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Malcolm X and his autobiography: Identity development and self-narration

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Abstract

This paper takes up Tappan's (????) project of analyzing the identity development of Malcolm X. Considering Malcolm X's autobiography as an instance of mediated action, I show how he uses the mediational tool of 'development as metamorphosis' to narrate himself. Because of the similarity between this mediational tool and Tappan's own theory, I question Tappan's use of the autobiography to illustrate his theory. Utilizing data sources beyond the autobiography, the present analysis makes three theoretical points. First, the development of Malcolm X's identity is not so much a series of 'liberations' as it is the accumulation of discourses from different social strata. Second, it is the complex and unresolved inter-relations between these discourses that comprises the uniqueness of Malcolm X. Third, ideological becoming is often, as in Malcolm X's case, constrained by social structure. In conclusion, I discuss methodological issues concerning the analysis of a public figure such as Malcolm X.

KEYWORDS: Malcolm X, Bakhtin, identity, self-narration, case study.

RUNNING HEAD: Malcolm X and his autobiography

Tappan (????) has made an interesting contribution by theorizing the relation between social structure and the dialogical self. While Hermans and Kempen (1993) have examined dominant and subordinate voices within the dialogical self, Tappan tries to make these dynamics explicable in terms of domination and subordination in society. Specifically, he argues that people in subordinate societal positions appropriate mediational tools from both the dominant and the subordinate groups and that these discrepant voices set up a dialogic tension that propels the oppressed toward overcoming the dominant ideology. This contribution is interesting because it provides a way of conceptualizing the individual self as both social and political.

Central to the history and practice of science is shared data. Early scientists such as Boyle invited witnesses to attest to the interrogation of nature. Today, we make public our means of data collection, such that anyone could, in theory, replicate, and thus engage in a dialogue with our analysis. In cultural psychology, however, the data analyzed are often the unique product of a certain situation, time and culture thus making replication impossible. Accordingly, we usually share theories but not data. By using publicly available data concerning Malcolm X to illustrate his theory, Tappan is courageously making his interpretations transparent and inviting dialogue.

Self narration as mediated action

In order to “illustrate” his theoretical proposition, Tappan utilizes the autobiography of Malcolm X to the exclusion of other possible sources of data. This is problematic because the autobiography is not a transparent window onto Malcolm X’s identity development. To use the autobiography as data, we have to consider what such data can illustrate. It is more appropriate, I suggest, to consider the autobiography as an actual case of mediated action, rather than, as Tappan does, a description of mediated action. In the autobiography, Malcolm

X, and his amanuensis Alex Haley, use mediational tools to carefully narrate Malcolm X. Although Tappan (in footnote 8) recognizes this point, surprisingly, he does not develop upon it. Taking up this missed opportunity, I ask: What mediational tools does Malcolm X use to narrate himself?

Tappan introduces his paper with a vignette from Malcolm X at the beginning of his prison sentence and then juxtaposes this with one from near the end of his prison sentence, in order to ask how Malcolm X has developed between these two instances. Looking in the autobiography at how Malcolm X narrates his own change, we find that he uses a spiritual narrative.

I remember how, some time later, reading the Bible in the Norfolk Prison Colony library, I came upon, then I read, over and over, how Paul on the road to Damascus, upon hearing the voice of Christ, was so smitten that he was knocked off his horse, in a daze. I do not now, and I did not then, liken myself to Paul. But I do understand his experience. (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 257)

This utterance is complex and contradictory. Malcolm X states that he “understands” the divine conversion of Paul, whilst claiming that he does not “liken” himself to Paul. The narrative similarities are striking: Malcolm X authors himself, like Paul, as a complete unbeliever, as “Satan” (p. 244), who has a “vision” (p. 285) and a divine conversion experience.

