Multiple Selves in Postmodern Theory:
An Existential Integrative Critique[1]
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Abstract. The self has come under considerable attack in postmodern times. Amidst many deconstructions and re-formulations of the self, various myths of self have lost their sustainability. This paper reviews a number of different theoretical perspectives on the self along with many postmodern challenges to the self. It is proposed that the self is a socially constructed entity which can be conceptualized from a variety of perspectives. We also propose that not all myths of self are equal. In particular, premodern and modern myths of self are inadequate for postmodern times. Building from an existential-integrative perspective, we propose Schneider's (1990) paradoxical self as a promising myth of self for postmodern times.

The self maintained a secure, even sacred place throughout the history of Western thought. Despite widespread disagreement about what constituted the self and the essential nature of the self, few questioned its existence. Contemporary times challenged this privileged place of the self. Technology and pluralism brought metaphors of multiple selves. Postmodern analyses quickly followed questioning whether a singular, essential self was a healthy construction. The influence of Eastern thought, in particularly Buddhist philosophy, introduced the ideal of no-self. Cultural analyses provided examples of cultures which did not have a conception of the self. In the end, the necessity of a self conception, so basic to Western psychology, is now in question.

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It is hard to imagine Western psychology without a language for and conception of the self. The self is intertwined with diagnosis, personality, assessment, and treatment. Indeed, it is so implicit in our language that it would appear to require a significant restructuring of psychology to remove the idea of the self. Furthermore, the entirety of psychology's history has been in the modern period until recent times. Despite recent postmodern trends, we agree with Gergen (1992) in asserting that, "To be sure, the vast share of contemporary inquiry in psychology is still conducted within a modernist framework" (p. 20). Although Gergen wrote these words 14-years ago, it remains largely true today. The self of this psychology is a modern self.

The purpose of this paper is to utilize a broad array of resources to elucidate the challenges to the self in postmodern times. We will use this analysis to develop an existential-integrative perspective on the self in postmodern times. A couple of our assumptions are worth noting at the beginning of the paper. First, consistent with postmodern theory, we assert that the self is best understood as a socially constructed concept. Second, we believe different constructions of the self may be more appropriate and psychologically healthier for some cultures and individuals than other conceptions. In particular, we are focusing on the self in Western culture in this paper. Though we believe this discussion may have value and applications beyond Western thought, we also consider that it would be highly inappropriate to turn any conception of the self into a metanarrative that should be applied across cultures and individuals indiscriminately. Third, at the outset of this project, we maintain the position that *myths of self* are valuable. Stated differently, we believe that conceptions of self, although social constructions, remain a valuable and meaningful myth for many people in Western society. As such, psychology and postmodernism should not wholly discard the idea of the self.

Language Issues

Implicit throughout this paper is the assumption that language is important and relevant to psychological well-being. At the same time, we are asserting in this paper that language is socially constructed. Language does not possess an absolute meaning; instead, it is more important to understand the local meaning of words and how they are used differently by unique individuals. Murphy (1996) highlights the multiple ways

language is used in modern and postmodern paradigms. Modern paradigms assume that language is generally describing something real having an absolute meaning. In this paradigm, it makes sense to debate the definitions of words. A postmodern linguistic theory views language as expressive, or related to internal perceptions and feelings. Additionally, postmodernism assumes language is socially constructive, and therefore not used in consistent manner over time or across people. In this paradigm, it makes little sense to debate over definitional issues; however, it remains important to clarify how terms are being used.

Given our assumptions, it is important to clarify some of the language we will rely upon in this paper. In particular, it is important to clarify how we will be using the term *self* and its relationship to *personality*. We define the self as the social and/or personal construction of an individual identity which implicitly assumes some boundaries and distinctions between the self and the outside world, including other beings. The self boundaries remain intact despite the possibility of shared aspects/qualities (spiritual, collective unconscious) or the ability to transcend these boundaries (transpersonal, transcendent, or pre-personal experiences). We define personality as patterns of internal experiences (thoughts, beliefs, and emotions) and behaviors which tend to maintain consistency over time. Personality is secondary to the self and tends to flow from the self. Changes in personality tend to occur gradually.

The *myth of self* is a phrase we rely upon regularly in this paper. The use of *myth* in this phrase relies upon the ancient Greek understanding of myth, which was recently revitalized by Rollo May (1991) in his book *The Cry for Myth*. According to May, myth is not something which is false, but rather something that can not be proven. At the same time, myths provide deep, sustaining meaning and help provide direction in life. Myths are healthy, growth facilitating, and necessary. In talking about the *myth of self*, we are not making a metaphysical statement about the existence of self; rather, we are referring to various social constructions of the self which can provide the type of sustaining meaning consistent with the Greek understanding of myth. Some constructions of the self may be healthier than others in the context of psychological well-being.

A final definition to briefly address is the idea of the essential self. Much of Western psychology and philosophy assumes an essential self, or some type of an essence of a person. This is illustrated in the common metaphor of "trying to find oneself." There is debate, as will be discussed, about what makes up this self, when it comes into being and whether it can change; however, its existence is generally implicit and unquestioned. The very idea of the self being socially constructed, as we assume in this paper, appears to call into question the idea of an essential self. However, this is not necessarily accurate. Within a socially constructed paradigm, what encompasses the essential self depends upon the definition. For example, if the self is defined as the biological makeup or genetics of an individual, then there is a clear essential self. While this definition is overly reductionistic for our purposes, it is a valid and defensible position. In summary, when we use the idea of an essential self, we are referring to that which is seen as essential or most basic in the definition of the self.

<div align="center">A Brief History of the Self</div>

The Pre-Modern Self

Zedek (1998) states that, "Any effort to summarize a 4000-year history and tradition cannot help but prove inadequate" (p. 255). As with many topics we attempt to address in this paper, to try to cover the various pre-modern and early religious perspectives on the self necessitates some overgeneralizations and oversimplifications. However, it is still necessary for us to address these to gain sufficient perspective on the contemporary condition of the self.

The Self and the Soul. Locke (1690/1959) distinguishes between personhood and humanity stating that people can exist as a corporeal entity and can be described as *human*; but to become a *person,* an individual must be a human and possess psychological continuity or a conscious memory. Conscious memory about one's own life is autobiographical memory and can be called a "self." This conception of self is culled from the narrative of an individual's life by classifying and prioritizing different aspects of our history, personalities, and our ideals. Because people are social creatures, the self is also influenced by the surrounding world, and intended to help people make sense of this external reality. Flanagan (2002) states that the "self is

designed to do, in interpersonal and intrapersonal commerce, the work of explanation, prediction and control" (p.241).

In most pre-modern religious perspectives, the soul was in important part of the self, the most essential part. In general, the soul was understood to be a metaphysical, or non-material, reality that goes beyond the physical self. In general, the soul was seen as the portion of the self that was "good." Plato's philosophy is often seen as having revolutionized ideas of the soul (Leahey, 2004; Murphy, 1998). In Platonic and neo-Platonic thought, the body became associated with what is bad, and the soul with that which is good. Religious thought since this time has continued with this dualistic view of the self.

Monotheism and the Soul. The monotheistic traditions base their understanding of soul on their religious texts, but they also base perceptions of soul on a neo-Aristotlian formulation that describes soul as the essence of humanity that is immaterial or non-corporeal. It is understood that human beings are created by God and have an eternal soul (Keller, 2000). The Psalms of the Christian tradition characterize the soul as something that can be rescued from death and secured in heaven. Free will is a gift given to people from God that allows individuals the ability and the responsibility to decide to think or behave for good or for evil. Miller (1999) suggests eight tenets that are the foundation of monotheistic faith: 1) The belief that there is a spiritual dimension to our world, 2) Humans were created by God but are not themselves God; 3) There is a standard of moral virtuous behavior and that to be outside this standard is called sin; 4) Humans were endowed with free will to be agents of change in making virtuous choices or not; 5) Spiritual wellness is related to psychological and physical wellness; 6) There is an inherent relationship of caring among all people, especially the poor or oppressed, that is part of the moral standard; 7) Humans can have hope because God wants to guide and comfort those who ask; and 8) Humans have the potential for transformation through individual learning and struggle or by God radically changing a person.

