

INSTITUTIONAL

Troubled Identities in

SELVES

a Postmodern World

EDITED BY

JABER F. GUBRIUM
JAMES A. HOLSTEIN

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Marquette University

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Preface

For at least a century, the self has been viewed as the ordinary center of experience. Notions of a personal self as opposed to a social self have competed for the spotlight as Americans contemplated the shape and sources of individual identity. Most recently, commentators have railed against the increasing institutional intrusions into the province of the self. Sometimes it seems as if organizations and institutions of all sorts—schools, clinics, counseling centers, self-help groups, and so forth—are contending among themselves for who will play the central role in defining who and what we are, and will be.

In a companion volume, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (Oxford University Press), we present this important story in detail. Its point of departure is the classic formulation of a transcendental self, one that Descartes and other philosophers like him pictured as standing over and above everyday life. But the real action starts when early American pragmatists—William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead, along with others—turned away from the transcendental self of philosophical reflection, supplanting it with a radically mundane self. This placed the self squarely in the midst of individuals' ordinary lives, where it was shaped and developed in relation to all manner of social influences.

Over the years, the story took what many commentators viewed as some very disturbing turns. According to some, post-World War II pressures toward conformity gave rise to "organization men" and "other directed characters" who seemed to sacrifice their individuality to the demands of social participation. Other commentators presented individuals falling in with the wrong crowd; their resulting selves became "deviant"—"outsiders." And today, according to some post-modern voices, the self doesn't amount to much at all anymore; the story of the self has come to an end. The self is a mere shadow of what it once was. Now evanescent, ungrounded, ephemeral, and experientially decentered, the self we once lived by has disappeared from the spotlight.

In *The Self We Live By*, we offered a different ending to the story of the self. Rather than allowing the self to recede from its central location in experience, or leaving it insignificantly dangling in our lives, we relocated it in a vast landscape of self-construction processes and potential identities. This turn in the self's narrative allowed us to conceive of countless opportunities for meaningful self-presentation and moral direction.

Still, while these opportunities are now greater than ever, not just anything goes. As abundant as the chances are for establishing our identities, self-construction is disciplined by the practical conditions under which it unfolds. These conditions include the operating discourses of subjectivity that comprise the institutional panorama in which we live our everyday lives. More and more, we find that these organizations are explicitly in the business of constructing the selves they need to do their work; they create the selves we live by in the process.

That is the principal theme of *Institutional Selves*. We have assembled nine distinctive chapters that collectively address the institutional construction of troubled selves. From the victims and villains of television talk shows, to battered women in support groups, to the violent selves of prison inmates, the chapters show how personal identity is structured in response to the pragmatic demands of participating in settings where personal and interpersonal troubles are under consideration. The theme is relatively straightforward, and each chapter vividly illustrates the institutional practices entailed in these activities.

Significantly, the authors of these chapters teach us that the process is never as simple as it might appear at first. This is no “cookie-cutter” matter of stamping out institutional personas. The articulation of available identities with the biographical particulars of the lives in question involves considerable “identity work.” Ignoring this risks creating a picture of self-construction that is overly determined by institutional preferences. It risks losing sight of how deft and creative the social construction of selves is in practice. Furthermore, it blinds us to the continuing resistances of both old and new constructions that always come with the territory. And it makes it difficult to detect the inventive formulations that may emerge in the process. This is the message we’ve gleaned from the contributing authors of this book.

As a group, they have been unflinchingly cooperative and professional in helping us to develop these themes. In their respective ways, they also have reminded us to maintain a flexible analytic focus on the *interplay* between the circumstantial conditioning and the everyday inventiveness of self-construction. Their chapters highlight the variability and nuance of the process, even as they reveal how institutional factors now endlessly mediate the production and reproduction of our identities. We are deeply grateful to each of the authors for their support.

Notes on Contributors

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Introduction

Trying Times, Troubled Selves

These are trying times for the personal self. We are constantly besieged by questions of who and what we are as we move through the myriad settings of everyday life. Our identities often seem uncertain or unstable. The selves we share with others can shift rapidly in response to the changing demands of being the “right” person at the right place and moment. We are buffeted about the identity landscape, as possibilities are paraded before us in ordinary interaction, in the mass media, and even in our imagination. Contemporary life poses apparently boundless options for what we could be.

