

We and us

The power of the third for the first-person plural

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1. Introduction

Phenomenological discussions of sociality have long been concerned with the relations between the *I*, the *You*, and the *We*. If we are to understand what it means to experience something as *ours*, rather than simply *mine*, or what the normative and affective implications are of social identities and group membership, then our analysis must reach beyond the first-person singular to the first-person plural. To these ends, both classical and contemporary phenomenologists have demonstrated the crucial importance of second-person engagement, reciprocal empathy, and communication (Husserl 1973; Carr 1986; Schutz 1972; Szanto 2016; Zahavi 2019, 2021). Recently, these phenomenological discussions have also engaged with the analytic philosophical work on collective intentionality and social ontology, resulting in a corpus of literature oriented around the first-person plural 'we' (Gilbert 1992; Schmid 2009, 2018; Tuomela 2013; Bratman 2014). In this paper, I do not contend these accounts of the 'we'. Instead, I argue that they are not exhaustive of first-person plural experiences *as such*. Following Jean-Paul Sartre, I argue for a phenomenological distinction between an experience of being part of a 'we' compared to an experience of being part of an 'us'. To have a 'we-experience' there must be a plurality of (unified) subjects sharing in an experience together such that the experience has the phenomenal character of being *ours*. An 'us-experience', on the other hand, presupposes the experiential salience of an external 'Third' in a way which is constitutively significant. I take the constitutive significance of the Third from Sartrean existential phenomenology and social ontology – particularly inspired by his discussions of the

'us-object' (1978[1943]) and 'the series' (2004[1960]) – and develop it in light of contemporary discussions of social identities, such as race and gender.

To argue for a phenomenological distinction between 'we' and 'us' may at first seem unmotivated, perhaps even puzzling. The following discussion is not concerned with mere language use, but rather aims to examine how pronouns "offer us a *prima facie* sense of what is involved in taking up a particular standpoint ... [as pronouns] are not simply grammatical categories but correspond to specific lived experiences, each with a certain phenomenology" (Pawlett-Jackson 2020, p. 78). Sartre – albeit whilst recognising the doubtful nature of deriving theoretical insights from grammar (Sartre 1978, p. 413) – describes how the objectual 'us' must be distinguished from the nominative 'we'.ⁱ In other words, how we should draw a distinction within the first-person plural between the experience of being part of a group-object compared to a group-subject (Sartre 2004, p. 519). Sartre's distinction between the nominative 'we' and objectual 'us' provides an important conceptual framework for considering the importance of power, positionality, and historical group relations for phenomenological discussions of sociality; particularly those aimed at theorising experiences of the first-person plural. By theorising us-experiences, we can better make sense of first-person plural experiences which are spatially dispersed, in tension with one's self-conception, and involve relations of power and conferrals of identities.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the section two, I draw on dominant philosophical accounts of the first-person plural to outline an uncontroversial, albeit general, understanding of what constitutes a we-experience. I then argue that the objectual form of the first-person plural – the 'us' – has been omitted from these discussions, and this has resulted in the constitutive role of the external Third being underappreciated. This leads me, in section three, to elaborate on three ways in which experiences of being part of an 'us' (us-experiences) are experiences of the first-person plural sufficiently distinct from what is typically considered a we-experience. I argue that the 'us' is distinct from the 'we' on three levels, all of which pertain to the constitutive role of the external Third. These are: (3.1) the necessarily triadic structure of the us, (3.2) the need for only first-personal apprehension rather than recognition, and (3.3) the different affective tendencies found in 'us-' and 'we-experiences'. In section four, I turn my attention to various experiences of the 'us'. Here, I draw on Sartrean social ontology to argue that an us-experience results either from a 'grouping action' or as an experience of one's serial relatedness to others. I conclude by reflecting on the implications my account has for further philosophical engagement with the first-person plural.

2. *Conditions for a first-person plural experience*

Most anglophonic discussions of the first-person plural are centred around the 'we', with the 'us' occasionally being spoken of in terms of a 'sense of us' or an experience having a character of 'for-us-ness' (Carr 1986; Taipale 2019; Zahavi 2019; Crone 2021; Salmela 2022). The distinction between these two forms of the first-person plural is rarely thematised as anything but semantic, meaning the 'we' is often taken to encompass first-person plural experiences *as such*. A first-person plural experience involves experiencing oneself as being part of a wider plurality, to such an extent that the subject is no longer experiencing something as a singular 'I'.

Many discussions of the first-person plural limit the scope of their analysis to collective experiences in the here and now of the face-to-face (Gilbert 1990; Crone 2021) or rather focus on collective or shared *emotive* experiences (Szanto 2015; Salmela 2012; 2022). By introducing the 'us' as experientially distinct from the 'we', my aim is to theorise experiences of the first-person plural which are often considered tendentious (Gilbert 1992), not genuine (Zahavi 2021), or less robust (León 2021), but which nonetheless have a phenomenal character of being plurally *ours* rather than singularly *mine*. To avoid ambiguity, I use the terms 'collective', 'plurality', and 'group' almost interchangeably. With each term I presuppose a degree of unification which is experientially salient for at least one of its members.

