Tensed toward the collective: A Simondonian perspective on human experience in context

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Abstract
In this article, we use Gilbert Simondon’s work on psychic and collective individuation in order to develop a process theoretical framework for studying human experience in context. We argue that experience—rather than being conceptually understood as coextensive with the processual becoming of an individual human being. We further develop this by taking into account two complementary trajectories of becoming: psychic individuation and collective individuation. We will show how this can help us to understand the situatedness and collectivity of human experience.

Keywords
collective, experience, individuation, process theory, Simondon

In this article, we use Gilbert Simondon’s work on psychic and collective individuation as a conceptual point of vantage in order to develop a process theoretical framework for studying human experience in context. We argue that experience—rather than being conceptualised as a property of a psychic apparatus (cognition, information processing, or the like)—should be conceptually understood as coextensive with the processual becoming of an individual human being. This is what Simondon (2007) calls psychic individuation. In order to present our proposal for a Simondonian approach to experience in context, we take the following argumentative steps: first we present Simondon’s theory...
of individuation, focusing on the concepts of the preindividual and psychic individuation. We then elaborate how this framework applies to the problem of experience as the mode of operation of individuation specific to human beings.

When developing the theory of psychic individuation in Simondon, it will become clear that psychic individuation cannot, by itself, account for social life and collective experience. Simondon argues that psychic individuation does not encompass being human in all its complexity. Rather, human life unfolds between two complementary trajectories of becoming: psychic individuation and collective individuation. In the third section, we consequently expand on our reading of Simondon in order to account for the situatedness and collectivity of human experience.

Throughout the article, it is our aim to develop a theoretical framework for studying situated experience in psychology. We think that Simondon bridges the gap between psychological theorising on an individual level and a transindividual perspective focusing on social practice and collective experience. At the same time, he does not lose sight of the constitutive difference between “experience” as the basic unit of psychological research and collective life as it presents itself to sociology, and other disciplines. In this sense, Simondon is also an important source of inspiration for a transdisciplinary psychology (Stenner, 2017). Last but not least, we hope that this paper might serve as a general introduction to the work of Simondon for psychologists not yet familiar with his ideas and that it will help foster interest in further exploring Simondon for the discipline.

Situating Simondon: The problem of experience in context

The ideas we present in this article converge with recent developments in the way theoretical psychologists think about how we are experientially relating to the world around us. Scholars from different theoretical traditions and fields of research have come to challenge the cognitivist tenet that experience is basically information processing, a faculty situated within a mind that itself is separated from the world and can thus only come in contact with what lies beyond itself by means of mental representations (Thrift, 2008). Alternative approaches to experience that are eschewing the Cartesian dualism of cognitive psychology have come from different theoretical backgrounds, putting different aspects of psychosocial life at the centre of attention (see McGann et al., 2013; Pouw & de Jong, 2015). Despite their differences, these approaches converge in the idea that

The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002, pp. 499–500)

What Merleau-Ponty drives at here is the idea that experience emerges out of a relational nexus between a subject and the world, where neither element of the relation precedes the relation itself. Thus, experience (or what is often called the realm of mentality, cognition, etc.) cannot be conceptualised as an a priori faculty situated within an already constituted individual, but has to be understood as an emergent property that already presupposes the relational interface between subject and world. However, the theoretical challenge has been to understand how relational experience actually unfolds and what concepts might help us come to terms with this.
From one side, enactivist theories of experience (Froese & Di Paolo, 2011; Thompson, 2007; Torrance, 2005, 2007; Ward et al., 2017) have been emphasising the role of the practical engagement of an actor with the world as fundamental to experience. How we relate to the world (as well as to ourselves as part of it)—both passive-perceptively (Noë, 2004) and actively (Weichold, 2018)—is thus founded in a primordial engagement with the world (McGann et al., 2013, p. 203). The enactivist perspective thus emphasises the dynamic, auto-poietic self-organisation of an organism relative to its environment (Di Paolo, 2005). By way of emerging first and foremost from the practical engagement with the world, experience as enactivists view it is not a detached and primarily reflexive–theoretical enterprise of extracting and synthesising information, but is fundamentally embodied, localised in the whole body as it interacts with what goes on around (Hanna & Maiese, 2009; Hutto & Myin, 2013; Varela et al., 2016). Further expanding the enactivist and embodied take on experience, scholars have also begun to focus the embedded (or situated) nature of experience (Pouw & De Jong, 2015). In this context, it has been highlighted that the auto-poietic process of embodied self-organisation is itself not detachable from the features of the situational environment with which the organism is engaged (Thompson & Varela, 2001). Drawing from Gibson’s (1986) ecological psychology, the embedded approach focuses on affordances—environmental structures that incite certain ways of perceiving, feeling, and responding—and their role in the dynamic self-actualisation of the organism (Da Rold, 2018). It was not least in this context that the role of the specifically social situatedness of experience has become a central concern for the enactivist project (Di Paolo, 2009; Maiese, 2019; Weichold, 2016).

