Continuity of Identity: Putting the Self Back Together Again

Interactionist scholars have revealed why a comprehensive analysis of the self must go beyond consideration of how people present and realize situated identities. To provide a more complete understanding of the dynamics of selfhood, social psychologists must also consider the experience of self, particularly the experience of a biographical self that gives elements of coherence and continuity to a person’s everyday presentations of self.

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INTRODUCTION: SELF/IDENTITY

Much has been written about self and identity. The two main issues I wish to explore here are, first, whether in these postmodern times, faced with threats to establishing a coherent identity, human beings construct identities that can be said to have continuity over time and, second, how the self might be seen more accurately as both structure and process—that is, how the self is simultaneously both static and dynamic.

Sociologists view the self as developed from the outside in, which is to say that we internalize social processes which, in turn, form the self. G. H. Mead considered the self a gift from society to the individual. We can view society and the individual as two sides to the same coin. Sociologists Gubrium and Holstein (2000) describe it thus:

From the start, the self unfolds in and through social life, never separate from it. If a personal self exists, it is not a distinct private entity so much as it is a concoction of traits, roles, standpoints, and behaviors that individuals articulate and present through social interaction.
The necessity of the collective—of the social—in the construction of identity is noted by Holland et al., (1998) who write: “[T]he cultural figurings of selves, identities, and the figured worlds that constitute the horizon of their meaning against which they operate, are collective products.” These scholars note that the “space of authoring, of self-fashioning, remains a social and cultural space, no matter how intimately held it may become.” Symbolic interactionists view identities as improvised; individuals use the cultural resources at hand in fashioning selves.

Mead distinguished the “elementary” and “complete” self, the former connoting a situational self—a self that is heavily influenced by the situation in which one finds herself. For example, the self we present at a party is, in some degree, different from how we present the self at work. The complete self, in Mead’s conceptualization, is the self which is stable across situations (Mead 1934). The claim of self-stability is called into question by many scholars working in the areas of social psychology and cultural studies, influenced by the implications of postmodernist thinking. Postmodernism rejects major tenets of modernity, such as a belief in one, stable truth; a reliance upon generalizations; and a view that coherence is natural. As a contrast, the postmodernist would posit multiple perspectives, not truth; situated accounts rather than generalizations; and the self as decentered—i.e., the self as fragmented, not having a coherent or fixed essence. From the postmodernist perspective, then, the notion of identity as having coherence and continuity is challenged.

IDENTITY IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY

In contemporary theory, identity is viewed as rather fragile, or at least quite malleable. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) provides us with an image of “the saturated self,” by which he means a self that is continually bombarded with social stimuli. The saturated self is a fragmented self and its relationships are “incoherent and disconnected.” Technological advances in communication and transportation have the effect of bombarding us with social stimulation. The saturated self is the postmodern self. That is to say, selves in the postmodern era are capable of fluidity; opportunities exist for making and remaking the self. Communication technologies, in particular, have contributed to this phenomenon. With e-mail, cell phones, and faxes, individuals can be connected (“virtually,” anyway) with many people. Each encounter may require a different presentation of self. Gergen suggests that the concept of an authentic self is untenable:
Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.7

This line of thinking certainly makes problematic the idea of a stable or enduring identity. We can try out various identities, not committing to any. Gergen here writes of continuous construction and reconstruction of selves—“a world where anything goes that can be negotiated."8 Rhetorician Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (2002) notes that the postmodern individual has been depicted as a “grab bag of fragmented identities, a collage shaped by others’ conceptions and beliefs, a product of discourse, of power, or technology.”9 If, as sociologists contend, we construct our self based on what is culturally available, then perhaps, when faced with so many choices, individuals are overwhelmed and any semblance of unity and authenticity is felt to be lost.

