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self

Kathy Charmaz

The concept of self is simultaneously social and subjective; the self exists in social life. Common definitions of the self, however, accentuate its subjective side: all those qualities, attributes, values, feelings, and moral sentiments that a person assumes to be his or her own. The social sources of self make subjectivity possible because the person's experience of feelings, images, and interpretations emerges and takes on meaning through social interaction.

The concept of self lacks a coherent history; however, its intellectual antecedents appear throughout the history of philosophical and theological reflections about essential qualities comprising human nature and consciousness. A concept of self emerged in Renaissance European philosophy as transcending social and corporeal existence. As industrialization progressed, conceptions of the self became embedded in social life, rather than separate from it. The industrial age recast social relation ships in new forms that vitiated prior assump tions. The classical theorists placed the self in society but did not explicitly theorize it. Marx theorized an inherently social conception of self without adopting a language of self. An impli citly theorized but explicitly social conception of self also emerged in Émile Durkheim's con trasting analyses of transformations wrought by the emerging industrial order.

A fundamental shift in the concept of self occurred when the early pragmatists resituated the self in ordinary experience. The pragmatists cut remaining ties to transcendental values and wove a *theoretical concept* of self from its social fabric. William James (1890) initiated a tradition of theorizing the self that has continued rele vance today. He differentiated the "I," the self as subjective knower, from the "me," the object of consciousness. James's concept of the "empirical self" developed in practical exis tence. For James, the number of a person's selves equaled the number of individuals who knew him or her. James contended that the self relied on its realization through experience and, moreover, brought communication into the forefront of theorizing the self. James viewed the self as inseparable from communication of its experience.

Charles Horton Cooley (1902) also empha sized communication and meanings of personal pronouns observed in everyday life. Building on James's empirical self, Cooley's concept of the "social self" brought the self into interaction. Cooley observed how children learn to distin guish between self and other, me and you, mine and yours. Moreover, Cooley brought senti ments and reflections into theorizing the self. In his concept of the "looking glass self," Cooley gave a central position to introspection and ima gination: we first imagine how we appear to others; then, we imagine their judgment of our appearance, followed by "some sort of self feeling, such as pride or shame." Later textbook authors sometimes misunderstood Cooley's point here despite his emphasis that the judg ment eliciting this self feeling is an "imputed sentiment," not a mechanical reflection.

George Herbert Mead (1929) criticized Cooley's introspective method as asocial and solipsistic; Mead believed that Cooley's view of self relied too heavily on biological explanations and gave too little attention to its fundamentally social nature. The criticisms of Cooley's concept of self that began with Mead continue to the present. Nonetheless, Cooley made sentiments central to the self and spawned a nascent sociol ogy of emotions. Relationships between the self and emotions remain evident in Erving Goffman's (1956) analysis of embarrassment and mortification, Arlie Hochschild's (1983) portrayal of feeling rules and emotion manage ment, Norman Denzin's (1987) analysis of the alcoholic self as living in a dis ease of emotions and time, and Thomas Scheff's (1990) argument that pride and shame are basic human emotions.

In the major statement of sociological theo rizing of the self, George Herbert Mead (1934) advanced the most explicit theory of a socially structured reflexive self. Mead's social self is cognitive and embedded in communication. It

arises within and remains a part of interactional processes. For Mead, the self is both social process and social object. It is contingent upon "minded activity" that emanates from social existence. As we participate in social life, we learn to envision our group's activities and to anticipate possible future actions – our own as well as other people's. To accomplish this minded activity, we learn symbols, understand meanings, and converse with ourselves. There fore, Mead and his intellectual descendants, Herbert Blumer and Anselm Strauss, argue that language plays a pivotal role in the development of self. Language gives us tools to view ourselves as objects for scrutiny. Through using language we invoke terms to make nuanced distinctions about ourselves as well as our worlds. We can envision, evaluate, and act toward ourselves as objects like we treat any other object. Further more, we mediate our responses during interac tion because we can imagine the view of the other person.

