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THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE SELF

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■ **Abstract**   An emerging sociological approach to the self reflects new emphases on power, reflexivity, and social constructionism. The significance of power in shaping the self is central to a new scholarship associated with Foucault. This body of work offers an important corrective to traditional sociological orientations associated with Mead and symbolic interactionism. The principle of reflexivity is at the core of the Meadian tradition and provides a pragmatic foundation for understanding agency and political action missing from much of the new scholarship. The principle of social construction is common to both new and traditional sociological approaches to the self and guides most recent empirical analyses. Promising avenues of research are evident in work that explores the sociological context of self-construction, the social resources employed in the construction process, and the growing importance of non-human objects in self-construction. The limitation of scholarship that overemphasizes the psychological products of self-construction is also examined.

INTRODUCTION

> The emerging direction of contemporary social theory is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the attention it lavishes upon the nature of the self, self-identity, and individual subjectivity.
>
> Anthony Elliot (2001, p. 8)

The past two decades of the twentieth century saw the concepts of self and identity move to the center of intellectual debate in the social sciences and the humanities. This eruption of attention was spurred by burgeoning developments in poststructuralism, cultural studies, feminism, and queer theory. Yet it is also the case that sociological forces outside of the academy have contributed to a growing concern with selfhood. As the globalization processes of late capitalism continue to destabilize traditional practices and cultural assumptions, the self is exposed in various ways. We see, for example, an increasing individualization of social life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), a proliferation of roles (Frank & Meyer 2002), and the emergence of "identity projects" (Giddens 1991), where personal meaning and social location become a matter of effort and conscious "choice."

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This widespread concern with the self has lead to a new scholarship that is multidisciplinary, methodologically eclectic, and generally postmodern in orientation. There are, for example, significant new developments in both theory and research on the self occurring in anthropology, history, political science, communications, and literary studies. It is notable, however, that most of the new scholarship has not been influenced by symbolic interactionism, sociology's dominant theoretical approach to the self. Lemert made this point more generally in 1992 when he observed the following:

> Symbolic Interactionism, like pragmatism more generally, finds itself limited today by its weird irrelevance to the debate over the postmodern condition. SI with its decided interest in language and pragmatism, with its deep structural commitments to view knowledge as always close to workings of the world, would seem to be the natural kin to any postmodern theory. This has not however been the case.
>
> Charles Lemert (1992, p. ix)

Lemert is correct in noticing a surface similarity between pragmatism and postmodern theory. There is indeed a shared appreciation of the centrality of language and communication, a common problematizing of symbols and objectivity, and recognition of the socially contingent nature of identity. In the time since Lemert's assessment, some intellectual cross-fertilization has occurred (Denzin 1992), particularly around the concept of identity (Howard 2000, Cerulo 1997). Nevertheless, it is still generally true that within U.S. sociology, most research on the self remains the relatively localized disciplinary concern of those working in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (e.g, Gecas & Burke 1995, Gubrium & Holstein 2000, Burke et al. 2003).

There are certainly institutional and disciplinary reasons for this divide. Postmodernism, after all, has its origins outside of sociology in the fields of art, philosophy, and literary criticism. Yet the gulf between symbolic interactionism and postmodernism reflects more than intransigent academic boundaries. Epistemological differences and independent conceptual systems have also been fundamental barriers to mutual elaboration.

From a postmodernist stance, symbolic interactionism and the pragmatist tradition can be dismissed as mere vestiges of modernist thinking. Symbolic interactionism's commitment to Enlightenment values that privilege reason and rationality are in stark contrast to the postmodern break with the discourse of science. In fact, much of the postmodern scholarship assumes a radical anti-essentialism that rejects on philosophical grounds the very concept of self.

On the other hand, from the perspective of many symbolic interactionists, postmodernism offers little that is new or that has not already been said using an interactionist conceptual vocabulary. This is the position staked out by Maines (1996), who argues that postmodernism is simply a weak approximation of pragmatist thought and is therefore largely irrelevant to interactionist work. Moreover,

Maines (1996, p. 335) believes that any theoretical convergence is unlikely because a postmodernist interactionism could never be sustained because it would "deconstruct itself in terms of its own epistemological arguments."

