Article

Agency and Identity in the Collective Self

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Abstract

Contemporary research on human sociality is heavily influenced by the social identity approach, positioning social categorization as the primary mechanism governing social life. Building on the distinction between agency and identity in the individual self ("I" vs. "Me"), we emphasize the analogous importance of distinguishing collective agency from collective identity ("We" vs. "Us"). While collective identity is anchored in the unique characteristics of group members, collective agency involves the adoption of a shared subjectivity that is directed toward some object of our attention, desire, emotion, belief, or action. These distinct components of the collective self are differentiated in terms of their mental representations, neurocognitive underpinnings, conditions of emergence, mechanisms of social convergence, and functional consequences. Overall, we show that collective agency provides a useful complement to the social categorization approach, with unique implications for multiple domains of human social life, including collective action, responsibility, dignity, violence, dominance, ritual, and morality.

Keywords

collective agency, collective attention, collective mental states, social categorization, social identity

The social identity approach to group affiliation (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987) is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in psychology and the social sciences more broadly (Brown, 2020a; Brown & Pehrson, 2019). Its fundamental tenet is the importance of social categorization—the psychological partitioning of the social world into social groups, or categories (Brewer, 2007). Any social group with which an individual identifies is conceptualized as being an ingroup, whereas anyone from a different social category is regarded as an outgroup member. The psychological and behavioral consequences of social categorization are profound, as the activation of a salient social identity shifts one's attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors toward those of the ingroup. Representing the self as belonging to a particular social category can thus facilitate coordination with others who do the same.

Central to the social identity approach is the formation of an objective view of the social self, wherein the self-categorization process transforms an individual into an exemplar of a particular category of objects. The individual agent thus represents itself in the same manner as it does the many other objects of its experience, as ". . . the basic processes of categorizations and category accentuation are presumed to be the same whether we are talking about individuals partitioning the world of physical objects and events or the social world" (Brewer, 2007, p. 695). The social categorization of the self thus involves the treatment of the self *as if* one were an object—a social category defined by a specific set of group traits and characteristics. That is, akin to representing a stool as a flat surface with three legs, we can represent ourselves as an amalgam of certain group traits (e.g., Canadian, female, professor), rendering trait-related attitudes, feelings, and beliefs more cognitively accessible. Despite the logical coherence and explanatory power of the social identity approach, we argue that it overlooks the relevance of collective agency—a representation of a general collective subjectivity.

We are hardly the first to raise the question of a "we" collective self-representation (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996) or the notion of collective experience (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000). Here, however, we propose that much of human sociality involves the experience of collective agency that is distinct from social categorization—it can occur in the absence of social categorization (or in its presence), either following or preceding social categorization. We develop the argument that collective agency, or the experience of communal subjectivity, is an important mode of group affiliation that has a distinct structure and function in human psychology, having

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a unique role in human development, shared mental states, coordinated collective action, and social responsibility. We will also argue that collective agency gives rise to collective dignity and is implicated in the exercise of dehumanizing violence, societal dominance, collective ritual, and shared morality.

As we will show, notions of collective agency are not wholly new; they are already embedded in multiple literatures across the psychological sciences. Our goal in the present article is to further a conceptual crystallization of collective agency and its central role in social life; we present it as a foundational social cognitive mechanism that operates separately from, yet also in coordination with, social identity dynamics. We begin by situating our notion of collective agency in relation to the process of social categorization, drawing parallels with the agency/identity distinction that is found at the individual level of analysis. Next, we review prior research that has considered collective agency in its various forms. Finally, we end with a look toward the future, outlining the novel predictions and research opportunities that emerge from the collective agency approach. The result, we hope, presents a more complete understanding of human social cognitive dynamics, incorporating both objective and subjective representations of the collective self.

Social Identity and Collective Agency

Cognitive categorization is a process in which within-group similarities and between-group differences are accentuated. In the case of social categorization, although the targets of categorization are people rather than mere objects, the cognitive machinery is assumed to be the same (Brewer, 2007; Turner et al., 1987). That is, the social world is defined by category memberships, just like other objects of experience. Although group categorization and object categorizations differ in content (e.g., properties of human groups differ from the properties of furniture groups), they are thought to parallel one another in cognitive process. This feature of social identity theory is regarded as a strength, as it aligns the psychological phenomenon of social categorization with the basic tenets of object categorization in cognitive psychology. In what follows, we argue that the mechanisms underpinning representations of collective agency are fundamentally distinct from the mechanisms underpinning object categorization, and by extension, social categorization.

Our central claim is that collective agency involves a representation of a collective self that cannot be adequately captured by processes of categorization. That is, although people do represent themselves as members of social categories (e.g., Canadians, professors), they also have a capacity to represent themselves as part of a collective agent—a generalized "we." Much like representations of social categories, representations of collective agency are instantiated in individual cognition. In contrast to social category activation, which directs selective attention toward group-defining traits, collective agency involves representations of a first-person plural point of view, where each individual mind encodes the imagined perspective of a nonspecific collective. Collective agency can take many forms depending on the targets of this collective perspective, which can include shared experiences of "our" attentional states (collective attention), desires (collective intention), affect (collective emotion), beliefs (collective belief), and actions (collective action). In each case, the target of the collective agent is represented as being shared by all co-attending individuals.

Unlike social identity, collective agency need not be bound by any group category. Rather, collective agency is constituted through a representation of a plural and self-aware subject. Whereas a social identity is a representation of the social self as an experienced object (defined by its observable self-characteristics), a collective agent is a representation of the social self as an experiencing—and acting—subject. Throughout the article, we will draw a distinction between collective agency and social identity in terms of mental representations, conditions of emergence, memory systems, brain regions, mechanisms of social convergence, psychological and behavioral impacts, and everyday experiences.

Imagine two Canadians walking into an American comedy club. Given the cognized contrast between themselves and other patrons, the prototypical Canadian trait of politeness will be activated. According to the social categorization approach, the cognitive activation of "politeness" as a trait that distinguishes Canadians from Americans is structurally the same as the cognitive activation of "wobbliness" as a trait that distinguishes three-legged stools from sturdy chairs. The categorical content that is activated in these cases (Canadian politeness and bar stool wobbliness) are mentally represented in the absence of any experiential perspective—constituting semantic content without a viewpoint, as if viewed from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). We propose that these objective representations of the social self as a category member must be supplemented with subjective representations of the social self as a unified collective agent: "we are aware of our attention to wobbly stools," "we are aware of our politeness." Whereas representations of collective agency can be related to, or interact with, social categorizations, neither concept reduces to the other. That is, the specific and objective what (e.g., polite) and who (e.g., Canadians) of the representation are necessarily distinct from the general agentic perspective (e.g., the "we") of the representation. Put differently, even if the two people who walked into the comedy club did not share a social category, they could still represent their perceptions from the perspective of a collective agent (e.g., "we are seeing the comedy club").

What, then, is the functional relevance of the general "we" agentic perspective? We will argue that whether they are accompanied by a specific social category *or not*, representations of collective agency amplify our attention and

emotions, change our attitudes and beliefs, assign personal and collective responsibility, forge dyadic and communal affiliative bonds, synchronize our cognition and motivation, and ultimately allow us firmer epistemic ground upon which to base collective action. They do so by tracking what is commonly known (Shteynberg et al., 2020), information that is not only known by the collective, but is also known to be collectively known by the collective (Vanderschraaf & Sillari, 2014). Furthermore, we will argue that representations of collective agency *uniquely* grant us collective feelings of inherent value, worth, and meaning. As such, our representations of collective agency may be threatened by those who wish to dehumanize us by denying us representations of communal experience. Relatedly, societal dominance may dovetail with the question of who is granted the most frequent and strongest representations of collective agency. Finally, we will propose that the bonding and organizing effects of social norms, collective rituals, and shared moralities are enabled by representations of collective agency. In all, we will show that representations of collective agency are of central importance to social life, notwithstanding the presence or absence of social category activation. To start clarifying the distinction between collective agency and social identity, we begin with a much more familiar, yet analogous, distinction between individual agency and individual identity. The agency-identity distinction within the individual self has figured prominently in the foundational frameworks of modern philosophy (Kant, 1781/1908; Hegel, 1807/1979; Wittgenstein, 1958), and modern psychology (Graziano, 2013; James, 1890; Tulving, 2002). Despite this fact, the agency-identity distinction within the collective self has received relatively little focused attention.