This leads me to the first criterion, namely, that the first-person plural only makes sense to speak of from within (Zahavi 2015, 2019). We are not concerned with identifying members of groups or collectives from the 'outside', as in from objective features, group markings, or external criteria. Instead, we are interested in how these groups are subjectively experienced by their members. Only someone who experiences themselves as being part of a plurality can sensibly speak of an 'us' or a 'we'. Secondly, in what is termed the "plurality requirement" (Zahavi 2021), the first-person plural must refer to a plurality of subjects. It makes little sense to speak of a first-person plural experience which has its basis in a singular egoic I; there must be some form of veridical demand such that what is felt to be a phenomenal we-, or us-experience *most likely* also coincides with reality.

Yet there must still be something more for the experience to take on the quality of being *our* experience rather merely *mine* or *yours*. With only the above two criteria, someone could interpret their experience as 'our' experience despite this interpretation being based on evidently

false assumptions. What more is required is something which unifies the subjects, such that one has sufficient reason to speak of the experience as more than just *mine*. Depending on how this unification is achieved, the first-person plural experience can vary greatly in intensity; from the joint attention between strangers, to the sharedness between intimate partners, and the collective experience of an audience of football fans.

Depending on which account one endorses, an agent can adopt a 'we-perspective' (Crone 2021), undergo a 'we-experience' (Zahavi 2015), relate to the world in the 'we-mode' (Tuomela 2013), or perform a 'we-intention', relative to how the above criteria are satisfied. What is common to most accounts is that a 'we-experience' involves second-person engagement (Zahavi 2019), plural subjecthood (Schmid 2009, 2018), feelings of togetherness (Salmela 2022), joint commitments (Gilbert 1992), or substantive elements such as shared norms, values, or emotions. These features are characteristic of first-person plurality due in large part to the theoretical pre-occupation with experiences of shared emotions, actions, and commitments, rather than collective experiences of more spatially and temporally dispersed identity formations. However, there are limitations to orienting the theoretical discussion – in phenomenology, social ontology, and analytic philosophy of action – around dyadic face-to-face we-experiences.

Lucia Angelino makes the point that "without shifting the theoretical focus from the You to the Third" (Angelino 2021, p. 186) it is difficult to make sense of more complex, polyadic, and spatio-temporally dispersed we-formations. In response to this lacuna, Angelino has introduced Sartre's figure of the Third into contemporary discussions of the 'we'. Another restriction, as I make clear in what follows, is that the focus on I-you relations between the plurality's constituent members also fails to take into account the constitutive significance of that which stands outside this 'we'. In response to this second lacuna, and with the aim of contributing to and further developing Angelino's line of inquiry, I also draw on Sartre's social ontology but with the distinct aim of demonstrating the role of the *external* Third in effecting *us*-experiences.ⁱⁱ I argue that *us*-experiences correspond to a dimension of first-person plurality which does not hinge on second-person engagement,ⁱⁱⁱ feelings of togetherness, joint commitments, nor even plural subjecthood.

In what follows, I demonstrate how the 'us' is the objectual form of the first-person plural, meaning, the (often abrupt) experience of having one's relatedness to others, or membership to a group, made the object of another's experience or having it established as an objective fact (Sartre 1978, p. 419). Rather than comparing *us*-experiences to Sartre's own

account of the 'we',^{iv} I compare a Sartrean 'us' to what is generally accepted as constitutive of we-experiences in both phenomenology and analytic philosophy of action.

3. 'We' are not always 'us'

3.1 - Dyadic and triadic foundations

The first aspect of the 'us' which distinguishes it from the 'we' is that the 'us' is *necessarily* triadic in structure. For the 'we' it can be sufficient that one experiences oneself as part of a dyad standing only in relation to each other. To experience oneself as part of an 'us' it is necessary that one's us-ness arises *because of* a collective relation to an external Third. The Third I refer to here is taken from Sartre and can manifest in the (presumed or actual) presence of a third subject, or a material reality which functions as a third (quasi-)social agent (De Warren 2017, p. 49). Thus, in us-experiences, in addition to experiencing oneself in relation to at least one internal other, the plurality must also experience itself in relation to a third *external* element.

Many we-experiences are undoubtedly also mediated by a Third, sometimes with the Third becoming experientially salient. If a colleague and I are interviewing a candidate for a job opening, our experience stands in relation to, and is mediated by, a third external element outside our dyad. It has also been argued that to properly make sense of certain complex and polyadic we-formations the Third also plays a crucial role (Angelino 2021, 2022). Yet even in ternary we-formations, the Third plays a mediating role as an *internal* agent. In us-experiences not only is the Third external, but what further differentiates the 'us' from the 'we' is that the external Third must be *experientially salient* for an us-experience to emerge.