Jewish Perspectives on the Self and the Soul. Jewish individuals often learn more about the soul from rabbinic literature than the Hebrew Bible. It is perceived as intellect which is partly inherent in a person and then developed further over the

lifetime. The Zohar explains that souls evolve over a person's lifetime from a lower level soul that is similar to the id, to a middle soul that is akin to the ego, and to a higher soul that can associated with the notion of the superego (Sassoon, 1978). Jewish mystic and rabbinic literature both state that there additional soul states that can be developed or given during certain holy occasions such as during Shabbat or upon the bar or bat mitzvah.

Christian Perspectives of the Self and the Soul. Throughout most of Christianity, the soul is understood in neo-Platonic terms, which emphasizes the body as the prison or capture of the soul. Christians believe that the soul is an immortal gift from God that can be developed overtime. The Holy Spirit adds a new dimension to the Christian understanding of the soul. For most Christians, the Holy Spirit, which is part of the triune God, is considered to be an external influence upon the self. The Holy Spirit is not part of the self, but influences the self.

Muslim Perspectives on the Soul. Muslims view soul much like the other monotheists. It is believed that their souls are subject to God's commandments. The Five Pillars define the principles of Islam: there is one God, Allah; prayer occurs at five specific times per day; give to the poor through alms; fast through Ramadan, and make a pilgrimage to Mecca once during your lifetime. Muslim identity is nurtured through observing the Five Pillars and participation in the Muslim community (Keller, 2000). They expect hardship and look to the afterlife for their reward. As with other monotheistic religious perspectives, this again places the focus on the soul or the afterlife instead of the mortal self or bodily self.

Kenosis, Emptiness, and Jewish Mysticism. In contemporary interfaith dialogues, it is interesting to note that the concept of emptiness has been pointed to as a central concept of convergence in the Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist dialogues (Abe, 1990; Altizer, 1990; Borowitz, 1990; Moore, 2002). In each of these religions, various traditions have an emptying or self-emptying religious process. In Christianity, the idea of Kenosis was also applied to Christ, and his self-emptying through the crucifixion (Abe, 1990). In Buddhism, the Sunyata, which literally means emptiness, is seen as the ultimate reality, including the reality of the self (i.e., no-self). In Jewish mysticism, the idea of emptying is less direct, but nonetheless still present (Borowitz,

1990). Within each of these very different religious traditions, all share a place for the concept of emptying as applied to God or Ultimate reality and the self.

Summary of Important Pre-modern Themes. The dualistic notion of the self containing the soul, which is pure, and the body, which is sinful, dominated pre-modern thought. In language, the self often became associated with the body and sinful nature. Because of this, excessive focus on the self, especially the worldly self, was seen as sinful. Self-denial is a common theme that was often encouraged. Some religious individuals have taken this to the extreme of stating that self-esteem or any self-focus is sinful and should be discouraged. The soul, or the immaterial and immortal aspect of the self, should conversely embraced.

The Modern Self

The modern period brought into question many of the assumptions of premodernism, which, in turn, questioned premodern assumptions about the nature of persons. Two broad approaches to understanding the self dominated in the modern period. The major challenges encountered in the modern period were attempts to rectify religious, philosophical, and scientific views of the self.

The dominant view of the self in the modern period was one of reductionistic materialism or physicalism. It assumed the self is contained within the biology of the individual while calling into question any metaphysical aspects of the self. From within this purview, a great many variations occurred. One line of reasoning emerging from this perspective emphasized behavior (behaviorism) and/or consciousness, narrowly defined as cognitive awareness, neo-behaviorism, or cognitive-behaviorism as the essential self. These are more easily traceable to the biological origins or derivatives of such self processes.

Freud, however, brought about an alternative biological position. Though often misrepresented, Freud's theory is a biological or drive model in which all the self is contained within the biology. The unconscious, though often conjuring metaphysical associations for many people, is located within the body for Freud. Freud's theory expanded the conceptualization of the self to include the unconscious along with behavior and conscious aspects of the individual.

The second modern perspective of self attempted to rectify modern assumptions with religious values. The idea of a soul or some metaphysical aspect of the person was important for most Western religious perspectives. Modern reductionism and materialism called this into question. There were a variety of attempts to rectify this discrepancy, many of which emphasized some type of parallelism between metaphysical and biological aspects of the self. While an overview of these different approaches is beyond the scope of this paper, we will address a few related issues.

Psychophysical parallelism, which maintains there is a parallel between what occurs in the mind and what occurs in the brain, is one common way to save the idea of the soul (Brennan, 2003). Several different forms of psychophysical parallelism developed from the 17th through 19th century. Many of these approaches adhered to a position that there was no interaction between physical and metaphysical aspects of the person; they simply were parallel to each other. Others, such as Descartes, advocated for an interaction between the physical and metaphysical aspects of the person.

Wilber (2000a) adds a more complex, contemporary alternative to psychological parallelism. In describing various aspects of the self, he states that they

> cannot be reduced to material dimensions (because, unlike matter, they do not possess simple location). Nonetheless, feelings, mental ideas, and spiritual illuminations all have physical correlates that can be measured by various scientific means, from EER machines to blood chemistry to PET scans to galvanic skin response. (p. 75)

For Wilber, this alternative is not necessarily that there is a metaphysical parallel to brain and physiological functioning; rather, the relationship is more complex than that. These functions of the self cannot be reduced to a singular place in the brain, but rather are the result of a complex interaction of various parts of the brain that go beyond its mere material makeup.

A recent alternative way to reconcile materialism and religion is elucidated in the concept of nonreductive physicalism (see Brown, Murphy, & Malony, 1998). The basis of this argument is to develop a physicalism which doesn't necessitate a

metaphysical mind or soul to explain our higher functions without reducing these same higher functions through reductionism (Murphey, 1998). Murphy states,

> To sum up, science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness. Furthermore, philosophers have argued cogently that the belief in a substantial mind or soul is the result of confusion arising from how we talk. We have been misled by the fact that "mind" and "soul" are nouns into thinking that there must be an object to which these terms correspond. Rather, we say that a person is intelligent, and by this we mean that the person behaves or has the disposition to behave in certain ways; we do not mean to postulate the existence of a substance, intelligence. Similarly, when we say a person has a mind, we might better understand this to mean that the person displays a broad set of actions, capacities, and dispositions. (pp. 18-19)

Emergent properties, often associated with that which makes people humans, have often been characterized as part of a metaphysical mind or brain. Instead, advocates of nonreductive physicalism state that properties these arise from complex actions and interactions arising from various aspects of our physical make up. Stated differently, the whole, through complex interaction, becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

Throughout the modern period, there was a consistent view of the self as being a reality. The essential nature of the self, though understood differently, was largely unquestioned. It was not until postmodern times and the introduction of Eastern thought that Western thinkers began to question the existence of an essential self.

Countercultural Perspectives in Modern Times

Though we will not focus on them in this paper, it is important to note that there were many countercultural movements in the modern period which did not always align with the modernist assumptions. Jung's psychology, especially his idea of the collective unconscious, is an important example. Additionally, the psychology of William James (1902/1997) maintained that scientific explorations should not be limited to that which can be studied empirically (i.e., through the senses). In addition

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to these intellectually rigorous approaches, there are numerous modern views which simply neglected to address the implicitly contradictory views of the self or viewed them as irrelevant. The specialization and compartmentalization of academic disciplines assisted this process. For example, religious and scientific knowledge were often understood as different domains, so apparent contradictions did not matter (Barbour, 2000).

<div align="center">Changing Conceptions of the Self in Postmodern Times</div>

Postmodern Themes

...there is nothing that is written about periods, places, or cultures that cannot be discredited. One can always find strong emanations of the past in what is "new." (Gergen, 1991, p. ix)

Modernism arose during a time in history when cultures remained fairly isolated. There is little doubt that this played a role in the narrowness of the modernist epistemology and worldview. The height of modernism brought with it great confidence in human potential, confidence in the role of humanity (particularly White humanity) in the order of all living things, and belief that science/technology would save the world from wars, sickness, and maybe even death. Myths of the fountain of youth, the manifest destiny, utopia, and other grandiose themes abounded. Modernism made attractive promises but, in the end, modernism failed. It did not come through with what it promised. Postmodernism emerged with the flurry of anger that so often accompanies the disillusionment of fallen heroes and broken ideals. In response to the idealism of modernism, postmodernism began with a reactionary pessimism that, over time, opened doors toward a theory able to integrate hopeful optimism with tempered pessimism. The myriad of postmodern theories today reflect everything from exuberant sanguinity to dreadful cynicism while, at its best, bringing together modulated versions of both dispositions.