Individual agency. When watching a movie, enjoying it, thinking about its plot, or discussing it with a friend, most people will represent themselves as the primary locus of perceptual and behavioral activity. That is, representations of experience, mental states, and behavior often include the self as the subject or the source of that experience, mental state, or behavior (e.g., "I am watching a movie that I like"). In psychology, William James (1890) is celebrated as being the first to point out the agency-identity distinction within the self. A similar distinction was also drawn by Kant (1781/1908). The agentic self (the "I"), James wrote, is the origin of personal attention and experience from one moment to another, whereas the objective self ("me") exists as the object of that experience through self-reflection and self-representation (see also Mead, 1934; Pinel, 2018). In other words, the self can be understood as both the subject of experience and as an object of experience. A more recent formulation by Michael Graziano (2013) describes the agent–object divide in terms of a cognitive schema of attention, wherein the mind constructs a model that relates the attending agent to its object of attention. The attended-to object can be a property of the self (I see that I am tired) or of the larger world (I see a red apple). In the former case, the agentic self is represented as attending to an object within the self; in the latter case, the agentic self is represented as attending to an object outside the self. In either case, human social cognition involves the use of internal models, however crude, linking agents to their experiences.

Human beings thus represent themselves, and others, not only as objects in the world but also as experiencers of the world, or subjects of experience. Human social cognition is in this respect dualistic, wherein mental representations distinguish subjects from objects, with subjects doing what objects cannot—experiencing the world. Represented subjects stand both in contrast to the objective world and in relation to it. The contrast is rooted in the subject's distinctive ability to have experiences; the relation is rooted in the fact that subjective experience must always be directed toward some object of experience (Crane, 2013). Critically, the self as an agent ("I") cannot be reduced to the content of its experiences—it is represented as the subjective bearer or locus of these experiences (e.g., attentive, attitudinal, intentional, affective, ideational, behavioral), *but not equivalent* to them. That is, even as the objects of experience change, the representation of the self as an experiencing agent remains. This is the case for both experienced personal traits (e.g., feeling tired) and impersonal experiences (e.g., seeing a red apple). Just as how the agentic self does not become an apple when seeing one, the agentic self does not become synonymous with tiredness, when feeling it. The "I" is thus a central part of human selfhood that can transcend any self-representations attached to the "me," allowing one's identity to change and develop over time.

This notion of individual agency is a familiar and foundational idea in the field of human psychology that has received ample conceptual and empirical attention (e.g., Bandura, 2000; Baumeister et al., 2018; Epley & Waytz, 2010; Gray et al., 2007; Graziano, 2013; James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Pinel et al., 2006). The extent to which this individual agency is afforded to other social targets is likewise a major focus of psychological research (e.g., Baron-Cohen et al., 2000; Frith & Frith, 2003; Waytz et al., 2010). According to social cognitive theory, the core features that define an agent include (a) forethought, where a desired future is imagined and represented (e.g., What do I want?); (b) self-reactiveness, where self-representations are evaluated against some desired standard (e.g., What did I achieve?); and (c) self-reflectiveness, where novel self-representations emerge by attending to the objective self (e.g., Who am I?) (Bandura, 2018).

In sum, the agentic self ("I") interacts with (but is not reduced to) the objective self ("me"). That is, the agentic "I" can be represented in the absence of an objective "me" (when one's personal perspective is on the world, but not the self), and the objective "me" can be represented in the absence of an agentic "I" (when a personal trait is activated, but without a representation of a personal perspective). The agentic "I" can lead to the objective "me" (when an individual reflects

Table 1. Individual and Collective Self as Agent and Object.

	Self as Agent	Self as Object
Individual Self	I (Individual agent)	Me (Individual identity)
Collective Self	We (Collective agent)	Us (Collective identity)

on their own qualities), and the objective "me" can lead to an agentic "I" (when the activation of one's qualities primes a representation of agency), with the implication being that the experiential self and the objective self can be represented concurrently.

Compared with the notion of personal agency, collective agency, wherein the self is represented as part of a collective agent, has received little sustained scholarly attention. The omission is remarkable given the clear structural similarity between the I–me relation and the we–us relation (see Table 1). It can be argued that agentic "I" representations are more intuitive because they are ordinarily attached to a specific person. And yet, agentic "we" representations can also be attached to specific persons. Perhaps the difficulty stems from the fact that "we" representations involve *collective* agents instantiated in *individual* cognition—a kind of numeral mismatch. In addition, it is possible that the cultural syndrome of individualism, wherein the individual is defined as distinct from social others (Triandis, 1994), makes it difficult to clearly articulate a collective agency that is represented within an individual mind. Whatever the reasons, while notions of collective agency have sporadically appeared in psychology, a comprehensive articulation of collective agency (akin to individual agency) is still missing within the discipline. We aim to provide such an articulation.

Notably, in forwarding a theory of collective agency, we underscore its distinction from, and interaction with, social categorization. We do so because when considered together these two forms of human sociality provide a more comprehensive account of human social life, illuminating the domains of collective action, responsibility, dignity, violence, dominance, ritual, and morality.

From individual agency to collective agency. How can individual minds conceptualize, or otherwise psychologically represent, the experiences of a collective agent? Here, an individual mind is tasked with representing the agentic self as a collective "we."

In the case of the singular "I," the mind goes beyond what the hand feels, or the eye sees, forming a representation of some object or event from a single integrated perspective. Its perceptions of different sensory inputs are no longer disconnected and disorganized, but are instead encoded in reference to a single experiential center—the agentic self. This form of cognition has been described as autonoetic, where the mind is aware of itself as a locus of experience (Tulving, 2002). As the brain matures and the self develops, the world is no longer represented as an unpredictable jumble of perceptions. It is instead encoded in relation to an experiencing self, marking the emergence of autobiographical-episodic memory (Klein, 2012). When using the experiencing self as a frame and epistemic reference point, the autonoetic mind affords an "I" by weaving together information from a multitude of sensory and cognitive channels, converging in the sense of an experiencing agent that is seeing, wanting, feeling, thinking, or doing something. This is an incredible achievement, with some scholars arguing that it is the seat of conscious experience (Graziano, 2013). Importantly, the autobiographical-episodic memory system that encodes the experiences of a subjective self is dissociable from the semantic memory system that encodes knowledge of an objective self (Klein et al., 2002). Self-representations are stored in parallel using both of these systems, which encode first-person experiences and more abstract semantic knowledge about the self, respectively.

In the case of the collective "we," sensations and perceptions of collective attention (e.g., Shteynberg, 2018), attitudes (e.g., shared evaluation, Festinger, 1950), emotions (e.g., shared emotions, E. R. Smith et al., 2007), beliefs (e.g., collective efficacy, Bandura, 2000), and behavior (e.g., behavioral synchrony, Baimel et al., 2018) are woven together as a representation of the "we" that is seeing, wanting, feeling, thinking, or doing "something." The psychological process of representing the collective "we" is analogous to the psychological process of representing the individual "I." Akin to the "I," the "we" involves the integration of a sensory and perceptual multitude into a representation of a collective autonoetic experience. That is, they are subjective experiences encoded into autobiographical-episodic memory from a *collective* point of view.

Social identity theory emphasizes an objective self-view, where social self-knowledge is stored in semantic and perceptual memory systems. This objective approach defines, or represents, features of the social self as if from the outside of the individual, or from a "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986). Collective agency, in contrast, allows autobiographical-episodic representations to play a central role in group experiences, such that people can relate to the world from the first-person plural point of view. Although there hasn't been much research examining the relative contributions of these systems to social identity dynamics, episodic and semantic self-knowledge both appear to be involved in different types of autobiographical memories (Haslam et al., 2011).

Analogous to the relationship between the experiential self and the objective self at the individual level, the collective agentic self ("we") interacts with (but is not reduced to) the represented social category ("us"). That is, the agentic "we" can be represented in the absence of an objective "us" (i.e., when there is a shared perception of the world without any salient social category), and the objective "us" can be

represented in the absence of an agentic "we" (i.e., when a social category is activated without any shared attentional states). The agentic "we" can lead to the objective "us" (when we reflect on our shared category), and the objective "us" can lead to an agentic "we" (when the activation of a social category primes the expectation of a shared experience), with the implication being that the experiential collective self and objective collective self can be represented concurrently.