In terms of its temporal structure, the narrative is akin to what Bakhtin called metamorphosis. “Metamorphosis,” Bakhtin (1981, p. 114) writes, is “a vehicle for conceptualizing and portraying personal, individual fate, a fate cut off from both the cosmic and the historical whole.” At the center of the metamorphosis chronotope, or temporal structure, is, Bakhtin (1981, p.130) writes, “the life course of one seeking true knowledge.” A common pattern, especially in early Christian texts, is a three phase movement: (1) the

sinner, (2) purification through suffering, and (3) the saint. This temporal template is clearly evident in Malcolm X's conversion to the Nation of Islam. Thus Malcolm X is using the Bible in particular, and the metamorphosis chronotope in general, as the mediational means, or more precisely symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2004). Thus the Bible in particular, and metamorphosis in general, provides Malcolm X with the mediational means, or more precisely symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2004), with which to narrate himself.

Malcolm X's narrative utilizes other mediational tools as well. Specifically, he blends this conversion narrative with a scientific genre. While in prison, he engages in a rigorous program of study which allows him to verify the teachings of the Nation of Islam. Thus, using both religious and scientific narratives, he, quite convincingly, narrates his conversion to the Nation of Islam as both divine and rational enlightenment.

Having identified some of the mediational tools that Malcolm X uses, we can now ask, following Wertsch (1998), what is he doing? In his autobiography, as in many of his speeches, Malcolm X uses his self-narrative as a mediational tool in order to act upon the minds of others.

I believe that it would be almost impossible to find anywhere in America a black man who has lived further down in the mud of human society than I have; or a black man who has been any more ignorant than I have been; or a black man who has suffered more anguish during his life than I have. But it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest light can come. (1965, p. 498)

Here the common religious metaphor, of moving from darkness to light, is used to describe Malcolm X's metamorphosis out of "the mud of human society." This narrative allows Malcolm X both to identify himself with "the mud of human society" and to position himself as someone who is different, who has seen "the greatest light." Thus Malcolm X, by using

the ancient and popular metamorphosis narrative, is able to position himself as a legitimate leader.

Now, returning to Tappan's theory, there is a striking similarity between Tappan's theory and Malcolm X's mediational tool. For example, Tappan (p. 29), following the narrative of the autobiography, describes Malcolm X's conversion to the Nation of Islam, while in prison, as a movement "toward a position of *liberation*." Of course there is much 'evidence' for 'liberation' in the autobiography because liberation is central to metamorphosis. Moreover, when Malcolm X states that "it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest light can come," he is in effect making Tappan's own argument, namely that subordination sets up a dynamic which propels dialogical identity development toward 'liberation.'

Using the autobiography to illustrate his theory violates Tappan's own, sound, methodological principle. Tappan (p. 9) states that "adopting a mediated action approach to identity formation means focusing less on what persons *say* about their own sense of self-understanding, and more on what they *do* in specific situations and circumstances." Tappan illustrates his theory by relying solely upon what Malcolm X *says* about himself, not what he does. In the present case this problem is acute: The autobiography has been constructed using mediational tools that are so similar to Tappan's own theory as to render the use of the autobiography to illustrate this theory circular.

Moreover, public data from beyond the autobiography contradict the theory of metamorphosis from subjugation to liberation. For example, consider the following extract from the final interview Malcolm X gave before he was assassinated. At this point he has moved beyond the self-presentation outlined in his autobiography, and he narrates a new moment of metamorphosis or 'liberation.'

I did many things as a Black Muslim [i.e., member of the Nation of Islam] that I'm sorry for now. I was a zombie then – like all Muslims – I was hypnotized, pointed in a certain direction and told to march. Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he is ready to pay the cost. It cost me twelve years. (Cited in Lomax, 1968, p. 242)

From this later perspective, Malcolm X's conversion to the Nation of Islam was subjugation and not a movement 'toward a position of liberation.' More interestingly, however, in this extract we see Malcolm X using the same mediational tool to narrate his break with the Nation of Islam which he used to narrate his conversion to the Nation of Islam, namely a metamorphosis narrative from "zombie" to seeing "the greatest light." How can Malcolm X's movement into the Nation of Islam be both divine conversion and becoming "hypnotized"? If we try to read these self-understandings at face value we end up in contradictions. However, if we focus upon the mediational tool that Malcolm X uses to author himself, namely metamorphosis, then the contradiction is resolved, and instead a surprising continuity in Malcolm X's use of mediational tools emerges.

