culture is not just learning how to interact with or respond to particular individuals or situations. Early on, we begin constructing our "family" with ambiguous places in it for baby sitters, cleaning women, neighborhood shopkeepers, family friends, and even the occasional pediatric meddler. We know from a generation of Bowlby–inspired research that even young infants differentiate "strangers" from familiars. How complicated families eventually become is caught in the title of Deborah Tannen's forthcoming book on family conversation, I only say that because I love you.

So how does a child learn, learn to construct, the imagined community that we glibly call his "family"? Constructing and mastering any such complex system typically begins with mastery of some sort of stripped–down, simplified prototype – as with acquiring language. What might this be where "family construction" is concerned? Let me examine this question with some illustrations from past research.

Learning how to pay joint attention with another is surely a first step along the way to constructing a culture. "Reading" Other

[1] Jerome Bruner, Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life, New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2002.

Minds, which is what is involved in joint attention, is the open sesame for sharing worlds. And since there is no "direct" or "veridical" way of getting inside Other Minds, it is a highly "constructional" business. We know, for example, that from the start, we have an overwhelming tendency to believe that Other Minds experience the world as we do and that they share our beliefs about it. It may indeed be this very attribution "error" that makes it easier for us to share "imagined communities" with others. Now, joint attention starts in the bosom of the family, notably in the routines of infancy. It soon becomes elaborated in more complex "book reading" and peekaboo. And in the sharing that occurs, the infant and toddler begins "constructing" expectancies, routines, etc. that come to characterize their "own" family. The "self" that emerges out of all of this is, perforce, a relational self, to borrow a term from a recent thoughtful article[2].

The unsurprising conclusion to all this is that constructing a "family" is the opening but crucial step in learning how to construct other versions of culture. Which is not to say that the family is the model of culture which then apply for the rest of our lives to everything else. Rather, it is in the family that we get our basic training in constructing cultures and in sharing imagined communities.

I could easily go on to other features of the child's early "family construction" that are relevant to the issue of constructing imagined communities in general. But that is not where I want to take us. Instead, I want to consider how family as an early imagined community continues to affect how we later view our own selves and how we balance selfhood between individual autonomy and cultural commitment.

IV

I shall draw my material from an adult family whose members were interviewed individually about their lives, and who then come together for a joint interview about what it was like growing up as a family. How does "family" affect how they talk about their "lives" and their selves? It is the "Goodhertz" family, on whom I have

[2] Susan M. Anderson and Serena Chen, "The relational self: a interpersonal social–cognitive theory". Psychol. Rev., 2002 108, 619 – 645.

reported briefly before, but whose interviews we are now finally analyzing in much greater detail.

Let me begin with a short quotation from a 1990 book of mine (*Acts of Meaning*) in which the Goodhertz family first came under scrutiny. Speaking of psychology's earlier habits of formulating self as a kind of "ontological reality", as something simply "there", I remarked:

> "[A] new set of concerns about the nature of Self began to emerge, rather more "transactional" concerns. Is not Self a transactional relationship between a speaker and an Other, indeed, a Generalized Other? Is it not a way of framing one's consciousness, one's position, one's identity, one's commitment with respect to another? Self, in this dispensation, becomes dialogue depended, designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purposes". (p 101)

As for that "recipient", we mostly tell him stories about ourselves, but we tell them in a way that is "doubly narrative" - they have to suit him, the recipient and us, the teller. We become complicit.

Now to the Goodhertz family, to their individual interviews and to the family–together interview (it lasted three hours and was still going strong when we stopped it). Clifford Geertz once remarked that "families are systems for keeping people from being pulled centrifugally by inevitably conflicting interests". They do this by familiar enough means – by light yet adroit interpersonal manners, by playing the expected roles, by sharing a stock of family stories, and the like. Underlying these standard face–to–face family maneuvers, however, there is a shared culture, an imagined community of "our family". And in the sense discussed earlier, it is an "imagined community", each member creating it from their own base of expectations and experience, never knowing "all there is to know" about the others and never expecting anything like unanimity.

The Goodhertzes, described by all of them as a ”close family”, are six in number. George, the father, is a self–made man in his sixties, a heating contractor who is active and much trusted in the Brooklyn community where he works and where the family has lived for thirty years. His father, a drinker and a poor provider, deserted the family when George was still a kid. George never finished high–school, but the kindness of the nuns in the Catholic school he attended led him to convert. His wife Rose – “I’m a Catholic and a Democrat” she remarked – is second–generation Italian–American, much involved with friends in the neighborhood and, like her husband, the child of a drinker, a poor provider, who was chronically unfaithful to his wife. She serves as book–keeper for her husband, is devoted to her family and intrudes on their lives when she can, which is no longer that often, thanks to their skilful evasions.

Carl, the eldest child in his latter thirties and unmarried, was a bright child, became active as an adolescent in the Catholic Peace Movement during Vietnam days, and was the first in the history on the family to go off to college, a Catholic one. Emboldened, he went on to take a doctorate in biology – this time at a non–secular university. “I go my own way and see through the prevailing cant and hypocrisy”. He now works in Manhattan at a research job, but like the other children, he goes faithfully home to Brooklyn to family dinners on Sundays. He ended his individual autobiographical interview with an Icarus–like remark: “What’s a buy from Brooklyn doping way up here?”

