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Emotional Foundations of Ontological Struggles: Collective Truth-making in Fragmented Societies¹

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the dynamics of truth-making in contemporary Western societies, which are no longer unified by a shared ontology and epistemology. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, and the sociology of emotions, I demonstrate that emotions—particularly shame and pride—play a pivotal role in the objectification of knowledge and experience, thereby enabling the maintenance of a shared reality. To understand the evolving role of shame in the construction of truth, I focus on the dynamics of localized collective interactions. I argue that grassroot collectives that inhabit digital locations are currently at the forefront of collaborative truth-making, as they construct and maintain distinct spaces with afford for shame work—navigating shame experienced by their members in external contexts—and internal emotional regulation. These emotional dynamics result in a localized ordering of reality contributing to the fragmentation of truth in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Emotions, social interactions, digital communities, truth-making, shame, pride

Introduction

Sociology has for long acknowledged the pluralism of the social world, that is, the fact that multiple social worlds, often referred to as life-worlds or subcultures, can co-exist within one society and produce distinct realities for their members (Schutz 1973). The rise of digital communication has made the plurality of these groups and multiplicity of their realities even more evident (Papacharissi 2015). Due to their location in the “de-territorialized and de-temporalized” (Kumkar 2023: 5) space of the internet, those groups became more accessible for research. More often than not, researchers’ gaze turns towards group-based microworlds that are depicted as constructed in parallel or even opposition to what is perceived as the cultural mainstream: communities existing “below the radar” (Abidin 2021), grouping “deviant loners” (Adler and Adler 2008) and normalizing otherwise “deviant” identities (Gavin et al. 2008). It is in “electronic elsewheres” (Berry et al. 2010) that these groups assemble to construct their own “partisan” epistemologies (DiMaggio 2022) that reflect a “countercultural reality” (Conner and MacMurray 2022). Descriptions of these socio-cultural constellations highlight, through

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the use of emphatic and figurative metaphors, the marginality of realities or “truths” they constitute from the standpoint of a general, dominant culture and discourse.

This article offers an alternative perspective on the making of current societies: as composed of groups that produce distinct shared realities challenging the mainstream reality and social order it implies, that are no longer subordinate or subaltern. These groups considerably vary in particular focus of attention, cultural specificity, emotionality, and internal ordering. What they have in common, however, is their ability to maintain spaces in which they construct and circulate meanings that embed realities independent of the dominant “nomos” (Berger 2011), and of each other’s ontological stances. Such collectives are increasingly able to mainstream (DiMaggio 2022) the meanings they forge against dismissal and shaming that their members encounter in external contexts, and, thus, they become agential and causative in shaping societal dynamics: lines of social divisions, cultural imaginaries, narratives, and “affective atmospheres” (Anderson 2009) of contemporaneity. The coexistence of such spaces and collectives independently engaged in truth-making gives rise to a society that appears ontologically fragmented.

In the present analysis, I investigate the mechanisms of truth construction within localized collectives from the perspective of the sociology of emotions, highlighting the role of emotions—particularly shame and pride—in the construction of truth. My focus on these two emotions is driven by their significance as “meta” emotions: they play a crucial role in social sanctioning and ordering mechanisms (Goffman 1982; Scheff 1988), and, thus, it is through these emotions that we not only “feel” about our thoughts or performances but also, not less importantly, “we feel about what we feel” (Wettergren 2019: 32). With this focus in mind, I ask: which societal processes currently undermine the mainstream culture’s ability to determine what counts as “true” and “real”? How do multiple truths and realities emerge in social interactions, especially the digital ones? How are they nurtured and maintained within inhabited digital spaces? My key aim is to reflect upon the processes that foster the plurality of divergent, group-based realities, and enable the collectives to construct and maintain their life-worlds against counter-discourses, counter-narratives and countering truths, adding to the ontological and epistemological fragmentation characterizing contemporary societies.

The Social Organization of Truth: the Role of Shame and Pride in the Emergence of Socially Shared Knowledge

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of the emergence of a societal formation that is no longer held together by a shared ontology and epistemology. In what follows I focus on one aspect of this multifaceted transformation and identify what has changed in the organization of experience in contemporary societies²

² In the 20th century Western sociology, from which I draw in this analysis, the term “society” was typically used in the singular form (see Berger 2011, for an example). This tendency arose from a desire to uncover general processes and patterns that pertain to human societal organization as a whole, as well as from a tacitly adopted assumption that Western societies serve as a model; a perspective that was challenged for instance by Eisenstadt (2002) in his account of “multiple modernities.” Acknowledging that societies differ in terms of the dynamics and

that enables multiple and diverse collectives to transform their members' subjectivities into realities independent of the mainstream viewpoint.