Gubrium and Holstein (1995) do not buy into the pessimistic predictions for self in the postmodern era. Their sociology of everyday life approach locates self-construction in the ordinary experiences of individuals:

While postmodernist images of the self can render it both empty (lacking in substance) and overly saturated (phrenetically suffused with meaning), empirically we can still watch people methodically construct viable and well-ordered selves using what is ordinarily available.10

Individuals use meaningful resources which are locally available in constructing who they are. Gubrium and Holstein (1995) emphasize the significance of biographical particulars in self construction and maintenance. They write:

In contrast to the fleeting, polysemic differences of postmodern consciousness, selves are regularly clarified, defined, or evaluated in ordinary personal and interpersonal comparisons. Judgments are not arbitrary but made systematically in the sense that self-understandings and conjectures are matched with available biographical particulars as bodies of evidence.11

These sociologists emphasize that lives are “narratively constructed” and made “coherent and meaningful” through the “biographical work” that “links experience into circumstantially compelling life courses”—a process which is “locally informed and organized.”12 We see here the rele-
vance of drawing upon the past and remembering former selves in the ongoing process of identity construction. Sandstrom et al. (2003) also emphasize the relevance of past, present, and future in constructing an enduring self:

[W]hen we act toward ourselves and others in a given situation, we are affected by our memories of the past, including our memories of the roles we have performed, the statuses we have achieved, the relationships we have negotiated, and the successes and failures we have experienced. We are also influenced by our thoughts of the future, including our thoughts of who we might become in the next situation or even several years from now. When we fashion acts and identities in a particular situation, then, we do so as people who have lives that extend beyond that situation—lives that include pasts and futures, as well as goals and responsibilities other than those we are currently enacting.13

Similarly, Holland et al (1998) note that identities are created “from the cultural resources at hand.”14 For this reason, individuals (and groups) are “caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them.” These authors suggest that identities are “hard-won standpoints . . . vulnerable to change” that “make at least a modicum of self-direction possible.”15 Further, the concept of “practiced identities,” highlights a sociology of everyday life approach which views identities as actively constructed. Several contexts of activity are involved in constructing practiced identities. Holland et al. (1998) identify four such contexts: “the figured world,” which refers to thinking, speaking, gesturing, and cultural exchange; “positionality,” which refers to entitlement to social and material resources and thus is linked to power, status, and rank; “the space of authoring” (which involves identifying social discourses and practices to craft a response to the world); and “making worlds,” which refers to activities that bring about new figured worlds. A consideration of these contexts and the way in which identities are constructed indicates the importance of the collective in fashioning the self. Also evident is that the space of authoring the self is “more often than not, a contested space, a space of struggle.”16

We would expect that the more stable the environment, the more probable is one’s identity to have stability, permanence, continuity. Yet, writing decades ago, sociologist Anselm Strauss (1959) made a case for stable identity even amidst environmental changes:
Even in a milieu marked by rapid social change, men seize opportunities for forestalling and minimizing personal change; they appear to establish, with at least partial success, islands of stability.  

The notion of “islands of stability” seems appealing and comforting, given that, as Gubrium and Holstein (2000) observe, “[t]imes are tough for the personal self. . . . Postmodern life provides one identity option after another, implicating a dizzying array of possibilities for the self.” But, really, what postmodern society presents is the option to create and recreate identities. Yes, one could indeed try out different identities and fail to have any sense of a unified, authentic self. But how many of us would really choose that? We also have the choice to construct our self in a way that is meaningful and allows for continuity. Postmodern society might make this project more challenging, but it does not negate identity as something meaningful and coherent. Deciu Ritivoi (2002) echoes this view when she says that, “despite what some radical postmodern theories of subjectivity tell us, many people value inner harmony and prefer not to live as a collection of disjointed fragments.” The following statements from Gubrium and Holstein (2000) are also consistent with this approach. They write: “While some view contemporary life as saturating the self, it also can be seen as providing countless options for what we could be, markedly expanding our potential for self-expression.” And, further, they suggest that “[o]ur ability to choose between options—indeed, to use some options in order to resist others, or to construct new ones—can be as liberating as it is overwhelming and debilitating.”

Today there is a greater supply of possibilities for who and what we might be. Identity is not threatened, but rather potentially enriched under such circumstances.

One need only look to the burgeoning self-help industry for an illustration of the possibilities for self construction and reconstruction that postmodern society presents. Embedded in the proliferation of materials which instruct us in our efforts to change the self, is a view that the self is not static, but dynamic. This view stresses we can become a different person than we are, if we so desire. Certainly, the popularity of self-help literature reflects the awareness that, in this day and age of myriad choices, we can actively select out a self which best suits us. Paradoxically, though, the message in most of the self-help literature is this: search inside and uncover the authentic “you” and work on being true to that person, nurturing the qualities you deem as positive and discarding those aspects which are unseemly. Even in an industry which both be-
moans and celebrates the fractious and segmented nature of self, an emphasis on the authentic self prevails.