Even though a strict convergence of postmodernism and symbolic interactionism is unlikely, there are nevertheless elements of the new literature that can enhance the traditional interactionist understanding of the self. Similarly, a serious engagement of pragmatism can help clear the muddied conceptual pool surrounding the new scholarship. In this review, I discuss an emerging sociological understanding of the self that draws from both interactionist and postmodern themes. This developing perspective centers on three organizing concepts: (a) power, (b) reflexivity, and (c) social constructionism.

The significance of power in shaping the self is central to much of the new scholarship and offers an important corrective to traditional sociological orientations associated with Mead, Goffman, and symbolic interactionism. The principle of reflexivity is at the core of the Meadian tradition and provides a pragmatic foundation for understanding agency and political action missing from much of the new scholarship. Finally the principle of social construction is common to both new and traditional sociological approaches to the self and guides most recent empirical analyses.

POWER AND THE SELF

> The individual is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects.
>
> Michael Foucault (1994, p. 214)

For well over two decades, an expanding chorus of postmodern and poststructural critics has proclaimed the death of self. For theorists such as Derrida, Laclau, and Baudrillard, the idea that individuals are in possession of a core, rational, unitary self, endowed with an essential nature and an independent consciousness, is simply a political artifact of the European Enlightenment. No single theorist has had a wider influence on this understanding of the self than Foucault (1979, 1980, 1988, 1994).

For Foucault, the self is the direct consequence of power and can only be apprehended in terms of historically specific systems of discourse. So-called regimes of power do not simply control a bounded, rational subject, but rather they bring the self into existence by imposing disciplinary practices on the body. Through the "technologies" of surveillance, measurement, assessment, and classification of the body, technocrats, specialists, therapists, physicians, teachers, and officers serve as vehicles of power in diverse institutional settings (prisons, schools, hospitals, social service agencies). In this way, practices that are normatively represented as humane interventions in support of community health, safety, and education actually serve as mechanisms of domination. Thus, rationality, reason, and scientific

knowledge are rejected as progressive sources of emancipation. Instead, these values of the Enlightenment project are understood to be the discursive foundation of control and domination in modern society. From Foucault's perspective, the self is coerced into existence, not to become an agent but as a mechanism of control where systems of discourse work from the inside out by creating a self-regulating subject.

Following Foucault, Stuart Hall (1996) stresses that there can be no true self hiding "inside" or behind the artificial or superficial because self and identity are constructed "within, not outside discourse." The analytical project, therefore, is not one of discovery but deconstruction. To deconstruct the self is to challenge essentialist assumptions and lay bare the manner in which the self is wholly dependent upon discourse. For Hall, this means analysis should focus on the specific historical and institutional sites of "discourse formation."

Rose (1996) also addresses the alternative methodological strategies of the Foucauldian tradition. He notes that the deconstruction of the self does not lead to a social structure and personality approach that investigates how "different ages produce humans with different psychological characteristics, different emotions, beliefs, pathologies." This is because "such analyses presuppose a way of thinking that is itself an outcome of history, one that emerges only in the nineteenth century" (p. 129). As an alternative, Rose advocates a "genealogy of subjectification" that would be concerned with localized attempts to produce meaning, especially as this occurs through professional vocabularies and the technologies and practices of science, medicine, government, and the workplace. A related strategy is evident, for example, in Cushman's (1995) historical analysis of psychotherapy in the United States. Although providing a fascinating description of the institutional, political, and economic forces shaping our cultural understanding of the self, his work is premised on the assumption that "There is no universal, transhistorical self, only local selves; there is no universal theory about the self, only local theories" (p. 23).

The primary contribution of the new scholarship is that it has connected the study of the self to the historical deployment of power. It has demonstrated that the self is constituted within relations of control and is deeply embedded within systems of knowledge and discourse. This is an important development, one that has contributed to new directions in the study of identities associated with gender and sexuality.