Nina is next in line, an obedient and fat child by her own testimony, first found her own independent voice when her father objected to some unladylike clothes she was wearing. “I was supposed to wear blacks and browns and keep quiet”. She is a spontaneous soul who uses natural laughter often gets her and her siblings over rough stretches with their parents at those Sunday family dinners. She has at a marketing job, was good at it, and started her own little company, which is quite successful now. She married and had a child, then got divorced a few years later. She got remarried and divorced again within a year. For all that she is strongly identified with her family, and sees herself as in her mother’s mold!

The next one is Harry, the Goodhertz's bad–luck story. He was so fat as a child that his mother used to hang a DO NOT FEED sign around his neck when he went out on the street. His marriage failed, he is involved in two confused lawsuits, one for the right to visit his son, the other to get his job back (from which he was fired for blowing up at a customer). He seems, however, to be the one best liked in the family. "I think he's the nicest one of us all", says his mother.

Debby had the "indulged childhood" of the youngest, by her account. "Lightness" and "spontaneity" are, she says, what she most cares about, not "just getting married and ending up cooped up by four walls with four kids". She went off to a local New York college, has many friends, and rather predictably, has now gone off to drama school to become an actress, an ambition that seems more personal than worldly. She is accepted and loved by the others in the family who only regret her deficiency in "street smarts", the very New Yorkese word for worldliness. At one point in the family interview, Debby attacked her parents as "racist" for their attitude toward her former Black boyfriend, to which her mother replied, without rancor, that "if God had intended the races to mix, would he have made them in different colors?" Nina, typically, gentled the confrontation with some laughing, conciliatory comments. It passed quickly.

Yes, despite all the differences and more, this is a close family – by their own account, and by our own commonsense observations as well. That they are an "imagined community" is self–evident enough, or perhaps we should say, a congeries of overlapping "imagined communities". We are still very much in process of analyzing the rich texture of their lives, but some things are already becoming clear. What they share directly is the idea of "home" - intimacy, trust, mutual aid, openness, forgiveness. Indeed, they share a "mode of discourse" for home, and a set of rituals, including the "Sunday dinner in Brooklyn" mentioned before. And they have exquisite maneuvers for keeping home "homelike" – styles of politesse, a kind of division of labor whereby Carl introduces the things that "matter", Nina the laughter, Mrs. Goodhertz the concern, Harry the opaque personal troubles, Debby the fancy, with Mr. Goodhertz rather in the role of a Supreme Court Justice delivering reasoned options to which the litigants are permitted to comment. As Debby put in her interview,

"We can discuss everything at home, everything". The object, though, in not to reach agreement, but, rather, to get an airing of the issues – and there are lots of those, most of those originating far beyond the Sunday dinner table.

Indeed, in contrast to "home" there is something which, for lack of a better term, we might call "the real world". It is a New York world, as full of variety as it is of dangers. One thing that is common to it, beyond its perils, is that you have to have "street smarts", that New York concept, to get on it – whether you are Dad with his community confidantes, Mom with her neighborhood pals, Carl at the research company where he work, Nina with her profitable little marketing company, Harry with his ill–contrived law suits, or Debby at her drama school with her postmodern ideas. It would be witless to say that all of them shared their "real worlds", but just as witless to say that "home" and "real world" were completely separate for them. "What's a kid from Brooklyn doing way up here" is only an example, if a vivid one, of the overlap. For all Debby's evident glee about the spontaneity of postmodern drama, she always has in mind that there is some bottom line about family like–kindness, even toward dumb animals. She shed a boyfriend once because he refused to stop his car to help an injured chicken who had wandered on to the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, perhaps one of the most heavily traveled roads in the world!

And each of the Goodhertzes seems to have a conception of themselves, of their selfhood, that combines an "at home" side and "real world", the one marked by sympathy, the other by street smarts. They interact, differently in each of them, but never in an obvious "logical" way. Rather, they get brought together by stories, by the supple maneuvers of narrative. Debby could have told the story of the boyfriend who deserted the injured chicken as an illustration of his street smarts – who would be so stupid as to try rescuing a chicken on the high speed, congested "BQE" (as that menacing expressway is called locally). But in that case, would she have needed to tell the story at all? Perhaps "home" is where you calibrate whether the real–world part of yourself is still "in touch" with the "home" part. We do not know. But we mean to find out.

The Goodhertz "family" is obviously an exception, one might say. Perhaps. Yet, so are all families. What could Tolstoy have meant when he remarked, gifted novelist and playwright that he was, that "All families are alike". We are on the hunt for an answer to his famous question in our ongoing work, sifting hundreds of thousand, even millions of works spoken by members of a single family, talking to us directly about their lives, their selves, and then talking with each other about how it mattered or didn't matter that they were the Goodhertz family.

V

So how does this relate to the dilemma with which we began – that one's selfhood is a creature of the culture "in general", yet an expression of one's singular individuality. I think the answer inheres in the origins of selfhood in early interaction with the form of imagined community that is one's family (or in whatever grouping serves in its place). Unless one is totally autistic, out of reach of other minds, there seems no way in which selfhood can remain autonomous and self–generating. Single human beings need to relate themselves to others in order to construct and maintain a "family". It is through that initial exercise that they enter "culture", the broader imagined community. It is how they do so that matters.

We want to examine the Goodhertz family in rich detail – not at the start of their lives, but in adulthood – to explore how this elaborating process expresses itself not only at "home" in the family, but, to use their expression, in the "real world" where "street smarts" are required for survival. That is what we are doing now, and I hope I have given you some sense of the subtle complexities that we are exploring. When we are done, perhaps "inside–out" and "outside–in" will turn out to be in the same direction and the dilemma will be resolved!