Danger often ensues when individuals take on a modern or postmodern outlook without critical examination of the potential consequences. Too often, it is assumed that modernism and postmodernism reflect different ends of a continuum, thus individuals must assume an outlook adhering to one or the other position. Modernism and postmodern are paradigmatically different, not opposite extremes on a

continuum. Extremes such as absolute relativity, scientific materialism, and logical positivism can all be located in broader conceptions of modernism and postmodernism, but focusing on these more extreme examples often prevents people from grasping the diversity within each paradigm. This is a difficult distinction for many people in Western culture to make. Western thought often wants to place things in opposites or dualities. Continuums demonstrate this difference in the polar extremes of the end points. However, opposites can also be seen as categorically different or the complete negation of the other. In this view, there is not a gradual transition between extremes, but the choice of one option which is implicitly assumed to be the opposite of the other. The difference between modernism and postmodernism can not be conceptualized as merely being opposites. Instead, they are paradigmatically different, but not necessarily to such an extreme as to fully negate the other viewpoint. Postmodernism embraces many aspects of modernism, such as modernist epistemology, by placing it in a different context changing its deeper significance (i.e., placing it as one of many ways of knowing instead of *the* way of knowing). In order to understand distinctions and similarities between these theories, different categories of differences are needed.

Anderson (1995) states that the transition from modernism to postmodernism "has to do with a change not so much in *what* we believe as in *how* we believe" (p. 2). It is the very nature of knowledge and truth (i.e., epistemology) that is changing. As such, postmodernism does not negate modernism; rather, it places it in a different context. Modernism believes there is a knowable absolute truth that can be known through science and reason (see Hoffman, Hoffman, Robison, & Lawrence, 2005). Postmodernists disagree about whether there is ultimate truth, but do agree that this truth cannot be known. This reflects a radical and important shift. Throughout the premodern and modern periods there was general agreement by the majority of authorities that truth, even ultimate truth, could be known. The postmodern shift represents the first major change in the history of thought which calls the assumption of *knowable* Truth into question on a large scale. This necessitates new conceptions of a theory of knowledge.

Modernism utilized a foundational theory of knowledge which begins with knowable ultimate Truth (Hoffman et al., 2005; Murphy, 1996). From this perspective, all knowledge is built from that which can be certainly known. The well-known example of Descartes demonstrates both the epistemology and methodology of this perspective. Descartes began questioning everything he could question and came to the conclusion that he couldn't question that he is thinking, which means he exists (i.e., "I think therefore I am"). This statement, which is often cited as the beginning of modernism, asserts that all knowledge must be built from this basic understanding as the foundation of knowledge. Descartes began with rationalism, but his theory evolved into a more scientific approach which combined rationalism and empiricism (i.e., knowing through the senses). These two ways of knowing were the privileged epistemologies of the modernist period. The methodologies of logic (a rationalistic method) and science (application of reason to empiricism) were elucidated from these ways of knowing as the primary methodologies.

Postmodernism began largely as a reaction against privileging modernist epistemologies and methodologies. The early phase of postmodernism focuses on deconstructing modernism, while the second phase is beginning to develop alternative epistemologies and methodologies (Hoffman et al., 2005). The primary epistemological position demonstrates an epistemological pluralism (Hoffman et al., 2005) and a metaphysical holism (Murphey, 1995) which does not privilege any one way of knowing. As an alternative, postmodernism suggests that multiple epistemologies and methodologies should be utilized.

Quine and Ullian (1970) developed a web theory which offered the basis of a postmodern theory of knowledge. While their initial formulations are important in the development of a postmodern framework, their approach remains limited in that it still privileges certain modernist ways of knowing (Murphey, 1995). Quine and Ullian's theory conceptualizes knowledge as being similar to a large web of knowledge. Each point of connection represents a piece of knowledge. Each point of knowledge is not an ultimate truth, but rather reflects the current understanding which is subject to reformulation. Knowledge, like a spider web, is interconnected and most dependent upon the connection points closest to it. If any connection point is changed, it

impacts all the other connection points in the web. The closest points are impacted more than the distal points. In this view, points of knowledge should continually be re-examined and re-considered.

The common critique of postmodernism and the web theory of knowledge is that it appears to relegate all ways of knowing as equal (i.e., relativism). However, this represents an oversimplification and misunderstanding of postmodernism rather than a valid critique. While there are postmodern approaches that embrace an extreme relativism, this is not essential to postmodernist thought. Postmodernism is pluralistic, embracing many different viewpoints and approaches, but not necessarily relativistic, stating that all viewpoints are equal. For example, when studying the self, postmodernism would advocate that psychology, anthropology, sociology, theology, biology, and physics, amongst other perspectives, should be considered. However, this does not mean that all of these should be given equal weight. In this example, physics is not likely to be seen as having the same weight in this discussion as psychology. However, if the focus was changed to discussing the impact of gravity on chemical and cellular structures in the brain during trips to space, then physics would be given much greater consideration.

In summary, four major themes emerge in a postmodern theory of knowledge. First, truth, regardless of whether there is ultimate truth, can only be understood locally or to a limited degree. Second, truth is best approximated using multiple epistemologies and multiple methodologies. Third, truth should continually be re-examined in light of various relevant sources and new discoveries. Fourth, truth is interconnected and interdependent.

General Postmodern Themes in Relation to the Self

Applying these postmodern themes to the psychological and philosophical study of the self brings to light several important factors. First, any understanding of the self will be incomplete and should take into consideration cultural (i.e., local) understandings of the self. Second, various approaches to understanding the self should be considered. Third, conceptions of the self should be continually re-examined in a broad, interdisciplinary manner. Fourth, any changes in the

understanding of the self impact the broader conception, potentially requiring a complete reanalysis.

These principles may also be applied more discretely to how individuals understand themselves. As the influence of postmodernism expands along with other changes inherent in postmodern culture, it is bound to impact the implicit assumptions people have about themselves. These changes bring opportunities, dangers, and challenges. Some of the challenges are connected to the misconceptions of postmodernism and the unique changes associated with contemporary culture. These challenges warrant a deeper examination of the relevant issues.

There are those who believe that a coherent self in the postmodern era is under unprecedented attack and in danger of annihilation. Adjectives applied to the postmodern self include empty, multiple, and saturated (Messer & Warren, 2001, as cited in Bracken, 2003). These descriptors stand in contrast to the modern view of an autonomous, boundaried, stable self. Postmodern thought encompasses a continuum of ideas about the self that generally center upon the idea that the self is socially mediated. The individual self is situated in a culture that provides a framework for understanding personal experience and acts as guidance for behavior.

The threats to the self discussed are related more to the extremes of postmodernist theory. The more moderate positions argue for a plurality of selves appropriate to the context of the moment and the environment (e.g., Leib & Kanofsky, 2003; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Neimeyer, 1998). The real postmodern challenge may be only to a modern conceptualization of a permanent, totally autonomous self. The postmodernist self is a more holistic, complex, nuanced, and adaptive self that is actively engaged in the world. In the words of Martin and Sugarman (2001), "a self-interpreting human being emergent within a real but contingent physical, biological, and sociocultural world" that exercises influence upon the environment even as it is influenced by the environment and actively engages in making meaning out of experience. An example offered by Neimeyer is found in the Personal Construct Theory of Kelly (1955, as cited in Neimeyer, 1998) which "viewed identity as organized around 'core role constructs'" used in construing self and world. In the words of Ellis (1991), "If the complex term self can properly be defined at all

(which seems somewhat doubtful), it seems inevitably to include both the social context . . . and the individual's unique consciousness (and consciousness about consciousness) in which the social self is embedded" (p. 539).

Challenges to the Self

The Self and Pluralism. As previously stated, culture provides a lens through which experience, behavior, and the self are interpreted. Culture involves, among other things, shared language, symbols, and values. Therein lies another threat to the postmodern self. To the extent that a culture becomes less coherent or weakened through input from other cultures that is integrated by its members, the culture becomes less functional as an interpretive and evaluative lens. May (1991) believes that experience and the self are evaluated, directed, and interpreted by shared aspects of a culture's myths. The loss or weakening of that culture may leave the self rudderless and without structure, isolated without the social mediation upon which the self, at least in part, depends for its existence.

Exposure to other belief systems is also viewed as potentially undermining to the self in the postmodern era because other belief systems may challenge values that contribute to the framework through which the self and experience are interpreted and given meaning (e.g. Gergen, 1991). Challenges to values may also result in the perception of truth as relative and fluid. Exposure to varied cultures (religious and national) offers parallel belief systems which may cause questioning of those values integrated into the self concept by way of our personal myths (May, 1991).