At the same time, when everything appears to be in flux, we are sustained by the conviction that, deep down, a singular authentic self resides within us. We maintain an inner sanctum for the self that insulates it against the moral ravages of today’s world and the related pushes and pulls of daily living. While social life may shape who we are, permanently blemish our identities, or lead us astray, the popular belief is that a “true self” resides somewhere inside, in some privileged space. As besieged or hidden as it may be, the personal self is nonetheless available as a resolute beacon to guide us. We take for granted that in our most private recesses, we don’t need to divide ourselves between countless identities. Deep inside, it is possible to get in touch, and be at one, with our real selves.

In our culture, we place great stock in this notion of an inner beacon, in a self that stands fundamentally apart from the social world. While it may be socially influenced, we presume that the self ultimately exists separately from—outside of—our everyday social transactions. It’s immersed in social affairs, to be sure, but it’s figured to be an autonomous social agent in those affairs. We also believe that, in its inner cloister, this self speaks to itself more authentically than it speaks to anyone else. It is a self virtually owned by the individual, independent and distinct from the social marketplaces in which individuals gain purchase on identity. Categorically distinguished from social life, this personal self is repeatedly conjured up in familiar phrases such as “the individual versus society,” “the core, true self,” and “who I really am” (as opposed to who I merely give the impression of being).

Without reflection, we harbor this belief from early childhood, as significant others—parents, teachers, and even our peers—tout the value of being true to oneself. It lurks behind admonitions to be “self-reliant” or to build “self-esteem,”

qualities that we assume are influenced by social life, but which also somehow stand above it (Hewitt 1998). External influences aside, members of our culture believe that the personal self has a life of its own, residing deep within. We cherish its autonomy and authenticity.

Trials and tribulations have beset this personal self as an ever-expanding *panoply* of organizations and communications media have penetrated its privileged space. Today, identity no longer emanates from within, but penetrates us from every angle. From self-change groups and 12-step programs, to welfare agencies and psychiatric clinics, to self-help books and television talk shows, who and what we are in practice has been dislodged from our inner spaces, to be relocated in the self-defining activities of varied institutions. These “going concerns,” as Everett Hughes (1984) liked to call social institutions, are explicitly in the business of structuring and reconfiguring personal identity. Contrary to the popular image of the inner self, we are now seeing how even the deepest enclaves of the self are infiltrated by outside interests which threaten the very foundations of personal privacy. The personal self, we might argue, is increasingly *deprivatized* (Gubrium and Holstein 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Our most private essence is now being constructed and interpreted under the auspices of decidedly *public* going concerns.

Nevertheless, the belief in the self as a discrete, private entity endures. Our commonplace experiences and everyday folk psychologies tell us that the personal self hasn’t disappeared from our culture (see Cahill 1998). It remains one of the leading experiential themes of our lives, continuing to inform our own and others’ moral attention as we seek to develop beyond what we are, reform ourselves, or return to former identities. In the face of the institutional onslaught, our commitment to the personal self can leave us clinging to, even yearning for, a deep authenticity. At the same time, we continually confront the practical contingencies of occupying an institutional terrain that places more and more identity-shaping demands on all of us.

This book takes a serious look at the self in relation to today’s challenging social landscape. It shows how, in a variety of organizational settings, the personal self is discerned in public space and produced in social interaction. It examines how our modern notion of an individually controlled, private space for the personal self relates to a postmodern panorama of public sites of self-construction, whose venues diversely produce and manage personal identity. The book tours the almost dizzying array of institutions comprising this postmodern environment, a world where selves are regularly decentered from their inner recesses and recentered in institutional life. As we will see, the postmodern self is continually assembled from the complex definitional handiwork of these going concerns even as participants cling to the belief in its personal, private recesses.

