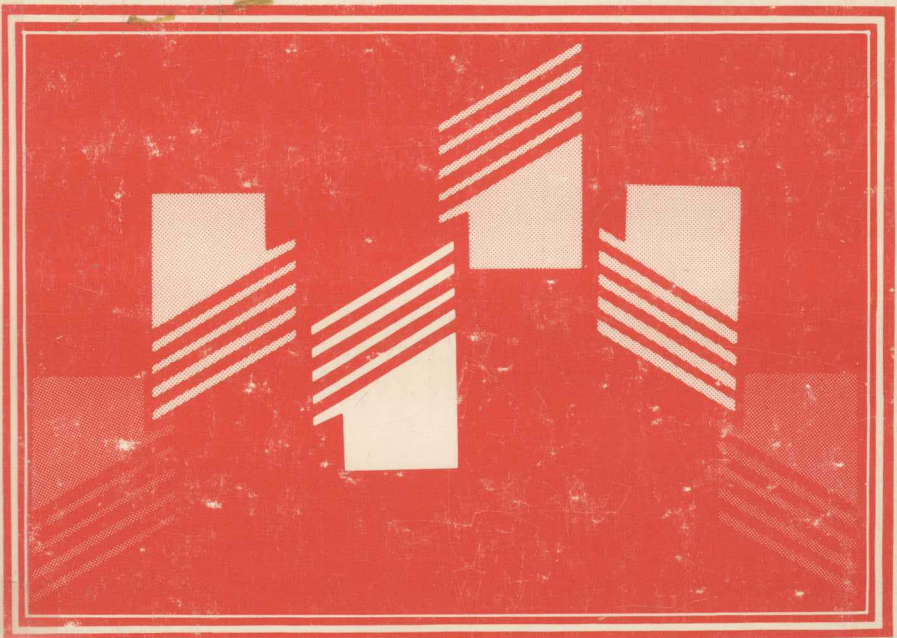


# THE MUTABLE SELF

**A Self-Concept  
for Social Change**

**Louis A. Zurcher, Jr.**



Foreword by **Ralph H. Turner**



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**SAGE PUBLICATIONS**

**Beverly Hills**

**London**

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*For information address:*

SAGE PUBLICATIONS, INC.  
275 South Beverly Drive  
Beverly Hills, California 90212



SAGE PUBLICATIONS LTD  
28 Banner Street  
London EC1Y 8QE

Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Zurcher, Louis A  
The mutable self.

(Sage library of social research ; v. 59)

Includes index.

1. Self. 2. Social change. I. Title.

BF697.Z87                    155.2'5                    77-21026

ISBN 0-8039-0930-6

ISBN 0-8039-0931-4 pbk.

FOURTH PRINTING, 1982

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TO ANTHONY WALSH ZURCHER

So he will be able to understand what  
I thought I saw happening in the world  
of my years, and how it at once surprised,  
confused, frightened, satisfied, pleased,  
and thrilled me.

AND TO SUSAN SHRUM ZURCHER

Who shared it all





## FOREWORD

The career of the concept of self in behavioral sciences has been a checkered one. Its espousal by such pioneer investigators as psychologist William James and sociologist Charles Horton Cooley gave it early prominence. But it nearly became a casualty of the healthy iconoclasm of early behaviorism. Because the self-processes are typically reified into objective entities in popular thinking, behavioral scientists are properly cautious in speaking of the self. And much of the research on self has shown little convincing connection between self-conception and behavior beyond what smacks of tautology. Often interest in studying the self has been kept alive by little more than intuitional conviction that great explanatory power would some day be found in the concept.

Out of several decades of work three substantial streams have formed, each carrying the promise of shedding light on personality and social interaction. The evaluative dimension of self, as in self-esteem and self-acceptance, has elicited the most objective research. The less manageable aspects of self are deemphasized in this stream to permit concentration on the more readily quantifiable aspects. A second stream turns away from the trans-situational anchorage of self and even the "propriative" quality of self to concentrate on the self as ceremonially manipulated in front of an audience. In this approach, made popular by the exciting work of Erving Goffman, the self is more appearance than inner conviction and more situational than general.

The third stream owes most to Manford Kuhn, who struggled imaginatively with the self-conception as a qualitative and more or less global self-characterization, expressing and mediating the

individual's articulation with the social structure. In research employing Kuhn's Twenty Statements Test, the salience of particular roles in the self-conception is shown to be related to attitudes and performance in these roles. A more general categorization of self-references by firmness of articulation with social structure has also been useful. Although the relationships uncovered have ranged from weak to moderate, these studies incorporate more of the richness of the idea of self than research in the other streams. This is the stream to which Louis Zurcher has made a seminal contribution, opening up a wide range of new issues for investigation.

