

Toward a Sustainable Myth of Self

An Existential Response to the Postmodern Condition

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The self has come under considerable attack in postmodern times. Amidst many deconstructions and reformulations of the self, various myths of self have lost their sustainability. This article reviews various 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; however, 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 paradoxical self as a promising myth of self for postmodern times.

Keywords: *existential psychology; postmodernism; self; myths; personality theory*

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. Behaviorism and its offshoots replaced the focus on self with behavior (Polkinghorne, 2001). Technology and pluralism brought metaphors of multiple selves (Gergen, 1991, 1996). Postmodern analyses quickly followed, questioning whether a singular, essential self was a healthy construct

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(Zweig, 1995). The influence of Eastern thought, particularly Buddhist philosophy, introduced recognition of *no-self* as an ideal (Mosig, 2006). Cultural analyses provided examples of cultures which did not have a traditional conception of self, but rather understood what is referred to as the self in Western thought in terms of roles which are much more fluid over time (Cross & Gore, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2003). In the end, the necessity of a self conception, so basic to Western psychology, is now in question.

It is hard to imagine Western psychology without a conception of the self. The self is intertwined with diagnosis, personality, assessment, and treatment. So implicit is it in psychological language that it would appear to require a significant restructuring of psychology to remove the idea of the self. Yet, history and convenience should not be the sole argument for retaining the concept of the self.

This article uses a broad array of resources to elucidate the challenges to the self in postmodern times. This analysis concludes by developing an existential-integrative perspective on the self. Several assumptions are worth noting at the outset. First, consistent with postmodern theory, we assert that the self is best understood as socially constructed. Second, different constructions of the self may be more appropriate and psychologically healthier for some cultures and individuals than others. In particular, we are focusing on the self in Western culture in this paper. It would be inappropriate to turn any conception of the self into a metanarrative forcefully applied across cultures and individuals indiscriminately. Third, we maintain the position that myths of self are valuable, particularly for those individuals living in Western societies.

Language Issues

Language is relevant to psychological well-being as well as a staple of some approaches to postmodernism. At the same time, language is devoid of an absolute meaning; instead, it is more important to understand the local meaning of words and how they are used differently. Murphy (1996) highlights multiple ways language is used in modern and postmodern paradigms. Modern paradigms assume that language is describing something real with an absolute meaning. In this paradigm, accurate definitions of words are essential. Postmodern linguistic theory views language as expressive or related to internal perceptions and feelings. Language is socially constructive and therefore not used in a consistent manner over time or

across people. In this paradigm, it makes little sense to debate definitional issues; however, it remains important to clarify how terms are being used.

Given this assumption, it is important to clarify how certain terms, such as *self* and its relation to *personality*, are defined in this paper. We understand the self as the social and/or personal construction which implicitly assumes some level of boundaries and distinctions between the self and the world, including other beings. Self boundaries remain intact despite the possibility of shared aspects/qualities (spiritual, collective unconscious) or the ability to transcend these boundaries (transpersonal, transcendent, or prepersonal experiences). Personality is defined 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 often flows from it. Changes in personality tend to occur gradually.

The *myth of self* is a phrase relied on regularly in this paper. The use of myth relies on the ancient Greek understanding of myth, revitalized by Rollo May (1991) in *The Cry for Myth*. According to May, myth is not something which is false, but rather something that cannot be proven true. Myths provide deep, sustaining meaning and help provide direction in life; they are healthy, growth facilitating, and necessary. In referring to myths 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 aforementioned type of sustained meaning.

A Brief History of the Self

Zedek (1998) states, “Any effort to summarize a 4000-year history and tradition cannot help but prove inadequate” (p. 255). Certainly this is true of the history of the self along with descriptions of how the self was dominantly understood in various periods and theories. Any such attempt in an article of this length requires significant over-simplification. We acknowledge the limitation of not being able to address many nuances of the self across history; however, it is still necessary to highlight historical developments in how the self has been understood.