The Personal Self

As a point of departure for the tour, let’s consider some recent commentary on the state of the personal self. This deserves our attention from the outset because,

even though the chapters of this book focus on the institutional construction of selves, the belief in the personal self perseveres underneath it all. Indeed, as the commentary shows, this belief sustains an image of a social world persistently at odds with the personal self.

Kenneth Gergen's (1991) book *The Saturated Self* presents one of the most personally poignant stories of the plight of the self. Gergen marshals a compelling argument that the self is desperately seeking relief from the hubbub of contemporary life, which has left it overwhelmed, virtually saturated with social demands. As Gergen notes, this fast-paced and multidimensional—postmodern—world is so full of meanings and messages that it routinely floods the self, leaving the self with no life of its own. Filled to overflowing, the self dilutes and squanders any sense of a true identity. The real self, according to Gergen, should have a life held in abeyance from the plethora of social influences that bear upon it. It is a self that can only breathe a sigh when it gets away from these relationships; it feels most at home separated from the madding crowd. Somewhere in the sequestered niches of experience, Gergen hopes, the self can come into its own, unencumbered by society. This is the only way we can maintain at least partial ownership of who and what we are.

The first chapter of the book, entitled "The Self Under Siege," is telling. It's apparent that it is the author himself who is inundated, whose self-ownership is at risk. Gergen feels pulled in myriad directions at once. He wants to maintain mastery over his affairs, but this eludes him. His life seems to spin out of control at every turn. He begins this opening chapter by recounting what awaits him as he settles into his college office after a brief trip out of town:

An urgent fax from Spain lay on the desk, asking about a paper I was months late in contributing to a conference in Barcelona. Before I could think about answering, the office hours I had postponed began. One of my favorite students arrived and began to quiz me about the ethnic biases in my course syllabus. My secretary came in holding a sheaf of telephone messages, and some accumulated mail . . . My conversations with my students were later interrupted by phone calls from a London publisher, a colleague in Connecticut on her way to Oslo for the weekend, and an old California friend wondering if we might meet during his summer travels to Holland. By the morning's end I was drained. The hours had been wholly consumed by the process of relating—face to face, electronically, and by letter. The relations were scattered across Europe and America, and scattered points in my personal past. And so keen was the competition for "relational time" that virtually none of the interchanges seemed effective in the ways I wished. (P. 1)

Honorific as this seems, something is missing, something that, if it were in place, could signify a sense of being at one with oneself. Gergen soon tells us what that is: "I turned my attention optimistically to the afternoon. Perhaps here I would find moments of seclusion, restoration, and recentering"—three characteristics of a distinctly modern view of the private, autonomous self. From the start, Gergen conveys the personal contours of the self he desires, which he is apparently losing to the frenzied pace and diverse spaces of postmodern life. This is a self that

gains the measure of who it genuinely is by getting away from the daily rat race. While there is no doubt that such a self is at home in social experience, ironically, it is most likely to be who it truly is when it is separated from that. In seclusion, it can take stock of its real identity and restore itself.

This self needs to be periodically recentered, that is, placed at the heart of one's personal life as opposed to being bandied about by diverse and competing social influences. Gergen cringes from the exponential growth of these influences, which are "producing a profound change in our ways of understanding the self" (p. 6). According to Gergen, we are no longer coherently thinking or deeply feeling entities; we increasingly incorporate into ourselves a "multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self" (p. 6). He decries a variety of negative consequences as the self is fragmented and the "authentic self" is displaced to a thousand locations on the social scene.

For everything we "know to be true" about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an "authentic self" with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all. (Pp. 6–7)

There is a clear experiential geography to this saturated self. It is battered and bullied by a world external to itself. Its source of strength is its interiority. This vision is extended by metaphors of volume and, especially, depth. The self might be fragmented by the diverse demands of social life, but it remains a substantial repository with an impressive inner capacity and an ability to hold out against the social storm outside. At its greatest depth, the self is secure from the vicissitudes of daily living. The deeply authentic self, while socially nurtured and informed, is capable of fending off the social influences that can spoil who it truly is. In a sense, the very conditions of interaction and communication that supposedly nurture the self—social relationships—become its adversaries.