An us-perspective involves a subject within the 'us' and an agent *outside* the 'us' being mutually aware of a common object. Furthermore, the common object is the plurality to which the Third constitutes the internal subject to be a member of. As Catalano describes:

For example, for the most part, an African American man is viewed as part of the African American community, regardless of where he lives. In this case, the 'white' community is the 'third', a third that mediates his solidarity with other African Americans wherever they live. The same is true of women as seen by men or homosexuals as seen by heterosexuals. Without such mediations, the unions would not exist; indeed, outside a particular social structure, such labels would not exist. (Catalano 2010, pp. 82-83)

In line with the above, I will not limit the scope of the us-perspective to instances in which the Third manifests as an embodied subject one encounters face-to-face, rather, I also examine how the Third manifests in "particular social structure[s]". These two forms of the Third have been termed in German social philosophy, respectively, as *der/die Dritte* and *das Dritte* (Bedorf 2003; Fischer 2022). In what follows, I argue that us-experiences can be effected in face-to-face encounters with an out-group subject (4.1), as well as us-experiences which are more structural and spatially unbound (4.2).

Before discussing the varieties of us-experiences, let me briefly illustrate how the external Third gives rise to us-experiences once it becomes experientially salient. If we are taking a walk together and having an intimate conversation, the presence of other people may mediate the way we interact such that our we-experience prereflectively takes on a character of secrecy and we adopt hushed tones. Yet, so long as this mediating role of the Third is unthematic and we primarily experience our walking conversation as a dyadic interaction which stands independently of the people around us, this second-personal encounter remains a we-experience. If, however, we suddenly become aware of an eavesdropper nearby who we apprehend as being interested in our conversation, what was previously a we-experience may abruptly become an us-experience. This happens when one experiences oneself as being objectified as constituting a 'them' in the eyes of the Third. Our actions are no longer simply mediated by the Third – as is the case in many we-experiences – but we now experience ourselves *through* the Third *for whom* we exist in plurality. The mediation becomes experientially salient to such an extent that we experience ourselves as the object of their experience, and in turn, our 'us-ness' becomes the object of our own experience.

3.2 - *The role of recognition*

As noted above, the "plurality requirement" has been widely accepted as it makes little sense to speak of experiencing oneself as part of a 'we' if your first-person perspective is not shared by at least one other (Carr 1986; Zahavi 2019, 2021). It is the first-person *plural* after all. Moreover, unlike mere group membership, considering oneself to be part of a 'we' must entail some sense of subjective affiliation (Abrams & Hogg 1990 as cited in Zahavi 2019; Gilbert 1992, p. 205, p. 424). It would be strange to speak of *our* experience if you do not recognise yourself as being part of a plural 'we'. One can draw a distinction, as Gilbert does, between a "full-blooded we" and a "tendentious we" to elaborate on how recognition is necessary but not necessarily reciprocated (Gilbert 1992). In a full-blooded we, there must be

reciprocal recognition between its members such that you are justified in positing that the other members of the first-person plural share in your interpretation of the situation. In the tendentious we, it is sufficient for an individual agent to posit that others belong to their 'we', and this positing can be accepted (at which point it becomes a full-blooded we), rejected (at which point the 'we' most likely dissolves into an 'I'), or it can remain tendentious if neither recognition nor rejection occur. Second-person engagement and local reciprocity is thus fundamental for explaining the relations between the 'I' and the 'we'.

For an us-experience, neither the full-blooded reciprocal recognition of each other's membership, nor a subject's self-recognition of their membership are *necessary*. For a subject to experience themselves as part of an 'us', they must merely *apprehend* that they are constituted, by the Third, as being part of a plurality. In this sense, and as illustrated above, we can understand the 'us', unlike the 'we', as correlating in many instances to the third-person plural 'they'.^v A we-experience can occur irrespective of whether one's plurality is correspondingly experienced as a 'them' for an external agent. Our experience of taking a walk together does not depend on us also being experienced as "they-who-walk-together". The 'us', on the other hand, presupposes that the plurality also exists as an objectified whole *for* the Third.

There are two important and interrelated implications that follow from the 'us' not requiring any form of recognition from within. First, the 'us' accommodates discrepancies between both the first- and third-person, and first- and second-person perspectives. Second, and resulting from this, the 'us' refers to a first-person plural experience which can be experienced by a single subject. Let us take these in turn.

Firstly, us-experiences merely require that a subject apprehends and understands a collective representation (or stereotype) of themselves and other similarly positioned agents, rather than for the external construction to also be subjectively endorsed and recognised. Even if you may not consider yourself to be a member of the plurality, the look of the Third can only be made sense of once you apprehend that you exist as a member of a larger entitative whole *for them* (Sartre 1978, p. 418). One's membership to a group, when formulated by others and understood by the subject themselves, can often be interiorised before being then "re-exterioirised into stereotyped actions" (Sartre 2004, p. 574). It is not necessary to accept the objectifying look of the Third and hold it of oneself. It is sufficient to simply understand that

the Third constructs you in a particular way for this construction to thereby modify how you participate in the social world.^{vi}

A perhaps more puzzling (and controversial) consequence of the Third being so constitutively significant is that it permits discordance between the first- and second-person perspectives. In the example of being eavesdropped on, I may undergo the abrupt experience of being constituted as a 'they-as-object' for the eavesdropper (Sartre 1978, p. 418). Even if my friend remains oblivious to the eavesdropper, instead enjoying the ontological ease of the isolated 'we', their unaffectedness from the Third does not preclude my experience becoming phenomenally *our* us-experience. So long as I remain unaware of the discordance of the second-person perspective, and I assume that the correlate and character of this experience is shared by at least one other member of the plurality, then I experience being *collectively* alienated by the look of the Third. Thus, there is a sense in which the 'plurality requirement' for either form of the first-person plural differs in its demands. Whereas we-experiences presuppose a veridical sharedness between subjects *within* the plurality, for us-experiences, the plurality which comes under the heading of 'us' can be experienced by only one member of the 'us', so long as they have correctly apprehended that they constitute a corollary 'them' for the Third. Unlike we-experiences which foreground second-person engagement, in us-experiences it is not the *recognition* from the first-personal *I* nor the second-personal *You* which is constitutively necessary, but rather an apprehension that for the third-personal *Them*, I am a member of a group.

