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At the relational crossroads: Narrative Selection, Contamination, Biodiversity in Trans-Local Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Agents act according to their knowledge of the state of the world and the relevant consequences which they may foresee, i.e. the payoffs corresponding to their choice of action. Such a pervasive representation of the world and of the position of the agents in the succession of cause-effect links is more than an aseptic information, but is rather culturally and emotionally dense. These overarching maps have been introduced in the literature as narratives, which include both the comprehension of the mechanisms of reality and the role covered in the latter by the self. Contrary to strategies and actions, narratives cannot be swiftly changed to better fit different situations and to achieve higher payoffs. We thus study what is the resulting narrative dynamics when two social groups with different “favoured” narratives interact in a Trans-Local Context. Indeed, we present the outcomes, framing them into three categories according to their interpretation in terms of narratives diffusion: *Selection, Contamination, Biodiversity*.

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1. Introduction

Social identities and narratives have been the subject of some key contributions since the 1990s (e.g. McAdams, 1995; McCloskey, 1990; Sen, 1985; Strassmann, 1993), and of numerous contributions in recent years (e.g. Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Darity et al., 2006; Davis, 2010; Shiller, 2017). In June 2016, a special issue of this journal was largely devoted to these topics (Snower, 2016). The relationship between social identities and narratives is particularly important for analysing how identities change. Indeed, Collier (2016) highlights that a certain story of the mechanisms of the world and the causal relations with an agent's own actions, i.e. a narrative, may only be maintained or adopted by an agent if it does not contrast with an individual self-representation into her society, i.e. her social identity. In addition, the narrative embraced by an agent may also influence the social identity she adopts, also by redefining the social group within which such narrative is more widely accepted. In other words, since identity is a socially constructed preference-ordering, sharing the same narrative with others may lead an agent to co-shape her social identity with them, ultimately affecting the agent's preferences. Since there are many contributions in the literature defining this conceptual couplet, it is useful to specify how we understand narratives and social identities in this work.

Narratives are compelling stories about the interpretation of reality and the position in the world of the members of a social group. A narrative tells where we come from, who we are and where we go; it is a set of stories that, ringing

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events along a plot, gives sequential and causal coherence to the world and/or to the experience of our group in the world. A narrative does not necessarily have to convey new information: if members of the group, for example, recite a daily prayer, or evoke a proverb for the thousandth time, they are not providing (new) informative content; rather, they are reproducing their meaning as a group. Moreover, there can be much “fiction” or “imagination” in a narrative, since its task is not to gauge events, but to constitute «an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture» (Bruner, 1990, p. 97). This is the case, for instance, of fictitious examples which provide an interpretative illustration of events. Collier (2016) reinforces this point by underlining that the informative content, the causal link, contained in the narrative does not need to be correct for the narrative to be believed. The recent surge of “fake news” in our world and their capacity to diffuse rapidly makes us witnesses of such independence of narratives’ spread from the truthfulness of their informative content. In game theoretic terms, narratives can be thought of as *fixed* strategies, which are to be played in multiple games simultaneously. Since they have deep cultural roots, narratives cannot swiftly be changed from one game to another.

As concerns social identity, the literature presents it as the process through which subjects recognize - and are recognized by - other subjects as part of a group and through which, on the basis of such affiliations, they attribute meaning to their own experiences over time (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). In the definition we adopt here, social identity is characterised by two main factors: the prevalence and the relative advantage of a narrative with respect to the others that may be available in the social group of reference. On the one hand, hence, we see social identity as being characterised by the main vision of the world that is shared by the members of the social group. As we detail later in the modelisation, this is the most volatile part of social identity and may be subject to change in a shorter time horizon. On the other hand, we see social identity as influencing the relative performance of narratives, yielding different rewards to the individuals adopting them. As narratives are representations of the world, they may be more coherent with the social context of one group with respect to another, thus increasing the performance of agents who adopt the *right* narrative in the *right* social group.

In this work, we rely on these two key concepts to tackle our research question: what happens when two separate social groups interact in a purely relational space? In order to answer this question, we build a game theoretic environment in which two sub-populations or social groups interact, each with its own social identity and preferred narrative. In this respect, we agree with Bates et al. (2000) in seeing such theoretical framework as among the most suited to investigate narratives. In two simultaneous games, all agents interact with one co-member and a member of the other group. In within-group interaction, each group has a dominant narrative which would always yield higher payoffs. However, in the cross-group interaction no narrative gives agents an advantage over the other. Indeed, the second game takes place in a purely relational space, which we define as Trans-Local Context (TLC, hereafter), in which no narrative is dominant. This is the only place in which agents belonging to different social groups may interact. Indeed, in this work we do not deal with migration, understood as the stable change in the membership of an agent, from one group to the other. Obviously, we all know that migrations are a relevant and persistent phenomenon in human history. The reason why we exclude migrations from our analysis is that they are hardly sufficient to explain the change in social identities of agents. In particular, we sustain that there is a wide divergence in human societies between the individual desire to change the social group membership and the actual ability to do so. This means that a migrant, an agent leaving her own social group and entering another, may not be able to automatically become a member of the new social group just by migrating into the latter’s territory. In order to understand what it takes to be recognised by the members of the new group and being attributed with the group’s social identity we need to look at other phenomena.

Indeed, there are other relevant social components of life that we all have before our own eyes and which take place on a larger scale than the migratory phenomenon. In particular, there are many occasions in which members of a social group exchange ideas, information, goods, resources with members of another group. Also, there are occasions in which they live with members of the other group life experiences, whether affective or competitive, cooperative or conflicting. There is a wide spectrum of occurrences in which a member of a social group can meet and exchange with a member of another group: from commercial and financial transactions to tourist trips, from religious pilgrimages to military clashes, from health journeys to extended family reunions, from scientific conferences to technology exhibitions. We call mixed meetings the whole set of these exchanges: they are frequent, have the most diverse content, but are often episodic for the agent, and never come to the definitive change of the subject’s belonging to a social group. In other words, we could say that in this model we disable any entry or exit mechanisms for the social groups, with all agents sticking to their initial membership, while interactions between the social groups occur on a regular basis. Agents are localised (territorially rooted) in a population without migration (intended as social group shift). This restriction seems plausible, since even in a globalised world, the localisation of social groups remains strong and pervasive and migration involves only a minority of the world population (estimated in a constant 3% by Berg and Besharov, 2015a; 2015b).

The aim of this work is to study the role of such frequent interactions occurring within TLCs in the diffusion of a narrative. We define and characterise three main functions a TLC may serve according to the narrative dynamics that takes place: *Selection*, *Contamination*, *Biodiversity enhancement*. Indeed, a first possibility is for one of the two narratives to disappear from both social groups, with all agents belonging to one group completely forsaking the narrative that is within-group dominant. The second function describes the case in which all agents in a social group stick to their within-group dominant narrative, whereas agents in the other group are divided into adopters of one or the other narrative. Finally, the TLC may enhance the biodiversity of the narratives if at the end of the dynamic process of interaction both the existing narratives are

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