In her book *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) makes extensive use of such metaphors to present a sensitive account of how the personal self can stave off an increasingly commercialized sociability. Focusing on the commercialization of feelings in the airline industry, Hochschild introduces her reader to the "emotion work" of flight attendants. Their job is to keep customers happy. Hochschild describes how they try to preserve their true selves in the face of the nagging demands of selflessly, cheerfully serving others.

Hochschild's is a narrative of resistance, not a lament over the state of the personal self in contemporary life, as Gergen's is. Rather than expressing a desire for repose and restoration, Hochschild provides a strategy for combating the saturated and commercialized self, a way of preserving the authentic "me" we feel in our heart of hearts. To be sure, flight attendants are a very special category of "emotion worker," yet they epitomize the way people can respond to a world where feelings are commodified and emotion management is rife. In such a world, Hochschild explains, the true self is overrun by false selves that have been mobi-

lized to ward off these demands of social life. As outside, especially commercial, interests inundate the self, it retreats inward, leaving only uncomfortable false personas directed toward others. This is the way the personal self preserves itself.

Hochschild explains that the "false self" is a "disbelieved, unclaimed self, a part of the individual that is not 'really me.'"

[T]he false self embodies our acceptance of early parental requirements that we act so as to please others, at the expense of our own needs and desires. This sociocentric, other-directed self comes to live a separate existence from the self we claim. In the extreme case, the false self may set itself up as the real self, which remains completely hidden. More commonly, the false self allows the real self a life of its own, which emerges when there is little danger of its being used by others. (P. 194)

In Hochschild's view, false selves perform an important, self-preserving function. They can be set up in service to others, leaving the authentic, core self protected. This is a way of accommodating the demands of social life; it serves as a buffer between external demands and an internal core that may be at odds with such demands. In today's world, according to Hochschild, false selves are necessary for preserving the true self while living civilly among others with so many ancillary interests in tow.

Emotions are the beacons of our true selves, in Hochschild's view. Every emotion serves a "signal function," Hochschild argues (p. 29), explaining that "it is from feelings that we learn the *self*-relevance of what we see, remember, or imagine" (p. 196). Emotions put us in touch with the personal "me," providing us with an inner perspective for interpreting and responding to experience. Social life becomes problematic, however, in that it often demands that we harness our feelings. This emotion management, Hochschild notes, intervenes in the signal function of feelings (p. 130), diluting or confusing a person's sense of self. With the commercialization of emotion management, we are asked to manipulate feelings and, by implication, our selves, for purely instrumental ends. As this happens, our feelings come to belong "more to the organization and less to the self" (p. 198). The result, according to Hochschild, is "burnout" and "estrangement."

The emotion work of the flight attendants illustrates the costs. Flight attendants, Hochschild explains, are not only asked to smile as they serve their customers, but are instructed to feel and project a warmth and sincerity that conveys the smile as genuine. But with emotion management and the distinction between real and projected selves in view, Hochschild asks,

What happens to the way a person relates to her feelings or her face? When worked-up warmth becomes an instrument of service work, what can a person learn about herself from her feelings? And when a worker abandons her work smile, what kind of tie remains between her smile and her self? (Pp. 89–90)

The answer is clear: flight attendants and, by implication, the rest of us in our own ways, become estranged from themselves.

Still, people know that “social engineering” affects their behavior and feelings. From time to time we are all asked to present images and emotions that don’t emanate from our inner, authentic selves. We give impressions and convey emotions that are dictated by social circumstances, organizational policies, and the like. We do emotion work as much to shield our true selves and deep feelings as we do it to manage social situations. It’s a way of resisting social intrusions, a technique for counteracting the demands placed on who we really are or should be.

At the same time, in Hochschild’s view, this resistance serves to further isolate and insulate the true self: “We make up an idea of our ‘real self,’ an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face. We push the ‘real self’ further inside, making it more inaccessible” (p. 34). If our relationships threaten the true self, it’s our defenses against social life that can ultimately be the self’s undoing. As we cloister our personal self, pushing it increasingly inward, we virtually lose sight of who we are. Trying times indeed!