Zurcher extends thinking in the Manford Kuhn tradition in two important ways. First, most investigators have retained the assumptions underlying Kuhn's early distinction between consensual and nonconsensual forms of self-reference. Thus consensual (or B mode) references indicate secure anchorage in the social structure while nonconsensual (or C and D mode) references indicate some disjunction between individual and society, with likely pathological consequences. Observing the recent shift toward more frequent C mode references, Zurcher develops a novel formulation in which C mode becomes the normal anchorage to social structure in a rapidly changing society.

While the reflective self (C mode) does seem more adaptive in a world of ephemeral social anchorages than the more rigid social self (B mode), it is still a product of an era. The individual remains more reactive than proactive with respect to the social world. Hence Zurcher takes a second important step in announcing the possibility of a Mutable Self, in which the individual achieves autonomy by learning to shift modes of self-reference so as to cope most effectively with the constraints and opportunities of varied situations. If Zurcher's contribution to C mode analysis extends our understanding of how society shapes personality, his description of the Mutable Self affords a guide to individual autonomy and control over the social environment.

Beyond his contributions to self theory, Zurcher proposes a far-reaching synthesis of contemporary sociological, psychological, and psychiatric ideas. While no one will agree with all of the linkages and equivalences, the juxtapositions are plausible and often both provocative and original.

The book will stimulate debate as well as elaboration. The Mutable Self may turn out to be as difficult to grasp and as utopian as Riesman's autonomous person. Some readers will wonder whether too many of the themes from currently fashionable therapies have been incorporated for the description of Mutable Self to withstand the passage of time, at least without substantial revision. More amenable to research are such questions as whether C mode self-references are indeed adaptive in a changing society, whether society continues to change in directions signaled in the sixties or is now undergoing a partial turnabout, and whether the poor and the hip do exhibit more than their share of cultural lead. And as with all efforts to characterize the dynamic of a contemporary era, the question will inevitably arise: is this truly a dissection of the era, or primarily a contribution to an emerging ideology—a step toward evolving the new era's inhabitants' own preferred way of viewing themselves and their society?

The pursuit of these and many other questions stimulated by this work will be richly productive, whatever the answers. No reader will come away without a new dimension for understanding the social self and a new perspective on the nature of post-industrial society.

*University of California  
Los Angeles*

*Ralph H. Turner*



## P R E F A C E

This is a book about self-concept and social change. I argue that the acceleration of socio-cultural change in American society can encourage in some individuals the evolution of a Mutable Self, and I labor to define and illustrate what is meant by that term.

The arguments offered are in large part speculations; the analysis is primarily discursive. An extensive amount of social science and futurist literature is reviewed and interpreted as supporting the case, but the review is deliberately selective. From a synthesis of the arguments, I assemble a schematic for the development of self-concept which includes, among other alternatives, the Mutable Self. I discuss the implications of the enactment of the alternatives and of the Mutable Self for the enactors, for those with whom they interact, and for the social forms in which they live. Since I believe that more Americans need to develop Mutable Self concepts for their own well-being and for the well-being of our society, suggestions are made for mutability training and mutability therapy.

I will suggest that there are four key components of self concept: physical self, social self, reflective self, and oceanic self. The social self is quite functional for individuals during periods of relative societal stability and has been the dominant self-concept among Americans. Since the early 1960s, social change has accelerated, and the stability needed to support the social self has increasingly been disrupted. More and more persons, I will argue, are experiencing temporary reflective selves, and are looking for escape from that uncertain condition, and many (often "helped" by narrow "therapies" or opportunistic fads) rush precipitously into alternative but rigid and defensive physical, social, or oceanic selves. Some become chronically reflective selves, alienated from society. Neither the individuals nor society profits. The book will

illustrate that this is not a necessary or inevitable outcome. It is possible for people to develop Mutable Selves in which all four components of self are balanced and synthesized, purposefully and productively for the individuals and for society. Mutable Selves can be remarkably full persons, open to the widest possible experiences of self, and can be very effective change agents.

The explication of the Mutable Self idea will include discussion of such notions as: dogmatism, authoritarianism; self-esteem; attribution; cognitive consistency and dissonance; autonomy; status inconsistency; vocabulary of motives; communication; susceptibility to exploitation; self as process *and* object; alienation; the centrality of dialectic in development of the self; types of emotional disturbances and defences associated with rigid self-concept modes; cognitive *reflexivity*; culture-self interaction and influence on thought; internalization of social imperatives, ideals, and styles; symbolic interaction; self-concept as influencing behavior; the possibility of change-oriented yet socially responsible persons; the possibility of cultural lead as well as cultural lag phenomena; the melding of perspectives (on self) of personality theorists, sociologists; existential social scientists, and "new self" authors.