The desire for authenticity stems from a process of fragmentation and a feeling of distance or loss. We seek the authentic because we want to regain something lost; we wish to make our own existence more credible. In his writings on postcoloniality and identity, Radhakrishnan (1996) notes that the question of authenticity “has to do not just with identity but with a certain attitude to identity. In other words, authentic identity is a matter of choice, relevance, and a feeling of rightness.”22

Authenticity shares with nostalgia the probability that it may be much like an idyllic past—i.e., something unattainable. Yet, real or imagined, the quest for authenticity is ubiquitous. Many proponents of identity politics encourage a reclaiming of authentic identity among members of groups which have historically been stigmatized and oppressed (e.g., women, people of color, homosexuals). While the dominant culture presents negative scripts for various groups in society, members of those groups need not accept the given scripts. Rather, individuals and groups can transform their identities and, in so doing, build solidarity and raise consciousness. This mission of those who would classify their work or approach as “identity politics” demonstrates a commitment to the view of identity as something which is anchored and “true,” as opposed to something transient, false, and distorted by ideology.

Yet, recent perspectives in poststructural and cultural studies focus less on a striving for coherence in identity construction and more on embracing a conceptualization of identity as fluid and shifting. Given the intersections among gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, identity is best viewed as fluid and based upon multiple standpoints. Following this line of thinking, the emphasis in identity politics on reclaiming identity serves to reinforce dependence on the dominant Other, given that it is in opposition to the dominant Other that these identity claims are made. Poststructuralists acknowledge the multiple determinations of gender, class, race, sexuality, and nationality, noting that we need to be wary of monolithic conceptualizations promulgated by hegemonic forces in society. Radhakrishnan (1996) succinctly states that, for poststructuralists, “‘discontinuity’ is the empowering principle.”23

Certainly, the poststructuralist perspective does much to break down the binary oppositions so significant to the dominant structure (e.g., self–other, mainstream–special interests, us–them, etc.). The conception of the self put forth in these recent approaches shares much in common with symbolic interactionist thought. Yet, they go a bit too far.
interactionism, which has its roots in pragmatism, considers the self a practical matter. The important question becomes: Does this self "work"? That is to say, does it enable me to successfully adapt to a given situation, aligning my actions with others such that my conduct makes sense and is appropriate? Meanings are negotiated interpersonally; identities are constructed through our connections with others. This is not to suggest that self construction and maintenance necessarily proceed without difficulty. As scholars working within these related schools of thought point out, our multiple identities in the postmodern era can result in contradictions and complexities that call for ever more reflexivity and negotiations of meaning. The "work" of self construction or identity formation takes place in the everyday experiences of the individual. It involves memory of past selves, awareness of the present self, and anticipation of future selves. But, this work is not wholly an individual endeavor. Our connection to and relationships with others (individuals, groups, institutions) shape the "project" of the self. And this project is ongoing.

IDENTITY AS BOTH STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

George Herbert Mead identified the self as comprised of two aspects: the "I," which is the creative, spontaneous part of the self, and the "Me," which incorporates the Generalized Other (i.e., the perspective of the community), allowing for internal social control. He saw both of these aspects as necessary in society at large; the "Me" is important because we need to have shared ideas and goals forming a basis of common understanding for society to continue, but the "I" is also important because there must be a source of new ideas to keep society growing and alive.24 To say that identity is both structure and process is to acknowledge these two aspects of the self and to suggest, as Mead did, that self and society are two sides of the same coin. As Gubrium and Holstein (2000) state, "the self emanates from the interplay among institutional demands, restraints, and resources, on the one hand, and biographically informed, self-constituting social actions, on the other."25

Alberto Melucci (1995) asserts that identity implies the notion of unity; the mutual recognition between two actors. He says that the notion of identity always refers to these three features: "the continuity of a subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; and the ability to recognize and to be recognized."26 As Melucci acknowled-
edges, the notion of “a certain stability and permanence over time seems to contrast with the dynamic idea of a process. There is no doubt that at any given moment social actors try to delimit and stabilize a definition of themselves. So do the observers.”