3.3 - *Affective tendencies*

A third and final way in which us-experiences are qualitatively distinct from we-experiences is in how they tend to be affectively valenced. This distinction is a difference of tendency rather than of necessity but is nevertheless worth spelling out. Experiences of being a member of a 'we' usually consist of an affectively salient identification (Taipale 2019) which is often described as entailing a sense of, or feelings of, togetherness (Walther 1923; Thonhauser 2018; Salmela 2022), at-home-ness (Schutz 1976), belonging (Zahavi 2019; Osler 2022), and preserving intragroup differentiation. Of course, being part of a 'we' is not always positively valenced. A 'we' can refer to two people fighting each other, or the 'we' of one's workgroup may be filled with resentment and disdain. Compared to us-experiences, however, these negatively valenced we-experiences are surely less frequent. We-experiences usually

arise out of purposive self-identification, an active enjoining with others, or from a sense of belonging in terms of community or kinship. Even when it requires a kind of 'self-alienation' as outlined by Dan Zahavi (2019), this is not a self-alienation which entails estrangement (Salmela 2022). Experiencing oneself through the eyes of the other is part of the process of adopting a kind of "social self-identity" (Zahavi 2019). The introduction of 'self-' to Zahavi's discussion of social identity is a useful way of emphasising that we-experiences pertain to social identity only when subjectively self-identified. When us-experiences pertain to social identities, however, the self-alienation can indeed entail estrangement as the social identity imposed by the external Third need not be reflectively endorsed.

Us-experiences are in many ways heteronomous. They arise from externally imposed identifications, passively being grouped by others, and often entail negatively-valenced alienation as one's us-ness is felt in tension with one's self-understanding. Even if the 'us' one experiences membership to is conducive to one's self-narrative, negative alienation is simply *more likely* than in instances of we-experiences. This is because membership to an 'us' can amount to mere cognitive, rather than affective identification, meaning you experience yourself as little more than an interchangeable unit of an objective whole. Unification is then derived from an external force without necessitating any internal organic common bond between the members of the 'us' (Rae 2011, p. 97). Again, I claim here that this is only a *tendency* of affect rather than a fixed characteristic. Us-experiences can be enjoyed, eliciting a sense of belonging, togetherness, or positive intergroup – but not intragroup – differentiation. If I experience myself through the eyes of the Third as belonging to the group of professors whom I am walking with through campus, I may relish in how this us-experience confers a sense of distinguished authority or equal standing onto me which I otherwise do not experience. Such positively valenced experiences of being part of an 'us', however, are less likely.

Moreover, once an us-experience begins to foster a sense of active or purposive togetherness then it has likely already transformed into a 'we'. This is because as soon as a group begins to coordinate its actions and communicate with one another as group members, the constitutive force of the Third dwindles. The experience of collective us-ness can never be the aim of collective action, nor is it ever explicitly formulated unless first derived from the Third (Sartre 2004, p. 574). This means although us-experiences may in some regard be parasitic on prior we-experiences, many we-experiences also emerge out of a prior sense of us-ness.^{vii}

Unlike the self-alienation (Zahavi 2019) and depersonalisation (Hogg 2004) which is required for adopting a we-perspective, the alienation and depersonalisation involved in adopting an us-perspective does not originate from the egoic I. As outlined above, an us-experience often involves being passively depersonalised and objectified in the eyes of the Third. Thus, there is no necessary link between being part of an 'us' and feeling a sense of positive commonality (Améry 2021, p. 22). Typically, us-experiences entail feelings of impotence, alienation, and interchangeability (Young 1994) as one is abruptly pulled out of one's being-for-oneself, and what becomes salient is one's being-objects-in-common and one's being-for-others (Sartre 1978, pp. 418-422). Because an us-experience has an external agent as its thematic focus (2.1) and does not require first-personal uptake or recognition (2.2), experiences of us-ness are far more likely than we-experiences to be accompanied by feelings of alienation and estrangement.