The Social Self

No doubt, these commentaries ring familiar. We regularly speak in these terms when the pace of life increases and demands on our time overwhelm us. Such talk all but admits that the complex and varied circumstances of everyday life are at odds with personal identity and integrity. As we lament trying times, we cast social life as the personal self’s ordeal, if not its looming adversary, pitting the personal and private against the public and social.

But is social life truly at loggerheads with the personal self? Must social interaction always involve some sort of “holding action” against the ostensibly divisive encroachments of the outside world? What is absent from this scenario is an equally compelling view centered on the *social* self. This view holds that the self is a thoroughly social structure. From the start and throughout its life, the self unfolds within society, never in some private space separate from it. From this perspective, if there is a personal self, it is not a private entity so much as it is a shared articulation of traits, roles, standpoints, and behaviors that individuals acquire through social interaction. It’s not so much the essential core of our being as it is an important operating principle that we use to morally anchor our thoughts and feelings about who and what we are. In talk and interaction, the personal self becomes the central narrative theme around which we convey our identity. It is, in other words, our primary subjectivity, the entity we construct, and comprehend ourselves to be, as we go about our everyday lives.

If the self is social, it’s immersed in communication. When we interact with others, we openly refer to ourselves and, in giving voice to our identities, convey a sense of who we are, how we feel about ourselves, and what we will do about it. Ordinary statements—often beginning with “I” and ending in “me”—describe the self to others in revealing detail. “*I’m the kind of guy who’d give my life and everything I own for those I love. That’s me.*” “*I’m a good person. My momma*

raised me to believe in God and I'm goin' to heaven. He's got a place up there for *me*." "I've always been one tough SOB. Nobody's gonna take advantage of *me*." "I thought I knew myself, but when she said those things about *me*, it really opened my eyes!"

Such references to "I" and "me" apply equally to our inner conversations with ourselves. As we think things through, "I" and "me" are very much like two separate, yet related, entities. It's as if we can stand outside of ourselves, look back, and identify who we are. We take stock of our identities, evaluate what we see, formulate who we are, and proceed as if we are the kind of person we've been considering. The "I" makes statements about the other, as if that other—"me"—were someone to be singled out, critiqued, and evaluated. The "me" takes on a distinct life of its own, as an object that we might love, hate, or not understand. What we describe, what we feel, and what we do about that "me" can be as rich, varied, and consequential as if the "me" were actually someone else.

It's striking how much the inner relationship between "I" and "me" parallels social relations between two different people interacting with one another. Individuals can think and feel deeply about each other, leading them to come together, avoid each other, cherish or detest the very ground they walk on, or silently pass right by each other, with no sign of recognition. It's the same with ourselves; we can think, feel, and do nearly everything that we can do in relation to others. We can be comfortably at one with ourselves, or remain distant and detached; we can admire or despise who we are, or not think or feel much at all about ourselves at any particular moment.

The past and future, too, are full of such references. We look back on what we've done and assume that it led us to become what we are today. We take stock of who we are and figure out where that will take us in the coming years. Who we have been and who we are becoming are guideposts for what we think, do, and say. Decisions we make about ourselves and others, or feelings that we have in relation to them, are enveloped in our sense of our own identities. From cradle to grave, we communicate who and what we are, how and why we've come to be that way, and what we expect to be in the future. We hear our mind's voice silently speak about ourselves, with glee, dismay, or indifference, just as we might hear somebody else offering the commentary. Even when we're alone, our selves are never socially isolated because this voice is always with us. Our silent self-conversations echo the myriad ordinary, daily conversations we have with others.

Interaction and communication are clearly the basis for the social self. As we converse with ourselves and others, we learn and tell about who and what we are. We "talk our selves into being" in social interaction, so to speak. But not just anything goes, either in social exchanges with others or in our inner conversations with ourselves. Social identities are not tokens in a pinball machine, ricocheting and rebounding, totally without design or restraint. What we say about and to ourselves is always spoken in terms of—and through—our social relationships. We speak of ourselves in ways that are recognizable and meaningful within the various social contexts in which we communicate. When we refer to ourselves, we do so with respect to the identities in question, in terms that others will recognize. Identities don't develop from within us as much as they emerge