The symbolic interactionist framework that I adopt as my starting point views knowledge about the world as a product of social interactions. Social interactions create a space in which subjective interpretations can be negotiated and validated (Blumer 1969), thereby facilitating the construction of a socially shared understanding of the world. Social constructivism supports this perspective by emphasizing that it is through social interactions that shared knowledge can be objectified, and that this objective, supra-individual reality further shapes and organizes subjective experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Berger 2011). In his analysis of the construction of objectified knowledge, Berger (2011) highlights the pressure that society exerts on individual perceptions, referring to it as a "nomic" influence: "In what it 'knows,'" he asserts, "every society imposes a common order of interpretation upon experience that becomes 'objective knowledge'" (p. 29). To conceptualize this "order of common meaning" (p. 28) Berger coined the term "nomos." Objectification, or the social ordering of experience, not only implies that certain experiences and viewpoints are acknowledged as meaningful and true, and incorporated into nomos. It also means that others will be dismissed as negligible or simply false, and marginalized.

The dynamics of the objectification of experiences under the social nomic pressure can also be viewed as a process of truth "making" (Bareither et al. 2023). We can conceptualize truth as a common—socially shared—order of meanings that serves as a benchmark or reference for interpreting and validating specific experiences, both on the macro (societal) level and on the micro (interactional) level. The concept of truth-making draws our attention to efforts and processes that underpin the construction of truth.

On a macro level, truth is maintained through procedures that together constitute a "regime of truth" (Foucault 2000). For Foucault, a regime of truth prescribes criteria and procedures for distinguishing between true and false claims, organizes discourses that convey what is to be taken as true, and provides frameworks for legitimizing truth claims as well as establishing the social standing of truth-tellers (Fischer 2019; Weir 2008). Regimes of truth do not stand in isolation from other social structures and overarching principles of social organization. As analyses of the transformation of expertise indicate, a specific regime of truth that emerged within the modern social formation in the West was embedded in "strong ties of modernity that believed in centralization" (Nowotny 2000: 12) and a particular rationality based on categorization and differentiation (Beck and Lau 2005). These characteristics of "early" (Nowotny 2000) or "first" (Beck and Lau 2005) modernity were reflected in the structure of modern institutions and in a specific logic that underpinned their organization and functioning.

According to Beck and Lau (2005), institutions of first modernity "worked according to the 'either/or' principle—either us or them, (...) facts or values, war or peace (...) either knowledge or not knowledge" (p. 527). This institutional logic reciprocally shaped the processes of truth-making in modernity, as it is through institutions that

forms of social and cultural change, I will use the plural form in this analysis, and limit its implications to the developments within Euro-American societies.

social nomic influence materializes in the form of credentials and certificates. The significance of educational and academic institutions derives from their ability “to impose recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 21) through the credentials they confer, thereby establishing and reproducing social hierarchies, that—we can add—sustain *nomos*. Institutions can effectively manage and maintain hierarchies of recognition, however, only as long as they are perceived as legitimate disposers of social recognition. From the perspective of relational sociology, recognition is a “relational act” (Donati 2009) that must be embedded in a mutual relationship. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we can view institutions as “sedimented meanings” (Fine 1993). This conceptualization is useful because it allows us to understand the emotional dynamics intertwined with the logic of institutional action. In this perspective, institutional credentials constitute sedimented social recognition that conveys pride institutionally bestowed upon their holders. Accordingly, we can view the refusal to acknowledge and certify a specific competence or perspective as an institutionally administered dismissal, through which institutions marginalize certain ideas, performances, and experiences. As long as these institutions are viewed as legitimate arbiters of social recognition, they pose the ability to deprive groups and individuals of institutionally mediated pride and impose shame.³

On a micro level, the logic that necessitates the classification of ideas, performances and experiences into mutually exclusive categories operates through exclusion. The “either/or” principle deriving from the first modernity enabled the delineation of strong boundaries between performances recognized as “professional,” and those that could be excluded from this category through the use of labels such as “deviant,” “amateur” or “pseudo” (Gieryn 1983), as well as experiences deemed significant and those considered negligible (Campbell 1994). Such categorizations, which either acknowledge or dismiss specific performances and experiences, leverage the human tendency to experience pride or shame and its variants, “feelings of rejection or failure” (Scheff 2000: 97), in response to social judgments and evaluative signals conveyed in interactions.