The neuroscience of collective agency. Research in social and cognitive neuroscience supports the idea that collective agency, which is encoded as a collective autobiographical episode, is functionally distinct from the categorical system of social perception that is the key mechanism underlying the social identity approach. Computational models of person perception are implemented as a dynamic summation of category cues, which compete for perceptual dominance when trying to determine which "type" of person someone is (Freeman & Ambady, 2011). The relative salience of these perceptual cues is biased by social expectations, which can enhance the processing of stereotype-congruent or goal-relevant information (Freeman & Johnson, 2016). Social categorization thus depends on the same processes of biased competition that are used in models of nonsocial visual perception (e.g., McClelland et al., 2014).

While semantic knowledge in general is primarily represented in the anterior temporal lobe, with modality-specific extensions into sensory cortex (Ralph et al., 2017), social categorization also engages regions associated with evaluative processing and social information, such as the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), fusiform gyrus, and medial prefrontal cortex (Brooks & Freeman, 2019; Van Overwalle, 2009). The fusiform gyrus in particular, which is implicated in face perception and visual expertise, has been associated with the top-down modulation of social perception dynamics (Stolier & Freeman, 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2011), including the differentiation between ingroup members and outgroup members with similar perceptual features (Ratner et al., 2013; Van Bavel et al., 2008). Activity in the OFC has likewise been associated with the strength of an individual's ingroup bias in a minimal groups paradigm (Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2010).

Autobiographical-episodic memory, on the contrary, involves a network of brain regions centered around the hippocampus and medial temporal lobe (Tulving, 2002). This brain network is associated with remembering past episodes, imagining future episodes, and constructing a spatially defined perceptual scene out of multimodal sensory information (Moscovitch et al., 2016). Interestingly, the same brain systems that are active during autobiographical memory have also been implicated in theory of mind processes, where an individual simulates the perspectives and subjective experiences of other people (Buckner et al., 2008; Spreng et al., 2009). For example, the temporoparietal junction, which is preferentially activated during theory of mind tasks, and the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex, which is activated when sharing attention with others, are both implicated in autobiographical memory (Saxe, 2006). In all, the brain systems that support semantic categorization and episodic experiences are functionally distinct from one another, although they are known to interact in daily life (Greenberg & Verfaellie, 2010).

The formation of collective agency. Notably, representations of a collective agent may not require representations of a personal agent as an antecedent. Both types of agency may instead be built on subpersonal sensations and perceptions of the world. For instance, a mind can perceive the sound, sight, and vibrations of thunderous applause, forming a representation of a collective agent in action. Identification of whose hands, eyes, and even feelings belong to whom is not required to perceive that many hands are clapping, many eyes are attending, and that there are many feelings of glee. Together, these subpersonal sensations and perceptions may lead to the emergence of a collective agent that is represented as the subjective origin of experience, thought, and behavior. Alternatively, representations of collective agency may be preceded by, and based on, representations of individual agents (e.g., I/you/they representations).

The accuracy of collective agency. Critically, individual and collective agency both involve the representation of one's own experiential perspective. In the latter case, this perspective is represented as being shared. Both types of agency also involve psychological constructions that may be discordant with objective reality (e.g., what is perceived as a stool may in fact be a chair). The confidence with which one holds such individual and collective representations depends on many factors, including the combination of general beliefs (e.g., stools have three legs), concrete observations (e.g., noticing three legs under the seat), and cognized subjects of the observation (e.g., who is aware of the observation). People can certainly be mistaken about the collective nature of their experience (e.g., thinking that an event was jointly apprehended, only to realize afterword that your partner was staring at their phone). Collective agency thus involves inferences about collective mental states, which can be bound by varying degrees of uncertainty. However, it is also the case that people can be mistaken or uncertain about their own mental states, as when behavior is directed by unconscious goals (Bargh & Morsella, 2008) or when an emotional experience is poorly understood (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). Accordingly, there is no need to assume that representations of collective agency will be fully accurate. What is central to collective agency is the representation or belief in a shared experience, not the objective accuracy of those representations.

The function of collective agency. What is the functional utility of collective agency? Why would humans bother having

thoughts like: "we are aware of our clapping" and "we are having fun"? Here we argue that representations of collective agency have a unique capacity to indicate what is commonly known across perceivers (Hume, 1738; Lewis, 1969; Schelling, 1960), enabling coordinated collective action. Common knowledge is knowledge that is not only known to all, but it is also known to all that it is known to all (Vanderschraaf & Sillari, 2014). For instance, I may think that a comedian is funny, and you may think that the comedian is funny, but these convergent perceptions may not reflect common knowledge, because I may not know that you think that the comedian is funny. Common knowledge is achieved when we both know that the comedian is funny. The attainment of common knowledge has been regarded as critical to linguistic discourse (Clark, 1985), coordination in economic games (Schelling, 1960; Thomas et al., 2014), and collective action (Shteynberg et al., 2020; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). And yet, the psychological representation of common knowledge can be elusive due to mind-in-mind recursive doubt. That is, I may know that you think the comedian is funny, but I doubt that you know that I know that the comedian is funny. Even if I know that you know that I know that the comedian is funny, I may doubt that you know all that! Both Rubinstein (1989) and Halpern (1986) show that doubt at any level of the recursive hierarchy compromises the rational basis for acting together.

And yet, people act collectively, including in ways that assume common knowledge; how do they do so? Representing the world from the perspective of a collective agent is one possibility (see Shteynberg et al., 2020 for a detailed discussion; also see Gallotti & Frith, 2013). When a person adopts the perspective of a collective agent while reflecting on the belief that the comedian is funny, there is a *unified* social perspective on the comedian, leaving no other co-observer whose perspective may be in doubt. Supporting this view are empirical literatures on collective attention (e.g., Shteynberg, 2015a, 2015b, 2018), shared reality (e.g., Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020), collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000), group emotions (E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2015), and I-sharing (e.g., Pinel et al., 2006), which, we believe, suggest that *collective* psychological states prepare people for collective action by synchronizing cognition and motivation (e.g., Bandura, 2000; Shteynberg, 2010; Shteynberg et al., 2016; Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011), affect and attitudes (e.g., Echterhoff et al., 2009; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2015), and the desire for affiliation and cooperation (e.g., Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel et al., 2015). Most recently, Tomasello (2020) argued that the psychological sense of moral obligation also requires the recognition of a collective agent—a representation of a we perspective on personal obligation. In other words, the coordination problems associated with recursive doubt about common knowledge can be resolved by representing co-attended events *as if* all observers are knowingly experiencing the same thing. The result is a pragmatic basis for social coordination.

Manipulating and measuring collective agency. The representation of "we-awareness" in relation to attentional targets, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behavior can be evoked situationally and measured. Collective agency is more likely to be represented when information is delivered publicly and synchronously—contexts in which individuals are more likely to think that "we are aware of our attention, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, or behavior." That is, situations in which participants notice that others are sharing an experience with them, and *critically*, that others are also aware of the shared experience. Synchronous information delivery in an open, public setting is ideal. Some minimal level of psychological closeness/similarity to co-experiencing others is also critical, given that individuals must assume that the experience is indeed shared. Notably, real-time conversations are a common context for the emergence of collective agency because such communications are public, synchronous, and typically affiliative. Indeed, establishing a shared frame of reference across speakers is a prerequisite to any meaningful communication. More broadly, collective agency has commonly been studied experimentally by comparing the effects of co-attended stimuli with the effects of privately attended stimuli (importantly, co-attended events also produce distinct effects when compared with being physically close to others but attending to different stimuli; Shteynberg, 2015a).

Measuring collective agency without manipulating it involves gauging the extent to which people believe that their experiences are shared with others. This feeling of a unified collective experience is at the heart of collective agency. Although the collective agent is represented as existing in the current moment ("we are aware of X"), its targets can be drawn from the past ("our" memories), the present ("our" situation), and/or the future ("our" hopes and goals).

Looking Back: Collective Agency in the Psychological Literature

Although there has been a relative lack of attention given to collective agency in previous research, the notion is nonetheless implicitly or explicitly embedded within several different psychological literatures. By reviewing these literatures, we are striving for a conceptual crystallization that will support future research and theorizing on a general sociality that is accessible to all self-reflective beings, regardless of social category.