Dialectical or dialogical development?

According to both Malcolm X and Tappan, Malcolm X's identity metamorphosis proceeds through a linear sequence of identities: Malcolm Little (class president in a predominantly white school), Detroit Red (hustler in the black ghetto), Malcolm X (minister in the Nation of Islam) and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (international human rights activist). According to the metamorphosis chronotope and the liberation narrative, the end point of this development, the identity of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, is discontinuous with the previous identities. However, analyzing the discourse of the later Malcolm X (more

precisely, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) reveals that it comprises discourses associated with each of the former identities, thus questioning the extent of this discontinuity.

One early Malcolm X identity concerns the early teenage years that Malcolm Little spent living with a white family and attending a predominantly white school. Here Malcolm Little engaged white society on its own criteria and excelled: he was one of the best students in the class and became class president. It was at this school that he reports the interaction with Mr Ostrowski, which Tappan (p. 25) refers to. When narrating this event in the autobiography, Malcolm X states:

I have often thought that if Mr Ostrowski had encouraged me to become a lawyer, I would today probably be among some city's professional black bourgeoisie, sipping cocktails and palming myself off as a community spokesman for and leader of the suffering black masses [...] I'd probably still be a brainwashed black Christian. (p. 120)

Here again we find Malcolm X using the term "brainwashed" to reject one of his previous identities, and implicitly to announce his current liberation. Thus, if we rely upon Malcolm X's self presentation, we would be led to believe that he has transcended this earlier identity. However, even in the autobiography there are traces of the young Malcolm Little. For example, toward the end of the autobiography, when reflecting upon his life as a whole, he states:

My greatest lack has been, I believe, that I don't have the kind of academic education I wish I had been able to get – to have been a lawyer, perhaps. I do believe that I might have made a good lawyer. (p. 498-9)

The traces of the young Malcolm Little run deeper than this wish. Malcolm X, although he never went to university, remained a diligent and hard working student. His eruditeness and familiarity with history show that in his later life he also read, studied and learned. Thus,

although Malcolm X ostensibly rejected the image of the bourgeoisie, in actuality he held several of this bourgeoisie's values, and, had he not valued education in this way, it is unlikely that he would have been as convincing in debates and interviews as he was. The point, then, is that although Malcolm X, in accordance with his metamorphosis narrative, explicitly rejects the identity of Malcolm Little, there are implicit echoes of Malcolm Little in the later Malcolm X that are integral to Malcolm X.

A similar continuity from early to later life is evident with the identity of Detroit Red, the black ghetto hustler, pimp and drug dealer. Tappan (p. 27), again following the metamorphosis chronotope of the autobiography, presents streetwise Detroit Red, with conked hair, before the metamorphosis into Malcolm X, as an exemplar of "complete subordination." However, the words and phrases of Detroit Red sparkle in the language of the later Malcolm X. The discourse of Detroit Red seems to come to the fore when Malcolm X gets angry. For example, when talking about the "black bourgeoisie" who rejected his anti-white stance, Malcolm X says:

Why you should hear those Negroes attack me, trying to justify, or forgive the white man's crimes! Those Negroes are people who bring me nearest to breaking one of my principle rules, which is never to let myself become over-emotional and angry. Why, sometimes I've felt I ought to jump down off that stand and get *physical* with some of those *brainwashed* white man's tools, parrots, puppets. (p. 391)

The principle rule, "never to let [himself] become over emotional and angry," presumably belongs to Malcolm X's identity as a Muslim minister. However, the urge to "jump down" and "get *physical* with some of those *brainwashed* white man's tools, parrots, puppets," I would argue, is an irruption of the discourse of Detroit Red.