The Self as a Social Construction. One broad theoretical orientation in psychology allied with postmodern thinking is called, variously, constructivism, constructionism, and constructive (Raskin, 2002). Radical constructivism holds that human reality is created by interpretation of objective reality and that there is no objective reality (Lieb & Kanofsky, 2003). Social constructivists argue that an individual's identity is constructed by social interaction, but the person actively constructs that identity. Nonetheless, according to Raskin, social constructivists aver that there is no internal self. What is perceived as the self is actually a configuration of positions taken within a social network. A third form of constructivism is critical

constructivism. Critical constructivists believe that there exists an independent first order reality that constrains, but does not create, individual, or second order, reality. Second order reality is created by an individual's active interpretation of and influence upon experience in the context of social interaction (Mahoney, 1991). Language holds a critical place in constructivist theory in that selfhood and reality are said to be co-constructed through shared language (Gergen, 1991).

One line of thought is that, because a sense of self is culturally constructed, a homogenous social environment is required for its existence. Proponents of this view see personal identity as intrinsically social and founded on relations with others (Greenlaw, 1994). These theorists believe that the requisite cultural homogeneity is eroded by the technologically facilitated exposure to other cultures (whether religious or national) and contexts. For these writers, language and its consensual meaning is critically important for the development of a self concept. According to Gergen (1996), "To the extent that there is homogeneity in context of expression . . . the underlying psychological source is enhanced." The expanded vocabulary of the self, both from other cultures and from the "mainstreaming" of terminology in the field of psychology, is thought to create a potential for confusion in the culturally based meaning of words used to define the self.

This perspective is not without its dissenters. Developmental theorists such as Piaget (Pulaski, 1980), Mahler (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1994), and Erikson (Erikson & Erikson, 1997) observed children of all different ages in different settings to formulate stages of development. As a result of their work, it is accepted by many psychologists that a sense of self begins to develop during infancy, before language is acquired (Courage & Howe, 2002). According to Allport and Sullivan, even young children have a concept of "good me" and "bad me" without a sophisticated vocabulary with which to express it (McAdams, 1994). Yet, it should be maintained that the ego is not necessarily the equivalent to the self, and may only refer to an aspect of self at best.

The Self and Fluidity. Lifton (1995), drawing on Greek mythology, introduces the Protean self:

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> Now, we know from Greek mythology that Proteus was able to change his shape with relative ease from wild boar to lion to dragon to fire to flood. What he found difficult, and would not do unless seized and chained, was to commit himself to a single form, a form most his own, and carry out his function of prophecy. We can say the same of Protean man, but we must keep in mind his possibilities as well as his difficulties. (p. 130)

Proteus is not the typical mythic figure. In the West, it is more common to see myths of stability as can be easily illustrated in movies and literature. People in the United States have been inundated with images of the unwavering cowboy or hero who perseveres by sticking to his or her values and commitments. While admirable in many situations, there is also the image of the "tragic hero" who loses everything because he or she is unwilling to adapt to changes.

This second side of the Protean myth is as dangerous as the first. May (1991) illustrates,

> But this addiction to change can lead to superficiality and psychological emptiness, and like Peer Gynt, we never pause long enough to listen to our own deeper insights. Lifton uses the myth of Proteus to describe the chameleon tendencies, the ease with which many modern Americans play any role the situation requires of them. Consequently, we not only do not speak from our inner integrity, but often have a conviction of never having lived as our "true selves." (p. 105)

The tragedy is in the inability to balance the stability and fluidity of the self, as illustrated in our constrictive and expansive potentialities (Schneider, 1990). Proteus and the lonely hero are equally tragic.

In mainstream psychology, theorists across different domains fall prey to both tragedies. Many view the self as a dynamic, adaptive structure which is naturally in a constant state of change (e.g., McAdams, 1994; Markus, & Nuria, 1986; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Sartre, 1988). At the same time, research from a number of theoretical orientations inquiring into the nature of the self concluded that adults direct more attention and more quickly process information that is self-relevant and congruent with internal representations of the self. Individuals tend to interpret ambiguous

information or fill in missing information in a manner consistent with their internal representations (e.g. Bowlby, 1973; McAdams, 1994; Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004). In other words, they construct the self in a consistent manner. Results from studies such as these suggest that people have some stability to self-representations that are likely to be resistant to change or dissolution. However, self-representations are not equivalent to the self and could refer to a *perceived* self instead of a *real* self. Additionally, while some self-representations remain stable and resistant to change, others could show greater change. As Gergen (1995) states, "we have paid too much attention to such central tendencies, and have ignored the range and complexity of being. The individual has many potential selves" (p. 142).

Another challenge to the self represented by postmodernist thought is the question of whether the self can change or grow in any real or purposeful way. Social constructivism argues for a non-agentic self constructed by culture and social discourse with language as a "matrix of meaning making" (Neimeyer, 1998, p. 135). One could argue, as does Lyddon (1998), that accepting this to be true (in contravention of social constructivist tenets rejecting metanarrative) is tantamount to an abdication of any personal responsibility because the individual is at the mercy of social currents and circumstances as well as the extent of one's facility with language. This begs the question of what this means for adherence to culturally accepted norms of behavior or legal systems which infer agency and confer responsibility (Neimeyer, 1998). A second point: If there is no self, who makes the meaning (Gaskins, 1999)? The constitution of the self through social discourse also begs the question of how current technologies which may replace or minimize person-to-person discourse influence the self (see Gergen, 1991). The advent of television, voice mail, computers e-mail, and the internet mean that exchanges of language can occur without any live discourse. How "social" must the discourse be to have meaning in the construction of the self?

The Self and Masks. Gergen (1995), in his early writing, challenged the conception that a stable, coherent self is necessary for psychological health. As Gergen points out that nearly all psychological research and assessment is based upon the assumption that it is normative for individuals to develop a "firm and consistent

sense of identity" (p. 137). If this is normative and healthy, then inconsistency is seen as bad. Gergen states,

> My research over the past few years has led me to question both of these assumptions very seriously. I doubt that a person normally develops a coherent sense of identity, and to the extent that he does, he may experience severe emotional distress. The long-term intimate relationship, so cherished in our society, is an unsuspected cause of this distress because it freezes and constricts identity. (p. 138)

This challenging statement not only calls into question prominent psychological assumptions, but also many cultural and religious values. For instance, the last sentence in the above quote could be interpreted to mean that the constrictive nature of marriage may interfere with optimal psychological health. Furthermore, could it be that multiple marriages or relationships over a lifespan, each fitting the current conception of the self, may be healthier? What would a protean self in constant flux mean for the long-espoused belief in Western psychology that children need consistency from caregivers?

Gergen is not necessarily advocating for this extreme position and neither are we. However, this does point toward some important implications. For example, in premarital counseling, the assumption of a stable, coherent sense of identity pervades. This supposition is that if the couple is currently a good fit, they will remain a good fit. This perspective is likely to fit for a couple in which both individuals are less likely to engage in personal change and development, given external influences do not change this propensity. However, for many couples, particularly if the individuals are committed to personal growth and development, a greater risk is inherent in the assumption of a stable self. Premarital counseling, in these situations, should also attempt to explore the likely trajectory of growth and change in the individuals. In order to do this, a different approach to psychological assessment is needed as well as interventions designed to promote sharing in the growth process and, perhaps, to encourage growth in parallel or to moderate growth in divergent directions.

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In the marriage example, Gergen's (1995) concern centers on three interrelated issues. First, he believes many couples focus on their spouse for fulfillment of their needs. Second, the inability to appreciate or tolerate differences in the other pushes spouses to pressure the other for consistency. Finally, the idealization process naturally brings about several extreme states of emotion that do not last and are often difficult to tolerate. The conception of the self and the spouse in their relationship often develop during periods of intense passion and idealization. When these break, there is the natural tendency to shift to extremes of anger and sadness. If the couple is not prepared to withstand these challenges, it often leads to the dissolution of the relationship.

For Gergen (1995), the healthy resolution of this problem is to become more comfortable with different experiences and different masks. If individuals can seek out and learn to appreciate a broad range of different experiences, they are better able to tolerate differences with their spouse or others with whom they choose to maintain long-term relationships. Additionally, they will learn to adjust and appreciate different sides of themselves or their different masks. Their appreciation for diversity within oneself and others replaces the myth of the stable self.