There is, however, a critical limitation of the Foucauldian tradition. The radical break with Enlightenment ideals has dissolved the foundation of a universal self and eliminated the assumption of an agentic and knowledgeable actor (Elliot 2001). This is problematic in that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to theorize the possibility of emancipation through organized resistance and political intervention if actors are conceived to be mere subjects of discourse. In the view of Best (1994, p. 46), "Foucault reduced consciousness and identity formation to coercive socialization and failed to grasp the individualizing possibilities created by modernity. . .this radical antihumanism posed the obvious problem of seeking social change without free and active agents." Although Foucault did not reject all

claims to truth or the possibility of resistance, his work teeters on a slippery philosophical slope, and critics have forced Foucault and other postmodernists to defend the subject against charges of moral relativism (Levine 1992), neoconservatism (Habermas 1983), and political inaction (Gitlin 1995).

For Nicholson & Seidman (1995, p. 35), a solution to this political dilemma can be found in a social postmodernism, where critique is supplemented with positive possibilities of action and where "the problematizing of essentialized identities, the de-centering of the subject and society, the re-centering of the social around analyzing power/knowledge regimes, are major resources for critical analysis and a democratic politics." Consistent with this strategy, Mouffe (1995) does not believe, for example, that the deconstruction of gender as a feature of the self must necessarily rob feminism of a coherent identity. On the contrary, she proposes a politics where the aim is to "construct a 'we' as radical democratic citizens" and where political movements associated with identity categories are enabled despite their tentative, discourse-dependent nature. Yet to accomplish this important and necessary reformulation requires a conceptualization of the self as an embodied agent, a knowledgeable, problem solving actor rather than an amorphous "subject position." In other words, it requires an appreciation of the reflexive process of a social self, a foundation missing from the new scholarship but well established in the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism.

THE SELF AS REFLEXIVE PROCESS

> It is a mistake to say that identities are trans-historical and universal, but it is also a mistake to say that personhood and selves are not.
>
> Norbert Wiley (1994, p. 2)

Most theorists who have criticized the essentialist assumptions of the modern self have done so without reference to Mead's social psychology. As a consequence, the new scholarship on the self is trapped by a "category error," or the failure to distinguish a generic self from particular identities (Wiley 1994). For symbolic interactionists, the self is first and foremost a reflexive process of social interaction. The reflexive process refers to the uniquely human capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object. Reflexivity is not a biological given but rather emerges from the social experience. According to Mead (1934, p. 134), "It is by means of reflexiveness—the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself—that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it." Wiley's neopragmatism extends this basic principle and merges the pragmatism of Mead and Pierce in arguing that the self, defined in terms of a basic semiotic process of interpretation, is a defining feature of human nature and is thus both transhistorical and universal, a quality that does not extend to identities, which are taken to be the social products of the self process. This is a key distinction and one that is surprisingly absent in arguments that problematize the self.

Just as the acceptance of language as a cultural and historical universal does not mandate the emergence of a common human language, the contingent nature of identity does not rest on the universality of the reflexive process. It should also be noted that an acceptance of the self process as universal does not mean that the self can simply be reduced to language. This is because interactionists stress the primacy of social action.

Dunn (1997, pp. 695–96) builds on Wiley's neopragmatism, arguing that post-structuralists such as Butler (e.g., 1990) offer a limited conceptualization of agency because they fail to appreciate the prediscursive capacity to act that is so central to Mead's theory of the self. "Far from being merely a word, in the Meadian view the 'I' is an internal experience of reflexivity that precedes the sense of linguistic reflexivity imparted by signification." Dunn shows how the pragmatist position allows for an understanding of the self "as structured in and through discourse without being reduced to it."

Using a somewhat similar distinction, Schwalbe (1993, p. 334) defends the self "against postmodernism," asserting that the self emerges and takes form in the corporal body of individuals and is a "psychic process wherein signs and other forms of imagery answer to biologically rooted impulses," a point that has also been well developed by Joas (1983, 1996). In other words, the self at its most basic level is a reflexive process that regulates the acting, agentic organism. Unlike most other acting organisms, humans have a sophisticated system of signs and gestures that enable and constrain perception, reflection, and action (Perinbanayagam 1991).