Collective agency in social identity research. Over half a century ago, Henri Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971) published their highly influential ingroup–outgroup studies, showing that an irrelevant group categorization (e.g., Klee vs. Kandinsky, Under-estimator vs. Over-estimator) led participants to discriminate against outgroup members, even at the cost of reducing ingroup profit (see also Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969 for earlier experiments using this methodology; Brown, 2020b). Self-identification

as a group member emerged when participants learned that indeed there are two distinct groups, with some personal trait or preference situating them into one group or the other. While the original studies in this paradigm had participants learn these facts collectively (e.g., Tajfel, 1970), the social identification mechanism that emerged is premised on basic individual awareness of the information given. From the social identification perspective, self-categorization in a group is based on personally attained information about oneself and one's group; representation of collective awareness of such information is not needed, nor considered, as a relevant factor. Indeed, from a social identification perspective, it doesn't matter if each participant received information about one's group publicly, privately, or even secretly, without the other ingroup members knowing. The description of the social categorization mechanism (Tajfel, 1970) does not consider collective agency, common knowledge, or even shared knowledge, as important to self-categorization in a group. The same is true of the vast social categorization literature that followed, wherein self-placement in a social group can be evoked situationally, while alone, and/or assessed through a questionnaire in complete privacy.

In sum, collective agency is not discussed, conceptualized, nor considered in the minimal group paradigm, and yet it may have still played a role in these foundational studies. Imagine that each participant thought that they alone knew about the group categories; would they still show ingroup favoritism? A considerable literature on outcome dependence (Rabbie & Horowitz, 1969; Rabbie & Lodewijkx, 1994; Rabbie et al., 1989) and ingroup reciprocity (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Jetten et al., 1996; Yamagishi et al., 1999) suggests that ingroup category members' actions are interdependent—people discriminate when they think others in their ingroup will discriminate. Critically, there is little reason to expect other ingroup members to discriminate if they do not have common knowledge of the ingroup and outgroup categories, and hence a mutual expectation of discrimination. As Thomas et al. (2014) show, information that is delivered publicly and synchronously is more likely to motivate mutually beneficial collective action as there is little doubt that other participants know about the benefits of social coordination. Situations in which information is delivered publicly and synchronously are contexts that evoke collective agency (e.g., collective attention, Shteynberg et al., 2020; collective feelings, Pinel et al., 2006), signaling that such information is common knowledge.

In an interesting sense, then, an appreciation of collective agency in conjunction with social identity promises to heal the post-Lewinian rift between the social identity/categorization (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987) and the social interdependence approaches (Deutsch, 1949; Koffka, 1935; Lewin, 1935, 1947; also see Johnson & Johnson, 2005) to group affiliation. Following Lewin (1947), who himself followed Koffka (1935), Deutsch (1949) argued that social affiliation and collective action are particularly likely when individuals' goals are interdependent, where one's goal achievement is predicated on another's goal achievement, and vice versa. As such, whereas Tajfel and students yoked group affiliation to the psychic unity of the ingroup category, Deutch and others focused on the interdependence of individual interests as the foundation of social affinity. The tension between the two perspectives is clear—how can an individual maintain psychic unity with one's group while calculating the fit among individuals' goals and perspectives? Collective agency reconciles the conflict, allowing for a mental representation of social interdependence that is inherently and irreducibly collective.

The collective agency account holds that social interdependence resides in a mental representation of a goal (and of the world in general) from a collective perspective, wherein we collectively attend to our goal (and world). As such, from a collective agency point of view, social interdependence does not require the calculation of whether group members' goals facilitate one another; however, such calculation may precede social interdependence. Rather, each individual represents a single goal—a mental representation, often of a desired future state, that is experienced as a cognized object of a first-person plural subject. As was noted above, such mental representation of collective agency obviates the mind-in-mind recursion involved in goal coordination (e.g., I know that her goal facilitates mine, but does she know that I know that?) that renders collective action difficult (e.g., If she doesn't know that I know that her goal facilitates mine, she will not help me because she thinks I have no reason to help her. Since she will not help me, I am not going to help her). At the same time, the notion of collective agency retains the irreducibly collective character of social categorization, albeit in a mental representation of a collective subject rather than object—a change that allows collective agency to track social interdependence (e.g., we know our goal) while maintaining psychic unity.

Collective agency in collective attention research. Collective agency is instantiated during moments of collective attention (Shteynberg, 2015b, 2018; Shteynberg et al., 2020) when a person perceives that "we" are attending to something. A robust empirical finding is that representing the objects of experience as being shared by a collective agent (rather than simply an individual agent) increases the amount of elaborative processing that the target receives. Information under collective attention is remembered better (Elekes et al., 2016; Eskenazi et al., 2013; He et al., 2011; Shteynberg, 2010; Shteynberg et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2017), felt more intensely (Boothby et al., 2014, 2016, 2017; Shteynberg et al., 2014), pursued more arduously (Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011; Walton et al., 2012), and enacted more faithfully (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013).

The literature cited above spans research that involves between-subject designs that are more common in social psychology (some participants attend together, and others

don't), and within-subject designs that are more common in cognitive psychology (the same participants attend to some stimuli together, and to some stimuli apart). A consistent finding across these experiments, however, is that knowledge of co-attention to a stimulus enhances its cognitive prioritization. Notably, effects are particularly likely to emerge when fellow co-attendees are either physically or psychologically proximal, allowing for the representation of a unified collective agent in respect to the co-attended information (see Shteynberg, 2015a, 2015b, 2018, for a review). In experiments where social categorization is evoked (e.g., Shteynberg, 2010; Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013; Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011; Shteynberg et al., 2014; Shteynberg, Hirsh, Galinsky, & Knight, 2014; Skorich et al., 2017), the social categorization alone does not lead to greater cognitive prioritization of the presented information. Rather, the presented information is cognitively prioritized only under collective attention. In other studies, synchronous co-attention is preceded by casual conversation, rather than social categorization, to evoke collective agency (e.g., Haj-Mohamadi et al., 2018).

Collective agency in shared reality research. In a tradition of research that begins with the onset of social psychology (e.g., Asch, 1951; Festinger, 1950; Lewin, 1947; Newcomb, 1959; Sherif, 1936), shared reality research (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 2019) finds that when participants communicate personal attitudes that match those held by others (doing so to attain greater attitudinal certainty and/or relational strength), the attitudinal change is more authentic and lasting. Most recently, Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021) showed that participants in conversations, even if strangers, strive to attain a generalized sense of shared attitudes and feelings across a multitude of topics.

Critically, in a description of Shared Reality Theory, Echterhoff et al. (2009) stress that a successful shared reality experience involves "experiencing a successful connection to someone else's inner state" (p. 502). Within the saying-is-believing paradigm (Higgins & Rholes, 1978), this connection between a participant's attitude and that of another is established when the participant communicates their novel attitude to the other. Indeed, if the communication of the novel attitude is misdelivered (Echterhoff et al., 2013), or misunderstood (Hausmann et al., 2008), the attitudinal change does not take root. Both conceptually and operationally, attitude formation within the shared reality tradition requires that attitudes are "held and experienced in common" (p. 8). But what can we say about the psychological state that underpins this ability to experience something in common?

As we have argued, the experience of common knowledge, including that of shared attitudes, is supported by the representation of a collective agent. It is when "we know" that we find the joke funny that we limit recursive doubt about our attitudes. That is, communication of novel attitudes to ingroup members does not lead to attitudinal change unless the attitude is commonly known—represented as an attitude held by a collective agent. Put differently, the communication of one's attitude to another may "close the loop," assuring the self and other that "we are now aware of our attitude," thereby creating confidence in a singular attitudinal stance, poised for action.

Collective agency in collective efficacy research. The central mechanism of human agency in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is efficacy—the belief that one can produce desired effects—as without potent self-efficacy beliefs, people have little reason to act. Bandura allows for the possibility that the "self" in self-efficacy beliefs can be either personal or collective (1998, 2000). That is, a person's perception of what she has the power to achieve as an individual self, and as a collective self, are relevant to independent and interdependent action, respectively. For Bandura, collective self-efficacy beliefs are a group-level phenomenon, wherein aggregation across group members is required.

It is worth asking how self-efficacy beliefs incorporate the sense that they are collective. Such beliefs can be collective because they are *about* the collective—an individual's personal representation of what the group can achieve by working together (e.g., "I think we can win the game"). However, there is another way such beliefs can be collective—an individual's representation of *what the collective thinks* can be achieved by working together (e.g., "we think we can win the game"). Collective efficacy in the latter sense is a representation of collective agency wherein the self that is thought about, and the self that is represented as the thinker, are one and the same.