The Premodern Self

The premodern self was intricately tied to the development of dualism. Originating in Platonism, dualism distinguished between the material self,

or the body, and the soul, which is understood as a purer or more essential aspect of the self. The soul, as understood in Platonic thought, has a non-material, metaphysical basis. In this conception, the physical body is denigrated, and the soul is idealized. Religion, primarily Christianity, served as the gatekeeper and carrier for many philosophical ideas, such as the conception of the self, throughout the premodern period. As such, this distinction between the soul and the material self is deeply embedded in much Christian theology, which took an increasingly negative view of the material body. Self-denial was a common theme and often encouraged. Some religious individuals took this to the extreme stating that self-esteem or any self-focus is sinful and should be discouraged. Conversely, the soul, or the immaterial and immortal aspect of the self, should be embraced.

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). Within 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 as his self-emptying through the crucifixion (Abe). 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). Each of these very different religious traditions share a concept of emptying applied to God or Ultimate reality and the self.

The Modern Self

The modern period questioned many assumptions of premodernism, which, in turn, questioned premodern assumptions about the nature of persons. Two broad approaches to understanding the self were important in the modern period; however, it should be noted that it is not possible to cover all the modernist notions on the self in this article. Instead, we focus on two of the more influential views that typified the central tenets of the modernist self. The dominant view of the self was one of reductionistic materialism or physicalism. It assumed the self is contained within the biology of the individual, calling into question metaphysical aspects of the self. Within this purview, many variations occurred, such as behaviorism and cognitive theory. Freud developed an alternative biological position. Often misrepresented, Freud's theory is a biological or drive model in which the self is contained within the biology. The unconscious, although often conjuring metaphysical associations, 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.

A second modern perspective of self attempted to rectify modern assumptions with religious values. The idea of a soul understood metaphysically was important for most Western religions. Modern reductionism and materialism challenged this position. 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. Psychophysical parallelism, which maintains there is a parallel between what occurs in the mind and the brain, is a 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.

Although not a modernist viewpoint, Wilber (2000b) adds a more complex, contemporary alternative to psychological parallelism. In describing 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 (2000b), this alternative is not claiming a metaphysical parallel to brain and physiological functioning; rather, the relationship is more complex. 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 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 does not necessitate a metaphysical mind or soul to explain our higher functions without reducing these same higher functions through reductionism (Murphy, 1998). Murphy states,

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 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 . . . 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 human, have typically been characterized as part of a metaphysical mind or soul. Nonreductive physicalism states that these properties emerge from complex actions and interactions arising within the physical make up. The whole, through complex interaction, becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

Modernism maintained a consistent view of the self as a material reality. Increasingly this was understood in physical terms, leading to metaphors of machines and later computers to illustrate human functioning. The essential nature of the self, although understood differently, was largely unquestioned. The late modern period, however, reflected a shift away from the focus on the self. Polkinghorne (2001) notes academic psychology shifted to focus on behavior instead of the self. This deemphasized the necessity of the self in psychology and understanding what it means to be human, paving the way for the postmodern rejection of the self.

Changing Conceptions of the Self in Postmodern Times

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 represented a period of history when cultures remained fairly isolated. There was 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 and technology would save the world from wars, sickness, and even death. Myths of the fountain of youth, manifest destiny, utopia, and other grandiose themes abounded. Modernism made attractive promises but, in the end, modernism failed. 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 their best, bringing together modulated versions of both dispositions.

Danger often ensues when individuals take on a modern or postmodern outlook without critical examination of potential consequences. It is assumed that modernism and postmodernism reflect different ends of a continuum; however, these theories are paradigmatically different, not opposite extremes. 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 prevents people from grasping the diversity within each paradigm. This is a difficult distinction for many. Western thought wants to place things in opposites or dualities. Continuums demonstrate this difference in polar extremes. 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 cannot 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 and changing its deeper significance (i.e., placing it as one of many ways of knowing instead of *the* way of knowing). To understand distinctions and similarities between these theories, alternative ways of conceptualizing and categorizing difference 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 nature of knowledge and truth (i.e., epistemology) that is changing. Modernism believes there is a knowable absolute truth that can be known through science and reason (see Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008). Postmodernists disagree about whether some forms of ultimate truth may exist but agree that this truth cannot be definitively known. This reflects a radical and important shift. Throughout the premodern and modern periods there was agreement by the majority of authorities that truth, even ultimate truth, existed and could be definitively known. The postmodern shift represents the first major change in the history of Western

thought which called the assumption of knowable truth into question on a large scale.