Mead (1934) adopted James's terms, the "I" and the "me," to portray the self. The "I" is the creative part of the self that initiates action. It is spontaneous, immediate; the self enters the act without deliberation. The socialized "me" then monitors and directs the act because it assesses the "I" through a conversation with and about self. This conversation takes into account the internalized views and values of the group. Thus, the self is a social structure; it differs according to the social situation. Mead said that the situation calls forth a response from the self. More accurately, a situation calls forth *a* self because people's varied situations lead to posses sing different selves.

Mead wrested the concept of self from beha viorism. His concept of a social self counters portrayals of people as stimulus response crea tures or as beings determined by social, cultural, or economic forces. Mead's self develops in active response to what occurs around it. This response may consist of internalization, adapta tion, innovation, or resistance. Much of social life is routine; however, when we reflect on new or problematic situations, we can choose how to res pond, rather than react, to them. In short, Mead's concepts of mind and self mean that we have agency: we can choose and control our actions.

Symbolic interactionist social psychology made the Meadian concept of self a cornerstone of its perspective. As a result, symbolic interac tionists kept the idea of an agentic self alive throughout mid century structural functionalist disciplinary dominance. The functionalist perspective ignored the self in favor of a static concept of roles and disregarded the interactive and interpretive features of socialization. More recently, theorizing about agency has brought interactionist conceptions of an acting, interpret ing self into the mainstream of the discipline, although its pragmatist antecedents often go unrecognized (Maines 2001).

Throughout the later part of the twentieth century, Blumer's (1969) Meadian view of the self and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical self sparked a vibrant dialogue about the self among symbolic interactionists and some structural social psychologists. Dramaturgical analysts view the self as constructed in action in response to concrete situations and settings in which peo ple find themselves. Action, not individual reflection, becomes the distinguishing feature of self. Thus, dramaturgical analysts assume that what people do reveals more about their selves than what they say.

Erving Goffman (1959) observes that when ever we are in the real or imaginary presence of others, our behavior has social meaning and a promissory character. Subsequently, our actions express ourselves and give an impression of self to others, whether favorable or not. Goffman argues that people intend to bring about a cer tain impression of self. How we approach other people derives from the nature of the shared situation. Yet they realize that we try to make favorable impressions on others. Thus, our audience looks for cues we give off as well as what we say. Despite intentions and staged per formances, social actors give off unwitting messages about self.

The dramaturgical perspective brings the occasion and its structure into theorizing the self. If the interaction order of the occasion produces selves, can the self be a unique perso nal possession of its holder? Might it not be a mask to cover a role? Learning the interaction order of an occasion requires only a minimal model of the actor – and self – who could behave sensibly in it.

The empirical study of the self has gained momentum over the past fifty years. Manford H. Kuhn's (1960) Twenty Statements Test

(TST) advanced the empirical study of the self by asking people to state how they see them selves. A major strength of the TST is that research participants give their own definitions of self without the researcher's preconceptions or suggestions imposed on them. A weakness is that the TST treats the self as stable attributes and does not take situations and processes into account.

The identity theorists have advanced con nections between quantitative empirical stu dies and theoretical conceptions of the self. In Stryker's (1980; Stryker & Burke 2000) state ment of the structural approach to identity theory, he asks how social structure affects the self and how the self affects social behavior. For identity theorists, the self is constituted by an organized set of identities (Burke 1980; Serpe 1987). Serpe's (1987) study of college freshmen supports the major premise of stability of self in identity theory and makes the significance of choice explicit. Serpe finds that identity change is expected in those identities in which choice is structurally possible. Burke (1980) not only emphasizes the relational aspect of identities, but also points out that their salience takes hier archical form and that potential identities can motivate individuals. Burke calls for quantita tive testing to measure the theoretical properties of identity, which he and Franzoi (1988) aim to do in their study of experiential situations. They used an innovative sampling method of signal ing research participants with a timer to respond to a questionnaire about their direct experience, including their identities and roles. Burke and Franzoi found that how participants viewed their immediate situations shaped how they viewed themselves and, in turn, their behavior depended on how they viewed themselves.