For Schwalbe, Dunn, Wiley, Joas, Perinbanayagam, and most other symbolic interactionists, a full understanding of the self begins with the Meadian notion of reflexivity. The self conceived in this way allows for agency, creative action, and the possibility of emancipatory political movements. It does not preclude the very real possibility that the self-regulating processes of reflexivity will come to be colonized by forces of domination and control, but it does show how resistance is always on the horizon of the possible. Just as important, this configuration is not inconsistent with new, postmodern approaches to self and power. In fact, Antonio & Kellner (1994, p. 136) show that Mead and other pragmatists prefigure much of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment self in that

> they attacked the tendency to treat the rational capacities of the self as an impervious ruler over human activities and experiences. For example, they held that thought follows as well as leads practices. And they did not privilege cognitive capacities at the expense of sensuousness, emotion, sympathetic identification, and other feelings.

Yet, despite the early political concerns that motivated Mead and other Progressive era pragmatists (Shalin 1988), the symbolic interactionist tradition has, for the most part, failed to develop a sophisticated conceptual understanding of the self in which relations of power are presumed to be constitutive. A recent advance in this direction can be found in the work of Callero (2003), who merges elements of critical theory and symbolic interactionism in the conceptualization of a political self.

Although sharp differences between pragmatists and postmodernists will no doubt remain, and the ontological status and essential origins of self-meanings will continue to be debated, there is today a consensus within the discipline that the self is at some level a social construction. Whether phenomenal or discursive, fragmentary or unitary, stable or transitory, emotional or rational, linguistic or embodied, the self is assumed to be a product of social interaction. It is this fundamental principle that frames most contemporary research on the sociological self.

THE SELF AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

For many constructionists the hope has been to build from the existing rubble in new and more promising directions. The postmodern arguments are indeed significant, but serve not as an end but a beginning.

Kenneth J. Gergen (1999, p. 30)

It has become common in reviews of the sociological self to argue that the self is both a social product and a social force (Rosenberg 1981). In the first instance, the self is examined as a bounded, structured object—Mead's "me"—whereas in the second instance, the self is examined as a fluid, agentic, and creative response—Mead's "I." The distinction captures the core principle of a socially constructed self, namely that the self is a joint accomplishment, neither completely determined by the social world nor pregiven at birth.

Following Cooley and Mead, most research in the symbolic interactionist tradition has focused on self-understandings, self-meanings, and self-concepts as the social products of interest. The emphasis has in other words been on the social production of the personal self. Yet the social construction of selfhood is also about the meanings and understandings associated with the public self, the self that is visible and known to others and encompassed by what we come to accept within the cultural category of personhood. Cahill (1998) recognizes this bias in the literature and makes a compelling case for a "sociology of the person." (Cahill offers a conceptual distinction between person, self, and individual that is helpful but unlikely to overcome the momentum of current usage. I use the term public self in place of Cahill's person.) Drawing on the work of Durkheim, Goffman, and Foucault he proposes a framework for understanding the collectively instituted conceptions of the public self, the means by which these conceptions are produced and the disciplinary techniques of power that are deployed in the process. Cahill's work offers an important corrective to approaches to social constructionism that tend to psychologize the subject. As he notes, "the public person is not made in the image of a unique self; rather, an interpretive picture of a unique self is made in the image of the public person" (Cahill 1998, p. 131).

This suggests that a full understanding of self-meanings, self-images, and self-concepts requires a broad conceptualization of context, one that extends beyond the immediate definition of the situation to include the historical and cultural settings where unarticulated assumptions about the nature of the person have their origin.

The Sociological Context of Self-Construction

In an ambitious and important piece of scholarship, Taylor (1989) offers no less than a history of the modern self. Although his primary concern is with demonstrating the relationship between changing senses of the self and changing moral visions, his work also examines the sociological context within which the modern assumptions regarding self and identity emerged. For Taylor (1989, p. 111), the partitioning of the world into the inner sphere of private experience and the outer world of public experience is not a cultural universal but "rather it is a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West .... but which has a beginning in time and space and may have an end." Taylor (p. 206) is clear that the modern approach to identity arose because a "wide range of practices—religious, political, economic, familial, intellectual, artistic— converged and reinforced each other to produce it."