For this self who is more prone to adjust within the context, he or she is comfortable playing many different roles. There is an appreciation for these variations of the self. The stable self is replaced by an intersubjective self, which is created anew in different contexts. For Gergen (1995), this does not threaten the depth of being, but rather creates it in a more pluralistic, diverse context. Stated differently, "The mask may be not the symbol of superficiality that we have thought it was, but the means of realizing our potential" (Gergen, 1995, p. 144).

Gergen's Saturated Self.

Gergen's (1991) most significant contribution to the literature on the self is his book *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. In this book, he develops an important postmodern thesis stating that social saturation threatens the postmodern self. By social saturation, it is meant that the technology of this age facilitates interpersonal interaction so that people may engage in more relationships than before. Pluralism, which was discussed previously, is one part if this new matrix.

The potential threat is predicated upon the belief that our personal essence is based on social context and a multiplicity of relationships means the self is under constant construction and reconstruction without opportunity for introspection.

It is not necessarily the exposure, in itself, that is danger, but rather the rapid rate in which exposure occurs that doesn't allow time for introspection and integration. In *The Saturated Self*, Gergen (1991) takes a more cautionary agenda in than in his previous article advocating for multiple masks (the original version of this article was published in 1972, almost 20-years prior to *The Saturated Self*). While he recognizes this progression into multiplicity of experience is inevitable at this point, he appears more cautious about the consequences of these changes.

Regardless of how an individual feels about the modern self, it is not likely that this construction can exist in a meaningful way for most people in contemporary life. The modern stability is quickly overwhelmed by the postmodern plurality. While a rigid defensive position is possible, it may not be able to maintain psychological health. This doesn't necessitate a discarding of the self or moving to the extreme of no-self or many selves, but it does call for some necessary reconstruction.

Buddhism's "No Self" and the Middle Path

A central concept in Buddhist philosophy is that of "no self," or *anatta*. Buddhism teaches that personal identities are the individual's creation and the source of suffering. According to Gaskins (1999), describing Zen Buddhist teaching, the First Noble Truth of Buddha is that life is suffering, and the Second Noble Truth of Buddha is that the suffering is caused by "craving or striving" (p. 206). Craving arises from desire to be, for the existence of a self in denial of our natural state of impermanence.

Gaskins (1999) writes, "The Buddha taught that what we recognize as a self of permanent essence is actually an ever-changing configuration of physical or mental energies or processes that is only meaningful because of . . . (particular contexts)" (p. 206). Here, the distinction between the self and the personality is illuminating. In Buddhist perspectives on reincarnation, what continues on into the next life is an enduring pattern, not the self, which is an illusion. In comparing this with our definitions above, this is more consistent with the idea of personality. Most Western

interpretations of reincarnation assume that it is the self, not the personality, which endures. However, the self is not seen as real.

The creation of a self not only divorces people from their natural state, but also from the reality of the moment because the meaning-making self *filters* and *interprets* experience rather than *being in* experience. Part of the meaning-making function of the self is evaluative. This evaluative quality leads us to desire (crave) those things, qualities, and characteristics that we value more highly. The result is unending craving and discontentment, Gaskin (1999) explains, because there is always something more to crave, more highly valued than that which is possessed.

Gaskins (1999) states that enlightenment and freedom from suffering in Buddhist philosophy is the dissolution of the false structures which encumber the natural human state, accepting and returning to the original state of impermanence. This is the Fourth Noble Truth of Buddha. Thus, dissolving the distorting boundaries between us and existence – a return to *anatta* – is the path to freedom from suffering to happiness and contentment. Anatta frees us from craving and the expectations, wants, and evaluations that form as a result of creating an independent self.

The Buddhist conception of self is often misinterpreted by many in Western culture in two ways. These misconceptions arise out of misunderstanding the current state and the Buddhist ideal. In the Buddhist view of self, the ultimate goal is to reach an understanding that the self is an illusion or empty. This is often viewed as a cognitive understanding or assent to the idea that the self is not real. The Buddhist conception, however, goes much deeper than the cognitive realm. A better analogy is that the Buddhist seeks to achieve a letting go of the illusions of the self at an experiential level. It is the experience of no-self.

Second, many Buddhist perspectives do not advocate that the no-self ideal is something that individuals should directly seek to accomplish. In other words, it is not recommended that denying oneself is the path to experience no-self. Instead, it is helpful, if not necessary, to maintain some conception of the self along the way. Using the analogy of the middle path, the journey to no-self avoids the extremes of excessively holding on to conceptions of the self and the extreme of denying oneself (Epstein, 1995).

This second misconception is dealt with beautifully in Epstein's (1995) book *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. The title of this book itself seems to imply that there is no self; however, this is oversimplifying the Buddhist perspective. According to Epstein,

> When asked the ultimate narcissistic question by another follower – "What is the nature of the self?" – the Buddha responded that there is neither self nor no-self. The question, itself, was flawed, the Buddha implied, for it was being asked from a place that already assumed that the self was an entity. (p. 65)

The middle path, for the Buddha, attempted to avoid the extremes of narcissistic or grandiose conceptions of the self which held firmly to the idea of a real self and the opposite extreme of a self-deprecating, empty self (Epstein, 1995). Epstein continued stating,

> If Buddha had answered that there was a Self, he would have reinforced his questioner's grandiosity, that is, the idealized notions of possessing something lasting, unchanging, and special. If he had answered that there was truthfully no Self, he would have reinforced his questioner's sense of alimentation and hollowness, a despairing belief in personal nothingness. (p. 65)

There is an inherent sense of paradox in much of Buddhist thought, which parallels Schneider's (1990) paradoxical self. Both see the dangers apparent in the extremes, along with the wisdom of a middle path.

Another way of conceptualizing the no-self is through the idea of impermanence (Eckel, 2002). Eckel states, "To be wise…is to see that the self changes at every moment and has no permanent identity" (p. 60). In this conception, the idea of no-self is emphasizing that the self is in a constant process of changing, so there is no permanent self, but instead a fluid, ever-changing self.

Zweig's "No Self"

Zweig's (1995) idea of no-self integrates the Buddhist viewpoint into a psychological perspective. Similar to Gergen, Zweig focuses on pluralism to argue for a social construction of self that appears to be moving in the direction of no-self. However, Zweig focuses more on psychological pluralism than cultural pluralism in her discussion:

This relativizing of beliefs about the Self in our time goes far beyond a mere nod of the head to cultural pluralism: Many theorists are calling into question any idea of a Self as a stable, continuing entity apart from its own descriptions of being. (p. 149)

Here, Zweig provides an important distinction about the stability of the self. While self-descriptions may remain stable, as demonstrated by psychological tests, the actual self or construction thereof may be more fluid. Thus, the apparent stability of the self may be more due to a limitation of language than a reality.

As Zweig (1995) illustrates, this development can be seen across several psychological orientations toward an understanding that the self is socially constructed. Within these constructions, trends toward a more relational understanding of self along with views of a less essential self or no-self seem to be appearing with greater frequency in psychological theory.

<div align="center">Existential Perspectives on the Self</div>

Existential perspectives on the self share with postmodern thought the basic premise of inherent impermanence in our existence, our no-thingness. The ancestral existentialist philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Pascal foreshadow the postmodern view of the self as mutable, fluid, and endlessly constructed and re-constructed. The self is seen as a process rather than a stable entity (Bugenthal, 1978). Selfhood is a product of consciousness. Lao Tzu and Pascal both spoke of the infiniteness of our existence (Schneider & May, 1994). Pascal also spoke of the paradox of infinite possibilities inherent in our no-thingness (Friedman, 1991, as cited in Schneider & May, 1994). The infinite possibilities inherent in our no-thingness confer upon people the freedom to transform or create who they are in any moment, unconstrained by who they were the moment before (Schneider & May, 1994). Existential thought allies this freedom with responsibility for our creation. Existential theorists believe that terror of both infiniteness and nothingness – both states of nonbeing – fuel the striving to be and, often, the form which being takes.

Rollo May: Myths and the Self

May (1991) believed in the importance of myth to add structure and vitality to daily existence. He also saw myth as the narrative form of symbols which unite

members of a culture by communication of shared themes of existence, belief systems, and meanings (May, 1975). According to May (1991), a significant problem in our time is the loss of myths and concomitant loss of values which they communicate. On a cultural level, the loss of myth results in cultural fragmentation that is a primary source of problems in living for the members of that culture who tend to embody the cultural dysfunction (1969, p. 20). May blamed a loss of myth for the increasing alienation and mechanization he observed in human existence.