Another important contribution came from scholars who—based on the enactivist and embodiment arguments—started questioning the usefulness of the distinction between experience and context (environment, situation, “world,” etc.) altogether. Extended cognition approaches focus on instances where properties traditionally assigned to the subjective side of experience, with mentality or—broadly—with the psychic, are externalised (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Froese & Fuchs, 2012; Menary, 2010). Proponents of this approach have been arguing that—at least under certain circumstances—it is warranted to extend the concept of experience beyond the confines of the individual brain (or body in the sense of the embodiment perspective). Some have referred to examples such as technological enhancements of experiential (and motoric) capabilities, like using a notebook in order to compensate for impairment of basic memory functions. Over the years, the enactivist, embodiment, situated, and (sometimes) extended approaches to experience in context have converged into a theoretical framework (Etzelmüller et al., 2017; Thompson, 2007). Nevertheless, there are considerable conceptual tensions and ambiguities within this thought collective that are the topic of ongoing and controversial debates (Maiese, 2018).

**Turning to Simondon: Emergent experience and processes of becoming**

In this article, we are not dealing with these controversies directly but rather address the underlying problem of experience in context from a different angle. To that aim, we build on the work of Gilbert Simondon. Simondon was a French psychologist and philosopher
who studied under George Canguilhem and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and gained his doctoral degree in 1958. While the supplementary thesis, “Du mode d’existence des objets techniques” (“On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects”; Simondon, 1958), was immediately published and was widely recognised as an important contribution to the philosophy of technology, the first part of Simondon’s (1964/1995) main thesis, “L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et de l’information” (“Individuation in Light of the Notions of Form and Information”), only got published in 1964 (Simondon, 1964/in press) and did not receive quite the recognition as his writings on technology. Though Simondon was elected to the chair of psychology at the Sorbonne in 1963, his theoretical influence was most profoundly felt beyond the disciplinary boundaries of academic psychology. A continuing volume of his work on individuation was not published until 1989, the year in which Simondon died. Only recently has Simondon’s work been rediscovered—often through the work of Deleuze, Massumi, Stiegler, and others (De Boever, Murray, & Roffe, 2012; De Boever, Murray, Roffe, & Woodward, 2012a, 2012b). The year 2020 is finally seeing the first English translation of Simondon’s “L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et de l’information” (Simondon, 1964/in press).