In 2000, Bandura wrote "the theorizing and research on human agency has centered almost exclusively on the direct exercise of personal agency . . ." (p. 75). This statement remains largely true today. It is our hope that further progress is possible if collective agency is understood to be a property of individual cognition and yet also representation of a collective point of view. As we have argued, experiencing collective beliefs from a collective perspective yields psychological common knowledge, a more assured epistemic ground from which to participate in collective action (Shteynberg et al., 2020).

Collective Agency in Group Emotion Research. Intergroup emotions theory holds that people not only have emotional reactions to events that happen to them personally, but they also have emotional reactions to events that happen to them as a group (Mackie & Smith, 2018). As the authors themselves describe, "these are emotions people feel on account of their membership in a group to which they belong and with which they identify" (p. 1). The central idea is that specific social categories can be linked to specific emotional reactions. In studies, for example, participants who are led to think of their American identity report distinct emotional experiences from participants who are led to think of their gender identity (Seger et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2007).

From a collective agency perspective, however, group emotions can occur in the absence of social category activation. One can laugh and cry with a room full of strangers, wherein people represent their laughing and crying as a collective experience (i.e., we are aware of our mixed emotions). It is possible that social categorization as a group can follow such an event (e.g., we share a mixed emotion identity), but it need not precede it. In this sense, collective emotions parallel personal emotions. Personal emotions such as happiness and sadness do not require individual identities to precede them, although they can shape such personal identities and be shaped by them.

Again, our point is not to discount the well-documented influence of social categorization on emotional reactions. Rather, it is to offer a supplementary account as to what it means to feel a collective emotion: an emotion that is represented as the shared experience of a collective agent. It is possible that such emotional experiences are already what is being represented when one reflects on the typical tenor of one's group (Mackie & Smith, 2018). That is, it is not only that a particular social category is typically associated with a particular emotion, but that we (members of a social category) are collectively aware of feeling our emotion. Arguably, the latter conceptualization of collective emotion can be particularly motivating for collective action, as each person will perceive that the emotions are indeed collectively felt.

Collective agency in I-sharing research. Shared subjective states are also actively studied within the I-sharing tradition (see Pinel, 2018 for an overview). Here, participants find out simultaneously that they share the same subjective response to a trivial stimulus, and as a result are more likely to like, and to cooperate with, one another. Moreover, these co-experiences of fleeting subjective similarity increase affiliation and cooperation in the face of long-standing objective differences in social identities (Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel et al., 2015). Critically, simultaneity of experience appears to be critical to I-sharing effects—cooperation is reduced when participants learn about a subjective response similarity after a short delay. Analogous to the role of synchronicity in collective attention effects, synchronous experiences of the same attitude are fertile ground for generating a mental representation of a collective agent that is experiencing a common subjective response, binding people together in the process.

Collective agency in descriptive cultural norms. Descriptive cultural norms are the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are thought to be typical, or representative, of one's social group (Chiu et al., 2010; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Shteynberg et al., 2009). Measures of descriptive cultural norms typically ask about the notions and actions of most people in one's social group. Such individually held normative representations have been found to predict behavior better than personal attitudes (e.g., Shteynberg et al., 2009; Zou et al., 2009).

We will not argue that measures of descriptive cultural norms are effectively capturing collective agency. It may be, however, that representations of collective agency are central to the emergence of descriptive cultural norms (Chiu et al., 2015; Shteynberg, 2015a). That is, it is in the public and collectively experienced routines of everyday life that each of us learns what is indeed typical of our group (Shteynberg et al., 2020). For instance, collective attention to novel group beliefs and behaviors may shift what is considered normative precisely because the novel beliefs or behaviors are now commonly known to be collective (Lewis, 1969). It is thus possible that representations of what "most people" think and do are derived from experiences of collective agency, where the normative perceptions of the group are initially defined.

To summarize, a collective agent (a "we"), or a representation of collective attending, feeling, thinking, and doing, has a unique function in signaling common knowledge, enabling the coordination of collective action through the synchronization of memories, mental states, and behaviors. Following Tulving's (1995) cognitive model, information from autobiographical-episodic, semantic, and perceptual memory systems can be retrieved independently from each other. Accordingly, social identity (an "us") can be activated in the absence of collective agency, and collective agency in the absence of a shared social identity. And, of course, these two forms of social affiliation can intersect, wherein collective agency is constituted in relation to one's social category, such that "we" are attending to or thinking about "us."

Social identity scholars may regard the conceptual distinction between collective agency and social identity as reminiscent of the interpersonal-intergroup continuum (Brown & Turner, 1981; Tajfel, 1978), wherein collective agency is a culmination of inter-individual comparisons, and social identity is a product of inter-group comparisons. However, as we have argued, a mental representation of a collective agent attending, thinking, feeling, wanting, and doing does not necessarily require distinct representations of each individual within the collective. Rather, just like the construction of the individual "I," the representation of the collective "we" can be based on subpersonal perceptions. Most importantly, however, even when the collective agent is a product of inter-individual comparison (an aggregate self that emerges by synthesizing individual selves), it remains a mental representation of an irreducibly collective viewer, thinker, feeler, desirer, and doer that is experienced as the subjective *origin* of mental and physical activity, rather than as an object that is equivalent to, or consists of, this activity.

A more complete account of individuals' psychological relationships to their social groups (as well as to themselves) involves an appreciation of collective agency, or the subjective and experiential side of a shared human sociality (see Table 2). A representation of a collective agent and a social identity do share something in common—they characterize a nonreductive collective. However, as we will describe next,

Table 2. Distinguishing Collective Agency From Social Identity.

	Self as Collective Agent	Self as a Social Identity
Mental Representations	Represented as a subjective source of, or in relation to, cognition, affect, and behavior	Represented as constituted or defined by, or as equivalent to, cognition, affect, and behavior
Conditions of Emergence	Thinking, feeling, and acting together with others, synchronously	Meta-contrast principle with no need for the presence of similar others
Memory Systems	Autobiographical-Episodic	Semantic and Perceptual
Neural Systems	Hippocampus, medial temporal lobe, temporoparietal junction, medial prefrontal lobe	Fusiform gyrus, orbitofrontal cortex, medial prefrontal cortex
Mechanisms of Social Convergence	Simultaneous encoding of a jointly attended stimulus	Parallel activation of a social category prototype
Psychological and Behavioral Impacts	Prioritizes cognition, affect, and behavior that is commonly known in the moment	Prioritizes cognition, affect, and behavior that defines the social category prototype
Everyday Experiences	A stream of collective consciousness	An interchangeable member of a social category
In Lay Terms	Shared experience	A specific social group

when that collective is represented as an agent of cognition rather than an object of cognition, it functions in a distinctive way in human social life, offering us new perspectives on collective development, action, responsibility, dignity, violence, dominance, ritual, and morality.

Looking Forward: Collective Agency and Social Identity in Human Social Life

Acting in the moment *together* is how our ancestors overpowered prey that were much larger and more individually lethal than themselves (Agam & Barkai, 2018), how they sustained a way of life in some of the most inhospitable places on the planet (Goebel, 1999), and how they responded to and survived sudden and extreme environmental change (E. I. Smith et al., 2018). Paleoanthropological evidence indicates that the frontal lobes of the modern human brain, distinctive in terms of its involvement in social cognition and language, evolved in the last 1.7 to 1.5 million years (Ponce de León et al., 2021), which is after *Homo erectus* and/or *georgicus* had already dispersed from Africa. While this dispersal reached as far north as Dmanisi, Georgia, and southern China by about 1.8 million years ago (Zhu et al., 2018), further dispersal into Iberia, Sima de los Huesos for example, did not occur until hundreds of thousands of years later, about 430,000 years ago (Arsuaga et al., 2014). It may be that the ability to represent things and minds from a collective point of view evolved in the interim, affording the later *Homo* a novel capacity for coordinated collective action that expanded their range of habitable environments.

Spontaneously coordinated collective action continues to be at the center of human sport, artistic performance, and work. Moreover, although the failings of group performance have dominated much of social psychology in the 20th century (e.g., Janis, 1972; Stasser & Titus, 1987; Stoner, 1968), groups regularly outperform individuals on a wide range of problems (Hastie, 1986; Hill, 1982; Kerr & Tindale, 2004; Levine & Moreland, 1998; Wegner, 1987). Indeed, groups outperform even the best individual performances (Krause et al., 2010; Laughlin et al., 2006), suggesting that the superiority of group performance is due to group-level deliberation and pooling of cognitive resources.