4 Varieties of 'us'

4.1 - The 'us' of the grouping action

I now outline more concretely two ways in which us-experiences manifest. I experience myself as part of an 'us' either (1) as a result of being grouped, or (2) as a consequence of my "seriality" becoming thematic in experience (Sartre 2004). Let us begin with the former. I take a grouping action to be one function of 'the look' as found in *Being and Nothingness*, namely, how the look can effect a collective experience of being-objects-in-common (Sartre 1978, p. 415). Grouping actions need not be enacted in the ocular gaze of the other but can manifest in their mediated presence, such as in the distant windows of a house, the rustling of branches, the sound of approaching footsteps (Sartre 1978, pp. 257-261) or in a security camera pointed at you. Important for understanding how the look groups agents into a collective object is understanding how it provokes you to experience your us-ness with others as an objectively established fact (Sartre 1978, pp. 415-419). The other's look confronts us with a self-awareness that we are, for them, a group-object. As Angelino notes, I abruptly "now pre-reflectively and nonthematically recognise myself as forming a unity ... I discover the 'Us', in whom I am integrated *outside*, in the look of a third person" (Angelino 2021, p. 189). Instead of experiencing the kind of organic common bond which is characteristic of the 'we' (Rae 2011), we instead become unified by the external force of the Third who constitutes us under the heading of 'them'.

For Sartre, an 'us' can arise in the most banal and commonplace encounters.^{viii} Given my aim to maintain a meaningful distinction between us- and we-experiences, when I speak of a grouping action, I refer to an experience of being-looked-at where you apprehend the external Third as another (present, probable, or represented) subject *for whom* you are constituted as part of a 'they-as-object' with others (Sartre 1978, p. 418). Contra Sartre, it is insufficient to simply be looked at; the look must also be understood as communicating to you that you are being constituted as a member of a wider plurality. The member of the 'us' must "apprehend his condition and that of other members of this collectivity as looked-at and thought about by consciousnesses which escape him." (Sartre 1978, p. 421). On my account there must be a first-personal motivation to believe that the Third is constituting you as a *unified* 'them'. I thus share, to some extent, Hans Bernhard Schmid's worry that Sartre's external Third in *Being and Nothingness* is granted an unlimited capacity to effect experiences of us-ness (Schmid 2009, pp. 174-176). There is a sense in which a grouping action "reveals" or "discovers" a (perceived) latent 'us' rather than spontaneously creating it (Schmid 2009, p. 176). Two strangers evidently foreign to one another engaged in non-reciprocal (or even coordinated) action seems to be insufficient motivation to believe that the Third groups them into a collective object.

Typically, the most experientially salient experiences of us-ness arise amid face-to-face encounters. In such instances, the Third is almost always the embodied presence of another subject, but we can also imagine a grouping action resulting from the mere probability or representation of a Third being present. In other words, the Third can manifest in either the unmediated or mediated presence of another subject. The former refers to grouping actions which occur within face-to-face encounters with another embodied subject, the latter captures those us-experiences which are elicited from the projected, presumed, represented, or expected presence of another subject. This means that us-experiences are not limited to the here and now of the face-to-face, but can also be repeated, pervasive, and contingent on structural arrangements. *Prima facie*, it may be assumed that grouping actions enacted by a real, present other elicit a far more profound and alienating us-experience, and thus a distinction must be drawn between the mediated or unmediated presence of the Third. I do not take this to be (necessarily) the case. In fact, what seems to matter the most with regard to degrees of intensity is not how the Third manifests, but rather the context within which the grouping action occurs.

An important category of grouping actions which can be both mediated and unmediated, is the grouping together, or experience of being grouped, according to social identity. In her study of race and gender in *Space Invaders*, Nirmal Puwar examines how

different spaces are oriented around different bodies, and the embodied effects this has for those subjects who experience themselves as incongruous to the space they inhabit (Puwar 2004). One of Puwar's main focuses is on the British parliamentary space of Westminster. A member of parliament (MP) Puwar interviews recounts:

The great problem for Black and Asian MPs is the mainstream press, who never see us as anything but Black and Asian MPs ... We are so worried about what *The Sun* is going to print about us, and so you know weighing up every word we use on race issues. (Puwar 2004, p. 67)

Based on their perceived racial identity, non-white members of British parliament undergo an institutionalised super-surveillance. They are marked as 'other', and rather than being recognised simply as MPs, they are instead entitatively grouped together as "Black and Asian MPs". The MPs Puwar interviewed are thus thematically aware of themselves as being-objects-in-common for the British media. *The Sun* newspaper, functioning as the Third, represents the presence of another subject – or subjects – *for whom* the Black and Asian MPs constitute an objectified whole.^{ix}

This institutionalised interpellation is collectively apprehended, and these MPs reflectively alter the content of what they say and how they present themselves because of this (Puwar 2004, pp. 67-68). As Sartre writes, "it is for them that I exist in a situation organized with others and that my possibles as dead-possibles are strictly equivalent with the possibles of others" (Sartre 1978, p. 421). No matter their heterogeneity, subjects grouped under the heading of "them", are homogenised, and this homogenisation is felt.^x Each agent experiences themselves as an anonymous and interchangeable unit of a larger homogenous whole (Schutz 1972, 1976). Regardless of their first-personal sense of togetherness and belonging (or lack thereof), these MPs are led to experience a collectively alienating us-ness.^{xi}

The discussion above is widely supported by many philosophical and social psychological discussions of social identity. When speaking of social identity, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes "every identity makes it possible, that is, for you to speak as an 'I' among some 'us': to belong to some 'we'" (Appiah 2019, p. 9). This captures an important way social identity facilitates us-experiences. Social identities involve being situated among other people occupying similar social locations but without this necessarily entailing a subjectively endorsed and positively valenced sense of *belonging* which the 'we' typically entails. The 'us'

is often about experiencing oneself *qua* a culturally and historically instituted identity. This, however, is not always the case.