As argued within the sociology of emotions, both pride and shame are pervasive social emotions that serve as powerful tools for interpersonal regulation, because they carry an information about the social standing of an actor. Scheff (2000) emphasizes that since shame signals a “threat to the social bond”—a threat of exclusion—“(…) all human beings are extremely sensitive to the exact amount of deference they are accorded. Even slight discrepancies generate shame or embarrassment” (p. 97). Shame manifests in interactions as shaming (Rafanell 2013) and, in this form, can be used to dismiss experiences, performances, or viewpoints that deviate from what is regarded as the “common order of meanings” (Berger 2011: 28). Pride, in contrast, emerges in response to social recognition and acceptance, signaling inclusion. As Scheff (1988) observes, “when we are accepted as we present ourselves, we usually feel rewarded by the pleasant emotions of pride and fellow

³ According to Honneth (1995), deprivation of recognition—whether in private (personal), legal (institutional), or solidarity (communal) spheres—can trigger “struggles for recognition.” In the optics of the sociology of emotions, we can conceptualize these struggles as a collective process aimed at reworking shame and constructing social and interactional contexts in which individuals and groups can achieve social recognition. As empirical examples discussed in the subsequent sections of this article suggest, the truth-making dynamics that lead to the creation of localized emotional life-worlds can also be understood in Honneth’s terms as struggles for recognition.

feeling” (p. 396). Priding serves as an interactional counterpart to shaming (Rafanelli 2013) and can be employed to affirm and validate specific opinions and viewpoints as the true or legitimate ones. Thereby, shame and pride contribute to maintaining shared knowledge and interpretations in social interactions.

This account, based on Berger’s concept of *nomos*, describes how specific institutional and interactional mechanisms contributed to a distinct organization of meanings, or truth, within a relatively stable social world that persisted in Western societies until the mid-1960s. From that time onward, the “meaningful order” observed and described by Berger began to disintegrate; the beliefs that anchored individuals in society and a shared, supra-individual reality, became increasingly fragmented.

More specifically, the structure of social pressures that had previously shaped the organization of individual experiences gradually transformed, accompanying the process of the “dissolution of modern social structures” (Marody and Giza 2018: 320). In his theory of individualization, Beck (1994) highlights the multidimensional process through which “collective (...) sources of meaning” (p. 191) that organized experiences in industrial societies ceased to provide guidance on how to attribute meanings to experiences. The disembedding of individuals from structural constraints, along with the subsequent disintegration of collective categories such as social class, family-defined gender roles, and national identities, resulted in the collapse of the overarching “common order of interpretation” (Berger 2011: 28) that could previously have been referenced in the making of individual life choices and biographies. As Beck (1994) argues, this dissolution of the “conscience collective” (p. 194) “leads to the imposition of all definition effort upon the individuals” (p. 191).

The processes that Beck identified in the 1990s have currently accelerated, particularly due to changes in communication that directly influence the dynamics of social interactions. The digitalization of communication has been a crucial development in this context, as it has, at least partially, removed physical and geographical constraints on bonding among individuals. The digital infrastructure of connective media (van Dijck 2013) fosters communicative activities that facilitate the negotiation and validation of experiences across physical distances. It enables, to some extent, “de-localized and de-temporalized” participation (Kumkar 2023: 5), allowing individuals to explore the internet and seek out communities that resonate with their specific interests. However, the experience of digitally mediated sociality, along with the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, is shaped by the affordances of digital platforms (Hutchby 2001) and the policies embedded in algorithms and moderation procedures. Affordances are best understood as features of particular communication venues that both enable and constrain possible modes of participation in localized digital interactions (Hutchby 2001), including emotional expressions (Bareither 2019). Algorithms govern digital connectivity by either promoting or silencing certain types of content, performances, and connections. Through algorithms, platforms enforce their internal regulations on the interactive dynamics they host. As Gillespie (2018) highlighted, “[i]n terms of impact on public discourse and the lived experience of users, the rules these platforms impose probably matter more than the legal restrictions under which they function” (p. 34). The potential impacts relevant to truth-making processes include the creation of closed circuits of information through algorithmic personalization (Wolfowicz,

Weisburd, and Hasisi 2023) and the promotion of content eliciting “affective engagement” (Papacharissi 2015). The digitalization of communication not only multiplies the contexts and venues for interactions but also amplifies the voices of multiple “truthtellers” (Harsin 2018), facilitating the circulation of various truths, and creating increasingly multicultural (Marody and Giza 2018) social contexts within contemporary societies.

Thus, these societies are increasingly characterized by the disintegration of *nomos*, and the disembedding of institutions and mechanisms that were once ingrained in this “common order of meanings” (Berger 2011: 28) and reciprocally sustained it, but are currently no longer unquestioningly legitimized across social contexts. How is truth-making achieved in such circumstances? Can shame and pride still be employed in the construction and enforcement of shared interpretations? In the next section, I will address these questions by outlining a conceptual approach that enables the analysis of meaning-making as a localized—spatially restricted—collective, and emotional dynamics.

Truth-Making as a Localized Collective Dynamic

Emerging accounts of these novel circumstances, in which the logic of exclusion can no longer function as a mechanism for maintaining a “common order of meanings” (Berger 2011: 28), utilize the concepts of “post-truth” and “post-shame” to highlight critical features of contemporary societies.