Two minds are indeed better than one. It can be difficult, however, to think and act in coordination with others in a way that is worth the additional costs of the coordinating effort. Social coordination grows more difficult in a dynamic informational environment, wherein partners must respond to one another and to novel information. More precisely, coordinating partners must respond to one another *while each* is responding to new information. The challenge of human social coordination is then (a) to leverage a common social history and (b) to create a common social future in the face of a continuously changing present.

There is no doubt that the social identity approach has been extremely useful in helping us to make sense of our social worlds, allowing us to analyze self and social perception in terms of salient social identity categories. By expanding the social identity approach to include representations of collective agency, a number of new research avenues are opened. In particular, this line of thinking suggests that social dynamics will be shaped not only by the relative salience of different social categories, but also by the relative salience of different agentic representations (both personal and collective). Although the subjective (autobiographical-episodic) and objective (semantic/categorical) aspects of social affiliation may often operate in tandem, our analysis suggests that they can be functionally dissociated and therefore should be considered in parallel. In that spirit, we discuss the relevance of collective agency in human development, action, responsibility, dignity, violence, dominance, ritual, and morality.

Collective development. Humans begin to self-categorize in group categorical terms in childhood (Bennett, 2011). It appears that both gender self-labeling ("I am a girl") and racial self-labeling ("I am Black") emerge around the age of 3, with accurate national identification developing closer to 5 (Barrett, 2004; Lambert & Klineberg, 1967). Interestingly, children's social categorizations progress from those based on physical appearance (e.g., skin color; Quintana, 1998) to social categorizations based on behavior and preferences (e.g., boys fight, boys are rowdy), to social categorizations based on beliefs (e.g., British people believe in fair play; Sani & Bennett, 2001).

Years before engaging in social categorization, however, infants begin to coordinate their attention with that of another person (Meltzoff, 2007; Scaife & Bruner, 1975), establishing a common point of reference. At around 12 months, infants check to make sure that others are indeed attending to the same thing that they are (Scaife & Bruner, 1975)—an ability that foreshadows later language development (Brooks & Meltzoff, 2015; Morales et al., 2000; Mundy & Newell, 2007; Tomasello & Farrar, 1986). Stephenson et al. (2021) argue that joint attention episodes are cognitively underpinned by experiences of agency, wherein the infant represents the self as a source of action. Similarly, Baron-Cohen (1995) suggests that joint attention behaviors involve representations of triadic attention (e.g., "daddy sees that I am attending to x"), whereas Mundy and Newell (2007) suggest the involvement of multiple dyadic representations (e.g., "I am attending to x; daddy is attending to x"). Developmental psychologists regard representations of one's own and another's agency as critical to the onset of social coordination.

There are good reasons to believe that representations of collective agency emerge around the same time frame as representations of individual agency. First, representations of collective attention (e.g., we are attending to x) are more cognitively frugal than representations of multiple agents attending (e.g., I see . . . and you see), and far more cognitively simple than representations that involve attentional recursion (e.g., I see that you see that I see . . .). Second, representations of collective attention are the surest psychological indicators of common knowledge (Shteynberg et al., 2020), averting recursive doubt about what is known collectively in the moment. This includes the earliest representations of shared intentionality (Tomasello et al., 2005), wherein children represent goals from a collective point of view, as well as collective obligation (Tomasello, 2020), wherein one's personal responsibility is represented from a collective agent's normative standpoint (more on this later).

The earliest recognition of another's agency likely involves representations of others as physical beings that behave in the world, rather than as mental beings with conscious experience. Such recognition of physical agency occurs in many nonhuman animals. In human beings, however, representations of world sharing (e.g., we are aware of our attention to the ball), and eventually representations of thought sharing (e.g., we are aware that we like the ball), follow suit. Such we-thought is prominent in human social psychology, perhaps reflecting a species-specific capacity to concurrently distinguish perspective ("we") from object (the ball), and mental states (ball liking) from the objective world (ball awareness).

Collective action. Acting together toward a common goal requires social coordination. Whether we are coordinating pass completions on a football field or coordinating communication during group problem-solving, human minds must act in complement to achieve group success. We argue that human collective action in the moment is driven by both collective identification and collective agency. Whereas the former evokes established knowledge (self-stereotypes), the latter creates novel knowledge. Put simply, collective identity is rooted in the group's semantic memory of itself, and collective agency in the group's present autobiographical-episodic experience. Of course, as we will describe, the past and the present can converge when collective identity and collective agency are evoked concurrently—in these instances, the social categories of the past inform the collective agent of the present, and the collective agent of the present informs the collective identities of the future.

From a collective agent's perspective, the objects that *we experience together* are the objects that most require interpretation precisely because such objects are also experienced by others. Matching representations of co-experienced objects is critical and can emerge from several processes. Some research suggests that when aiming to share interpretations of co-experienced objects, for example, people raise their level of abstraction to create a common field of understanding (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020). Another possibility is that engaging in collective experiences increases the salience of any social identities that are shared with co-attendees. Recalling shared collective identities and their associated attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors during moments of collective attention would render shared perceptual interpretations more likely. Put differently, shared interpretations of information are most critical to social coordination when such information is being collectively attended, and hence cognitively prioritized. In this instance, the "we" and the "us" are linked: the contents of what "we" co-experience are interpreted through the normative lens of a shared social category—a specific "us." This leads to a representation of collective experience that is heavily influenced by perceived group norms.

Over time, the contents of collective experience may form the rudimentary elements of a novel social category. The transformation from a collective agent into a socially categorized self involves a shift in focus away from "we are experiencing something" to "something is us." When this occurs, the group becomes the object of its own attention. For instance, if a group of strangers co-witness a comedy routine, the routine is experienced as the object of their collective

attention (e.g., we are aware of our attention to this event) and/or collective emotion (e.g., we are aware of our glee). Over time, however, co-witnesses of the comedic routine may develop a novel social category for themselves, constituted through the weaving of their individual impressions. That is, co-observers may categorize themselves as fans, and in doing so, establish a novel social identity. Relatedly, Postmes et al. (2005) describe this as a process of inductive (rather than deductive) identity formation, where an ingroup identity is induced through individual interaction, rather than deduced from an established ingroup category (see also Jans et al., 2011). The ability to interact over a commonly experienced event is rewarding (Reis et al., 2017), motivating social identity formation and adoption (Levine & Moreland, 1994).

From our perspective, the transition from collective agency to social identity involves the transformation of the subject–object relationship (i.e., collective experience of the comedic routine) into an ingroup category (i.e., defining features of the comedy fan club) that can be commonly identified, reflected upon, and imitated by others who did *not* co-experience the seminal event. Such a shift dramatically increases the number of people who can socially affiliate and focus attention to group boundaries and norms—helping to perpetuate subjective certainty (Hogg, 2007) and social coordination (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) over the long term. In all, collective agency can culminate in novel social identities (Drury & Reicher, 2000) or "collective self-objectification" (p. 53) that empowers group advocacy (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Notably, achieving interpersonal similarity in cognition, motivation, and affect through social category activation differs from doing so through collective agent activation. In the case of social category activation, the achieved similarity is rooted in one's existing knowledge of the social category. Termed "perceiver readiness" (Turner et al., 1987), this is what the individual brings to the current moment from what they already know about the social category.[1] To the extent that the socially identified individuals have the same prior understanding of their social category norms, their comprehension of the present moment will overlap, facilitating social coordination. In the case of collective agent activation, the achieved similarity in mental states is anchored in the present attentional focus of the collective agent. It is what the individual experiences in the current moment from the first-person plural perspective that is prioritized in cognition, motivation, and affect. To the extent that the co-attending individuals infer similar perceptions for the collective agent,[2] their social coordination will be enhanced over the short and long term (due to enhanced memory encoding).

In sum, through a mental representation of collective agency, individuals can prioritize the same information, thoughts, emotions, and goals, thereby allowing for coordinated collective action. Although simultaneous activation of similar ingroup categories facilitates superior group performance (e.g., Earley, 1993; Worchel et al., 1998), it is not the only route to cognitive synchrony, nor is it a prerequisite for collective action—"we" can take action without first defining "us" as a group.