Modernism utilized a foundational theory of knowledge which begins with knowable ultimate Truth (Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008; Murphy, 1996). From this perspective, all knowledge is built from that which can be certainly known. The well-known example of Descartes demonstrates the epistemology and methodology of this perspective. Descartes began questioning everything he could question and came to the conclusion that he could not question that he was thinking, which means he exists (i.e., "I think therefore I am"). This statement, often cited as the beginning of modernism, asserts that all knowledge must be built from this basic foundation of knowledge. Descartes began with rationalism, but his theory evolved into a more scientific approach which combined rationalism and a form of empiricism (i.e., knowing through the senses). These two ways of knowing were the privileged epistemologies of the modernist period. The primary methodologies of logic (a rationalistic method) and science (application of reason to empiricism) were elucidated from these ways of knowing.

Postmodernism began as a reaction against privileging modernist epistemologies and methodologies. The early phase of postmodernism deconstructed modernism and the second phase began developing alternative epistemologies and methodologies (Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008). The primary epistemological position demonstrates an epistemological pluralism (Hoffman & Kurzenberger) and a metaphysical holism (Murphy, 1996), which does not privilege any one way of knowing. As an alternative, postmodernism suggests that multiple epistemologies and methodologies should be utilized regardless of the assumption of whether or not ultimate truth exists.

Quine and Ullian (1978) developed a web theory providing the basis for a postmodern theory of knowledge. Although their formulations are important, their approach remained limited in that it privileged modernist ways of knowing (Murphy, 1996). Quine and Ullian's theory conceptualized knowledge as being similar to a large web of knowledge. Each point of connection represents a piece of knowledge, which is not an ultimate truth, but rather the current understanding which is subject to reformulation. Knowledge, like a spider web, is interconnected and most dependent on the connection points closest to it. If any connection point is changed, it impacts all the other points in the web. The closest points are impacted more than the distal points. In this view, points of knowledge should continually be reexamined and reconsidered.

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., absolute

relativism). However, this represents an oversimplification and misunderstanding of postmodernism rather than a valid critique. Although some postmodern approaches embrace extreme relativism, this is not essential to postmodernist thought. Postmodernism is pluralistic, embracing many different viewpoints and approaches, but is not necessarily relativistic, stating that all viewpoints are equal. Furthermore, absolute relativism is based in a personal constructivism, whereas postmodern thought is rooted in social constructivism. The social or cultural factors limit relativism by locating truth in a complex relational matrix.

In summary, at least five 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, often portrayed in postmodern theory as bound by language. Second, truth, if and where it exists, is best approximated using multiple epistemologies and multiple methodologies. Third, if ultimate truth exists, there is less of it than the modernists would portray. Fourth, truth should continually be reexamined in light of new information. Fifth, truth is interconnected and interdependent. It could be noted that this is a broader and more inclusive definition of postmodernism than what is typical. This is intentional; we maintain postmodernism is best understood as a variety of approaches that share many common values instead of narrowly focusing in on particular requirements to be considered postmodern.

General Postmodern Themes in Relation to the Self

It has been argued that a coherent self in the postmodern era is under unprecedented attack and in danger of annihilation (Zweig, 1995). Adjectives applied to the postmodern self include *empty*, *multiple*, and *saturated* (Messer & Warren as cited in Bracken, 2003). These descriptors stand in contrast to the modern view of an autonomous, bounded, stable self. Postmodern thought encompasses a variety of ideas about the self that generally center on the idea that the self is socially mediated. The individual self is situated in culture providing a framework for understanding personal experience and guiding behavior.

Threats to the self are inherent in the extremes of postmodernist theory. The more moderate positions argue for a plurality of selves appropriate to the context and environment (e.g., Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Neimeyer, 1998). The real postmodern challenge may be to a modern conceptualization of a permanent, autonomous self. The postmodernist self is a more holistic, complex, nuanced, and adaptive self that is actively engaged in the world.

Challenges to the Self

The Self and Pluralism

Culture provides a lens through which experience, behavior, and the self are interpreted. It involves, among other things, shared language, symbols, and values. Therein lays 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.