The term “post-truth” (Oxford Dictionary 2016) society is now widely used to elucidate the cognitive-emotional dynamics of meaning-making within the context of the pluralization of regimes of truth. According to the theorists of post-truth, “we are after a historical period where more people relied on and trusted the same truthtellers and when popular truth was more stable” (Harsin 2018: 37), what leads to a widespread “ontological insecurity” (Aupers 2012: 22). Although the concept of post-truth quickly gained traction as a means of describing the construction of truth in contemporary societies, it may be argued that, contrary to its apparent emphasis on emotions, it actually neglects the emotional processes involved in truth-making. In addressing the current normalization of far-right discourses, Wodak (2019) contrasts the idea of “post truth” era with a concept of “post-shame” society. A defining characteristic of a post-shame society is that individuals no longer feel ashamed when expressing previously tabooed opinions or emotions; moreover, the very notion of “taboo” is increasingly being dismantled.

These accounts illuminate the cognitive and emotional processes that accompany the disintegration of *nomos* in contemporary societies. However, by focusing on individuals and their personal experiences they exhibit an individualistic bias: they portray society as composed of pre-existing personal experiences and readily available meanings that are presented to individuals in the process of communication and digested by them in due course. To some extent, a similar conceptualization of an individual facing society underlies Berger’s account of nomic processes, in which personal experiences are directly shaped by social pressures transmitted to the individual from society through social interactions. In contrast, I propose adopting a relational approach to the process of truth construction in contemporary societies, focusing on the meso-level, that is, the level of in-group collective interactions.

Such a relational approach to the processes involved in the emergence of shared realities can be traced back to early interactionist and constructivist accounts that depicted interactions as constitutive of our sense of reality—what we perceive as real—and of the frameworks—typifications (Berger and Kellner 1964) or meanings—through which we conceive of the world. Symbolic interactionists underscored the social origins of reality, pointing out that it is fabricated from meanings regarded “as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer 1969: 4–5). Social constructivism emphasized the inherently social nature of reality, highlighting its continuous validation through interactions in which a “conversation about this world can be continually carried on” (Berger and Kellner 1964: 4). The significance of interactional validation was further illustrated by Goffman (1959, 1982) and Garfinkel (1999 [1967]), both of whom focused on the inherently interactional process through which a socially shared reality is “made through cooperative social actions” (Rawls 2015: 227). According to Goffman, the interactional validation of a situation and the selves of actors involved occurs through the appropriate—adequate—engagement of all participants. Proper and coordinated participation in the interaction sustains a shared sense of reality. And, conversely,

When an incident occurs and spontaneous involvement is threatened, then reality is threatened. Unless the disturbance is checked, unless the interactants regain their proper involvement, the illusion of reality will be shattered, the minute social system that is brought into being with each encounter will be disorganized, and the participants will feel unruly, unreal, and anomic. (Goffman 1982: 135)

Goffman emphasizes that it is through our emotions that we identify and respond to threats to the shared sense of reality. In a similar vein, Garfinkel (1999 [1967]) demonstrated through “breaching experiments” that strong emotions, such as anger and disorientation, arise in response to disruptions in normal interactional routines. Both the aggressive reactions of individuals confronted with an unexpected course of interaction and their tendency to engage in extensive efforts to re-establish interactional order suggest that our ontological security relies on the mutual confirmations exchanged in social interactions (Rawls 2015).

The disintegration of *nomos* outlined above implies, however, that the commonality of normative expectations or background knowledge among interaction partners can no longer be taken for granted, nor can they be automatically evoked or referenced in communication. Under these circumstances key become confirmations and references made within distinct interactive spaces where individuals engage with one another. As emphasized by Barnes (1983), social reality emerges from collective dynamics, where group members learn to reference and categorize specific objects while observing others in their group making similar categorizations. As a result, “[s]ocial reality (...) is that which is referred as such by a collective of users” (Rafanell 2013: 189).

Such an ontological consensus, however, cannot be currently achieved through habitual actions. The formation of individuals and their past experiences is too diverse to automatically generate shared interpretations. The increasingly complex structuration of contemporary societies shapes individuals who are “plural” (Lahire 2011) in their dispositions to feel, think, and act. These individuals engage in interactions within an increasingly under-defined social reality. While social reality has always been to some extent under-defined,

as emphasized in social constructivist accounts (Barnes 1983; Rafanell 2013), we are now confronted with a situation in which the “gaps” in meanings are too wide for individuals to rely unreflectively on existing meanings or to refer to established habits, practices, and background knowledge derived from past experiences. In this sense, the disintegration of *nomos* disrupts the interactional process of habituation (Berger and Luckmann 1966) through which social reality acquires its taken-for-granted quality. This disruption enables individuals to question the previously dominant definitions of what is considered important or negligible, right or wrong, true or false. Simultaneously, however, it deprives them of shared coordinates that harmonized the validation of meanings in interactions. Furthermore, under these circumstances, common interpretations cannot be supported by rational actions driven by a shared knowledge. The multiplication and diversification of epistemologies, viewpoints, and truths to which individuals can currently subscribe (Harsin 2018; Mede and Schäfer 2020) complicate their ability to establish a repository of shared, validated knowledge that can be referenced when formulating courses of action.