The militant discourse which Detroit Red acquired on the streets of the ghetto, is also evident in Malcolm X's political stance. Had Malcolm X never been a hustler it is unlikely

that he would have developed his militant politics. Given this ‘previous’ identity, it is no surprise that Malcolm X and not Martin Luther King (who grew up in a middle-class family) put forth strident critiques of non-violence. Malcolm X’s unique militant views were thus a distant echo of the discourse of Detroit Red, and thus again we find the so-called earlier identity integral to Malcolm X’s later dialogical self.

These echoes and threads of continuity are necessarily erased within Malcolm X’s metamorphosis narrative. They are, however, not completely erased in Tappan’s theory and illustration. For Tappan it is the tension between such diverse discourses which is ideological becoming. But this conception of ideological becoming, I suggest, is not so much Bakhtinian as it is Hegelian. A common understanding of the Hegelian dialectic seems to underlie the ideal that an opposition between the dominant ideology (thesis) and subordinate ideology (antithesis) resolves itself in ‘liberation’ (synthesis). This conception of development, from a Bakhtinian (e.g., 1981, p. 17, p. 271; 1986, p. 147, p. 162) perspective, is monological: it tends toward a singular and static end point. For Bakhtin genuine development is dialogical, implying an increasing diversity of perspectives, or discourses, entering into increasingly subtle dialogic interrelations.

Empirically, the case of Malcolm X, I suggest, supports a dialogical, not a dialectical (as usually understood), conception of development. Rather than successive liberations or metamorphoses, there is, in Malcolm X’s development, an accumulation of discourses from diverse social enclaves. The later Malcolm X’s dialogical self was a complex, internally contradictory and thus dynamic, composite of the discourses of the “black bourgeoisie,” of the street hustler and of the Islamic minister. The uniqueness of Malcolm X is not to be found in his ‘liberation’ from these discourses, but rather in the multiple dialogic interrelations between these co-existing discourses.

Struggling with another's discourse

Tappan (p. 34) states that Malcolm X's development occurs through a "miss-match" in the appropriation of the dominant discourse, which opens up the opportunity to resist. No matter how complete the appropriated oppression is, Tappan suggests, there is always a gap for resistance, because the oppressed person is positioned in a subordinate position and thus is always, to some extent, outside of the dominant ideology. But, if this is so, why does not everyone who is oppressed become liberated?

In order to understand the uniqueness of Malcolm X we need to examine the different forms of dialogical inter-relation between discourses within Malcolm X's dialogical self. I pursue this issue by focusing upon Malcolm X's relation to the discourse of the spiritual leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad.

According to Tappan (p. 29), Malcolm X begins his relation to Elijah Muhammad's externally authoritative words by "ventriloquating" them. An analysis of the early correspondence between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, however, complicates this assertion. The following extract is from a letter, written in 1951 by Malcolm X while he was in prison and most likely addressed to Elijah Muhammad:

I thought that I was being motivated solely by the earnest desire to think, speak and eat in the manner that all Muslims should. Well, I was wrong! [...] with great remorse I now think of the hate and revenge that I have been preaching in the past. But from here on in my words shall all be of Love and Justice. (Cited in FBI, 2004, Part 01, p. 12-13)

While Elijah Muhammad taught that Allah would punish the "white devil" in due course, Malcolm X was impatient. The above extract suggests that Malcolm X has been reprimanded for "preaching" "hate and revenge," that is, for not ventriloquating the words of Elijah Muhammad, but rather, speaking different words (maybe, in part, the words of Detroit

Red?). In this extract, the words of Elijah Muhammad are indeed externally authoritative. The relation of ventriloquism is also evident, especially in the final phrase: “my words shall all be of Love and Justice.” But this ventriloquism seems forced. These words “sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them” (Bakhtin 1981, p.294). Malcolm X is actively *subordinating himself* to the discourse of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X was not simply possessed by the voice of Elijah Muhammad. The more familiar, very different, discourse of Detroit Red constituted an obstacle to the easy appropriation of Elijah Mohammad’s discourse. Moreover, Malcolm X was active in this appropriation by suppressing his own discourse and promoting the discourse of Elijah Muhammad.