Late twentieth century sociologists restored the self to its central place in theorizing. When using the term "self," however, they sometimes blur distinctions by reifying a single, static notion of self, rather than theorizing the multi plicity of selves and their processural nature. Following Mead, Viktor Gecas (1982) answers this problem. He distinguishes between the self as process from the self as stable structure, the self concept. Selves are built on processes; the stability of self concept is built on consistent processes; meanings about self last. Interaction processes constitute human existence. Thus the self is continually in process. Yet human beings often display remarkable consistency of self over time. If the self is continually in process, why are selves not more mutable? People learn ways to define themselves. They take some things as mirroring their "real" selves, but do not claim their other enacted behaviors as reflecting them. Ralph Turner's (1976) notion of the self concept indicates why. Turner defines the self concept as an *organized* set of definitions of self, sentiments, values, and judgments, through which a person describes himself or herself. Enduring self concepts typically develop when people receive consistent responses from others. The self concept has boundaries, whether firm and impenetrable, or flaccid and permeable. Once a person's self has congealed into a self concept, it becomes more or less enduring.

The narrative turn of recent decades locates the self in stories people tell about themselves and how they tell them. The self becomes accomplished through active processes of self construction that entail rhetorical skills and occur within social contexts. Bjorklund (1998) shows how cultural discourse about the self speaks through autobiographies. Authors of autobiographies invoke historically and cultu rally situated vocabularies of the self to make sense of their lives and to present them to readers as moral performances.

Narrative analysts take literary forms as a point of departure and ask how people adopt and improvise on these forms. Thus their inter ests include plots, narrative coherence and logic, narrative sequence, composition of the story, and its specific content. Conversational analysts account for the production of self in the struc ture of ordinary conversations, but note that certain situations invite a self story and others require entitlement, negotiation, or cooperation for a story to ensue at all. They attend to the linguistic and interactional practices which make selves discernible in conversations. Both approaches foster placing primary focus on the texts in which discourse and conversation occur. Paradoxically then, these analysts may garner stories of the self produced under special condi tions such as the research interview rather than those developed in everyday practices.

Most sociologists agree on the centrality of the self for understanding human existence, but views of its relative coherence and methods of

studying it remain contested. The postmodern self is tenuous, mobile, provisional, and fragmented. The self stands on shifting ground and thus shifts and becomes inconsistent, fragmented. Thus, contemporary life strips the self of its once coherent core and weakens the attachments on which this core was based. Despite its fragmented incoherence, these depictions of a postmodern self rely on a conception of society and cannot be divorced from it. Moreover, Gubrium and Holstein (1991; Holstein & Gubrium 1999) argue that if we reframe postmodern discourse and examine it empirically in everyday interpretive practices, then researchers can retrieve the concept of self for traditional sociological theory and research.

The concept of self in its many forms and varied emphases has inspired research that spans numerous substantive fields, such as occupations and professions, health and illness, aging, emotions, deviant behavior, race and ethnicity, and gender, as well as social psychology. These literatures contribute to an emphasis on development and change throughout the life course. Themes of reconstruction, development, and sometimes transformation of the adult self pervade studies of life changes, whether through experiencing losses or gains. Through these studies, sociologists have challenged assumptions of an asocial, reductionist, and static self. In sum, the self, and its attendant concepts, self image, self concept, and identity provide sharp tools to understand how, why, and when people develop, change, or retain a stable self throughout their lives.