Oftentimes, us-experiences are singular, ephemeral, and not parasitic on any structure of social identity. This means that although wider discussions of social identity provide a framework for better understanding the importance of many us-experiences, these same discussions fail to thematise and reflect on the phenomena of innumerable other grouping actions. For example, you sneak into an empty room at your workplace with a love affair and you are suddenly apprehended by the Third. To further illustrate how the face-to-face presence of the Third does not always lead to more profound us-experiences, in one scenario we can imagine the Third to manifest in a security camera pointing at you, in another scenario, the Third is a close friend who walks through the door. In either case, you might abruptly experience yourselves as an objectual 'us' by virtue of the presence – supposed or real – of another subjectivity which now groups the two of you as "they-as-objects", or in this case as "they-as-promiscuous-lovers". If the friend already had knowledge of the affair, and the security tape would most likely be seen by many people in your workplace, then it seems fair to assume that the disembodied Third could elicit a far more abrupt and alienating us-experience. Of course, if the Third in either case does not become experientially salient, then the brief encounter – as in many we-experiences – unfolds irrespective of, and oblivious to, an externally imposed objectification. This means that it makes little sense to speak of it as an us-experience. Nevertheless, this type of grouping action captures a pervasive form of us-experience which cannot be thematised under the heading of social identity.

4.2 - The serialised 'us'

A more pervasive form of us-experience emerges in light of what Sartre calls "the perpetual Third" (Sartre 1978, p. 420) and "the series" (2004). Sartre speaks of the perpetual Third in the context of class consciousness, and how members of the oppressed class apprehend their collective condition as one which is structured *for* the oppressing class (Sartre 1978, pp. 420-422). Rather than the Third which manifests in the face-to-face encounter of the look (4.1), here we have an external Third which extends beyond one's immediate spatio-temporal location to the material world and its social structures (Flynn 1986, p. 95). For this reason, this second category of us-experiences can be spatially dispersed, temporally extended, and historically instituted.

'The series' is a form of collective being which is constitutively dependent on the practical field (Sartre 2004). The 'practical field' is here taken from Sartre's discussion of "the practico-inert field [which] surrounds and conditions us" (Sartre 2004, p. 324). This field concerns the humanmade structures of our material reality which constrain, mediate, and guide our behaviours and actions; from the transport we take, to the roles we adopt, institutions we rely on, and the collectives we form. In Sartre's favoured example of economic class, the proletariat stand in a serial relation to one another because of the objective characteristics of their labour, the forms of exploitation they collectively experience, and how they are similarly related to the local factory, authorities, and community (Sartre 2004, p. 326). This "seriality of class-beings" (Sartre 2004, p. 313) can sometimes entail a *serial us-ness* once it is collectively apprehended by its members.

An important development of Sartre's work on the series comes in the form of Iris Marion Young's work on *Gender as Seriality* (1994). In this paper, Young demonstrates how other social identities can elicit us-experiences due to their serialised structures. Young argues that:

As a series *woman* is the name of a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history ... Women are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by the activities surrounding those structures and objects. (Young 1994, p. 728)

Whereas the proletariat are related as a series in relation to the perpetual Third of their labour relations, subjects of a particular gender category experience seriality according to how the practical field positions, defines, and mediates their actions, beliefs, and desires. For Young, "woman" names the serial unity between individuals who are similarly constrained and enabled by their material environment. Depending on whether the surrounding social structures and objects position you as either feminine or masculine, you typically come to understand yourself as a member of the series of either 'woman' or 'man'.

Although Sartre favoured the example of the proletariat, his understanding of serial collectives [*collectif*] was seemingly anticipated by Simone de Beauvoir's work on gender and her conception of the collectivity [*collectivite*] (Beauvoir 1972[1949]; Kruks 2018). Beauvoir writes that collectivities consist of "similar individuals, located in similar conditions, [who] will grasp similar significations from what is given" (Beauvoir 1972, pp. 46-47). By drawing on the serialised existence of gendered subjects, Young elaborates on gender as a category

which functions as a background to identity without being contingent on naturalised objective characteristics. An important insight provided by Young's account is that one's membership to a series – which could also be that of race, class, and other collective structures – usually remains unthematic in experience unless this membership entails constraints. It therefore makes little sense to speak of an us-experience as *necessarily* resulting from one's seriality.

Without encountering constraints which arise by virtue of one's serialised social location, one's serial us-ness will in most cases not become experientially salient. In terms of gendered categories, it is not the case that women are more serially related to one another than men (Sartre 2004, p. 332; Young 1994). Men are correlatively positioned as masculine in relation to the practical field, but the way these socio-material structures modulate their social being often remains unthematic in experience. For women or trans people, on the other hand, the ways that your gendered being mediates your experience of the social world is most likely more salient both in terms of frequency and intensity due to structural constraints. Jean Améry also describes the moment he realised that the practical field of the National Socialist German state "had just made a Jew of me. Or rather, [it] had lent my preexisting knowledge of my Jewishness, which had previously been of little consequence, a whole new dimension." (Améry 2021, p. 11; cf. Sartre 1995, p. 145). Although is not constituted entirely by constraints, these constraints are constitutively significant for experiencing one's serial us-ness.