In his work on psychic and collective individuation, Simondon (2007) was interested in the emergent relation between an organism and its environment. There he touched on many of the themes and concerns that drive the research agenda outlined in the previous section, albeit from a unique perspective. For Simondon, the central problem was to understand the process by which a particular individual emerges relative to their associated milieu—its ontogenesis (Simondon, 2009). Regarding his own theoretical background, Simondon can be included in a lineage that also features names like Bergson, Whitehead, and his contemporary Deleuze (Bowden, 2012; Halewood, 2005; Roffe & Jones, 2009; Stenner, 2008). With regard to the topic of this paper, this lineage can be characterised as follows: perhaps the most important point is that these thinkers part with the idea of a “presence of (static) entities as foundational cornerstones” (Nichterlein, 2018b, pp. 8–9) of scientific discovery, instead focusing on the process through which such entities come into being in the first place. With reference to experience, this process theoretical point of vantage is expressed by Whitehead (1927–1928/1985) in “the statement that experience involves a becoming, that becoming means that something becomes, and that what becomes involves repetition transformed into novel immediacy” (pp. 136–137). In other words, process theory is built on the assumption that becoming precedes individual being, but that becoming itself can only be adequately understood as the becoming of something (the individual being). Therefore, becoming—the operation of the creative forces of life in potentiality—is not beyond (or in opposition to) structure, identity, and being, but has to be theorised as the immanent principle of everything that comes to be. What these authors aim to explain then is not primarily being as static and unchangeable matter of fact but the emergence of difference and the transformative potential of becoming other. This focus on creativity and the emergence of the novel is not to be misinterpreted as obliviousness to the normative and structurally repressive dimension of—for instance—social experience (Deleuze, 1992). Rather, it is about a radical shift in the way subjectivity and experience are approached as “a temporal effect of immanent processes of emergence and organization,” state Duff and Price-Robertson.
We are dealing with “a processual subject, an emergent effect of an imminent ‘field’ of pre-personal . . . affects, relations, forces, signs and events” (p. 98). What Duff and Price-Robertson express here is a shift from an essentialist ontology (privileging the position of the experiencing subject a priori to any situated instance of experience) toward a relational ontology (Del Lucchese, 2009). By prioritising processes of becoming over the matter-of-factness of things, these thinkers part with the substantialising idea of an autonomous agent of experience (the subject) in favour of placing the experiencing subject within a context of experience. The aim then is to explain the coconstitution (Slunecko, 2008) of subjective experience and its environment. And finally, by foregoing the idea that experience is the property of an already constituted cognitive apparatus, mentality, or simply the brain, these thinkers have rejected the idea that experience is best understood as reflexive and rational information processing. Instead, they found the relational becoming of experience in a relation of concern (Stenner, 2008, p. 92), that is, a prereflexive, affective mode of encountering the world (Massumi, 1995). Within a process theoretical account of relational coconstitution of experience, “the activity of feeling is not the ‘actual’ as fixed, finite, receding form, but the process of actualisation whereby potentials are concretely realized” (Stenner, 2017, p. 213).

To sum up, Simondon’s work can be situated within a philosophical lineage that prioritises processual becoming over static being, relational coconstitution over essentialist conceptualisations of subject/object, and affective potentiality (and creative differentiation) over structure (lawful sameness). In this article, we will not be able to deal specifically with Simondon’s position regarding these matters (but for general introductions to Simondon’s work in context, see Combes, 2013; De Boever et al., 2012; Scott, 2014). There are close similarities and conceptual overlaps between the theoretical lineage that Simondon comes from and an enactivist perspective on situated experience outlined in the first section of this article. These similarities have been brought to the forefront most prominently in the context of what has been labelled the affective turn in the social sciences (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Leys, 2011; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995; Wetherell, 2015). A key figure here is Massumi (1995; see also De Boever et al., 2012), who has introduced a concept of affect derived from the tradition of Spinoza and Deleuze to social scientific research (Deleuze, 1988; Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019; Spinoza, 2002; Stenner, 2017; Yovel, 1999).

What makes Simondon particularly compelling at the intersection between these converging theoretical lineages, and especially from a psychological perspective, is the fact that his theory of psychic and collective individuation accounts specifically for the processual emergence of human individuality. While there has been a tendency recently to de-emphasise the psychological focus on the individual in favour of more large-scale practices of subject formation (see, for an overview of the field, Slaby & von Scheve, 2019), Simondon does not only forgo the distinction between the genesis of macrolevel social practices and the process of concretisation of individual experience—rather, he aims at integrating both as moments of a general theory of ontogenesis. Therefore, we think that Simondon can help us to articulate a distinctly psychological perspective on experience in context, while also acknowledging in full the implications from the converging enactivist and process theoretical traditions outlined thus far.
Becoming individual: Simondon on processes of individuation

In order to understand Gilbert Simondon’s concern, we need to consider the general scope and ambition of his work first. We have already pointed out key features of Simondon’s philosophical lineage. Within this broader philosophical context, Simondon was concerned with the genesis of “individuality” or individual being (Simondon, 2007). To him, individuality is the always preliminary and never fully achievable result of a process of individuation. Following a process theoretical, relational approach, Simondon criticises traditional theoretical positions for trying to explain the process of individuation based on its outcome, that is, the already constituted individual (Simondon, 2009, pp. 4–5). Rather than trying to back trace the process of genesis by which this individual came into being, thus risking substantialising the individual in its presumed full concreteness, Simondon wants to understand individuation as an open process of (trans-)formation. He thereby breaks with the presupposition that what is there in front of us is the inevitable outcome of a teleological development (Simondon, 2009). Importantly, this goes along with the understanding that the creative forces driving individuation are not limited to what ultimately ends up manifesting. There is always an excess of creative potentiality that transcends the manifestation of a concrete individual being and adds to its specific timbre. Studying ontogenesis in its full scope always has to consider this excess and cannot stop at the prima facie facticity of being as individuated.