In this context, emotions emerge as a driving force behind human actions and social ordering. As I demonstrated in the previous section, the maintenance of social reality—or, put differently, of a particular regime of truth—has also in the period of stable social organization, exemplified in this analysis by early or first modernity, been achieved through emotional regulation, particularly through shame and pride operating within the logic of exclusion. Although the interaction partners can no longer easily apply the logic of exclusion across diverse social contexts, emotions not only continue to play a crucial role in the processes of truth construction but also become a primary driver of meaning-making.

This is possible due to the intricate entanglement of emotions with various aspects of human social functioning. Emotions serve a signaling function, informing individuals about the significance of specific objects and events (Hochschild 1983; Kemper 1990; Scheff 2000). These emotional assessments, stemming from accumulated personal experiences (Damasio 1994), allow individuals to identify issues of personal significance and to form collectives on this basis. Numerous examples exist of groups that coalesce around issues deemed “important” by their members, such as grassroot self-help groups, “communities of practice” (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner 2015) that focus on collaborative learning, and others. When such collectives form, emotions facilitate mutual identification and bonding among their otherwise heterogeneous members (Collins 2004). Collective emotional processes are also intricately linked to the dynamics of boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002) and belonging. Emotions contribute to truth-making also by triggering meaning-making activities (Joffe 2008; Jasper and Poulsen 1995) and conveying meanings. They are embedded within cognitive categories (Höijer 2011; Piermattéo 2022) and narratives that structure our thinking and feeling (Hochschild 2016; Sawicka 2024).

Due to these links between feeling, thinking, and acting, the sharing of emotions has become the primary mechanism of truth-making in contemporary societies, where individuals find it increasingly difficult to refer to shared knowledge, meanings, or habitual epistemic practices. The groups that emerge from these dynamics advocate for specific issues to be recognized as significant, striving to mobilize emotions surrounding these topics and, consequently, to achieve an emotional framing of particular aspects of reality. In the following section, I analyze the mechanisms of emotional truth-making that

operate within collective interactions and underpin the formation of localized realities, the coexistence of which constitutes the makeup of fragmented societies.

Emotions in Truth-Making: the Formation of Fragmented Societies

Although the collectives that co-constitute contemporary societies attract individuals who are emotionally drawn to similar interests, it would be an oversimplification to assume that emotional “attunement” (Papacharissi 2015) among their members arises solely from a shared perception of reality or the convergence of emotional experiences. On the contrary, these groups reflect the complexity of society, as they consist of heterogeneous individuals who collectively navigate an increasingly under-defined social reality. Truth-making within such collectives, entailing emotional framing of selected aspects of reality, thus, necessitates a collaborative effort. Key dimensions of this effort include, firstly, liberating individuals from the pressure of shame and shaming imposed by outsiders in broader social contexts through internal priding dynamics, and secondly, fostering collective emotional regulation through which insiders collaboratively establish the “right” way to feel about particular objects that hold significance for their group.

The efforts aimed at liberating members of a specific collective from the experience of shame can be conceptualized through the notion of “collective shame work” (Sawicka 2025). Through collective shame work, the groups create emotionally inclusive spaces “in which people can freely express their (...) views without the need to ‘feel bad’ about them or fear social sanctions” (Leser and Spissinger 2020: 338). I will argue below that these collectives do not create entirely shameless spaces, because internal shaming continues to function as a mechanism for in-group ordering. When individuals seek to belong to these groups and maintain access to their social, material, and symbolic resources, they become susceptible to judgments from fellow members, particularly signals that may convey interactional criticism and dismissal, which carry the looming threat of exclusion. Nonetheless, these collectives are, importantly, capable of constructing “enabling spaces” (Leser and Spissinger 2020) governed by a priding dynamic and a logic of inclusion: the meanings created and re-created within these spaces empower interaction partners to cope with externally imposed shaming and express feelings negatively sanctioned outside of the group.