Collective responsibility. The distinction between agency and identity allows the acknowledgment of situations in which the dimensions (individual vs. collective) of agency and identity differ, but are nevertheless linked. For instance, a person can mentally represent the self as an individual agent (an "I") who is experiencing, or thinking about, one's social identity (an "us"). The idea of an individual agent being merged with a social category is reflected in the theory of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012), where personal and social aspects are connected. Indeed, Swann et al. (2012) point out that increasing individual agency can amplify social identities that are important to the individual agent. Alternatively, a collective agent (a "we") can experience, or think about, one's personal identity (a "me"), in which case a high degree of self-consciousness and identity negotiation is likely (e.g., public speaking). Such representations are likely to be involved in feelings of personal responsibility (Tomasello, 2020), wherein each person represents a broad general agent holding specific beliefs about the responsibilities of each individual identity (e.g., "we" expect "me" to give an eloquent speech).

In the same vein, the distinction between agency and identity allows for the conceptualization of situations in which collective levels of agency and identity differ, but are nevertheless linked. For instance, a person can mentally represent the self as a collective agent (a "we") that encompasses a few people (or all of humanity) thinking about a specific social category (an "us") (e.g., "we," people in this room/planet, are attending to/thinking about "us" professors, plumbers, Canadians). Such representations are also likely to be involved in feelings of group responsibility, wherein a person represents a broad general agent holding specific beliefs about the responsibilities of a particular social category (e.g., this world expects scholarship from "us professors"). The conceptual distinction of individual and collective agency from that of individual and social identity tracks everyday phenomenal experiences and provides a nuanced account of both individual and social responsibility within human groups (see Table 3). An appreciation of the agent–identity distinction in human social cognition brings a new level of complexity to the matter, but it also reveals a novel conceptual terrain that invites exploration.

Collective dignity. It is difficult to maintain that the emergence of collective dignity, reflecting the intrinsic worth and value of a community of minds, relies only on social categorization, a psychological process that treats the self as any other object. Even if one treats one's self as an object *of esteem* or an object worthy of self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2003), that is still to treat oneself as an object and thereby

Table 3. Intersection of Self as Agent and Self as Identity.

	Self as Individual Agent	Self as Collective Agent
Self as Individual Identity	I believe I am a good student	We all think I am a funny person
Self as Social Identity	I see our group is large and powerful	We know our group is weak and fractured

ignore one's subjectivity. Positive stereotypes do not accord dignity (Kay et al., 2013) precisely because their recipients are treated as objects, albeit ones with positive qualities. This view is consistent with the broader philosophy of humanism (Sartre, 1946/1948), which argues that purely positivist or mechanistic approaches to social science will inevitably alienate us from our own experiences. Highly esteemed objects of experience have value, but this value differs in kind from dignity. The importance of this distinction is highlighted in what Columbus famously wrote of the Taíno, "They were very well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces . . . They should be good servants" (Columbus & Toscanelli, 1893).

It is far easier, we believe, to argue that representing oneself and others as experiencing agents underlies both feelings and attributions of dignity. Experiencing one's own agency is not an act of valuing a social category, but a recognition that the self has inherent (as opposed to instrumental) value and significance (Buber, 1937/1970). It is through the experience of collective agency that we most readily extend this evaluation to others. In the Abrahamic religions, this is reflected in the notion that each human mind has some aspect of the divine within it, rendering it intrinsically valuable (Kilner, 2015). In the humanistic tradition, this inherent dignity has to do with the freedom and autonomy of the individual agent (in contrast with mere objects, who experience no freedom), which distinguishes human dignity from modes of moral status possessed by nonhuman animals (Garthoff, 2010, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Without including some form of collective agency, the social identity approach thus cannot enable the experience of collective dignity, in which an entire group is afforded intrinsic value.

There is some support for this perspective in social identity scholarship on superordinate goals, wherein groups working together on a joint task, toward a common goal, are able to lessen intergroup hostilities (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). This intergroup contact model does not seek to change ingroup–outgroup categorizations (Brewer, 2007), but aims to increase mutual recognition of the inherent value of other people through having them share a common goal. Notably, it is not simply that goal sharing increases the utility of outgroup members, as outgroup members can be deemed useful to goal accomplishment without sharing that goal (i.e., as a means to an end). Rather, sharing a goal aids in recognizing the inherent, rather than the instrumental, value of the fellow sharers. Put differently, superordinate goals are likely to encourage representations of collective agency—we know our goal—and therefore to accord dignity to ingroup and outgroup members. Likewise, affording dignity to one's self and others may also boost health and well-being, not only due to ingroup membership (e.g., Haslam et al., 2014), but also via representations of collective agency.

In sum, representation of collective agency constitutes the social self as an experiencing, desiring, feeling, thinking, and behaving subject. This representation of the collective subject as an agent that is oriented toward the world thus distinguishes it from everyday objects that can be represented in purely nonrelational terms. While the former is afforded intrinsic value, the latter, akin to other objects, is only allowed instrumental worth.

Collective violence. One cause of intergroup violence is the dehumanization of outgroup members (Kteily et al., 2015). Dehumanization can be conceptualized as an attribution of fewer human experiences to others than to oneself (Haque & Waytz, 2012; Leyens et al., 2000). The denial of subjective agency, whether human or otherwise, is at the center of dehumanization, for it reduces a person or a group to a mere object (e.g., "I/we" experience "It"; Buber, 1937/1970). The more useful that object is, the more likely it is to suffer violence and control rather than being left alone. For instance, the present-day mass slaughter of farm animals for human consumption is not due to malice, but rather to a diminishment or denial of subjectivity and agency to these animals (perhaps) prompted by their utility for oneself—"they experience very little and are delicious." Furthermore, even if they can experience the world, they do not represent their own mental states—and hence are not self-conscious agents with autonoetic awareness in the sense that we are. We are capable of collective experience with animals who themselves lack self-representations, and so we are in a position to recognize inherent worth in these animals even where we do not recognize humanity. Subjugation, disenfranchisement, and ultimately enslavement are rooted in the diminishment or denial of subjectivity, making it easier to engage in instrumental control over another's existence.

There is another form of intergroup violence that is driven by malice, rather than by blindness to another's subjectivity. Here, dehumanization may not be the precondition for

violence, but is its goal. Dehumanization as a willful act of aggression can only be pursued if the target is recognized as a person to begin with. Dehumanizing motivations that presuppose their targets' personhood are given classical treatments by Rousseau (1755/1992, 1762/1979) in his account of *amour propre* and by Kant (1784/1991) in his account of "unsocial sociability." In contemporary terms, Bloom (2017) writes that "the sadism of treating human beings like vermin lies precisely in the recognition that they are not." Such virtuous violence, as Fiske and Rai (2014) call it, is rooted in the effort to maintain existing social structures, often hierarchical ones. From our perspective, one common purpose of intergroup violence is to strip agency from another group, turning them into mere objects of our experiences and actions, rather than subjects of their own.[3] Put differently, the purpose of malicious violence is not to change the objective situation, but to transform how "we" think about its victims. It is possible such malicious violence increases felt power precisely because it diminishes the agency of others. However, diminishing the agency of others likely highlights the precariousness of one's own status as an agent (Baldwin, 1998). That is, violence to anyone's agency is violence to the very notion of agentic experience, threatening the idea that one's perspective, or even existence, has irrevocable meaning or value.

In sum, intergroup violence can be based on seeing other humans in nonsubjective terms or in wanting to see them so. The first type of violence is well-described by ingroup–outgroup dynamics, wherein the outgroup is simply seen as inferior to the ingroup (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Stott et al., 2001). Malicious violence is more puzzling from a social identity perspective, as it requires that the victims are seen as equals before, and so that, denigration can occur. We imagine that the nature of intergroup violence differs according to its psychological basis, with nonmalevolent violence designed to ignore the subjectivity of its victims, and malevolent violence intended to highlight the removal of the victims' subjectivity.

Collective dominance. The social identity approach holds that members of privileged groups undergo similar social categorization processes as members of marginalized groups (Turner et al., 1987). If so, it is difficult to understand why members of dominant groups are often unaware of their collective identity content. For instance, lists of "what white people like" often amuse because they surprise the White audience with the idea that their seemingly individual preferences are indeed related to their social position. We then have a conundrum: on one hand, dominant group membership is predictive of personal attitudes, and on the other, this relationship is surprising to dominant group members.