The shift in perspective from the outcome of individuation to its source and processual unfolding leaves Simondon with the question of what this ominous point of origin of individuation might be. If one does not assume from the outset that individuation “creates” or “evolves into” this individual being by some inevitable progression, then becoming individual must originate from a state of being prior to individual being. At the same time,

> In order to grasp firmly the nature of individuation, we must consider the being not as a substance, or matter, or form, but as a tautly extended and supersaturated system, which exists at a higher level than the unit itself, which is not sufficient unto itself and cannot be adequately conceptualized according to the principle of the excluded middle. (Simondon, 1992, p. 301)

By rejecting the notions of “substance,” “matter,” and “form,” Simondon emphasises that individuation does not originate from an ontological unity that precedes the becoming individual. Contrarily, the notion of a “supersaturated system” captures that being prior to individuation is an overdetermined state, capable of a multiplicity of becomings. However, these potential trajectories do not cancel each other out—as would be required by the principle of the excluded middle—but constitute a being sui generis. Simondon’s term for this mode of being is the preindividual. The central idea here is that the preindividual emerges from the juxtaposition of different “orders of magnitude” (Barthélemy, 2012, pp. 219–220), one exceeding the level of individual being, one remaining beyond it. It holds the potential for a multiplicity of becomings, yet in such a way that it is indeterminable a priori which one of them might come to actualise. In order to avoid the misunderstanding that the preindividual is merely an abstract background construction.
based on an already manifest individual being, Simondon also uses the expression preindividual reality, thus emphasising that preindividuality is in fact a real (lived, felt, experienced) state of the living, albeit one that could be more aptly described as a problematic of the living. In this regard, Simondon shares a line of thinking with Bergson and Deleuze (Nichterlein, 2018a; Nichterlein & Morss, 2016), insofar as the preindividual can be understood as Simondon’s version of a vitalistic concept of life as creative force, or as potentiality on the verge of actualisation (Nichterlein, 2019). However—and this is the crucial twist in Simondon—the inherently tensed and conflicted dynamic of a preindividual situation means that the living is urged beyond this deeply ambiguous state and towards concretisation through individuation. Simondon rejects versions of vitalism that hypostasise the creative forces of life as opposite to everything that is structure, fixation, order, and so forth, as if the solution to the inherent problem of the living were to free the creative powers of life from that which holds and represses them (Massumi, 1995; Stenner, 2017). In contrast, Simondon points out that the reality of the preindividual is at the same time a lived state characterised by heightened sensitivity, affectivity, and dynamic potentiality, but also a state of unbearable tension, conflict, and ambiguity. Later in this article, we elaborate in more detail that this pressure-cooker situation of preindividual reality is exactly where Simondon situates the affective dynamics of anxiety—an anxiety that urges the living being to “turn” toward the collective. Simondon borrows from thermodynamics when defining preindividual reality as metastable (Barthélémy, 2012, p. 217; Combes, 2013, pp. 3–4; Simondon, 2007, pp. 14–16). An energetic system is in a state of metastability when it is in a heightened state of tension, its inherent forces pulling the system in multiple directions at the same time. It is a system on the verge of actualisation, as its inherent dynamic conflict has reached a tipping point. Consequently, individuation can be conceptualised as the process by which the tension inherent in a metastable system is (temporarily) resolved:

Individuation must therefore be thought of as a partial and relative resolution manifested in a system that contains latent potentials and harbors a certain incompatibility with itself, an incompatibility due at once to forces in tension as well as to the impossibility of interaction between terms of extremely disparate dimensions. (Simondon, 1992, p. 300)

For Simondon, the resolution to the inherent incompatibility that characterises the preindividual in human beings can only be achieved through what he calls psychic individuation. Picking up on the distinction between life as vital force (potentiality or the virtual, to borrow a term from Massumi, 2005) and lived experience as the emergence of structured patterns in the relation of an organism to self and world, Simondon argues that the two aspects of the living should not be seen as strict opposites, but as two moments of the process of becoming individual. Thus, individuation does not—strictly speaking—resolve the preindividual tension, but rather transforms its energetic potential in a novel relational configuration of the living being.