Moving on twelve years, to Malcolm X’s separation from the discourse of Elijah Muhammad, we now find Malcolm X beginning to turn Elijah Muhammad’s discourse into an object. Although Malcolm X never fully subordinated his own discourse to the discourse of Elijah Muhammad, he did manage to conceal this dialogical tension from the public (including in the autobiography). This hidden dialogical tension becomes evident in the following extract. It is from a tape-recorded interview done by Louis Lomax with Malcolm X in early 1963 concerning a recent article:

It’s a lie. Any article that says there is a ‘minor’ difference between Mr. Muhammad and me is a lie. There is no such thing as a ‘minor’ difference with the Messenger. Any difference with him is major. It is a lie, a lie, a lie. Somebody paid (the author) to write. I was up there in his office yesterday and I was ready to waste (harm, or kill) him for that. [...] But I will tell you this: The Messenger has seen God. He was with Allah and was given divine patience with the devil. He is willing to wait for Allah to deal with this devil. Well, sir, the rest of us Black Muslims have not seen God. We don’t have this gift of divine patience with the devil. The younger Black Muslims

want to see some action. (Cited in Lomax, 1968, p. 104-5, round brackets by Lomax, square brackets by me).

This extract contains three broad changes of perspective. First there is Malcolm X, student of “the Messenger,” Elijah Muhammad. Here the discourse of Elijah Muhammad is authoritative: it does not permit any divergence, it demands complete allegiance and it can be profaned. Malcolm X is trying to accept this authoritative discourse, or at least, trying to present such an acceptance. The thought that there is a divergence of perspective is “a lie, a lie, a lie.” The profanity of the suggestion makes Malcolm X angry, the restraint of the minister gives way to a second a more militant discourse – perhaps an echo of Detroit Red: “I was ready to waste him.” The third perspective is introduced with the pronouncement: “But I will tell you this.” This voice stands apart from Elijah Muhammad’s words, it begins to objectify those words. Malcolm X explains that he is loyal to Elijah because Elijah has conversed with Allah, and been given “divine patience.” Others, like himself, he says, have not had this experience. This experience marks Elijah Muhammad as someone to be followed, but also as someone who is different from the “younger Black Muslims who want to see some action.” Thus, through a dialogical knot, Malcolm X comes to confess the very divergence which he initially denied.

In the above extract we can see Malcolm X beginning to represent his divergence from Elijah Muhammad. The novel discourse emerging from this struggle is that Malcolm X wants “to see some action.” While this discourse is in a sense novel, it also seems to echo, once again, Detroit Red. I do not want to simplify. Malcolm X did not return to being Detroit Red, but there seems to have been a certain attitude which carried over, even if refracted through over a decade of serving the Nation of Islam. This struggle, between being obedient to Elijah Muhammad, and the desire for “some action,” was fundamental to the uniqueness and potency of Malcolm X’s dialogical self. This struggle is evident in his early letter to

Elijah Muhammad and his last words about Elijah Muhammad, thus again illustrating continuity. This tension, I suggest, is what differentiates Malcolm X from the majority of the many oppressed people who do not become ‘liberated’ political activists. This uniqueness is not simply a function of Malcolm X being oppressed or having appropriated oppression, as in Tappan’s analysis. This uniqueness can only be made explicable by understanding Malcolm X’s specific trajectory through the social structure, where he accumulated the discourses of the “black bourgeoisie,” the hustler and the minister.

The interrelations between these discourses were not resolved in the year before Malcolm X’s assassination. In fact, one could argue that each of these facets of Malcolm X’s dialogical self found a new manifestation. For example, politically he moved toward, what he would have earlier called, the “black bourgeoisie” by espousing “brotherhood” and abandoning the white devil doctrine. The discourse of the minister also became more pronounced in his establishment of the Muslim Mosque Inc. And, finally, the more pro-active, or militant, aspect of Malcolm X’s unique dialogical self was given expression in his establishing a second non-religious, and exclusively political, organization called the Organization of Afro-American Unity. That Malcolm X did not become ‘liberated,’ in the sense of resolving these dialogic tensions, is not to be lamented, my point is that the dialogical interrelations between these discourses was the uniqueness of Malcolm X.

