



How a desire to stand

U N I

out from the crowd



shapes behavior and

E L Y

creative thinking

By Hans-Peter Erb and Susanne Gebert
Photoillustration by C. J. Burton

Who am I?

The question seems so simple, yet it cuts to the heart of everything we do. Without an answer, we lack the inner compass that guides us through life. Decisions become arbitrary. Relationships dangle by a tenuous thread.

Introspection offers partial insight into this nebulous yet vital question. A fuller account, however,



FAST FACTS

BALANCING "I" AND "WE"

- 1 Researchers call the human drive to emphasize individuality the need for uniqueness.
- 2 A high need for uniqueness is characteristic of extroverted, open people.
- 3 In daily life we try, often unconsciously, to balance our sense of "I" with our sense of "we."

emerges from our interactions with the social environment. As we move through the world, certain people, ideas and activities resonate more than others. This mix of allegiances is ultimately what makes you *you*.

A defining force in the shaping of identity is a person's drive to be different and special. Psychologists define this facet of personality as the need for uniqueness. Their research has revealed that every one of us seeks uniqueness to some degree. Those who have little need for uniqueness tend to find comfort in familiarity. Others strive to be extreme outliers. Most of us fall somewhere in between.

Even for the most exotic among us, the need for uniqueness is counterbalanced by a desire to fit in. Consider, for example, the hypothetical case of a Fortune 500 businesswoman with a thoroughly pierced face and a Mohawk. Most likely she feels very much at home around others with a similar look. In a corporate boardroom, however, she probably feels ill at ease. The reason is context: in the first case, she surrounds herself with like-minded people, a group to which she feels she belongs. Because these two social circles—those who embrace a punk aesthetic and those who sit in boardrooms—rarely overlap, we almost never encounter such edgy executives. Herein lie the yin and yang of uniqueness: somewhat paradoxically, we set ourselves apart by affiliating with groups of people more like us. Uniqueness emerges from the distinct combination of alliances that only you seek out.

The natural drive to be unique has broad effects. It informs purchasing decisions. It affects appearance, for example, through hairstyles and tattoos. And it is an important driver of innovation. Many major discoveries emerged from the minds of scientific outsiders. Think of Albert Einstein, the patent office clerk who chafed under the strictures of academia but thrived once he could pursue his interests in autonomy. Or consider Marie Curie, the first woman to achieve numerous accomplishments in science, culminating in two Nobel Prizes. Had she conformed to the social expectations for her gender, the world would have been deprived of her many contributions. In short, uniqueness enhances creativity. So let your true self shine through—the world might thank you for it.

Fitting in vs. Sticking Out

The idea of a need for uniqueness has a long history in psychology, originating with the study of its counterpart, conformity. Psychologist Solomon Asch attained renown in the 1950s for demonstrat-

ing that a person's views are vulnerable to the opinions of the majority. In his now classic experiment, a participant sat in a room with several other people, all of whom had been secretly hired by Asch and his colleagues. The task was to look at a line and then pick which one of three other lines most closely resembled the initial prompt. Given the way the task was designed, identifying the proper line ought to have been exceedingly simple.

But the experimenters set up the situation so that the actors they had hired all responded before the real participant, and they all gave the same wrong answer. When the participants' turn came around, about a third responded just as the actors did—an astounding fraction, given that the correct choice was crystal clear. Later, when they were asked why they gave the wrong answer, the subjects recalled the uncertainty they had felt at the time. Although they had initially arrived at the proper response, they began to doubt themselves and concluded that the group was probably right.

Variations on Asch's initial study revealed that factors such as the size of the group, the presence of a dissenter or two, and the group's overall status could alter how many participants ultimately go against the grain. Nevertheless, as Asch concluded, "that we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and the values that guide our conduct."

The matter of why and when people strike out on their own captured the interest of two other psychologists, Howard L. Fromkin, then at York University in Ontario, and his colleague Charles R. Snyder, then at the University of Kansas. In the 1970s they developed a theory that everyone craves uniqueness to some extent. They discovered that relatively simple questions can gauge the intensity of this need in a person, and so they devised a uniqueness scale. In it, respondents rate how strongly certain statements apply to them, such as "I tend to express my opinions openly, regardless of what others say," "I like to go my own way," and "I always try to live according to the rules and standards of society."