In contrast, sociologists have generally taken a more limited approach to context when pursing the social construction of self. The dominant tendency has been either to focus on the immediate situation, as evident in Goffman's work, or to examine contemporary shifts in culture or social structure. The latter perspective is often categorized as the social structure and personality approach and is associated with a long list of monographs addressing changes in a generalized communal self or character. Notable sociological statements include *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman 1950), *The Organization Man* (Whyte 1956), *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Slater 1970), *The Fall of Public Man* (Sennet 1977), *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch 1979), *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985), and *The Saturated Self* (Gergen 1991). Taviss Thomson (2000) and McClay (1994) have both produced excellent critical assessments of this literature.

The value of these efforts is that they provide a perspective of distance that directs our attention to common sociological forces that control, limit, and define the construction process in common ways. At their best they can offer insight into the changing definitions and meaning of the public person. Yet there is also a danger in that the wide generalizations of these analyses can sweep over the multidimensional, overlapping, and shifting cultural meanings of self. We know that critical features of self-construction vary over the life course (Demo 1992) and across racial, ethnic, class, and gender categories (e.g., Owens 2000, Frable 1997). For this reason, the most enduring and informative analyses are often those that link together historical shifts in the political economy, changes in particular social settings, and critical alterations in self-experience. The work of Hochschild (1983, 1989, 1997) is particularly strong in this regard. Drawing from macro-economic indicators, structured questionnaires, and in-depth interviews, she has produced insightful descriptions of workers who struggle with new and ambiguous self-understandings and self-meanings that are being constructed in response to powerful changes in the capitalist labor process. A similar positive contribution can be found in the recent work of Sennett (1998).

A related avenue of research deals with globalization and the self. The process of globalization is a highly contested topic within sociology and there are important

debates about its origin, scale, and trajectory (Guillen 2001). In general, it refers to the increasing dispersion of capital, people, information, and culture across international borders, a process that has been accelerated by advances in travel and communication technologies (Held & McGrew 2000).

The effects of globalization on the self are seen primarily through the disruption, elaboration, and colonization of local cultures. According to Arnett (2002), the most prominent self changes are evident in adolescents and young adults where an increase in identity confusion has been recorded. Identity confusion occurs when the disruption of traditional practices and perspectives results in a loss of meaning (Tomlinson 1999) and the erosion of tradition. Stevenson & Zusho (2002), for example, reported that collectivist values and practices are on the decline in Japan and China as a consequence of Western influences.

Global media culture and increasing rates of migration also expose actors to a wider set of meanings for the construction of identity. This has resulted in the formation of bicultural identities, where the self defined by local meanings and more traditional practices is maintained alongside a self defined by global culture (Arnett 2002). Others see the process as more complex and have advanced the notion of a hybrid identity, where local and global meanings are not segregated but exist in a multiple, dynamic, and conflicted relationship (Hermens & Kempen 1998). Important research in this area is beginning to explore the manner in which global cultural meanings and new ways of living are negotiated at the local level (e.g., Derne 2002).

Still, not all cultural disruptions are integrated into an adaptive self-system. Resistance to the forces of globalization has been manifested in the construction of a wide range of oppositional identities. This can be seen, for example, in the growth of religious fundamentalisms (Marty & Appleby 1993, Swatos 2001), a resurgence of nationalist identity projects (Barber 1996), and the emergence of global protest movements where the exploitative effects of capitalism are contested by diverse political groups (Elkins 1992, Russell 2003).

Resources for Self-Construction

A considerable body of research is concerned with the symbols and communication strategies employed in the construction of individual self-meanings. These resources for self-construction are conceptually diverse and include storytelling, cultural narratives, political ideologies, roles, identities, and features of the corporal body. Although resources are often invoked in the quest for personal distinction and individuality, they should not be thought of as a private symbolic cache, nor should they be considered universal qualities of the self. Rather, they exist as part of a cultural "tool kit" (Swidler 1986), are interpersonally maintained within various cultural spheres of meaning, and are deployed in social settings to accomplish social objectives. This is particularly evident in the case of storytelling and cultural narratives.