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 result in the perception of truth as relative and fluid. Exposure to varied cultures 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 actual objective reality. 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. Another 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 on 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 coconstructed 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 technologically facilitated exposure to other cultures 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" (§ 10). 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 defining the self.

The Self and Fluidity

Lifton (1995), drawing on Greek mythology, introduces the Protean self:

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. Although admirable in many situations, there is also the image of the tragic hero who loses everything because he or she is unwilling to adapt or change.

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 constrictive and expansive potentialities (Schneider, 1999). 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., Markus, & Nurius, 1986). 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; 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 of 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, although some self-representations remain stable and resistant to change, others readily 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 nonagentic 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 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). 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, e-mail, and the Internet allow exchanges of language 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, nearly all psychological research and assessment is based on 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 statement not only calls into question prominent psychological assumptions, but also many cultural and religious values. For instance, this 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? This protean idea of the self challenges many religious views of marriage and young children’s need for stability and consistency.

Gergen is not necessarily advocating for this extreme position and neither are we. However, this has some important implications. For example, in premarital counseling, the assumption of a stable, coherent sense of identity pervades. The supposition is that if the couple is currently a good fit, they will remain a good fit. This works for couple where both individuals are less likely to engage in personal change and development, given external influences do not change this propensity. However, for many couples, a greater risk is inherent. Premarital counseling should attempt to explore the likely trajectory of growth and change in the individuals. 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 moderate growth in divergent directions.

In the marriage example, Gergen’s (1995) concern centers on three inter-related 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 causes 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 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 may lead 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 experiences and emotions, 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. Their appreciation for diversity within themselves and others replaces the need for a stable self.

This self, who is more prone to adjust within the context, is comfortable playing many different roles. The stable self is replaced by an intersubjective self, which is created anew in different contexts. According to 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, p. 144).

Gergen's Saturated Self

Gergen's (1991) most significant contribution to the literature on the self is *The Saturated Self*. In this book, he develops an important postmodern thesis stating that social saturation threatens the self. Social saturation means that the technology of this age facilitates interpersonal interaction so that people may engage in more relationships than before. Pluralism is one part of this new matrix. The potential threat is predicated on the belief that 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 dangerous, but rather the rapid rate of exposure, not allowing time for introspection and integration. In *The Saturated Self*, Gergen (1991) takes a more cautionary agenda than in his previous article advocating for multiple masks (1972/1995; the original version of this article was published in 1972, almost 20-years prior to *The Saturated Self*). Although he recognizes that this progression into multiplicity of experience is inevitable at this point, he appears more reticent 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. Modern stability is quickly overwhelmed by

the postmodern plurality. Although a rigid defensive position is possible, it may not be able to maintain psychological health. This does not 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. 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 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 the 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.

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 individuals to desire (crave) those things, qualities, and characteristics that are valued more highly resulting in unending craving and discontentment.

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. Dissolving the distorted boundaries between the individual and existence—a return to *anatta*—is the path to freedom from suffering to happiness and contentment. *Anatta* frees people 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 in Western culture (Hoffman, 2008a). 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 often is 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.

Additionally, many Buddhist perspectives do not advocate that the no-self ideal is something that individuals should directly seek to accomplish. In other words, denying oneself will not yield the experience no-self. It is helpful, if not necessary, to maintain a conception of the self along the way (Epstein, 1995; Hoffman, 2008a). 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. 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 that 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 alimention 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 (1999) 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 emphasizes that the self is in a constant process of changing or becoming, 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. Although self-descriptions may remain stable, as demonstrated by psychological tests, the actual self or construction thereof is more fluid. The apparent stability of the self may be more because of limitations of language and conceptualization 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 are appearing with greater frequency in psychological theory.