Another important feature of apprehending one's serial existence is that it often entails an experience of (negatively valenced) collective alienation or otherness (Young 1994, p. 726). This is because an experience of serial us-ness involves apprehending oneself as passively and unintentionally connected to others 'like me' (Kruks 1995, p. 14; Young 2002). Experiencing seriality is characterised by a feeling of collective impotence as one's plural experience depends on the actions of others and the structure of an external field (Sartre 1978, p. 419; 2004, p. 303; Catalano 1986, p. 157). For example, when the practical field is organised around a heteronormative gender binary, and people who deviate from this are vilified and marginalised, we can imagine how the experience of two transpeople having to use a gender-specific toilet may evoke a serial us-ness. Unlike two cis people who experience no collective constraints when going to the toilet together, the two transpeople may experience themselves as constituting an objectified whole *for* a perpetual Third. The Third need not manifest in the embodied presence of a subject but is present in the various constraints presented by the arrangement of the practical field; namely, of feeling fear and apprehension due to the systemic vilification of transpeople and the omnipresent threat of potential violence that follows from

this. The heteronormative arrangement of the practical field persistently causes 'deviant' subjects to experience a collectively alienating 'us-ness'.

By discussing serial us-ness as distinct from we-formations or we-experiences, we can understand how a 'we' often develops out of, and dissolves back into, an 'us'. In some instances of seriality, the members of the series lack any unity such that their experience is best characterised as one which remains in the first-person *singular* (Sartre 2004, pp. 369-370). Besides encounters with constraints, what may unify members of a series is an apprehension of how the practical field produces for them a *common* objective or exigency. Seriality, for Sartre, is thus in some sense "*a community which is already inscribed in things*, in the manner of a passive idea or a totalising destiny" (Sartre 2004, p. 368 original emphasis). This means that although serial flight may be experienced in disunified isolation, in practice it *tends* to effect an initial integration (Sartre 2004, p. 369). This integration often amounts to the dissolution of the series and the emergence of what Sartre calls a "fused group", at which point it makes more sense to speak of a 'we' than an 'us'. Thus, between first-person singular serial isolation (the *I*), and mutual reciprocity between group members (the *We*), we find the first-person plural *Us* which is unified negatively in collective alienation.

Apprehending one's seriality implies that what becomes experientially salient is the dependency and relation one has – collectively with other members of the series – to the Third of the practical field. It is by becoming aware of one's alienating us-ness that members of a series might enjoin in action and positively identify with other subjects who are similarly constrained by the practical field (Young 1994, p. 728; Kruks 1995, p. 17). Movements of resistance and activism, for example, attempt to unify around problems experienced in serial isolation for the purpose of then reversing the conditions which foster such constraints. This is a case of a we-formation emerging out of a serial us-ness. We also witness the dissolution of we-formations back into isolated seriality, as in cases when activist movements lose momentum to such a degree that the members' collective relation to the Third becomes once again unthematic.

In addition to the cases above, many experiences of serial us-ness arise because of a grouping action rather than through constraint alone (as in the bathroom example) or the revelation of a common exigency (as in activist movements). For example, as a white person my serial us-ness with other white people in the lecture hall may only become experientially salient for myself once the lecturer performs a grouping action and thematises that there is a disproportionate number of white bodies in the audience. This grouping action brings the serial

relatedness of me to other white people into focus and elicits an experience of serial us-ness. We can also easily imagine a grouping action which is much less explicit. Oftentimes, as Alcoff discusses, the mere occurrence of 'race talk' is enough for a perceptible discomfort to manifest in the white bodies in the audience, as eyes are suddenly lowered and participation in discussion decreases (Alcoff 2006, pp. 192-193). Sometimes the thematisation of a practical field organised around white supremacy and institutional racism is enough to constitute an (albeit indirect) grouping action. Yet it must be made clear that members of marginalised groups are far more likely to have their us-ness made salient by external social agents. For many non-white people occupying a white-coded space (which is often the spatial norm) (Puwar 2004), their serial us-ness is experientially salient without the need for *explicit* grouping actions.

In his study of colonialism, Albert Memmi speaks of "the mark of the plural" which entitles the colonised subject "only to drown in an anonymous collectivity" (Memmi 1991, p. 85). In Puwar's example of the non-white MPs, it is also not obvious that their us-experience is contingent on a grouping action. Rather, their collective experiences of various constraints and incongruities which arise by virtue of a *marked* membership is enough to throw them back on themselves and experience a kind of collective alienation. It is in this sense that we can understand the practical field to function as a perpetual Third. The various constraints that subjects experience by virtue of their marked memberships to oppressed groups are representative of the Third *for whom* these marginalised subjects drown in anonymous collectivity.