SEE ALSO: Agency (and Intention); Cooley, Charles Horton; Dramaturgy; Goffman, Erving; Identity Control Theory; Identity: Social Psychological Aspects; Identity Theory; Looking Glass Self; Mead, George Herbert; Narrative; Rosenberg, Morris; Self Concept; Self Esteem, Theories of; Symbolic Interaction

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self-concept

Scott Schieman

Sociological interest in the self concept, rooted in the early writings of Cooley and Mead, has evolved into a multifaceted quest to describe the connections between social contexts and personal functioning. In his classic work, *Con ceiving the Self* (1979), Rosenberg defines the self concept as all of the thoughts and feel ings that individuals maintain about the self as an object. Gecas and Burke (1995) have expanded on the definition: the self concept "is composed of various identities, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences, along with their evaluative and affective components (e.g., self efficacy, self esteem), in terms of which individuals define themselves" (p. 42). These processes involve reflexivity and self awareness; that is, a level of consciousness or awareness about one's self that emerges from the distinctly human capacity to be an object and a subject to one's self.

A substantial core of the content of the self concept involves identities – the meanings that individuals attach to the self. Identities embody the answer to the question: "Who am I?" Often, but not always, identities are connected to the major institutionalized social roles of society such as "spouse," "parent," "worker," "student," "church member, "Muslim," and so on. In many respects, identity is the most "public" feature of the self concept because it typically describes one's place or membership in structural arrangements and social organization. At a social event, for example, individuals will ask each other about their work, their interests, their neighborhoods, and other pieces of infor mation that typically peel back the layers of their identities. However, there may be a cost to the public nature of identities. Goffman illustrated the "spoiled identity" as socially undesirable or stigmatized aspects of the self concept. Spoiled identities contain discredited elements of the self concept that the individual is encouraged to conceal or "manage." Failure to do so often exacts social costs. Collectively, these ideas underscore the highly *social* nature of the self concept: other people have substantial influence on the form, content, consequences, and revela tion of the self concept.

Some of the most widely known research on the self concept has focused on its evaluative and affective components, especially self esteem and self efficacy. Self esteem is "the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself or herself: it expresses an attitude of approval or dis approval toward oneself" (Rosenberg 1965: 5). Survey researchers have sought to measure self esteem with responses to statements that include: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," "I feel that I'm a person of worth at least equal to others," "I am able to do things as well as most other people," "I take a positive attitude toward myself," and so on. By contrast, self efficacy – also referred to as the sense of mastery or personal control – involves the extent to which one feels in control of events and out comes in everyday life. Measures of the sense of mastery ask about agreement or disagreement with statements like: "I have little control over the things that happen to me," "There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have," "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me," "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to," and so on. Sociologists are interested in mastery and self esteem for several reasons: because they are socially distributed, because their absence may erode well being, and because of their potential as psychosocial resources that help people avoid or manage stressors. That is, what groups have higher or lower levels of self esteem than others? How does a low sense of mastery influence psychological well being? And, do people who possess more favorable self evaluations have a different capacity to cope with the presence and consequences of stressful adversity?

The complexity of processes involving self dynamics has also provided researchers with terrain for theoretical and empirical develop ments about the self concept. For example, actors are often motivated to protect the self concept from external threats. In broader terms, an array of socialization forces and social structural arrangements shape the formation and content of the self concept; thus, it is a *social product*. In terms of self concept formation, the notion of personal or self investment evokes the

ideas of identity salience and the centrality of achieved statuses, such as education, for the emergence of positive self evaluations. Analyses of the structural determinants of personal qua lities, especially with respect to achieved sta tuses and dimensions of social stratification, have a long tradition in sociology, from Marx's broad portrait of estranged labor to more spe cific occupational sources of alienation and powerlessness. Marx asserted that, although individuals may strive for self fulfillment, the physical quality and organization of many work environments can thwart self enhancement and lead to personal misery. Thus, Marx provides some of the earliest pieces of evidence about "structural social psychology" because he traced linkages among objective social economic con ditions and the subjective, inner lives of indivi duals. Since then, sociologists of mental health and others have followed his efforts by docu menting and describing the role of the self concept in the connections between structural strains and psychological distress. For example, a typical sequence of hypotheses about the dis tressing effects of poor work conditions is as follows: (1) poor work conditions elevate unfa vorable self evaluations; (2) unfavorable self evaluations increase the risk for undesirable mental health outcomes; and (3) unfavorable self evaluations explain why poor work condi tions increase the risk for undesirable mental health outcomes.