Using Fromkin and Snyder's scale, one of us (Erb) and his colleagues looked at how the need for uniqueness mapped to the "big five" personality traits, the basic human characteristics recognized by most psychologists. (The five traits are extroversion, openness to experience, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness.) In a survey

of approximately 150 students, we found that three of these traits are closely connected with the need for uniqueness. Individuals with a strong need for uniqueness tend on average to be extroverted. They are sociable and optimistic about life. They also tend to be open to new experiences. In addition, a pronounced need for uniqueness is associated with low neuroticism; such people generally are more satisfied with their life and have fewer mood fluctuations.

Despite their convivial nature, people who are

Individuals with a higher than average need for uniqueness and openness to experience tend to engage in creative activities more frequently than their mainstream counterparts.

high in their need for uniqueness also tend to care less about others' opinions, and they typically engage in creative activities more frequently than their mainstream counterparts. [For more on creativity, personal challenges and the need for uniqueness, see "From Contretemps to Creativity," by Scott Barry Kaufman, on the next page.] The other two dimensions of the big five, agreeableness and conscientiousness, do not appear to be linked with either a strong or weak need for uniqueness.

Manipulating Uniqueness

Although a person's propensity to seek uniqueness is generally stable throughout life, certain situations can shift it temporarily. In a 2009 study conducted by psychologist Roland Imhoff, now at the University of Cologne in Germany, in collaboration with Erb, we wanted to investigate how making someone feel average might affect his or her subsequent behavior. To do so, we asked our subjects to fill out a personality test. We then gave them bogus feedback—half the participants were told they had very pronounced individual traits, at the same time

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the other half learned that their personality was simply normal.

Next we asked them how they felt about a debate regarding dining cars on trains. To test whether the personality test results altered their desire to stand out in the crowd, we showed them a chart that claimed that either 79 or 21 percent of respondents believed that dining cars should be dropped from German Federal Railway trains.

As we discovered, the subjects who had been told they were average were much more likely to opt for the minority opinion. In contrast, those who had been told they had notably unique traits tended

to agree with the majority. We interpreted this as meaning that the people who had been led to believe they were unremarkable had felt that their individuality was threatened and thus offered a dissenting opinion as a way to differentiate themselves. People will express their individuality even in something as mundane as a debate on German dining cars.

The realization that the desire to both fit in and stick out can drive decision making has not been lost on retailers and product designers. People who wish to be seen as tough, for example, are more likely to sport a leather jacket. To come across as shrewd in business, a person might acquire a cus-

tom-tailored suit. These behaviors may seem commonsense, but the underlying motivation is to signal an individual's inner self to the outer world.

To understand how this need motivates consumer behavior, consider a study published in 2012 by graduate student Cindy Chan of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and her colleagues. They examined how purchasing decisions reflect a person's attempts to juggle identifying with a social group and maintaining individuality.

Chan and her co-workers suspected that consumers satisfy their competing motives on different dimensions of a given product. To test this idea, the

researchers recruited college students who belonged to one of their university's eating clubs. Similar to fraternities, the eating clubs differ in their social identities, with one club attracting athletes, another drawing science and engineering students, and so on. The researchers took pictures of participants from three clubs and blurred the images so only the clothing remained visible. The students also filled out a questionnaire to measure their need for uniqueness.

Then a group of students drawn from those same three clubs viewed the photographs and guessed the subject's club. They also rated the

FROM CONTRETEMPS TO CREATIVITY

FOR SOME PEOPLE,
HARDSHIP CAN
TRIGGER CREATIVE
GROWTH

By Scott Barry Kaufman

"I paint in order not to cry," artist Paul Klee once remarked. The artist suffered from an autoimmune disease, which crippled his hands and made it difficult for him to even hold a pen. Yet he painted obsessively. His turmoil seemed to release an outpouring of creative energy.

Systematic research has shown that many eminent creators—think of Frida Kahlo, the Brontë sisters or Stephen Hawking—endured harsh early life experiences, such as social rejection, parental loss or disability. A growing field of research, called post-traumatic growth, now seeks to unveil why adversity and ingenuity sometimes go hand in hand and why some people blossom more than others in the wake of trying times.