Maines (2001, p. 177), who has been instrumental in developing a "narrative sociology," offers a useful distinction between storytelling and narratives. Whereas

storytelling is "an overt, conversational activity that can vary according to a number of factors, including situation, audience and competence," narrative structures are "cultural frames and ideologies that prefigure some stories." Consistent with this distinction, we can think of self-narratives as autobiographical stories that draw on cultural frames.

Although evidence suggests that the use of narratives in the process of self-construction occurs early on in life (Bruner & Lucariello 1989), the narrative is not a natural form of cognition. Research by Nelson (1997) supports the idea that the narrative is a culturally structured product of language use learned relatively early on in the socialization process.

Brunner (1997) pursues the larger question of why we are compelled to develop extended autobiographical self-narratives in the first place. His answer is found in the observation that self-narratives function to sustain a sense of stability and predictable understanding in the world. When disruption is perceived it must be explained, and narratives provide a framework. Narratives are thus elaborate accountings designed to deal with the troubles created by departures from legitimacy, which suggests a greater use of narratives during times of dynamic social change or in settings of social diversity (Hart & Fegley 1997).

Snow & Anderson's (1993) classic study of the homeless also provides support for the use of narratives as resources in defense of an unstable social environment. As conventional identities are challenged by economic and social exclusion, Snow & Anderson found that the subjects of their study would resort to "fictive story telling" in an effort to sustain a positive self-understanding. The difference between fictive storytelling and cultural narratives is key. Because fictive storytelling is not sustained within a larger community, others are not likely to accept the explanation as legitimate. As a consequence, the actor using fictive storytelling may be privately bolstered but publicly excluded or ridiculed. In this way, coordinated collective action is essential to the power of narratives, a principle that has been empirically demonstrated by Mason-Schrock (1996) in a study of transsexuals. Despite the absence of an established cultural narrative, the subjects of his study avoided the isolation of fictive storytelling by cooperating to produce shared stories. Once established, it was group affirmation of stories that "cemented the interpretation of gender nonconformity" (p. 186). Related support can also be found in Loseke & Cavendish (2001) and Holstein & Gubrium (2000).

The corporal body can also serve as a resource for self-construction. Through surgery on genitalia (Preves 2001), cosmetic surgery (Davis 1995), body art (Phelan & Hunt 1998), and fashion (Crane 2000, Guy & Banim 2000), the body can be shaped in an attempt to construct particular meanings of self. Once again, however, these creations are not simply individual products. Gagne & Tewksbury (1999) show for the case of transsexuals that the meanings that are either sought or contested through alterations of the body are themselves influenced by dominant social discourses and political ideologies, a theme well developed in Denzin's (1992) approach to symbolic interactionism as cultural studies.

Denzin emphasizes the political nature of stories and texts as cultural products and shows how the production, distribution, consumption, and exchange of signs within systems of discourse are a key to understanding how we become the self of the stories we tell. In his research on the alcoholic self, he illustrates this process by showing how the stories that are told in groups like Alcoholics Anonymous are based on cultural understandings that often draw on media representations of alcoholics that may or may not reflect actual experiences. Denzin's contribution is important in that it moves us closer to linking self resources to larger institutional forces, political ideologies, economic interests, and the so-called going concerns of social life (Gubrium & Holstein 2000). It is here that power is often hidden in the taken-for-granted momentum of tradition, popular culture, and interpersonal relations.

The relatively stable set of social meanings and social relations is the focus of those within the so-called structural tradition of symbolic interactionism. Researchers in this tradition have produced an impressive body of empirical work in support of a bounded set of hypotheses and relationships centering on the use of social roles (Callero 1995, Collier 2001) and identities (Stets & Burke 2003) as fundamental resources for self-construction. Stryker's (1980) identity theory has been most influential in establishing the framework for this project. For Stryker, identities are distinct parts of the self defined by the meanings and expectations associated with network positions and role expectations. Positions are defined as elements of a social structure and have associated with them behavioral expectations that emerge from patterns of interaction and remain relatively stable over time. When the meanings of social roles are internalized, they are said to have become a part of the self. Social interaction thus produces the resources for constructing the self (role identities), which, in turn guides and patterns behavior defining social structure.