There is a double meaning of the term relation at play here. The first is expressed in Simondon’s statement that the vital forces of becoming can never be ultimately fixated through individuation. Something of the preindividual is carried on throughout each cycle of individuation (Simondon, 2007, p. 18):
The process of individuation does not exhaust everything that came before (the preindividual), and that a metastable regime is not only maintained by the individual, but is actually borne by it, to such an extent that the finally constituted individual carries with it a certain inheritance associated with its preindividual reality, one animated by all the potentials that characterize it. (Simondon, 1992, p. 306)

Therefore, in one sense, individuation unfolds into a novel relation between two modes of being (preindividual and individual), in this sense rearticulating and transposing the initial tension into a new configuration. At the same time—this is the second meaning of relational—what comes of individuation is a novel relation between the living organism and its environment, its milieu, as Simondon (1992, p. 300) puts it. To unfold this argument, let us return to the concept of different orders of magnitude involved in the characterisation of preindividual reality. The process of individuation is thus situated at the intersection between a broader problematic of the living (referring to the broader context in which the organism finds itself) and a particular problem of living (think for instance of a task, an obstacle to overcome, etc.). Whatever the circumstances, the problematic of living always relates to something that transcends the organism as well as to something that does not exhaust its capacities. In a sense, one can say that life is the site of a polarity (or relation) between these distant orders of magnitude. The problematic of living then comes down to incorporating the polarity such that the living being bears its inherent tension rather than being torn apart by it. With reference to the notion of a relation between orders of magnitude, psychic individuation then is the process through which the polarity is incorporated as elements of an internal organisation of the organism (Simondon, 2007, p. 17).

Moments of experience: Perception, affect, action

Up to this point, we have for the most part been using the terms living being and organism when referring to human beings in the process of becoming individual. This has been justified thus far, as Simondon develops the notions of preindividual reality and individuation as principal moments of the ontogenesis of living beings in general. In this regard, the difference between human beings and organisms like, say, plants or vegetables, is not one of substance. Rather, it is defined in terms of quantitative differences (with regard to the problematic of incompatible orders of magnitude) and modes of resolution. Thus, ontogenesis in the (specifically human) mode of psychic and collective individuation is preceded by (and continuously complemented by) biophysical individuations (Simondon, 1964). The specific problematic of becoming human has to be explained through an analysis of how individuation works in this case. This is the point at which we encounter the central problem of this article: the problem of experience in context.

In order to get to this crucial aspect of Simondon’s theory of individuation, let us return to preindividual reality once again. As we pointed out at the end of the last section, one way to understand the problematic situation of the preindividual is by referring to a polarity between distant orders of magnitude that need to become incorporated as elements of the organisation of an organism. Without going too deep into the philosophical
intricacies of the matter (Combes, 2013, pp. 1–24; De Boever et al., 2012b; Scott, 2014), the crucial point is that psychic individuation is basically the (temporary) resolution of preindividual tensions (conflicting impulses, distant orders of magnitude) through establishing an experiential polarity of an (sensitive, emotive, and mobile) individual oriented toward its associated milieu. In this sense, Simondon can say that “in the living being, individuation is brought about by the individual itself, and is not simply a functioning object that results from an individuation previously accomplished” (1992, p. 305). However, this is not to be misinterpreted as a backdoor to a renewed substantialism of an agency that is driving individuation. Instead of speaking of interiority it might be better to use the expression interiorising, which refers to a perpetuated liminal process in which there is ultimately always more at play than what the becoming individual is able to incorporate:

The psyche represents the continuing effort of individuation in a being that has to resolve its own problematic through its own involvement as an element of the problem by taking action as a subject. The subject can be thought of as the unity of the being when it is thought of as a living individual, and as a being that represents its activity to itself in the world both as an element and a dimension of the world. Problems that concern living beings are not just confined to their own sphere: only by means of an unending series of successive individuations, which ensure that ever-more preindividual reality is brought into play and incorporated into the relation with the milieu, can we endow living beings with an open-ended axiomatic. (Simondon, 1992, pp. 306–307)