May saw a person's life story as their own personal myth. The personal myth guides and informs individual experience and development, thereby playing an important role in forming self and identity (May, 1991). Identity, the interpretation of the self, is a personal myth made up of our values, experiences, and relationships which include material from the cultural mythology. There is a social aspect to our personal myth derived not only from relationships with others but also from our cultural context. Our personal myths give structure to our lives. May believes that myths provide a sense of belongingness and imbue the individual's existence with meaning while allowing them to make sense of their experience. Without myths, people may be restricted in their capacity to exercise their inherent freedom to choose the form and nature of their existence and more vulnerable to neurotic guilt and anxiety. May (1969) wrote,

> Psychotherapy reveals . . . the immediate situation of the individual's "sickness" *and* the archetypal qualities and characteristics which constitute the human being as human . . . . It is the latter characteristics which have gone awry . . . . The interpretation of a patient's problems . . . is also a partial interpretation of man's self-interpretation of himself through history in the archetypal forms in literature (pp. 19-20)

Archetypes in the Jungian tradition are principles that make sense of our experience (Storr, 1983). The literary expression of archetypes in myth is, according to May, the expression of themes shared by mankind of struggles for identity and affirmation. The loss of myth for individuals means a loss of the ability to organize our experience with a corresponding diminution in meaning-making ability as well as the loss of sustenance and comfort as we confront universal struggles of human existence.

Myths of self provide important meaning for individuals which help them maintain through difficult times. Whether they are acknowledged or not, myths exist. However, when they are not acknowledged, they often lack the coherence and integration to be sustaining. From an existential perspective, *the reality of the self may not be as important as the myth of self*. Individual myths should be assessed pragmatically as well as in comparison with an individual's values.

Sartre's Existence and Essence

Sartre's philosophy gave rise to two tenets of existential psychology: The self is in constant evolution, and existence precedes essence. These two ideas are intertwined in Sartre's philosophy. Sartre (1956) described a human being as being-for-itself and a material object as being-in-itself. Being-in-itself is something complete, the initial conceptualization, or essence, of which is brought into physical existence. Being-for-itself refers to human beings as products of freedom in the consciousness inherent in each person and exercised in the choice each person makes as to who they are to be. Who people are, in Sartre's thinking, is their essence. Essentially, "existence precedes essence" refers to the idea that human beings are without predetermined form or limitations: We exist. The form individuals choose for themselves (who they become) follows and constitutes their essence. Sartre (1946) said, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." What people make of themselves is essence. The freedom to choose what to make of one's self is accompanied by responsibility for one's existence. In fact, Sartre carries responsibility beyond the individual to humankind as a whole.

Sartre (1988) viewed the choices that become the self as the result of a stream of reflective acts of consciousness. Sartre posited two kinds of acts of consciousness: first and second degree. First degree acts of consciousness are the awareness of objects excluding the self and are, in Sartre's language, non-reflective. A second degree act of consciousness reflects upon the self and through reflective activity, gives form to the self that is reflected upon. Unending series of second degree acts of consciousness form the ego or the Me. Despite the human experience of a constant Me across time, Sartre believed that each reflective act gave birth to a new self different

from that created by the previous act. Thus, in Sartre's view, the self is impermanent because it is unendingly changing, a constant project (Schneider & May, 1995).

Sartre also acknowledged the social nature of the self. He believed that the self that is created truly exists only to the extent that others acknowledge its existence. Accordingly, individuals are aware of a self only in the instant that others are aware of them (Danto, 1975). Sartre (1946) stated that outside of conscious awareness, the self – indeed any object – is only a probable. In Sartre's thinking, however, for consciousness to be directly aware of itself makes that consciousness into an object which is an affront to the dignity of people and is never the case. He states, instead, that in the Cartesian phrase "I think, therefore I am," the "I think" (the *cogito*) refers to not only the immediate sense of self but that of others as well, and it is in the other's recognition of the self that the self is attained. In Sartre's words, individuals "cannot be anything other than what others recognize [them] to be" (1956). The reflective awareness of the other becomes the object which gives birth to the truth of the immediate self.

The Shadow, the Daimonic, and the Self

Jung's idea of the shadow, along with May's conception of the daimon, adds a vital dimension to any discussion of the self (Diamond, 1996). Too often, discussions of the self build idealistic pictures of inner beauty and potential without considering the potential for evil. This does not heed Whitmont's (1991) warning, "The shadow cannot be eliminated…When we cannot see it, it is time to beware!…It becomes pathological only when we assume we do not have it; because then it has us" (p. 18-19).

The shadow has been defined as, "that part of the personality which has been repressed for the sake of the ego ideal" (Whitmont, 1991). For most theorists, the shadow remains largely or entirely in the unconscious. According to Jung, there is both a personal shadow along with a collective shadow (Jacobi, 1942/1973; Zweig & Abrams, 1991). The collective shadow can be understood as the potential for evil inherent in the human condition (Zweig & Abrams, 1991). While May felt Jung's contribution of the shadow was an important development in the history of psychology, he felt its definition was too constraining (Diamond, 1996). Instead of

attempting to broaden Jung's terminology, he introduced a new term, the daimon, which was borrowed from ancient Greek thought. The daimon is "any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person" (May, 1969, p. 65).

Both Jung and May believed that the shadow or daimon could be destructive or instructive, a force of evil or a force of creativity (Diamond, 1996). Consistent with psychoanalytic thought, they believed that which is repressed will find expression. When these forces, which represent our dark side or disavowed aspects of the self, are not dealt with, then they will find a way to exert themselves. For both Jung and May, it is better to integrate them into our self-conceptions utilizing their energy as a creative force.

One danger in moving toward a conception of multiple selves or no self is the difficulty dealing with evil. If there is no self, then it is easy to disregard the potential for evil inherent in every person. If multiple selves are conceived of, it becomes easy to relegate evil to particular selves to avoid taking full responsibility for evil acts. Furthermore, when the potential for evil is not owned, it becomes easier for them to be projected onto other people or groups. Keen (1991) states, "In the beginning we create the enemy. Before the weapon comes the image. We *think* others to death and then invent the battle-axe or the ballistic missiles with which to actually kill them. Propaganda precedes technology" (p. 198). He continues,

> Instead of being hypnotized by the enemy we need to begin looking at the eyes with which we see the enemy…We need to become conscious of…"the shadow." The heroes and leaders toward peace in our time will be those men and women who have the courage to plunge into the darkness at the bottom of the personal and corporate psyche and face the enemy within. Depth psychology has presented us with the undeniable wisdom that the enemy is constructed from denied aspects of the self. (pp. 198-199)

When the self is no longer a container for individuals to own their own potential for evil, the temptation to project this on the other may increase. This is particularly hideous when connected with racism, sexism, and homophobia. For many, hate begins with the inability to tolerate aspects of the self and ends with the projection of this intolerance onto others who represent difference.

Surprisingly, evil becomes one of the stronger arguments to maintain a myth of self. Evil needs to be owned to be prevented.

Schneider's Paradoxical Self

The paradoxical self, according to Schneider (1995), is a function of positions on a continuum between contradictory polarities of constricting and expansive capacities across six spheres of consciousness. A constricted consciousness is narrow in expression and experience (Schneider, 1998). An expansive consciousness is a broadening of experience and repression.

The paradoxical principle conceives of a constrictive/expansive continuum of which makes up the psyche (Schneider, 1990). In other words, the true self paradoxically encompasses the capacity for expansion and the capacity for constriction. Positions on the continuum reflect the individual's capacity to expand or constrict their experience. The center position reflects integration of the polarities which means enhanced conscious experience, self-awareness, and the ability to flexibly move from one polarity to the other.

Only part of the continuum is available to consciousness. The extremes of the polarities are potentially annihilation, either through constriction into nothingness or expansion into chaos (Schneider, 1998). The potential for annihilation creates anxiety which may result in the denial of the feared part of the continuum. This may result in maladaptive functioning arising from a defense against the dreaded polarity by movement to the opposite polarity. According to Schneider (1990), the defensive assumption of extreme positions on either polarity is the basis for maladaptive psychological functioning.