Existential Perspectives on the Self

Existential and humanistic perspectives on the self share with postmodern thought the basic premise of inherent impermanence in our existence, or *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 and is a product of consciousness (Bugental, 1978). Lao Tzu and Pascal both spoke of the infiniteness of existence (Schneider & May, 1995). Pascal also spoke of the paradox of infinite possibilities inherent in no-thingness (Friedman, as cited in Schneider & May), which confers on people the freedom to transform or create who they are in any moment, unconstrained the moment before (Schneider & May). Existential thought allies this freedom with responsibility for the individual's creation. Existential theorists believe that the terror and awe of both infiniteness and nothingness—both states of nonbeing—fuel the striving to be and, often, the form which being takes (Schneider, 1999, Schneider & May). Paul Tillich's (1952) *The Courage to Be* is a classic example of this paradox in existential thought. Although he focuses more on the courage to

be in the face of nonbeing, he also points toward the connection with the *ground of being*, or infiniteness. For many existentialists, the allure of the being/nonbeing paradox is the foundation for striving to be (see Sartre, 1943/1956, Schneider, 2004; Tillich).

At this point in the article, we begin building an argument for an existential answer to the problem of self. This begins with an overview of humanistic psychology, of which existential psychology is often considered a subset. However, the distinction between an existential and a humanistic viewpoint is also necessary. In agreement with Rollo May, we believe the humanistic view of the self has severely neglected the potential for evil, or the daimonic. Although humanistic and existential psychology agree on much regarding the nature of the self, this distinction makes it important to speak of an existential perspective on self.

Humanistic Psychology and the Self

Foundations of the Self in Humanistic Psychology

Early humanistic psychology developed three important conceptualizations of the self which are important for our conversation. First, beginning with Maslow and Rogers, it emphasized the self as being, or becoming (Polkinghorne, 2001). The self is always in process or flux, ever changing rather than stable. This point is shared with many of the postmodern viewpoints; however, postmodernism tends to describe the changes in terms of a fractured or divided self, or in terms of multiple selves interacting with each other. Humanistic and existential perspectives favor the idea of a fluid and changing, but integrated self. The integration of the self, as should be evident, is necessarily an ongoing process that adjusts to the fluid nature of the self. Although this difference may be viewed as a semantic one, we disagree. This distinction influences the way one experiences oneself and what the individual does with that experience. Fragmented and multiple selves are more chaotic, less integrated, and less centered. For most, this self experience can be chaotic and often incoherent. Furthermore, the assent to the idea of multiple selves does not encourage one to make sense of the inter-relationships between the selves or how the multiple selves share responsibility.

Second, the self is experienced; it is not merely a cognitive construct (Polkinghorne, 2001). In contemporary psychology, the focus is typically on self-concept (i.e., how a person understands or defines themselves) or self-esteem (i.e., how one feels about or appraises oneself). Neither of these approaches the deeper conception of how a person experiences oneself.

Gendlin (1962/1997) discusses this in terms of one's *felt sense* of oneself. The felt sense is often a preverbal and presymbolic experience recognized within one's body. Contrary to many postmodern theories that emphasize the necessity of language in self understanding, this suggests another realm of experiencing oneself beyond words. Furthermore, it suggests that there is a real self and that this real self can be experienced directly. Gendlin (2003) understands this as contradicting postmodernism; however, we would disagree and even purport that it could be understood as postmodern. In our view, postmodernism does not deny the possibility of a direct form of knowledge or experience, but rather views this as always incomplete and lacking in definitiveness. Gendlin approaches this through what he refers to as *focusing*. If focusing is understood as an ultimate truth, then it would conflict with the understanding of postmodernism presented in this article. However, we believe the rather ambiguous, incomplete, and subjective nature of the truth obtained through focusing is quite postmodern.

Third, the self is an agent, or has the ability to act. This, according to Frie (2003) and Frederickson (2003), is the biggest challenge to integrating postmodern perspectives on the self with psychotherapy approaches, such as humanistic and existential, which emphasize personal responsibility. Without a clear, bounded self, there appears to be no base from which to act. However, as we will discuss shortly, there is the possibility of a centered self that does not necessitate clear boundaries.

Contemporary Developments

Polkinghorne (2001) uses four theories to develop possibilities for a contemporary humanistic view of the self that takes into consideration the challenges of postmodernism. This development adds several themes to the humanistic view. First, consistent with postmodernism, it does not necessitate a "real me" or an essential self and recognizes that what is viewed as self is dependent on a point of view or perspective. Second, it advocates for a whole person understanding of the self that includes emotions as well as cognitions and ideas about the self. In other words, it integrates the conceived self, the interpersonal self, and the experienced self as part of a larger whole self. The language of multiple selves in humanistic psychology is more metaphorical than the language used in postmodernism. Third, the humanistic view implies integration, centeredness, or connectedness that is not part of the postmodern viewpoint: postmodernism sees these selves as more distinct. Each self is part of the larger, whole self. Similarly, Polkinghorne discusses Gendlin's advocacy for a real self beyond the

cultural constructs that is able to experience the self in connection with the world. Fourth, building on Ricoeur, Polkinghorne maintains that humanistic psychology can be blended with a narrative understanding of the self in which the self is redefined and understood in process.