The book unfolds, chapter by chapter, in a sequential manner that partly reflects the chronology of my concern with the Mutable Self idea, and partly reflects an attempt to order logically the theoretical arguments concerning the idea. Consequently, I would hope not only to have presented the notion of the Mutable Self convincingly, but to have illustrated at least to some extent one manner in which a social science construction emerges and is pursued, regardless of whether the construction subsequently is shown to be right or wrong, helpful or misleading.

I intend the book to be provocative but not definitive, to be scholarly but not pedantic, and to be useful in the classroom but not limited to academia. It employs a cross-disciplinary perspective (sociology and psychology), and is qualitative rather than quantitative in methodological procedure. The major theoretical orientation is symbolic interactionism, though I maintain an eclectic approach. I attempt to link wherever possible pertinent theoretical elements from both personality and social theories in order to explain the emergence of the Mutable Self.

The book could serve as one in a series of texts for Introductory

Sociology or Psychology. More likely, it could be a productive text in such undergraduate or graduate courses as the self; social change; personality and society; personality and culture; socialization; symbolic interactionism; social psychology; urban sociology; theories of personality; theories of society; cognitive psychology; modernization; cultural anthropology; urban anthropology; social problems; sociology of deviance; collective behavior; counseling or clinical psychology; personal adjustment; mental health; planned social intervention; urban planning; social work practice; alternative life styles; and futurism.

The material in the book could be helpful to those professionals whose practices involve therapy, counseling or advocacy with clients who are seeking a better understanding of themselves and more effective coping skills. Such professions would include psychiatrists; clinical psychologists; counseling psychologists, social workers; vocational counselors, pastoral counselors; marriage and family counselors; supervisors of such intervention agencies as halfway houses for people experiencing marked personal and social transition (e.g., parolees, drug or alcohol rehabilitants, divorcees, ex-priests and -nuns, retirees, releasees from mental institutions, adolescent runaways).

Though the book is intended primarily for students and professionals in the social sciences or the helping professions, it would be of interest to anyone who wishes to examine his or her own conception of self as it fits with today's changing society.

Several people have sparked me to formulate the speculations and trace the ramifications. Graduate students in several social psychology seminars at The University of Texas have been particularly helpful; they are thanked by name in the appropriate chapters throughout the book. However, I would like to single out, with gratitude, Michael Wood (whose fascinating doctoral dissertation involves an analysis of self-concept and social change in diaries), Marianne Hopper, Natalia Moehle, Kathlene Letlow, Elaine Landy, and Edward Murguia. Many professional colleagues have provided useful comments: Ivan Belknap, Harold Nelson, Theodore Caplow, Miles Simpson, Arnold Buss, R. George Kirkpatrick, Rosabeth Kanter, Marion VanFossen, Anthony Orum, Wayman Crow, Boyd Littrell, Orrin Klapp, Kurt Lang, Anthony Oberschall, Gary Marx, Russell Curtis, and Luther Gerlach. I owe



a special debt for constructive insights to Ralph H. Turner, Chad Gordon, Philip Zimbardo, Louis Schneider, James B. Taylor, Wynona Garretson Hartley, Shiela Sheinberg, Gideon Sjoberg, and Irwin C. Lieb.

Susan Shrum Zurcher participated to a greater or lesser extent in most phases of the preparation of the book. She was extraordinarily helpful, despite the many other demands on her time and energy. Most importantly, she provided me with an intimate, living, and loving example of a person with a Mutable Self concept—herself. And she once again successfully resisted the efforts of a staggering C moder, me, to convert her to a defensive B moder.

Financial support for the work was provided in part by Research Grant 1 RO1 MH18034-01A1 SP, National Institute of Mental Health, awarded to Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, La Jolla, California (while I was on leave there), and in part from Research Grant 14 7499 0260 from The University of Texas Research Institute. Natalia Moehle, Lesley Williams, Linda Richardson and Rebecca Connelly patiently typed the manuscript from garbled tape cassettes and ghastly scribbled pages. Ann Hairston generously and helpfully edited the rough draft of the book.

I am grateful to the following for permission to cite substantial passages from previously published works: Thomas S. McPartland, for use of the *Manual for the Twenty-Statements Problem* (Kansas City, Missouri: The Greater Kansas City Mental Health Foundation, Department of Research, 1959); Wynona G. Hartley, for use of the *Manual for the Twenty-Statements Problem (Who Am I?)* (Kansas City, Missouri: The Greater Kansas City Mental Health Foundation, Department of Research, 1970); Charles M. Bonjean, editor, *Social Science Quarterly*, for use of my article, "The Poor and the Hip: Some Manifestations of Cultural Lead," *Social Science Quarterly* 53 (September 1972), pp. 357-376; Leonard D. Goodstein, editor, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, and Rosabeth M. Kanter, for use of the article written by Kanter and me, "Concluding Statement: Evaluating Alternatives and Alternative Valuing," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 9 (March-June 1973), pp. 381-397, and for use of my article, "Alternative Institutions and the Mutable Self," in the same issue, pp. 369-380.