

## Culture, Personality and the Multiplicity of Identity: Evidence from North African Life Narratives

### Gary S Gregg (1998)

**OVERVIEW:** This paper shows that individual identities are often in flux - sometimes in contradictory ways. These identities are shaped by surrounding cultures, as well as one's personality and life circumstances. Gregg's paper shows that identity is a result of negotiation between society and self.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Morocco, North Africa, Key Cultural Symbols, Life-History Interviews, Genotypic and Phenotypic Personality, Multiplicity of Identity,

#### **CONTEXT:**

Gregg analyses the life narratives of four individuals who live in North Africa and practice Islam through either a psychological study or an analysis of autobiographies written by the individuals themselves. Through this, Gregg aims to explain what identity is and how it functions:

#### **The Subjects:**

- I. **Fadhma Amrouche:** An Algerian Berber who was viciously marginalized by her community for being an illegitimate child of a widow, Amrouche was placed into an orphanage for her own protection. She overcame her struggles and became a successful teacher. Gregg analyses her autobiography, *My Life Struggle*, which Amrouche wrote in 1989 at the request of her grandson.
- II. **Fatima Mernissi:** A Moroccan feminist, sociologist and human rights activist, who grew up in relative affluence but had to overcome the constraints placed on her by her gender. Gregg analyses Mernissi's autobiography, *Dreams of Trespass*, which she wrote in 1994.
- III. **Hussein:** A 25-year-old law school dropout from Agdez, Morocco who at the time was unemployed and living with his parents. Hussein struggled to come to terms with the psychological, and occasionally physical, abuse inflicted on him and his mother by his father. Gregg analyses Hussein's life through fifteen hours of semi-structured interviews and thematic apperception tests (TAT) to reveal the psychological beliefs that underpin Hussein's personality.
- IV. **Rachida:** A devoutly religious teacher also from Agdez. Rashida grew up in deprived circumstances cemented by her lower caste background and her membership of a minority ethnicity. She financially supports her family and at 27 has no plans of getting married. Like Hussein, Gregg analyses Rashida's life through semi-structured interviews and TAT.

#### **KEY POINTS:**

Amrouche and Mernissi's autobiographies provide valuable insights into how individuals conceptualise their own identities through narrative. Both writers fixate on similar recurring images, metaphors and symbols, which fuel their narratives. These mutual themes, however, are incommensurable in the two

histories. As for Amrouche, her mother's trespass brought her life bitterness and deprivation, meanwhile Mernissi romanticizes trespass as escape from the imprisonment of her upper-class home.

Through motifs and tropes both women embed their memories and construct personal experiences according to prevailing cultural models and interpretive frameworks. Likewise, images function as **"key" representational symbols**, linking abstract concepts, like exile, to tensions rooted in the core of the self, which generate one's identity. Both women construct their own identity through their own configurations of their North African culture.

**"Individuals do not only passively absorb their culture: each member actively "borrows" a subset of the cultural "traits" and then refashions these to cohere with a developing configuration [self-representation]." (Gregg, p.125)**

Gregg finds that **identity** differs from the **sense of self** that is constituted by culture. As identity can distort and misrepresent aspects of personality that an individual has chosen to present themselves as.

He distinguishes between two levels of personality organization:

- **Genotypic Personality** is regarded as more fixed, shaped during childhood and consists of inherited temperaments and type of upbringing.
- **Phenotypic Personality** (identity) is consolidated during the culturally defined transition to adulthood and is more flexible to change.

Gregg further examines these definitions of identity through an analysis of the life narratives of Hussein and Rachida:

**Hussein's** life narrative shifts between four identities that consist of **self** versus **anti-self**-oppositions. As he presents himself through modern and traditional, ascetic and heroic discourses. He shifts between these identities in search for empowerment.

**Thus: "No matter how strong the commitment a person makes to a particular discourse, life-narratives indicate that she or he also formulates alternatives, often as reversals, inversions, or reconfigurations of the structure she or he presents as his or her "true" self." (Gregg, p.136)**

**Rachida** expresses her **phenotypic** self as Muslim and teacher and through a "key" representational symbol; the metaphor of 'straying from the path'. This is a result of a deep faith in the Islamic virtues. These identities help her counter her **genotypic** personality, which centers around the fears of abandonment and deprivation, stemming from childhood traumas.

However, Rachida is paranoid that her gender and race will lead her off the path of purity and success, to the extent that she loathes her very nature. She blames the woes of womanhood, like her period, for her anti-self-figure, that opposes her devout, cultured self to her shameful stereotypical ‘womanness’ that needs to be controlled by a man. She recognizes these **two “senses of self”** in her and experiences herself constantly in movement between these identities.

### **TO CONCLUDE:**

Gregg suggests that **life-narratives** strongly support a **distributed model of culture**, as people share major features of their culture but select different fragments of those features and shape them into their own unique identities that reflect very different configurations of their said culture.

People’s **genotypic personalities** and life circumstances guide them to interpret and refashion these cultural features in distinctive ways. Their **phenotypic identity** differentiates genotypic tensions and embraces some as representations of **self** and others as representations of **anti-self** or **past-me**. Individuals differ in how they treat and anchor the anti-self.

Life-narratives demonstrate that people use structurally ambiguous representations as **“key” symbols** that differentiate and join contrasting “senses of self” in ways that determine a “higher” and “lower” version of themselves.

Likewise, life-narratives show that self-representational systems consist of multiple discourses, where an individual embraces one discourse as his authentic self and alternative discourses appear as inversions of that true self.

**“From this perspective multiple personality disorder or spirit possession do not appear pathological because of the multiplicity of subselves” (Gregg, p.146)**

Gregg uses a musical analogy to determine that **identity has a contrapuntal structure** with the **self** and **anti-self**-representations of being. This multiplicity of identity suggests more volatility to both personality and culture itself.



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**REFERENCE:**

Gregg, G.S. (1998). Culture, Personality, and the Multiplicity of Identity: Evidence from North African Life Narratives. *Ethos*, 26(2), pp.120–152.

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**GLOSSARY:**

**Contrapuntal:** In counterpoint

**Thematic apperception test:** Is a test designed to reveal an individual's perception of interpersonal relationships. Picture cards serve as stimuli for stories and descriptions about relationships or social situations.

Something else you would like included in this glossary? Let us know [here](#).