Sleeth (2006, 2007a, 2007b), in a series of articles, develops a perspective on self, or the self system, which incorporates transpersonal psychology into a humanistic perspective. Although there is debate in the field about whether transpersonal psychology is distinct from humanistic psychology, it appears evident in these articles that Sleeth's theory extends beyond typical humanistic understandings of the self through seeking to incorporate spiritual aspects of the self. Krippner (as cited in Sleeth, 2007b) stated that an "individual's sense of identity appears to extend beyond its ordinary limits to encompass wider, broader, or deeper aspects of life or the cosmos—including elements of the divine" (p. 47). In referencing this to the self, Sleeth confuses identity, which is more akin to what we have referred to as a self-concept, with the self, which is rooted in experience and agency. Feeling connected with something beyond oneself, even to the degree of understanding it as part of one's identity, does not necessarily make it part of the self.

In general, Sleeth's perspective highlights the distinctiveness of humanistic and transpersonal theories through accenting different aspects of self more than developing a convincing humanistic perspective. Although humanistic psychology, in general, opens itself to the incorporation of spiritual ideas, it does not necessitate them as in transpersonal psychology. Therefore, humanistic psychology remains more adaptable in working with multiple religious and nonreligious views whereas transpersonal psychology privileges perspectives with certain spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, two aspects of Sleeth's discussion are consistent with contemporary humanistic understandings of the self. First, along with Polkinghorne, Sleeth recognizes the importance of respecting the complexities of the self. Second, Sleeth advocates for a holistic understanding of the self.

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 symbolism that unites members of a culture through communication of shared themes of existence, belief systems, and meanings (May, 1975). According to May, a significant problem in contemporary times is the loss of myths and concomitant loss of values. 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 (May, 1969). May blamed a loss of myth for the increasing alienation, meaninglessness, and mechanization he observed in human existence.

May (1991) understood a person's life story as their own personal myth that guides and informs individual experience and development, thereby playing an important role in forming self and identity. Identity, the interpretation of the self, is a personal myth made up of individual values, experiences, and relationships including material from the cultural mythology:

May's use of the term "self," however, is not to be confused with the splintered and defensive fragment of personality referred to by the Freudians as the "ego," or by the Jungians as the "persona." Rather, the existential "self" is that indivisible point of centered integration presumed to exist as some level of the personality, from which we can objectively observe our own behavior in the world. (Diamond, 1996, pp. 102-103)

May's distinction of the self as "centered integration" lacks the clear boundaries of the self that is typical in most portrayals of the modernist self, allowing for a real self while at the same time leaving room for the self to be socially constructed. This allows for a distinction between the conceived self (i.e., self-concept) and self experience, while recognizing that they are also indelibly related.

There is also a social aspect to the personal myth derived not only from relationships with others but also from the cultural context. May believed myths provide a sense of belongingness and imbue existence with meaning while allowing the individual to make sense of their experience. Without myths, people are 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 experience (Storr, 1983). The literary expression of archetypes in myth is, according to May, the expression of themes shared by humankind of struggles

for identity and affirmation. The loss of myth for individuals means a loss of the ability to organize experience, with a corresponding diminution in meaning-making ability as well as the loss of sustenance and comfort as people confront universal struggles of human existence.

Myths of self provide important meaning for individuals that help them survive difficult times. Whether they are acknowledged or not, myths exist. However, when 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. Myths also have an integrative capacity; they can serve as a point to integrate the experienced self with the socially constructed, interpersonal, and even spiritual aspects of the self in a centered manner.

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. Sartre (1943/1956) 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. "Existence precedes essence" refers to the idea that human beings are without predetermined form or limitations: They exist. The form individuals choose for themselves follows and constitutes their essence. Sartre (1946/1948, p. 28) 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.