Shame work conducted within enabling spaces paves the way for maintaining the “truthiness” of certain experiences. In the literature regarding the creation of counter-knowledge in contemporary societies, truthiness is defined as a quality of a statement that “feel[s] true, even though it is not supported by factual evidence” (Zimmer 2010; cited in: Fischer 2019: 134). For the present analysis, we can conceptualize truthiness as a derivative of emotions attached to specific objects, opinions, or experiences that become significant for individuals and feel true or important to them. Interactional shaming and the dismissal of feelings of truthiness, in this regard, are methods employed in a struggle over the ontological status of objects, experiences, and worldviews. Shaming is an effective tool in this struggle not only because, as I previously argued, individuals are highly susceptible to interactional signals that convey shaming, but also due to the constant need for interactional validation of

individual perceptions. Experiencing “outlaw” (Jaggar 1989) or disenfranchised emotions in isolation constitutes a heavy burden: “When unconventional emotional responses are experienced by isolated individuals, those concerned may be confused, unable to name their experience; they may even doubt their own sanity” (p. 166). Reworking these emotions, particularly undoing the effects of shame through priding, becomes the initial step in collaborative truth-making; the collective construction of pride and internal priding enable reclaiming “epistemic agency” (Sawicka 2025). Through such collective shame work, truthiness can be collaboratively constructed and maintained.

Some illustrations of this process can be found in digital ethnographic studies of online groups that rework the “outlaw” emotions of their members and confront externally imposed shame. The digital ethnographic lens allows us to investigate situated micro-emotional dynamics within the context of the specific characteristics of the digital environment discussed above. By focusing on particular collectives that inhabit specific digital spaces and examining their interactive dynamics, digital ethnographic inquiries uncover how these groups employ and rework emotions in actual digital interactions. For instance, digital groups of mothers who have experienced perinatal loss collaboratively construct and uphold the status of their lost pregnancies as a loss of a real child against the dismissal of their grief by close relatives, friends, and medical practitioners, and frame their grief as grounds for an exceptional social status of “Angels’ mothers” (Rafanell and Sawicka 2020). In a similar vein, albeit in a different context, a digital COVID-advocacy group collectively expresses concern about COVID-19 to reinforce its status as a critical threat to public health, in opposition to the increasingly neglectful attitudes of the general public and the instances of shaming faced by individuals who continue to wear masks in daily interactions. Wearing a mask becomes, in this group, a marker of a particular virtue and concern for public health (Sawicka 2025). Shame work performed in these and other groups is a crucial step in collective truth-making, as it facilitates the further social shaping—or ordering—of emotional experiences.

These emotional dynamics underpinning the construction of truth relate to collectives inhabiting relatively open—semi-public—spaces and those that more thoroughly filter potential members and govern the visibility of in-group interactions. As I argued above, in-group dissent or discrepancies are intrinsic features of any human collective, especially in contemporary highly plural and heterogeneous societies. In this context, the groups must actively maintain any form of consensus through collective effort. Even closed and exclusive collectives cannot entirely rely on the homogeneity of their members. In his analysis of the emergence of social order, Barnes (2001) noted that people

can ride in formation, not because they are independent individuals who possess the same habits, but because they are independent social agents, linked by a mutual susceptibility, who constantly modify their habituated individual responses as they interact with others, in order to sustain a shared practice (p. 37).

This statement can be paraphrased for the purposes of the present analysis to suggest that members of these collectives can align emotionally not because they share identical feelings about a particular aspect of the world, but because they engage in interactions where their emotions are subject to continuous collective regulation. As long as these collectives provide unique symbolic resources and interactional rewards that members

can acquire only by adhering to in-group norms regulating performances and expressions, they can effectively monitor and regulate participation in interactions within spaces they inhabit. This collective, mutual interactional regulation that pertains to members' emotions encompasses three essential features.

Firstly, it is partial rather than exhaustive, it focuses on emotions expressed towards specific objects that hold significance for the group, and not the full range of emotional experiences of individual members. These groups concentrate on a selected aspect of reality—such as a problem or an issue—and construct shared typifications or definitions of objects related to their area of interest. More importantly, they coalesce around objects that become constitutive of the groups' shared reality (Sawicka et al. 2022). Some examples of such constitutive objects include vaccinations for a vaccination hesitant community (Sawicka 2023), protective masks for a COVID-advocacy group (Sawicka 2025), or a specific kind of drugs in a psychedelic drug market community (Sawicka et al. 2022). These “ontological” or “constitutive” objects are not only meaningful to the group but also central to its emergence, as sharing a particular conception of these objects serves as a key binding force for the community.