This concept of a processual interiorising situated at the threshold of a “plurality of orders of magnitude” (Simondon, 1992, p. 307), thus unfolding from an (impossible) position of eccentricity, brings with it important implications for a psychological theory of human experience. First, as we have already stated, experience cannot be conceptualised with reference to an already individuated psychic apparatus and its various capacities. Experience is precisely the process of interiorising through which the polarised relation between a realm of the psychic and a milieu toward which psyche is oriented is brought into being in the first place. In this sense, experience is the act of becoming (psychic) individual. The analysis of its modes and properties has to proceed with reference to this processual activity (and not—as we have discussed in the introduction to Simondon—to the outcome of the activity). At the same time, in order to understand the full scope of human experience, one cannot contain this activity within an individual entity separate from its environment as the dynamics of the experiential relation are—by definition—preindividual, thus always “more than one” (Combes, 2013, p. 3), larger in scope than the individual itself. Here we find a point of correspondence with the fundamental tenet of enactivist conceptions of experience (Torrance, 2005, 2007). What Simondon allows us to see is that the whole situational arrangement is at the same time the emergent result of a process and that this process itself perpetuates the problematic of the liminal intersection between exteriority and interiority. Consequently, it is not enough to state that experience is the process by which an individual actualises through its embodied and situated interaction with the environment. Rather, we have to understand how the broader problematic of the preindividual is reinscribed in a realm
of interiority (Simondon, 2007, p. 17). Thus, we have to understand the modes of the experiential relation with reference to the concepts of the preindividual and individuation. In *L’individuation psychique et collective* (Simondon, 2007), Simondon addresses this task with regard to perception, affectivity, and action. In particular, he uses the analysis of perception as a “starting point and anchor for his approach to the problem of individuation” (Scott, 2014, p. 45). It is with regard to the problem of perception that the shift in perspective that the theory of individuation wants to achieve becomes most tangible. The important point here is that perception is not an act by which an already-constituted subject takes notice of the world out there. Rather, “perception individuates by establishing a differential bipolar and intensive field” (Scott, 2014, p. 45). For Simondon, “the genesis of the subject and object operate on the same plane of individuation” (Scott, 2014, p. 51). Again, starting the operation from preindividual reality, which already places the subject within a wider problematic of life, perception is no longer about bringing together two distinct entities, but about a coemergent relation. Within this relation, perception is about a reciprocal enacted orientation connecting the experiencing subject and its associated milieu. In this article, we cannot give an account of Simondon’s prolonged and intense dealing with the problematic of perception, from its prominent status in *L’individuation psychique et collective* (Simondon, 2007) to his courses on perception (Simondon, 1964–65/2006), but refer readers to Scott’s (2014, pp. 45–93) discussion of the matter. Briefly, we want to point toward the similarity between the way Simondon introduces the problematic of perception and the prominent status of this topic in Paul Stenner’s Whitehead-inspired approach (Stenner, 2017). As we argue in the conclusion to this paper, further exploring the convergences between these theoretical projects will be an interesting endeavour for future research.

Regarding the topic of this article—developing a theoretical psychological perspective on the problem of experience in context—we have now reached a point where we have come to articulate the problematic of experience as one of psychic individuation. With Simondon we argue that experience is to be conceptualised as the processual resolution of a certain preindividual problematic. By shifting the focus from the constitution of a realm of the psychic to the problematic, which precedes the process of constitution, we see that individuation already presupposes a relational situation that is much wider in scope than what is usually considered to fall under the psychological domain. This relational situation simultaneously involves the becoming of an (experiencing) individual with its particular mode of encountering the world and at the same time the becoming of a certain milieu corresponding to the experiencing individual. This idea of a dual process of ontogenesis already holds the key to Simondon’s theory of collectivity and collective individuation. In order to address this aspect in the following section of this paper, however, we need to take one more step and deal with the role of affectivity in the process of individuation.

**Turning toward the collective: The psycho-social pathway**

So far, we have seen that psychic reality is to be characterised first and foremost by a state of tension, which already implies intense affective charges at play. And indeed, for Simondon, affect is key when it comes to understanding how preindividual potentiality
manifests as experience. We have seen that something of the preindividual problematic persists throughout each cycle of individuation, so that the individual can never become fully individuated. Rather, the individual always bears something of this initial tension at each level of concretisation. This is why, for Simondon, the precarious “state” of being individual is always but a phase in the process of individuation, charged with a surplus of potential energy which ultimately drives beyond what is.