Ideological becoming constrained

From his earliest interactions to his break with Elijah Muhammad, one can detect that Malcolm X persistently (though secretly) wanted more action. This begs the question: If there was, from the beginning, this divergence of perspective between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, why did Malcolm X not voice his own discourse? Simply put, Malcolm X was not in a social position which endowed him with the power to speak for himself without

negative consequences. He was in a hierarchical religious organization. As he himself stated, one can't have a difference of opinion with God's Messenger. If Malcolm X were to have voiced alternative militant ideas, he would have lost his position within the Nation of Islam, and thus his institutional support. Moreover, he probably believed that he could do more good for the black cause within the Nation of Islam than outside of it. In short, Malcolm X was embedded within a social structure.

This indicates an important relation between identity development and social structure that is absent from Tappan's theory. One cannot separate the authority of a discourse from the actual social positions of self and other. Struggling with an authoritative discourse is situationally constrained. For someone to acknowledge him or herself as having a new set of beliefs requires more than ideational realization. Dialogical struggles may persist and remain unresolved due to social structures of subordination and domination. Only when Malcolm X changed his societal location, when he was actually ousted from the Nation of Islam, could he openly break from Elijah ideologically. Thus social structure is a part of ideological becoming in two ways: first, as Tappan suggests, it can be the source of intrapsychic dialogic tensions, and second, it can mediate the course and manifestation of these dialogic struggles. Without recognizing this latter role of social structure, the resultant theory of identity development is idealist, in a philosophical sense, for it privileges ideological development while failing to recognize how ideological becoming is embedded in, and constrained by, social structure.

The public case study

In this commentary, I have tried to take up Tappan's project of relating social structure to ideological becoming by further analyzing the identity development of Malcolm X. This dialogic engagement has been possible only because of Tappan's innovative use of a

public case study to illustrate his theory. Although the analysis of public data is not new, and triangulation among researchers has a long history (Flick, 1992), its use today seems particularly relevant for two reasons.

First, the analysis of public data offers a means of establishing the quality of qualitative research. Gaskell and Bauer (2000) have suggested that qualitative research needs procedures of “quality management” in order to guarantee its scientific legitimacy. The collective analysis of public data provides one possible avenue for such ‘quality management.’ Making interpretations transparent in this way, and inviting interpretative dialogue, ensures that fundamental methodological questions are asked. For example, I have questioned whether Malcolm X’s autobiography is able to illustrate Tappan’s theory of identity development as liberation because the autobiography has been constructed using the same idea of liberation, or metamorphosis, as a mediational tool.

Second, the public case study method, when followed up with theoretical dialogue, can check the rampant collection of data, and refocus our attention upon interpretation and theoretical development. The public case study encourages less data collection and more collaborative and dialogical interpretation and debate. For example, by further examining Tappan’s illustration, I have suggested: that development is dialogical not teleological; that the uniqueness of Malcolm X is found not in his absolute liberation, but in the dialogical relations between accumulated and contradictory discourses; and that ideological becoming is constrained by the embeddedness of people within social structures. These interpretations are as open to dialogue as are Tappan’s interpretations. Further dialogue should produce both more subtle interpretations and contradictory interpretations. The advantage of analyzing public data is that it can introduce such dialogical tensions. The primary function of data, after all, is not to illustrate our theories but to disrupt our theories.

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Biography

Alex Gillespie lectures in social psychology at the University of Cambridge. He has recently completed his PhD thesis, which examines how interaction between tourists and Ladakhis (in north India) is producing and reproducing representations and selves. His theoretical interests are in cultural psychology and theoretical psychology, with a focus on the formation of self and an orientation that is built on the early American pragmatist psychologists/philosophers. Lately he has spent most of his time preparing lectures.

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