What is more, these groups are largely capable of accommodating a diverse range of members' viewpoints and practices. For instance, the aforementioned COVID-advocacy group embraces different modes of masking, even those deemed ineffective, and values the act of masking itself, regardless of how it is performed (Sawicka 2025). These collectives, however, simultaneously impose negative sanctions on emotional expressions that violate their internal emotional norms concerning their constitutive objects. While they engage in shame work to counter external shaming, they still employ internal shaming to regulate members' feelings toward these constitutive objects. For example, in the group for mothers who have experienced perinatal loss, expressions of anger regarding their pregnancies, the loss of those pregnancies, and the accompanying feelings of grief and pain are often met with negative sanctions. Local feeling rules demand that this experience—along with the suffering it entails—should be valued and cherished, as it is through this process that “Angel babies” become an integral part of their mothers' lives (Rafanell and Sawicka 2020). Similarly, within a psychedelic drug community, shaming is employed to establish and maintain a particular notion of what constitutes a “good drug.” Novel conceptualizations are interactionally evaluated and either integrated into a shared understanding through priding or excluded through shaming for being inadequate or misaligned with the community's values (Sawicka et al. 2022). Shame and pride, thus, remain pervasive emotions that underpin social organization of experience (Scheff 1988). What is achieved through interactional emotional regulation within such collectives, however, is a localized—restricted by the boundaries of space inhabited by a group—and transient ordering of reality anchored by a constitutive object, rather than an overarching social order that extends beyond the confines of these collectives.

The second feature of interactional emotional regulation within such collectives is that it is intertwined with the processes that govern belonging and, subsequently, contribute to the formation of social bonds and divisions. The groups analyzed here expect their members to express a specific form of emotional engagement toward their constitutive objects, which stands in contrast to the indifference (Simmel 1950) that characterizes the

general public. This engagement serves as a “significant marker of differentiation” (Attwell et al. 2018) between group members and those considered outsiders. For example, to be granted insider status within a bereavement group for mothers who have experienced perinatal loss, the objective characteristics of the loss (e.g., the gestational age at which the pregnancy ended) are less significant than the alignment with the group’s norm of mourning the lost pregnancy as the loss of a baby (Rafanell and Sawicka 2020). Similarly, to be a member of a COVID-hesitant group, individuals must demonstrate a fearless attitude toward the pandemic and reluctance to vaccinate against COVID-19, no matter what are their beliefs about the nature of the pandemic (Sawicka 2023). The primary concern within the collectives analyzed here relates to how members feel about the group’s constitutive object; in-group emotional attunement is achieved through the active policing of “emotionally deviant” acts (Thoits 1990) or through the voluntary withdrawal of members who cannot align with the internal emotional order.

What requires regulation, in addition to emotions directed toward constitutive objects, are group-oriented feelings. Shaming can serve as an effective method of interpersonal regulation only when exercised by a worthy—significant—other. The worthiness of insiders, often contrasted with less deserving outsiders, is constructed through self-priding directed at the collectives themselves. Members portray their collectives as “exceptional digital spaces” (Sawicka et al. 2023) that preserve the truth about a particular aspect of reality. Group moderators and engaged members actively promote in-group cohesion by moderating internal critique and shaming emotional expressions that may disrupt internal bonds, such as angry or aggressive confrontations between members.

These regulatory efforts are essential for the emergence of shared realities in the collectives under analysis. Thus, the third feature of in-group interactional regulation is that it underpins the construction of subcultural elements, such as identities, norms, and values held within a group, as well as narratives that organize meanings and attribute them to specific elements of the world (Sawicka 2024). Narratives are particularly significant, as some of them constitute ontological resources for the group (Somers 1994). Ontological narratives are “the stories that social actors use to make sense of—indeed, to act in—their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do” (Somers 1994: 618). Since these groups focus on emotional framing of the world, they construct narratives that focus on emotions, “deep stories” (Hochschild 2016). Similar to other narratives, deep stories serve as epistemological tools for group members, enabling them to make sense of the specific developments that the group observes.

The construction of a deep story can replace factual consensus in the truth-making process. In his exploration of the interplay between emotions and rationality, Barbalet (2001) observes, following James, that “the absence of evidence regarding a correct course of action means that calculation to aid decision-making is impossible, and an emotional rather than a logical choice or commitment is necessary” (p. 48). Both James and Barbalet argue that the limited availability of factual evidence characterizes most social situations. However, due to the disintegration of the “common order of interpretation” (Berger 2011: 28) and the proliferation of truth-tellers and regimes of truth, presently knowledge of facts is not only restricted but often contested. It is through narratives that groups and

individuals address pervasive ambiguity arising from such contestation, as demonstrated by the meaning-making activities within vaccination-hesitant groups facing the need to make sense of the COVID-19 outbreak (Sawicka 2023). The significance of narratives in the sense-making process elucidates why not only facts but also narratives become subjects of negotiation and contestation (Somers 1994) within the “struggle over whose reality counts” (Fischer 2019: 139).

In this section, I analyzed the key dimensions of the collective and collaborative efforts through which groups of interest strive to emotionally frame some aspects of the world. These efforts involve addressing the shaming and dismissal experienced by group members in external social contexts, evoking pride, as well as regulating the emotions expressed within group-owned digital spaces. Subsequently, these collectives construct localized emotional subcultures that anchor their shared realities. I propose that we regard these efforts as a key form of truth-making in fragmented societies.