But what does this mean for experience? At the beginning of the second section of this article, we pointed out that the persistence of preindividual potentials throughout the processes of individuation “can take the form of an unbearable invasion within the subject experiencing it” (Combes, 2013, p. 32). Again, this emphasises the affective dynamics at play in this situation. By speaking of an “invasion,” Combes gives us another important clue: for Simondon, the affective experience of the preindividual is crucially incited by the realisation that the individual can never be a self-sufficient entity. It is always “more-than-individual life” (Combes, 2013, p. 31). Simondon develops this notion of a constitutive “more-than” in two (interrelated) directions. The first is the relation individual/preindividual, that is, the relation between actualisation and all that is not (yet) actualised in a certain phase of becoming. The second aspect, or the “more-than,” brings us back to a point we briefly touched upon earlier: for Simondon, individuation is never a solipsistic process, but is situated at the intersection between what in more traditional terminology would be called “self” and “world.” Thus, individuation brings forth not only an individual entity (however supersaturated with potential), but a relation between individual and associated milieu. In this sense, individuation is always the becoming of an individual and at the same time the becoming of an environment relative to this individual. The experiential problematic of human beings (the unbearable invasion of which Combes speaks) has to be understood with both aspects of this “more-than” in mind. However, at a crucial point in L’individuation psychique et collective (Simondon, 2007, pp. 111–114), Simondon discusses the case of an individual trying to become truly individual by enclosing itself against all that goes beyond itself.

There, Simondon criticises the way Heidegger interpreted anxiety as a fundamental mode of disclosing our being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1993, pp. 339–346). In Simondon’s reading, anxiety arises not from the realisation of a being’s openness toward its ultimate possibility (being toward death). Quite contrarily, anxiety refers to the experience of a being attempting to become individual solely on its own terms. Therefore, what the affect of anxiety reveals is the constitutive futility of any attempt at dealing with the problematic of individuation intra-individually—the scope and scene of individuation already is beyond what an individual can grasp (Simondon, 2007, pp. 111–112). For Simondon, the individualistic attempt must lead to a paralysed and depressed state, experientially closed off from others as well as from one’s own immanent potentials. This point certainly is highly relevant for psychological and phenomenological research regarding certain psychopathologies like melancholic depression (see, for instance, Fuchs, 2010).

In showing—through his analysis of anxiety—how the solipsistic resolution of the problematic of human life is bound to fail, Simondon is able to present a different theoretical trajectory for coming to terms with the relational problematic of individuation. In light of its incompatibility with itself, the living being is “tensed toward the collective”
It is thus urged to inscribe its own problematic in a wider, transindividual process. Simondon argues that psychic individuation—becoming through lived experience—must be complemented by a collective individuation. It is important to stress that, for Simondon, psychic and collective individuation are not ontologically separate dynamics but rather one process viewed from two angles. However, there is a certain autonomy to psychic and collective processes of individuation. Both are intertwined and incite and provoke one another, still they operate on different levels of magnitude and upon different preindividual problematics. We think that this idea of multiple yet intertwined processes of individuation is important in order to get a clear understanding of the interplay between processes and practices on a collective level and the coconstitutive relation of an individual to the collective.

Depending on whether one addresses the situation through the lens of collective practices or individual experience, the articulation of preindividual problematics as well as the processual resolution of these problematics will differ. Together and through their continuous interplay, they bring forth what Simondon calls transindividual:

The two individualizations, psychic and collective, have a reciprocal effect on each other; they allow us to define a transindividual category that might account for the systematic unity of internal individuation (psychic) and external individuation (collective). The psychosocial world of the transindividual . . . requires that one postulate the previous influence of a veritable process of individuation rooted in a preindividual reality, associated with individuals and capable of constituting a new problematic with its own metastability. (1992, p. 307)

From a psychological perspective, the primary goal is to understand how a preindividual being turns collective in the attempt to come to terms with the “unbearable invasion” of what precedes it. It accomplishes this by unfolding a relational orientation toward its associated milieu, thus becoming collective individual.

Conclusion: Open questions and directions for further research

We have been proposing Simondon’s process theoretical framework for studying human experience through psychic and collective individuation. We have argued that experience should be understood as the processual resolution of a tension, which involves the polarity between different orders of magnitude in the living. This situates experience in the context of a vitalistic theoretical project in the tradition of Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, and others. At the same time, there are conceptual points of convergence with certain concepts and ideas coming from an enactivist, embodied, and situated take on cognition, action, and affectivity. To conclude this article, we present a few ideas for how to expand further on this theoretical project. As each of these trajectories would require a separate paper, we limit ourselves to listing them as hints and hope to be able to follow up on them in the future.