Indeed, as Deciu Ritivoi (2002) notes, “we belong to communities whose other members need to know who we are, and to know that they can count on us remaining more or less the same.” We crave sameness over time for our own sanity, and important people in our life demand it as well. Identity endures; this is how and why we can speak of “continuity of identity” in a meaningful way. Melucci (1995) says, “. . . identity entails an ability to perceive duration, an ability that enables actors to establish a relationship between past and future and to tie action to its effects.”

Perhaps drawing upon certain terms can aid us in viewing identity both as durable and as something in process. The term, “self-concept,” for example, may provide durability (much like Mead’s notion of the “Me”). Sociologist Kathy Charmaz (2001) notes that one’s experience of self in process can undergo change more readily than one’s self-concept. The self-concept is a structure that includes one’s beliefs and attributes; in short, it contains one’s fundamental notions of who she is. The self-concept, then, enables us to see identity as durable, while also acknowledging that, in day-to-day living, one’s experience of “Who am I?” is continually being configured. Weiss and Bass (2002), writing about meaning and purpose in later life, note that “we remain throughout our lives recognizably ourselves in the categories we use for understanding and in our assumptions about ourselves and others.” These authors assert that a core self does exist: “Even though the situations of our lives change, our personalities, although they may be modified as we adapt to new situations, have at their core a continuous self.”

Deciu Ritivoi (2002) argues that identity has continuity while also claiming that we are “never the same persons we were yesterday. We constantly lose a part of who we are, by having to commit to memory the person we used to be.” She reconciles these two contradictory views by arguing that identity is a narrative. If identity is a life story, then there must be a place for both structure and process. Narrative scenarios face us, and it is by drawing upon facets of the self that are stable that we are able to make sense of the story in which we are the protagonists. Deciu Ritivoi writes: “The constant gap between yesterday and today is what constitutes the self, by inviting recollection and reflection that can offer a structure to account for both ‘now’ and ‘then.’” Anselm Strauss (1959) instructs that “students of identity
should think in historical, as well as autobiographical, terms.”\(^{35}\) He holds that the individual thinks about and makes sense of her life by symbolically ordering the “multitudinous and disorderly crowd of past acts.”\(^{36}\) He elaborates:

If your interpretations are convincing to yourself, if you trust your terminology, then there is some kind of continuous meaning assigned to your life as-a-whole. Different motives may be seen to have driven you at different periods, but the overriding purpose of your life may yet seem to retain a certain unity and coherence.\(^{37}\)

Past acts may not necessarily fit together, but the framework one uses to make sense of one’s life reconciles the discordant acts, relating them in a meaningful way to both former and current self. Thus, when past “purposes and dedications” are viewed as part of a “larger temporal design,” a person’s life may be “understood, explained, and managed.” If discordant acts or events from the past seem important, then they are woven into the personal narrative.\(^{38}\) Similarly, Ira Silver (1996) suggests that “identity formation is, for both men and women, a continuous narrative process.”\(^{39}\) And it is the individual’s “biographical work” that makes possible the assembling of a life story which is consistent, such that the past “reasonably leads up to the present to form a lifeline” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).\(^{40}\)

**Summing Up**

My view of self and identity is one embodying both change and stability, sameness and differentness, the static and the dynamic. I propose to reconcile these contradictory views by assessing the biographical and narrative uses of nostalgia. Clearly, the relationship between nostalgia and identity that Davis originally put forth, and that I am exploring in this book (i.e., whether nostalgia facilitates the continuity of identity), requires that identity be seen as something that does (or can) endure. Do obstacles to constructing and maintaining an enduring identity lead individuals to call up memories and actively engage in reminiscence and nostalgia? To what degree are such strategies successful in maintaining a self over time? Nostalgia may facilitate *continuity of identity*, allowing people, through narrative and sometimes vicarious experience, to “place” themselves in time and space, yielding a sense of themselves as time travelers. Deciu Ritivoi (2002) puts it well when she says that nostalgia can be seen as “an effort to discover meaning in one’s life, to understand one-
self better by making comparisons between the past and the present, and thus integrating experiences into a larger schema of meaning.”41 Further, she considers the past a safety net, “which gives us a sense of grounding, and at the same time a way of embarking confidently on future experiments or adventures.”42

Through research studies presented in the next part of this book, I provide an empirical test of the proposed relationship between nostalgia and identity.