Building off the early sociological traditions of Marx, Cooley, and Mead, social stratification theory and research has sought to identify in detail the links between features of social struc ture (e.g., education, income, occupation, and work conditions) and self concepts. For exam ple, individuals in higher status jobs with more authority and autonomy and more creative, sti mulating, and challenging tasks tend to experi ence higher levels of self esteem and sense of mastery. Autonomous and non routine work, especially in higher status positions, reflects arrangements that contain greater chances for mobility and achievement. Such arrangements often include responsibility for vital operations that can shape the course and success of the organization. Individuals whose work has such qualities may feel more devoted to their jobs as a source of identity and feel a greater sense of confidence, causal importance, and relevance. It may also enhance another evaluative aspect of the self concept: the sense of mattering. Indi viduals who feel a sense of mattering believe that their actions are acknowledged and relevant in the lives of other people. It is easy to under stand the importance of mattering as a socially determined self evaluation by reflecting on the dreadful notion that one does not matter to any one or anything. Here, there are roots to other classical notions about the powerful effects of social integration versus social isolation – and their ultimate implications for the self concept.

In sum, the self concept reflects a multidi mensional and complex set of processes that contain numerous overlapping parts. Sociologi cal social psychology has sought to document and describe the ways that social contexts influ ence and are influenced by the self concept. Numerous domains of study of the self concept provide fertile grounds for advances in knowledge, including: the structure and organi zation of self conceptions; the internal dynamics of self concepts; the relationship between social structure and self conception; and the ways that self concepts influence the effects of social stres sors on health and emotional well being. Long ago, Cooley and Mead laid the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for the sociologi cal study of the self concept. More recently, Rosenberg (1992) asserted that "although the individual's view of himself may be internal, what he sees and feels when he thinks of himself is largely the product of social life" (p. 593). One of the main quests for sociological analyses of the self concept, then, continues to involve the documentation and description of the ways that fundamental sociological variables – especially those that designate one's location in the social structure – impress upon the self concept across the life course. While this "social product" side of analysis is critical, it is important to under score the "social force" role of the self concept; that is, the ways that the self concept impresses upon social structures and arrangements.

SEE ALSO: Cooley, Charles Horton; Identity: The Management of Meaning; Identity: Social Psychological Aspects; Identity Theory; Mead, George Herbert; Rosenberg, Morris; Self; Stress, Stress Theories

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self-control theory

Michael R. Gottfredson

Self control is a concept used by sociologists to explain differences among people in the frequency of engaging in a wide variety of acts that cause harm to others (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990). It is defined as the tendency to avoid acts whose long term costs exceed their momentary advantages. The costs include penalties from institutions such as schools and the criminal justice system, the loss of affection from family and friends, loss of jobs and advancements in employment, and bodily injury and physical pain. Individuals with relatively high levels of self control tend to have low rates of crime, delinquency, and substance abuse because these behaviors entail potential long term costs. They tend to have relatively high rates of school and employment success and lasting interpersonal relationships.

In criminology, the concept of self control derives from the branch of sociological theories known as control theories. These theories are distinguished by the assumption that people are rational actors, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Basic human needs and desires are seen as fairly uniformly distributed among people (even if access to the means to satisfy these needs and desires is far from uniformly distributed). They include the desire for affection from others, material goods, and pleasurable physical and psychological experiences. In general, people pursue these wants in everyday life; controls are established by social groups (including parents, communities, and states) to channel the pursuit of these wants in ways that cause the least harm to others. Because these controls are exerted or not in the social environment, and because individuals experience different environments related to these controls, the extent to