Recently, Paul Stenner (2017) has presented his own take on a process theoretical theory of experience based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead (1927–1928/1985). Stenner discusses the way in which Whitehead addresses the problem of perception and
sense-making. There is more than one theoretical link between Whitehead and Simondon and it will be interesting to see how the two approaches intersect but also challenge each other.

In a similar vein, Stenner (2017) is putting affectivity at the centre of his investigation of experience, especially in the context of his work on liminality (Stenner et al., 2017). His argumentation closely resembles the way Simondon links affectivity to the persistence of a certain metastability within each phase of an organism’s internal organisation. In this sense, affect as the experience of unresolved preindividual energy could be another way of approaching the experiential dimension of what Stenner and others (Stenner, 2017, Szakolczai, 2009, 2017; Thomassen, 2014) have been calling permanent liminality.

One last point regarding the work of Paul Stenner. An aspect, which we have been foregoing in this article, is the role of language and signification in processes of individuation. To incorporate such a perspective, it could be particularly worth exploring the relation between Simondon’s concept of signification and Stenner’s usage of the Bergsonian notion of fabulation as a starting point for a process theoretical conception of the psychology of signification (Stenner, 2017).

In light of the ongoing project of investigating social practices and structures through affectivity (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019), Simondon’s theory of a dual process of individuation that revolves around the polarity between psychic and collective individuation converging in a transindividual relation might be further developed in the direction of a distinctly psychological theory of psychosocial affect. This might open up psychological theorising (and empirical research) to inter- and transdisciplinary exchange with the current developments in the social scientific study of affect in context. In this direction, we find Tucker’s (2018) recent paper an interesting point of reference.

Moreover, we attempt to expand Simondon’s theory of affectivity in order to better understand the role that different notions of affective experience, as they are currently in use in psychological discourse, might assume within a theory of individuating experience. As we argue in another article (Wrbouschek & Slunecko, 2020), Simondon is helpful for expanding recent theoretical approaches to situated affectivity in the enactivist tradition (Colombetti, 2014, 2017a, 2017b; Colombetti & Thompson, 2008). However, and this seems to be very important for psychologists interested in working with Simondon, such a project will need to clarify how different affective experiences relate to Simondon’s preindividual and transindividual realities. To give just one example: (cognitive) psychologists and phenomenologists sometimes distinguish between different affective experiences with regard to the way they are bodily felt as well as with regard to their specific intentionality (see, for instance, Frijda 1993; Fuchs, 2013; Lambie & Marcel, 2002). Simondon’s claim that the persistence of preindividual reality throughout the process(es) of individuation is manifested experientially through affect then raises the question: Does this apply to all varieties of affective experience? And if so: How can differences between appraisal-like emotional responses (Scherer et al., 2001), moods (Breidenbach & Docherty, 2019), and presumably even more fundamental existential feelings (Ratcliffe, 2005) be conceptualised?

There is still much to be discovered in Simondon, just as his theoretical work is being rediscovered (Simondon, 1964/in press) and becoming more widely recognised.
Especially for psychological research, we consider Simondon an important and valuable source of inspiration and we hope that this article will help further the process of adoption of his process theory within the discipline.

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Notes
1. Here “world” does not refer to a static objective reality spread out for inspection by an otherwise enclosed mind. Rather, world here refers to what phenomenologists would call an intentional relatum of experience. In this sense, the shift in perspective we are advocating for is already inherent to the concept of world that we employ. Throughout this article, unless specified otherwise, we will refer to world in this sense.

2. The notion “orders of magnitude” is among the most complex in the work of Simondon. One way to explain this is with reference to problems of agency. The singular act by an individual can thus be construed as relating on the one hand to a specific set of affordances (the task at hand), which clearly does not exhaust the full potential agency of the individual. At the same time, the act relates to a context of practices and broader affordance systems (the tasks potentially performed in a situation like this—for instance in the context of contemporary capitalist division of labour) that exceeds the capacity of this one individual. Within this dual relational structure, the singular act is always a specific resolution of the tension between these two orders of magnitude and it is clear that the single act can never exhaust all the potential ways of resolving this tension.

3. Yet another way to express this would be to say that experience is the operation of folding exteriority onto itself thereby creating a space of internal resonance. By using the metaphor of the fold, the specific correspondence between Simondon and Deleuze (Deleuze, 1993, 1999, pp. 78–101) would be brought out even more clearly, however, a closer examination would go well beyond the scope of this paper (but see Bowden, 2012; Toscano, 2009; Tucker, 2018).

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