In a study published in 2013, psychologist Marie Forgeard of the University of Pennsylvania tackled these questions by asking a sample of adult partici-

pants to recall the single most stressful event they had experienced during their life. Most participants described a traumatic occurrence that happened either to them or to a loved one, such as going through a natural disaster, an accident, physical or sexual assault, illness or the loss of a loved one. Participants also completed measures of their involvement in creative endeavors.

The subjects tended to report that their most traumatic experiences motivated them to engage in creative behavior in a wide range of domains, including the arts and business, as well as within their relationships. This heightened motivation to pursue creative activities—also called creative growth—predicted a more general tendency to perceive new opportunities in life after the stressful circumstances. Commenting on these results, Forgeard noted that "going through adversity may enable individuals to see the world, and their role in it, in a different way."

Yet not everyone can wring lemonade out of life's lemons. Forgeard observed that people who are high in one particular personality trait, "openness to experience," are more likely to report creative growth following trauma. Those who have this trait enjoy exploring their rich inner landscape of emotions, ideas, daydreams and fantasies. They also often possess two other attributes: they tend to be more unconventional

than others and to have a higher need for uniqueness. In other words, individuals who are open to experiences are more likely to find themselves in unconventional and challenging situations and to construct meaning out of them—even when these experiences are not chosen but imposed, as with adverse circumstances.

Sharon Kim, an assistant professor at the business school of Johns Hopkins University, and her colleagues probed one aspect of this correlation in a 2012 study. They examined whether a need for uniqueness might fuel creativity in the wake of social rejection, a kind of adverse event. After assessing their participants' need for uniqueness, the researchers told some of their subjects that they were not selected to be in a certain group, and therefore they had to complete a set of tasks alone. The remaining individuals were told that they would join their group after finishing those same tasks.

Everyone then worked through a test of creative thinking that involved seeing an uncommon connection between words. For example, they might be asked to find the word connecting "fish," "mine" and "rush."* The researchers found that participants who experienced social rejection during the experiment performed better on the creativity test than those who felt included in the group. Consistent with Forgeard's findings,

those who were already high in a need for uniqueness displayed the largest improvements.

The real question, of course, is why adverse events—whether in the form of social exclusion or a personal tragedy—can induce creative behaviors. According to a theory by psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman of the University of Mas-

sachusetts Amherst, trauma shatters prior assumptions about the world and oneself. Thus, an adverse life event might not be strictly necessary to prompt creative growth. Maybe any experience that shakes up our prior beliefs will do the trick.

Psychologist Simone Ritter of Radboud University Nijmegen in the Nether-

lands and her colleagues explored this possibility in a study published in 2012. The team had some of the participants enter a virtual-reality world that violated the laws of physics. For instance, as people walked toward a suitcase lying on a table, the size of the suitcase decreased, and as they walked away, its size increased. Trippy! A second group merely watched a movie of those unexpected occurrences.

The researchers found that those who experienced the weird events in virtual reality displayed greater flexibility on a test of creative cognition than those who merely watched the film. They hypothesize that any unusual and unexpected event—whether it is the death of a parent or a semester abroad—can facilitate cognitive flexibility.

This is good news for anyone who wishes to increase his or her creativity without having to experience trauma. Flip the script of your ordinary routine. Butter your toast with your hands. Smile at everyone who passes by. Moonwalk on your way to school. With your brain snapped out of its ordinary awareness, you will be in a better frame of mind to create.

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*The answer is "gold."



THINKSTOCK (lightbulb); ISTOCKPHOTO (woman)

These dancers from the Philippines might appear outlandish, but they are in fact signaling group membership by participating in a local festival to honor birds.



uniqueness of that person's look as compared with others in his or her club.

As it turned out, the observers were good at their jobs. They were highly accurate when identifying a subject's club from his or her clothing in the photographs. They likewise guessed correctly which students had higher or lower needs for uniqueness. The finding suggests two things: that our taste in clothing broadcasts our identity to the people around us and that we can signal group

membership and uniqueness simultaneously through choices of clothing.

But these results do not yet tell us *how* a person's choices can accomplish these two goals. Thus, in a set of follow-up experiments, Chan and her collaborators manipulated whether a participant felt like he or she was an insider or an outsider. They did so by asking their subjects to write about a group that they either did or did not feel a part of, such as an athletic team, a fraternity or a student council. As before, they also measured their participants' need for uniqueness.