Conclusions

In this analysis, I highlighted the fragmentation of contemporary Western societies, which should not be equated, as I argue, with the pluralism of the social world that has long been recognized in sociology (Schutz 1973). Pluralism in the “society of big structures” (Marody and Giza 2018) implied that different groups within society produced their own meanings, narratives, and discourses; however, these sense-making efforts were subordinated to the dominant “common order of meanings” (Berger 2011: 28) embedded in relatively stable structures of early modern societies, such as the nation-state, class structure, and family. In contrast, the fragmentation of contemporary societies arises from the disintegration of nomos, resulting in the circulation of meanings or “truths” produced within various groups that are largely independent of one another. These developments contribute to a cacophony of coexisting meanings that are increasingly less integrated into an order of shared interpretations.

On a collective level, the disintegration of nomos and the proliferation of truths indicate that interactions across social contexts can no longer primarily focus on maintaining shared knowledge through habitually applied “interactional methods” (Garfinkel 1999 [1967]). This primarily pertains to methods that employ shaming to suppress expressions conveying alternative conceptualizations of the world, which were previously effective in aligning them with the mainstream interpretations. In contemporary fragmented societies, shaming more often than not triggers backlash reactions, as it is perceived as an illegitimate attempt to “steal pride” (see Hochschild 2024). The observation that shame evoked in interactions has lost its effectiveness in regulating expressions provided the basis for conceptualizing contemporaneity as a post-shame era (Wodak 2019), an emotional counterpart to the post-truth circumstances.

My assertion is that the post-shame account overlooks the actual dynamics of in-group interactions occurring in enabling spaces (Leser and Spissinger 2020) that individuals join in their pursuit of social and interactional validation of meanings and experiences. Within the socio-material boundaries of these spaces, mutual interactional regulation

and the policing of deviant expressions remain possible, serving as effective tools for social ordering. These collectives regulate their members' emotions, advocating for certain emotions, downplaying others, and navigating experiences of shame. Through collaboratively constructed symbolic resources, they achieve alignment in what it means to properly feel about a given aspect of reality. Due to their transient and flexible constitution, these collectives are best understood as assemblages—socio-technical or ethno-epistemic (Irwin and Michael 2003) formations—that focus on specific elements of reality while remaining open to change and reconfiguration. Thus, they facilitate alignment among their members; however, the emotional alignment achieved within them is partial rather than complete, representing an ordering rather than a stable and transferable order of meanings. In this context, fragmentation does not imply that collective actors do not strive to reconstruct *nomos*; rather, it indicates that these efforts are uncoordinated and decentralized.

The proliferation of decentralized truth-making formations has profound consequences for societies as a whole, extending beyond the individuals who directly engage with them. Their coexistence leads to a multiplication of realities and truths to which individuals can subscribe, blurring the boundaries of mainstream viewpoints. On an individual level, the multiplication of localized realities creates an epistemic challenge for those who identify with the mainstream, yet are increasingly inclined to question it. This challenge stems from an emotional dynamic: in their struggle to emotionally frame selected aspects of the world, the meaning-making formations analyzed in this article target emotional indifference and articulate specific claims about emotions. Consequently, the experience of feeling differently from (perceived) others becomes a shared plight among many, including both individuals engaged in the groups under study and those who merely observe their truth-making activities or encounter the truths and emotional claims they articulate. Such experiences undermine a sense of epistemic agency, as individuals “concerned [with outlaw emotions] may be confused, unable to name their experience; they may even doubt their own sanity” (Jaggar 1989: 166).

Lastly, the aim of this analysis is also partly methodological, as it advocates for micro-oriented approaches within sociology. I argue that these approaches are well-suited for analyzing the makeup of contemporary societies. Theoretical frameworks derived from symbolic interactionism and social constructivism highlight the processual nature of social reality, the active involvement of individuals in meaning-making, and the roles of communication and emotions in the dynamics of truth construction. Consequently, in contrast to approaches that emphasize abstract and diffuse affective contagion—such as Maffesoli's (1995) account of affective “tribes”—or other studies that focus on quantified emotional expressions (for examples see Boler and Davis 2018), these perspectives enable us to identify and analyze tangible dimensions of the interactive processes through which emotions are shared and validated, mediating the emergence of localized shared realities. The ethnographic toolkit provides methods such as observation, analysis of discursive interactions, and interviews with members of specific groups, which facilitate an investigation into truth-making dynamics in naturally occurring interactions (Geismar and Knox 2021; Hine 2015; Pink, et al. 2016) within particular cultural and technical contexts. By tracing the presence of emotions—through the interactive construction and regulation

of emotional displays—in tangible digital spaces, we can illuminate the mechanisms of truth-making but also to explain the dimensions of experiences that are otherwise obscure. Thus, we can move beyond post-truth and “post-shame” accounts and reveal mechanisms that underpin the fragmentation of contemporary social reality.

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