One solution to this mystery is that members of dominant groups may be more likely to experience objects and form attitudes as collective agents rather than as social categories. When experiencing collective agency, dominant group members can develop similar attitudes to one another in the absence of a salient social category representation. Because marginalized group members are more likely to be socially categorized under the gaze of dominant group members, their opportunities for collective agency in the absence of self-categorization ("we" without "us") are likely to be rarer. As a result, co-formation of similar attitudes among marginalized group members is psychologically associated with their collective identity. Dominant group members have the privilege of representing collective agency in the absence of collective identity, and hence of limiting their own awareness of the connection between group membership and the group's attitudes. Marginalized group members are more likely to experience collective agency in the context of social category activation ("we" + "us"), with a correspondingly stronger connection between their group membership and group attitudes. This possibility is in line with findings which reveal that social identity is more important for minority than for majority group members (Simon & Brown, 1987; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990).

In sum, the distinction between collective agency and social identity allows for a novel characterization of societally dominant groups as groups where the two modes of social affiliation come apart. Conversely, there is a closer relationship between collective agency and social identity within societally marginalized groups. It is conceivable that the psychological overlap between collective agency and social identity does not only characterize whether a social group is societally dominant or marginalized, but also perpetuate the group's societal position.

Collective ritual. Divergent Modes of Religiosity Theory (Whitehouse, 2004) proposes that ritualistic practices can be divided into imagistic and doctrinal. Imagistic practices involve collective rituals such as initiation rites, and wedding ceremonies, wherein a community gathers and observes some event. Doctrinal practices, in contrast, include repetitive rituals that can be performed alone. Whitehouse argues that whereas imagistic rituals involve the creation of episodic memories, doctrinal rituals involve the repetition and strengthening of semantic memories, including those associated with social identities. Indeed, Whitehouse and Lanman (2014) maintains that the two types of practices encourage distinct social bonds, with the imagistic mode promoting intense, communal bonds, and doctrinal rituals promoting diffuse, categorical bonds.

From our perspective, the distinction between imagistic and doctrinal rituals is underpinned by representations of collective agency and social identity, respectively. The in-the-moment experience of collective communion, as we have argued, is mentally represented as a relation between a collective subject and the objective world (e.g., "we see the event") or a mental state (e.g., "we love the event"). In concert with imagistic rituals, mental representations of collective agency involve the autobiographical-episodic memory

system. Conversely, social identity activation can occur during a solitary doctrinal ritual that is associated with a semantic category. Whereas collective agency-based imagistic rituals produce evocative memories and emotions, social identity-based doctrinal rituals can be sustained and transmitted across large populations that cannot gather collectively. Incidentally, shared dysphoric experiences may lead to small group cohesion (Aronson & Mills, 1959), not only due to intrapsychic dissonance resolution (Festinger, 1957), but because they evoke collective agency in the form of a commonly experienced mental state. Representations of shared aversive mental states may be more binding than representations of shared pleasant mental states due to negativity dominance in human attention, emotion, judgment, and memory (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Fascinatingly, modern communication technologies (and pharmaceutical discoveries) allow for the idea of a collective agent that encompasses all of humanity, all living beings, and perhaps all of existence. The regular production of such large-scale communal experiences, however, is still out of reach.

The distinction between collective agency and social identity can be fruitfully applied to resolving whether organized religion, and the cooperation it facilitated, preceded complex society (Norenzayan et al., 2016), or vice versa—complex societies preceded organized religion, using the latter to preserve social order (Whitehouse et al., 2019). Religious experiences that involved collective agency could powerfully bind individuals into a community, but the community size would be limited to the number that could gather in a synchronous collective experience. Accordingly, organized religion in the form of collective synchronous ritual may have been practiced thousands of years before the advent of city-states (Beheim et al., 2021). Religious experiences that involved social identity activation, however, could socially coordinate a larger population across vast geographic distances. Accordingly, organized religion maintained by social categorization enables the establishment of social order across time and space, and hence may serve as a powerful organizational tool in the emergence of complex societies.

Collective morality. The idea that human morality is a product of humans' groupish psychology has become axiomatic in our field. However, whereas moral beliefs and behavior are clearly linked to our social identities (Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2012), the social cognitive bases of belief and behavior *moralization* (Rozin, 1999) are still poorly understood (Skitka et al., 2018). The representation of collective agency in relation to belief and behavior should be considered as one possible avenue by which moralization occurs. We know that people tend to imagine that their moral convictions are widely shared (Skitka et al., 2005). Is it possible that this consensual feature of moralized attitudes does not simply distinguish them from strong idiosyncratic preferences, but also speaks to the nature of the social psychological process that yields their moral status? We know that humans distinguish between naked power and moral action. Could the distinction be made possible through mental representation of our collective responsibility to one another? We know that people resist compromising sacred beliefs for utilitarian gain. Perhaps commitment to such beliefs derives in part from a felt concern that compromising them would blur the distinction between the self as an experiencing being and the self as an experienced object.

Summary and Conclusion

We have argued that the collective agent is represented in the moment of shared experience when we experience, want, feel, believe, and/or do something. In that moment, we argue, the collective agent is not bound by an ingroup category. However, we anticipate that some readers will see kernels of social categorization in our description of collective agency. That is, one could argue that when we listen to the comedian, think she is funny, and laugh, we are effectively socially categorizing ourselves in the group of people who are listening, thinking, and laughing. Does this effectively dissolve collective agency into yet another cognitive act of social categorization?

No. Or more precisely: not without reconceptualizing the very nature of what we mean by social categorization. If one's representation of things and thoughts from a first-person plural perspective is an instance of social categorization, then it is a social categorization that involves a subject–object relation. It would then follow that an act of social categorization is not directly analogous to object categorization, as is claimed by the social identity perspective.[4] Thus, we must either (a) allow that collective agency is conceptually distinct from social categorization because collective agency is a representation of a plural subject to object relationship, and social categorization is not, or (b) grant that social categorization involves a representation of a plural subject to object relationship and is therefore fundamentally different from object categorization. We believe that treating collective agency and social categorization as distinct processes is preferred as it allows us to consider their unique effects and reciprocal interactions.

Social identities are conceptualized as the objects of human social cognition, wherein thoughts *about* the social category are regarded as social in nature. In contrast, collective agency is conceptualized as the subject of human social cognition and experience, wherein thoughts *from* the collective perspective are regarded as social in nature. This conceptual shift dramatically expands what kinds of cognitions, emotions, and beliefs are seen as imbued with sociality. Beyond thoughts about a social category, thoughts about *anything* can be regarded as social if they are represented from the personal plural perspective of a collective agent. Ultimately, whereas social identity scholarship is an application of cognition to social relations (Brewer, 2007),

collective agency scholarship constitutes the reverse—it is an application of social relations to cognition (e.g., social baseline theory, Coan & Sbarra, 2015; types of solidarity, Durkheim, 1893/1984; relational models, Fiske, 1992; thought as internalized dialogue, Vygotsky, 1978). Together, we believe that these two frameworks provide complementary perspectives on the social worlds that humans, as self-reflective beings, inhabit.

A fundamental goal of psychology is to explain how the mind experiences and interacts with the social world. The social identity approach has been highly influential on this front, fruitfully applying the categorical structure of the mind to our perceptions of the social environment and to ourselves. We suggest that it only provides part of the story, however, adopting an inherently objectifying perspective of the social world that ignores the subjective-experiential side of human sociality. An appreciation of the mind's capacity to conceptualize the self not only as falling within a social category, but also as helping to constitute a collective agent, points to novel directions in understanding what it means to be a group member. Understanding the distinction, and ultimately interaction, between these two forms of sociality reveals new directions in the study of social coordination and beyond. Wherever social dynamics have been modeled as a function of salient social identities, there are likely to be additional insights enabled by the consideration of salient collective agents. We hope that our work inspires future conceptual, empirical, and practical scholarship at the intersection of collective agency and identity.

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Notes

1. We do not mean to suggest that social categorization is not also a function of the present moment. For instance, information encountered in the present can change how a particular social category is recalled (e.g., the Canadian ingroup category may have different content when contrasted from the American vs. the French outgroup). However, we do want to point out that social categorization effects depend on recalled social category details.
2. The similarity of understanding may be due to a similar history of exposure, learning, and socialization. As we will discuss, it may also be due to the activation of the same social identity; however, social identity activation is not required to have the same understanding (e.g., we may speak and understand the same language without sharing a social identity).
3. While we focus our discussion on intergroup malicious violence, such violence may be analogous in structure at the individual level, wherein an "I" seeks to transform a "you" into an "it."
4. Whereas object categorization only involves the creation of two object categories (object vs. nonobject), social categorization under this proposal would involve the creation of a distinction and relation between a social subject and its object of experience.

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