5. *Conclusion and looking ahead*

In this paper I have put pressure on the equating of we-experiences with experiences from a first-person plural perspective *as such*. I have achieved this by demonstrating that us-experiences are sufficiently distinct from we-experiences as us-experiences require the additional experiential salience and constitutive role of the external Third. I elaborated on how these two forms of the first-person plural are experientially distinct on three fronts, before outlining two varieties of us-experience: the experience of being grouped and the experience of one's seriality.^{xii} These two types of collective experience illuminate the benefit of seriously considering the constitutive role of the Third – especially as an external agent – for first-person plural experiences; namely, in how it helps us make sense of collective experiences which are spatially dispersed and involving relations of power and the conferral of identities.

In order to emphasise the varieties and nuances of us-experiences, I have omitted a discussion of Sartre's accounts of both the we-subject (1978) and the fused group (2004). For Sartre, these are the alternate forms of the first-person plural (Angelino 2021, 2022). Within this paper I have drawn on Sartrean social ontology to argue for a distinction between the 'us' and the 'we' irrespective of which account of the 'we' one endorses.^{xiii} Sartre presents us with another form of collective existence which, despite lacking the tight-knit interrelationships of we-formations, is nonetheless fundamental for sociality (Jameson 2004). I then expanded on Sartre's own account by discussing Young's argument for understanding gender, along with other social identities, as seriality. Following this, I illuminated the importance of relations of privilege and marginalisation when considering the intensity and frequency in which people experience certain types of first-person plurality. This social ontological consideration has been too-oft omitted from phenomenological discussions of the 'we' and still requires more attention than was possible within the confines of this paper.

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ⁱ Sartre speaks of the "*le nous-sujet*" and "*le nous-objet*", which in English is widely translated to "we-subject" and "us-object", or simply "we" and "us" since *nous* in French is used for both forms of the first-person plural (Sartre 1978, p. 414 n16; Catalano 1985, p. 189 n3). I therefore follow the earlier Hazel E. Barnes translation rather than the more recent translation from Sarah Richmond which brings both under the heading of the 'we'.

ⁱⁱ Angelino does follow Sartre in drawing a distinction between we- and us-experiences. The focus of her papers, however, is to precisely examine the role of the internal Third in the genesis of a *we-*, rather than an us-perspective (Angelino 2021, 2022).

ⁱⁱⁱ I do not contest that us-experiences are parasitic on prior experiences of second-person engagement.

^{iv} As Angelino warns, it would be mistaken to take Sartre's account of the 'we' in *Being and Nothingness* as definitive for his social ontology (Angelino 2021, p. 14 n. 9). Sartre himself claimed that the chapter dedicated to the 'we' "was particularly bad" and "failed" (Sartre 1981, p. 13). Many theorists that discuss Sartre's social ontology of groups, collectives, and plural action thus tend to focus on what is presented in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Flynn 1986; Kruks 1995; 2018; Rae 2011; De Warren 2017; Angelino 2021). Exceptions are: (Flynn 1981; Eriksen 1995; Rae 2009). Despite this, traces of Sartre's early account of the 'us-object' can be found throughout his later social ontology in his discussions of 'the series', the 'group-object', and the 'seriality-object' (Sartre 2004). As Thomas R. Flynn points out, both the us-object and the series entail a "community of equivalence", and it seems "the entire discussion of the series in the later work falls heir to the description of the Us-object in *Being and Nothingness*." (Flynn 1981, p. 347).

^v Or, as Sarah Pawlett-Jackson demonstrates, the second-person plural form of 'you' (Pawlett-Jackson 2020).

^{vi} See, for example, Jean Améry's description of his 'Jewishness' (Améry 2021, p. 82) and María Lugones' concept of "world-travelling" (Lugones 1987, p. 10).

^{vii} I elaborate on this in (4.2).

^{viii} "If I am walking in the street behind this man and see only his back, I have with him the minimum of technical and practical relations which can be conceived. Yet once the Third looks at *me*, looks at the road, looks at the Other, I am bound to the Other by the solidarity of the "Us." (Sartre 1978, p. 419).

^{ix} In this example, the Third also manifests in the real presence of embodied subjects as this institutionalised grouping action then informs how many other subjects perceive and group together these public figures.

^x This claim is also supported by social psychological literature which demonstrates how in-group members attribute a much higher degree of heterogeneity to the group they are a member of compared to the homogeneity they attribute to out-groups (Turner 1988).

^{xi} This us-ness can of course provide impetus to collectivise and enjoin in action such that the MPs reclaim agency over a more active and purposive collective identity which is more akin to a 'we'. The us-experience is also to some extent parasitic on a prior, broader we-formation of being MPs.

^{xii} It could be contested that my account of the 'us' cannot be understood irrespective of one's understanding of what a 'we' entails, as we could simply expand our concepts of we-experiences and we-perspectives to accommodate us-experiences. I have little problem with this contestation, but as I am yet to find a phenomenological account of the first-person plural which sufficiently expands the 'we' to accommodate such collective us-experiences, I deem the project of drawing an internal distinction within the first-person plural to be worthwhile.

^{xiii} That being said, I am in agreement with Angelino that Sartre's potential contributions to current phenomenological discussions surrounding the first-person plural ought to be taken more seriously, and that Sartre provides a compelling account of a Third-involving 'we' which has been relatively overlooked (Angelino 2021, n9; 2022, p. 91).