Although the structural approach to symbolic interaction recognizes the dynamic and open-ended nature of self-meanings, little attention is devoted to the cultural construction of identity categories or the historical context of the construction process. Instead, two distinct but complimentary empirical projects are underway (Stryker & Burke 2000). The first closely follows Stryker and focuses on how social structure influences self structure and how self structure affects behavior. In this program of research, evidence suggests that commitment to relationships that shape identity affects the cognitive salience of the identity, which in turn influences behavioral choices (Stryker & Serpe 1982, Owens & Serpe 2003). The second project focuses attention on the internal dynamics of self, concentrating on the cognitive and behavioral processes that work to align the meanings of identity with self and action. Burke and colleagues have developed a cybernetic control model that demonstrates considerable power (Stets & Burke 1994, Cast et al. 1999) and has been used to explain how and why the meanings of personal identities change (Burke & Cast 1997).

Together the research traditions established by Stryker and Burke have had a wide impact and have influenced research on emotions (Smith-Lovin 1995), social

movements (Stryker et al. 2000), group conflict (Trew & Benson 1996), education (Collier 2000), and altruism (Piliavin & Callero 1991).

Nonhuman Objects as Apparatuses of Self-Construction

In a provocative review essay, Knorr Cetina (2001) examines the sociological implications of a postsocial environment, where the individualization process of modernity empties out traditional forms of sociality but creates space for nonhuman social resources. It is her position that "the modern untying of identities has been accompanied by an expansion of object-centered environments which situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities and families used to do" (p. 525). Although there is little empirical research associated with this claim, some studies have examined the manner in which objects come to serve as a resource for identity (e.g., Sliver 1996), and a growing field of research is concerned with the impact of new communication technologies on self-construction.

Cerulo (1997) argues that new communication technologies have expanded access to a wide range of "generalized others," thus altering "the backdrop against which identity is constructed" (p. 397). This is a point developed more fully by Altheide (2000), who notes that the influence of technological apparatuses can be seen in the establishment of "media communities" that add a new dimension to the physical and symbolic environment of our everyday lives.

The evidence suggests that media apparatuses work to assist in the construction of a self that is less place bound and therefore less dependent on "the definition of the situation" (Meyrowitz 1997). It also shows how new media technology can both separate the body from the self and hide it (in the case of the Internet) or create a detached viewing that highlights the body in the case of video (Waskul 2002). In both instances, we see important implications for self-construction. For some, this can take the form of a "parallel life," as in the case of Internet users who engage in extensive, online role-playing games (Turkle 1996), where actors feel liberated in their opportunity to express different "aspects of the self." Also, in the case of some television talk shows, participants can produce surprising feelings of empowerment and self-worth as they reveal intimate details of their lives to millions of viewers and receive a unique form of notoriety (Priest 1996).

However, the use of new communication technologies is far from positive for most people. Of particular sociological interest is the manner in which the new technology assists in domination and control of the self. This is the case for the expanding technologies of surveillance (video, lie detectors, drug tests, etc.) that work as mechanisms of induced self-regulation (Staples 2000). It is also evident when mass media, especially through commercial advertising, creates and commodifies identity images that construct the self in a manner that benefits a consumer economy (Ewen & Ewen 1992) and serves the interests of a decidedly conservative political agenda (Giroux 1997). Still, research by Milkie (1999) suggests that even though media images affect self-understandings through social comparisons and reflected appraisals, some actors do find ways to resist their influence. More research is needed to explore if and how such resistance occurs at a collective level.

Whether we are moving toward a culture that places greater authority and truth in online relations and onscreen images, as suggested by Baudrillard (1983) and other postmodernists, is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is clear that understanding the role of nonhuman apparatuses in the construction of the self is an emerging and important topic of study.