Then they examined the participants' purchasing preferences. Similar to the setup of the German dining car experiment, these researchers showed subjects a set of products, revealed the preference of the group they had described, and asked them what they would choose. But the decision scenarios were multidimensional. For example, participants might choose not only between a BMW and a Mercedes but also between colors or models of the respective brands.

Those who had been made to feel like outsiders did not reveal any preferences. After all, they were not motivated to try to either join or reject the social group they had been thinking about. The participants who felt like insiders, however, were significantly more likely to select the brand that their group had opted for. They successfully com-

municated their membership in that social circle.

But the insiders who ranked higher in the need for uniqueness did not follow the majority all the way. The desire to separate oneself from the herd exerted its influence not in the brand but at the level of the product, through the choice of a model or color. People do not simply assimilate or differentiate—they can do both simultaneously along different dimensions of a decision.

A Matter of Culture

Not only do individuals differ from one another in their need for uniqueness, entire cultures do as well. The most striking, well-supported divide between the cultures of the world is that of individualism versus collectivism. Individualist cultures emphasize personal freedom and reward achievements that make a person stand out. The U.S., the U.K. and the Netherlands are prime examples.

Collectivism emphasizes community cohesiveness. These cultures—think Pakistan, Nigeria and Peru, as well as many countries in Asia—encourage members to strive toward shared goals. In a collectivist society, uniqueness has negative connotations, akin to deviance, whereas conformity is linked with harmony. It is a small step to translate these differing cultural priorities into divergent needs for uniqueness. In a study that compared the need for uniqueness of Malaysians and Americans, for example, researchers found considerably lower scores among the former.

In one 1999 experiment that explored the effects of cultural attitudes toward uniqueness, psychologists Heejung Kim, now at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Hazel Rose Markus of Stanford University, recruited Americans and East Asians from the waiting areas at San Francisco International Airport. To disguise the true purpose of the study, the participants were asked fill out a short survey in exchange for a free pen. On completion, the experimenter reached into a bag and pulled out five green or orange pens such that one or two of the pens were always a different color from the rest. Which color a person selected was the real test. As it turned out, Americans opted for the more rare choice. They chose a pen of the minority color three times out of four, whereas only one in four East Asians chose the less common color.

Given the pronounced effect they saw, Kim and Markus wondered whether advertisers emphasize cultural themes in their efforts to entice buyers. In a survey of almost 300 advertisements, they found that Korean ads were twice as likely to highlight conformity than uniqueness, and American adver-

tisers more commonly underscored how a product makes someone stand out.

If a need for uniqueness is linked with creativity, then a culture's orientation toward individualism could enhance that society's overall innovativeness. At the same time, the every-man-for-himself mentality that accompanies individualism could undercut a culture's ability to capitalize on its inventive thinking. Aligning a team's members toward a common goal—an easy task in a collectivist group—might be significantly harder to achieve.

Contemporary Western society can sometimes seem to take uniqueness to its logical extreme—people pursue personal goals, advance individual interests and strive for independence from others.

To investigate this question, economists Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gérard Roland of U.C. Berkeley compared data across countries and found strong positive correlations between a country's individualism and its measures of innovation. They also noted in their study, published in 2010, that increasing individualism enhanced a country's standard of living considerably. Thus, an increase in individualism of one standard deviation—say, from Venezuela to Greece or Brazil to Luxembourg—was linked with a 60 to 87 percent increase in income. This trend suggests that, one way or another, countries of independent thinkers find a way to rally others to bring their ideas to life.

Contemporary Western society can sometimes seem to take uniqueness to its logical extreme: people pursue personal goals, advance individual careers and strive for independence from others. Yet it is important to remember that humans evolved as a group-living species. Over the course of evolution human adaptations have been such that a person is unlikely to survive without the aid of others. Shared resources, mutual protection and division of labor are all major advantages of belonging to a group.

It is clear that two opposing forces are at work in shaping a person's identity—a need for uniqueness and a desire to assimilate. For any one of us, the identity we settle on satisfies both constraints. But keep this in mind as you go through the rest of your day: it is only by standing out that a person can be outstanding. **M**

FURTHER READING

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