In Schneider's model, six spheres of consciousness form a hierarchy of depth with physiological consciousness at the top level followed, successively, by environmental, cognitive, psychosexual, interpersonal, and (deepest) experiential consciousness (Schneider, 1995). The spheres of consciousness also reflect the degree to which one is free to choose. Freedom of choice increases with depth. Thus, experiential consciousness at the core of the spectrum relates to "being level or ontological freedom" (p. 138). Different configurations of positioning along the continuum within each sphere of consciousness are associated in Schneider's model

with specific psychological dysfunction. An example offered by Schneider (1998) is that of a successful, charming woman presenting with depression. Her psychosocial history contained trauma which left her with a fear of hyperconstriction which led to compensatory hyperexpansive behavior in the form of early risk-taking behavior and a dynamic adult persona.

Optimal, adaptive functioning is the extent to which an individual can "integrate" the polarities and admit into consciousness the previously denied part of the self. Integration of the polarities, or centering, refers to the capacity to fluidly and adaptively experience the poles of the continuum that have been denied (Schneider, 1995). This frees the individual to exercise experiential freedom in the creation of self and meaning.

The paradoxical self, as a myth of self, offers the most promise of those we have explored through its ability to adapt while maintaining a coherent view of self. It is able to balance the polarities of an absolute, stationary self with the opposite extreme of no-self without relegating the final, ontological reality to the metaphysical realm. It can balance the tension between the potential for good and the potential for evil; stability, fluidity, and adaptability; individualistic needs and collectivist needs; the innate, the personally constructed, and the socially constructed; and between the subjective and the intersubjective. While adaptable enough to pull in many of the variation perspectives discussed above, it should not be turned into an oppressive metanarrative or ideal which is forced upon all people. Before ending our story, we will examine a few more perspectives which can be integrated with Schneider's existential view of the paradoxical self.

Toward an Integration

Implications of Whitehead's Process Philosophy

Alfred Whitehead, the founder of process philosophy, delineated a new way to understand reality. Cobb and Griffin (1976) provide a summary of process thought:

Process thought by definition affirms that process is fundamental. It does not assert that everything is in process; for that would mean that even the fact that things are in process is subject to change. There are unchanging principles of process and abstract forms. But to be actual is to be a process. Anything

which is not a process is an abstraction from a process, not a full-fledged actuality. (p. 14)

Unpacking the core themes of this concise definition alone could consume an entire paper. Whitehead's thoughts are not easy to digest, which may reflect why they have taken so long to gain influence in the academy. Witham (2005) noted that when Whitehead introduced his ideas at the famous Gifford Lectures, by the end of the lecture series there were only a few people left who could bear out his ideas. However, over time, as others have digested and made his thought more readable, the importance of process thought has been recognized by many.

Whitehead (1929/1978) believed that most philosophers erred in focusing on either the substance or the flow/flux; however, "in truth, the two lines cannot be torn apart in this way" (p. 209). Substance and change are connected in an essential way; however, most measurements of material or substance assume stability. Similarly, most abstract concepts and processes assume stability. It is easier to understand, discuss, and study entities that are stable. Because of this, the human tendency is to reify abstractions of process turning them into objects, thus making them easier to investigate and conceptualize.

This process mentality can be applied broadly to a variety of realities, including the self. The tendency is to conceptualize the self in a reified manner which focuses more on stability than flux. The idea of the self in process does not negate the *possibility* of aspects of stability; instead, it negates the *necessity* of stability. Consistency in measures of psychological inventories identify that, for many, aspects of the self or personality remain fairly consistent over time. But again, this *tendency* is not a *necessity*.

Many existential thinkers, such as Becker (1973), point to the need for defenses against some realities of life. For example, to live in constant awareness of the fragility of life can easily cause people to retreat from life into a form of living death. Similarly, the awareness of the constant potential flux of the self and the surrounding world could create overwhelming anxiety. The myth of the stable self provides a measure of security helping people cope with their world. When overly reified, this

becomes a constricting force preventing people from engaging in responsible, free living.

Quantum Physics Applications

At first, quantum physics appears to have little to do with the self. However, many applications of quantum physics have rather direct bearing on how he self is conceived. Two major themes are relevant for our current discussion.

Newtonian physics was the dominant mode of thought for the modernist period. Physics, in this guise, was the quintessential science. It demonstrated that some things are known for sure. However, quantum physics called into question many of the basic assumptions of Newtonian science (Ford, 2004; Wolf, 1981). This played a major role in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. During the time when the utopia science promised was beginning to be questioned, physics, which was seen as the most stable of all sciences, was being called into question. Quantum physics demonstrated that truth is more complicated than it often appears. Geertz (1973), the influential anthropologist, points out that the Newtonian view of people emphasized simplicity and laws which governed human behavior. The world of quantum physics and postmodern theory, by contrast, call into question the simplicity along with many of the laws thought to govern human behavior and selfhood.

A second, more direct implication pertains to the interrelatedness of all things. According to some perspectives in quantum physics, things are not as separate as what they appear to be or, stated differently, all things are related (Wheatley, 2001; Wolf, 1981). The boundaries often placed between different objects may be more arbitrary than once was believed. These quantum physics approaches focus on the world or universe as a holistic, interdependent system in which distinctions between self and world are not as absolute as previously believed. This calls into question even the materialist distinction between the self, others, and the world.

Jung and the Collective Unconscious

Jung developed a complex understanding of the self which incorporated archetypes and the collective unconscious as aspects of the self (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Jung, 1964). According to Jung, the unconscious, which is made up of personal and collective levels, was in existence far before the conscious and it remains more

primary (Jacobi, 1942/1973). Jacobi asserts that it is often difficult to distinguish between the realms of the unconscious; however, regardless of their realm, they exert their influence. While consciousness is also important in Jung's theory, to view it as primary is a mistake.

The collective unconscious presents certain challenges to previous conceptions of the self. According to Jacobi (1942/1973),

> the collective unconscious consists entirely of elements characteristic of the human species…The contents assigned to the collective unconscious represent the suprapersonal foundation both of the personal unconscious and of consciousness; it is neutral in every respect; the value and position of its contents are defined only when they come into contact with consciousness. (p. 35)

Accordingly, the collective level of the unconscious plays a primary role in the self's composition and organization. The self, in this view, cannot be contained within the material makeup of the body. Instead, the collective or universal aspect of the self is foundational to the self. Much like quantum physics, there is an interconnected quality in human beings.

As discussed previously, Jung also emphasized the importance of integrating various aspects of the self (Jacobi, 1942/1973; Zweig, 1995). The self was not so much of a thing to Jung as it was the idea of an integrated self which pulled together the various divergent aspects of one's being (Zweig, 1995). The striving toward integration or wholeness is primary in a Jungian conception of the good life.

Transpersonal Psychology, Spirit, and the Self

Transpersonal psychology focuses on the role of the spirit or the spiritual in the self (Cortright, 1997). It is interested in a variety of transpersonal experiences, or experiences which go beyond or transcend the self or the personal (Daniels, 2005). Similar to Jung, who is often considered one of transpersonal psychology's forefathers, this calls into question the boundaries of the self. While going beyond the self or beyond the personal suggests there is a self, it concurrently suggests that elements of the self go beyond the traditional boundaries of the self. The spirit, which is neither individual nor contained within the material self, is yet part of the

self. In contrast to the Christian perspectives discussed previously, the spirit is not an external reality that influences the self, but part of the self.

Wilber (2000a), whose integral studies influenced transpersonal psychology, conceptualizes the soul as "the great intermediate conveyor between pure Spirit and individual self" (p. 106). This suggests a spiritual realm beyond the self and a personal self which is more contained. Elsewhere, Wilber (1998) questions the traditional idea of the "real self," as the real self assumes some essential boundaries nature. However, for Wilber, the self is more of a witnessing (active voice) than an entity; a witness that is not contained within boundaries, but rather in a state of no boundaries. Wilber (2000b) also speaks of a spiritual self which is one with God or Brahma. Thus, self in Wilber's thought seems almost incomprehensible if not internally inconsistent, and maybe is. Wilber (1998) states,

> The Self is "not this, not that"….The Self is not this, not that, preciously because it is the pure Witness of this or that, and thus in all cases transcends any this and any that. The Self cannot even be said to be "one," for that is just another quality, another object that is perceived or witnessed. The Self is not "Spirit"; rather, it is that which, right now, is witnessing that concept. The Self is not the "Witness" – that is just another word or concept, and the Self is that which is witnessing that concept. The Self is not Emptiness, the Self is not a pure self – and so on. (p. 276)

In response to these seemingly inconsistent ideas of the self, Wilber (1998) states, "Because the real self resides neither within nor without, because the subject and object are actually not-two, the mystics can speak of reality in many different but only *apparently* contradictory ways" (p. 25, emphasis added).