Products of Self-Construction

In the fourth edition of the two-volume *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Gilbert et al. 1998) there is, for the first time, a separate chapter (Baumeister 1998) devoted exclusively to the self—covering 60 pages and containing over 300 references. Clearly the explosion of interest in the self so evident in the humanities and social sciences is also occurring in psychology. Although psychologists are moving away from an emphasis on biologically based dispositions toward a more social model of the individual (e.g., Walsh & Banaji 1997), they are still much more likely to focus on individual "products of self construction." By this I mean the qualities of the self observed at the level of the subject and conceptualized as a variable in the explanation of individual behavior. For example, Baumeister's (1998) review of the field contains discussions of self-enhancement, self-deception, self-monitoring, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-handicapping, self-presentation, self-guides, self-verification, self-knowledge, self-control, and self-image. As these products of the self-construction process come to be employed as predictors of behavior, there is a tendency to focus on stability, unity, and conformity and de-emphasize the sociological principles of social construction. The self that is socially constructed may congeal around a relatively stable set of cultural meanings, but these meanings can never be permanent or unchanging. Similarly, the self that is socially constructed may appear centered, unified, and singular, but this symbolic structure will be as multidimensional and diverse as the social relationships that surround it. Finally, the self that is socially constructed is never a bounded quality of the individual or a simple expression of psychological characteristics; it is a fundamentally social phenomenon, where concepts, images, and understandings are deeply determined by relations of power. Where these principles are ignored or rejected, the self is often conceptualized as a vessel for storing all the particulars of the person.

Take the case, for example, of self-esteem. When the concept of self-esteem entered popular culture it was loosened from its sociological and scientific moorings to become the "entrepreneurial" object of educators, parenting experts, pop psychologists, management gurus, hip televangelists, and personal power hucksters. Hewitt's (1998) aptly titled book *The Myth of Self-Esteem* serves as a timely sociological reminder that products of self-construction, such as self-esteem, often serve as conceptual resources for an entire culture. In a manner consistent with Giddens' (1991) notion of a "double hermeneutic," we see in self-esteem a concept that begins to shape the very behavior it was designed to explain.

Recognizing self-esteem as a cultural artifact does not necessarily mean it is irrelevant to sociological analysis. I agree with Hewitt that the self, defined in

terms of reflexivity (the capacity to reflect on one's actions, thoughts, and feelings), is a universal human experience that serves as a phenomenal base. Products of social construction are built on top of the psychic and corporal experience of reflexivity. Self-esteem is best understood in this context as a named emotion or mood that has been elaborated with diverse cultural meanings and uses. Understanding the historical, political, and cultural development of the naming processes is an important sociological task, one that should extend to other products of the self.

Recent attempts to move the study of self-esteem in a more sociological direction can be found in studies of the relationship between self-esteem and identity theory (Ervin & Stryker 2001, Cast & Burke 2002), the use of cultural narratives (Statham & Rhoades 2001), and beliefs regarding social inequality (Hunt 2001).

CONCLUSION

> [T]he postmodernists' most pessimistic view of the demise of the self has not been born out; rather, the core self has adapted to contemporary conditions and thrived.
>
> Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler (1999, p. 54)

The quote from Adler & Adler is in reference to a study of transient resort workers who live an unconventional and fragmented lifestyle of temporary and depthless relationships, yet have been able to maintain a core understanding of their own centered selfhood. It could, however, serve equally well as an assessment of the self as a sociological concept. At a time when many poststructural and postmodern scholars have declared the end of the self as a political, philosophical, and scientific concept, the self continues to thrive in academia and is especially vibrant in sociology.

Admitting to the constructivist nature of the self, recognizing its cultural and historical origins, and accepting the self as a product of power relations does not necessarily remove the self as an object and force in society. At its core the self is defined by the reflexive process, the universal human experience of self-objectification. Yet even at the level of self-meanings, self-image, and self-concept, where the historical, cultural, and political particulars of identity are exposed, the self continues to prosper as an important conceptual tool.

In much the same way that the concept of identity has become central to a wide range of substantive concerns (Howard 2000, Cerulo 1997) so too has the self expanded beyond the traditional boundaries of symbolic interactionism. Indeed, in many ways the self has been resurrected. In its new form we find a deeper appreciation of the historical, political, and sociological foundation of selfhood and a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the self and social action.

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