Wilber's contribution which is relevant to our current discussion relates to the complexity and constructed nature of the self. Wilber's theory spans from the individual, personal self to a spiritual self, speaking of various levels and conceptions of the self. In doing so, it becomes quite evident that Wilber creates uses of language as he goes to try to illustrate his point. At the same time, his complexities point to the difficulty in binding down any idea of the self in contemporary thought.

Additionally, in place the self in the active sense of *that which is witnessing*, it points toward a self in process as opposed to a stable self.

Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Intersubjectivity

Contemporary psychoanalysis, by shifting its focus to an intersubjective approach to knowing, has become a postmodern psychology (Hoffman et al., 2005). Previous psychoanalytic notions focused on the analyst as the knower, as in classical psychoanalysis, or the client as knower, as in object relations and self psychology (Hoffman et al., 2005; Stark, 1999). In contemporary psychoanalysis, knowing occurs in an intersubjective space between the therapist and the client (Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997; Stolorow & Atwood, 1992).

This shift in knowing relates to a shifting understanding of the self, which could be seen as arising from a dynamic process occurring between two individuals. The self, in this instance, is not merely an entity contained within the physical or psychological boundaries of a singular object, but instead the result of an interaction between two individuals. This view is similar to many feminist perspectives which believe in the centrality of relationship in any conception of the self (Zweig, 1995). This more dynamic self is able to better account for that which remains stable and that which fluidly adjusts.

Cultural Issues

Western psychology emerged during a period in which individualism was largely assumed and Western culture was fairly isolated from Eastern ideas. For much of its history, collectivist ideas were given very little consideration. However, psychologists today are remiss to not take into consideration collectivists ideas, particularly when working with or considering individuals from collectivist cultures (Sue & Sue, 2003). Sue and Sue state,

> In many non-Western cultures, identity is not seen a part from the group orientation (collectivism). The Japanese language does not seem to have a distinct personal pronoun *I*. The notion of the *atman* in India defines itself as participating in unity with all things and not being limited by the temporal work. (p. 108)

These examples parallel the diversity in the psychological theories reviewed elsewhere in this paper while adding the cultural variable in understanding how these distinctions emerge.

Cultural competency and sensitivity in therapy and psychological theory mandates that therapists develop the flexibility to work with clients with a variety of different conceptions of the self. This serves as part of the impetus for this paper, though it is scarcely mentioned to this point. The practice of therapy often assumes a particular view of the self, which then is imposed upon clients. As therapists often are unfamiliar with the nuances involved in various conceptions of the self, it is likely that they do not ever realize they are doing this. While this paper has focused on psychological variations in the conception of the self, it should be apparent to the culturally aware reader that many of these divergences are also reflected in culture. It may be beneficial for future work in this area to consider how this may impact therapeutic approach across cultural and other value differences.

<div align="center">An Existential-Integrative Ending</div>

The Need for a Myth of Self

> As a practicing psychoanalyst I find that contemporary therapy is almost entirely concerned, when all is surveyed, with the problems of the individual's search for myths. The fact that Western society has all but lost its myths was the main reason for the birth and development of psychoanalysis in the first place…I speak of the *Cry* for myths because I believe there is an urgency in the need for myth in our day. Many of the problems of our society, including cults and drug addiction, can be traced to the lack of myths which will give us as individuals the inner security we need in order to live adequately in our day. (May, 1991, p. 9)

> A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Whether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude, as Sartre would hold, or whether there is a meaning we need to discover, as Kierkegaard would state, the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance. (May, 1991, p. 15)

May's (1991) *The Cry for Myth* demonstrates the dangers inherent in trying to live in a world without myth. He credits the lack of myth for many of the personal and social problems in contemporary society. Postmodernism, while bringing many benefits, has played a devastating role in the destruction of myths. The early phase of postmodernism focused on deconstructing destructive modern myths and metanarratives, but only recently has begun attempting to build new mythologies which can replace the meaning systems it deconstructed.

The premodern and modern myths of self were fraught with problems in addressing pluralism and the postmodern world. Consistent with other early postmodern deconstructions and re-constructions, the initial reformulations of the self were extremist, often calling for getting rid of the idea of the self altogether. However, more tempered alternatives, such as Schneider's existential-integrative perspective, provide alternatives to the radical deconstruction of the self.

The self is too integral a myth in Western society to be completely disbanded. Even if a psychologically healthy alternative of no-self exists, it remains dangerous to move toward this ideal too quickly. The loss of this myth and resulting impact of meaninglessness for many is too risky. The myth of self sustains many people helping them survive what would otherwise be an unlivable life.

An Existential-Integrative Perspective

We've suggested that Schneider's (1990) paradoxical self, while not the only healthy alternative, may be, at the very least, one of the best myths of self for postmodern times. In the section above, we also delineated six themes (process thought, quantum physics, Jungian psychology, transpersonal psychology, and cultural issues) which should be addressed in an existential-integrative perspective.

Whitehead's process philosophy emphasizes the idea of realities in process. Applied to the self, process philosophy suggests the self and what influences it are fluid. While bringing a different understanding to the idea of fluidity, Schneider (2004) integrates this idea into an existential perspective:

> The fluid center is any sphere of human consciousness which has as its concern the widest possible relationships to existence; or to put it another way, it is structured inclusiveness – the richest possible range of experience within the

most suitable parameters of support. The fluid center begins wand unfolds

through awe, the humility and wonder of living things. (p. 10).

Both conceptions of "fluid" reflect a potential for expansion, growth, and development.

Awe also points toward what is beyond the self. Existential thought has maintained a tenuous relationship with religion, sometimes positive and collaborative while at other times antagonistic. In essence, existentialism is definitively neutral in its stance toward religion, and it is best for it to stay that way. While existentialism can be interpreted from and integrated with a religious perspective, it is not innately religious. This allows for a broader framework in working with a variety of belief systems. However, it is important for existential thought to engage with the religious and spiritual dimensions that are so important for many individuals.

Both Jungian and transpersonal psychology suggest there is a metaphysical reality that is beyond the self, but also part of the self. This forms another potential paradox within the existential integrative framework. The self is independent and boundaried while also being interrelated. Quantum physics and contemporary psychoanalysis emphasize the interrelated or intersubjective nature of the self. Again, these themes fit nicely within the existential-integrative framework, but are in need of further development.

Finally, cultural issues are an important, but largely uncharted territory in existential thought. Despite the breadth and comprehensiveness of existential-integrative psychology, it remains weak in its engagement with issues of diversity. It is imperative that existential-integrative psychology rectify this important oversight in its future development.

Existential philosophy and psychology has been decidedly individualistic in its focus throughout much of its history. This focus presents a difficult challenge when attempting to reconcile with perspectives from more collectivist cultures. In our view, existential psychology has fallen into the trap of extremism it so often speaks against. Individualism and collectivism need not be irreconcilable opposites; instead, they can be viewed as polar tensions. In our initial sketch, we believe the paradoxical self can reconcile these tensions. However, further work is needed in this area.

Conclusion

To me, the reality of life is paradox. When we are doing what's most important, being our most honest, working at healing ourselves, it's paradoxical. No one falls into the neat categories we like to place them in to make navigating our world easy. (Baker-Fletcher, 1998, p. 91)

The self is not an easy thing to locate, define, or describe. Maybe this is why after over 100-years psychologists still intensely debate its existence. It's not likely this debate will end any time soon. We hold no delusions of grandeur that we have solved the problems of the self in this paper. However, we hope that we have provided an adequate argument to not throw away the concept of a coherent self too quickly.

To summarize, we have maintained in this paper that the self is a social construction which can be conceived of in many different ways. No one view of the self, or *myth of self*, is best for all people. Myths of self should be evaluated in terms of their pragmatic benefit (helping provide a meaningful, sustaining life) and their fit to the individual's beliefs and value system. Healthier myths of self are also adaptable, so they can facilitate growth and development. In this manner, healthy myths of self balance the constrictive and expansive needs of the individual. Additionally, we have advocated for Schneider's (1990) view of the paradoxical self as an important myth of self because of its adaptability and ability to reconcile many of the different tensions inherent in the human condition.

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