Sartre (1937/1988) 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, nonreflective. A second degree act of consciousness reflects on the self and through reflective activity, gives form to the self that is reflected on. An 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). In Sartre's (1946/1948) 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.

The Shadow, the Daimonic, and the Self

Jung's idea of the shadow, along with May's conception of the daimonic, adds a vital dimension to discussions of the self (Diamond, 1996). Too often, these discussions 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" (pp. 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, p. 18-19). 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 connects with the potential for evil inherent in the human condition (Zweig & Abrams). Although May felt Jung's contribution of the shadow was an important development, he believed its definition was too constraining (Diamond, 1996). Instead of attempting to broaden Jung's terminology, he introduced a new term, *the daimonic*, which was borrowed from ancient Greek thought. The daimonic 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 daimonic 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 the individual's dark side or disavowed aspects of the self, are not dealt with, they will find another way to exert themselves. For both Jung and May, it is better to integrate them into our self-conceptions utilizing their energy

constructively as a creative force. Diamond, however, identified an important distinction in that May was concerned that the shadow or daimonic not be used to avert responsibility. May emphasized that the roles of choice and responsibility, no matter how small, were always present; the daimonic could not be used to abdicate responsibility or claim one was merely *possessed* by external or unconscious forces.

One danger in moving toward a conception of multiple selves or no-self is the difficulty of 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, of aspects of the self, to avoid taking full responsibility for evil acts. Furthermore, when the potential for evil is not owned, it becomes easier for it 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. . . . 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 potential for evil, the temptation to project evil onto the other increases. This situation 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. The problem of evil therefore becomes one of the stronger arguments to maintain a myth of self.

Schneider's Paradoxical Self

The paradoxical self, according to Schneider (1999), is a function of positions on a continuum between contradictory polarities of constricting and expanding capacities across six spheres of consciousness. A constricted consciousness is narrow in expression and experience. An expansive consciousness is enlarging of experience and expression.

The paradoxical principle conceives of the psyche as a constrictive/expansive continuum (Schneider, 1999). In other words, the 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 (or centric) position reflects integration of the polarities, which means enhanced conscious experience, self-awareness, and the ability to flexibly shift from one polarity to the other. Only part of the continuum is available to consciousness. The extremes of the polarities represent potential annihilation, either through constriction into nothingness or expansion into chaos.

In Schneider's model, six spheres of consciousness form a hierarchy of depth with physiological consciousness at the surface level followed, successively, by environmental, cognitive, psychosexual, interpersonal, and (deepest) experiential consciousness (Schneider, 1999, 2008). 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 the "being level or ontological freedom" (Schneider, 2008, p. 38). Different configurations of positioning along the continuum within each sphere of consciousness are associated in Schneider's model with specific psychological dysfunction. 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, 1999). This development 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. Although adaptable enough to pull in many of the various perspectives discussed above, it should not be turned into an oppressive metanarrative or ideal which is forced on all people.

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)

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; 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.

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.

Existential thinkers such as Becker (1973) identify the need for defenses against some realities of life. For example, to live in constant awareness of the fragility of life causes many people to retreat from life into a form of living death. Similarly, the awareness of the constant flux of the self and the surrounding world can create overwhelming anxiety. The myth of the stable self provides security that helps people cope with the world. When overly reified, this becomes a constricting force preventing people from engaging in free, responsible living.

Quantum Physics Applications

At first glance, quantum physics appears to have little to do with the self. However, two themes are relevant for the current discussion. First, Newtonian

physics, which represented the utopia of science's promise, was the dominant mode of thought in the modernist period. Physics was the quintessential modernist science maintaining that some things are stable over time and definitively known. Quantum physics called these assumptions of Newtonian science into question (Ford, 2004; Wolf, 1981). This played a major role in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Quantum physics demonstrated that truth is more complicated than it 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, by contrast, calls 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 they appear; all things are related (Wheatley, 2001; Wolf, 1981). The boundaries placed between different objects are 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. Although it does not deny that the possibility of the self as a distinct agent acting in the world, it emphasizes, as did the Gestalt psychologists, that the distinct is part of the whole; boundaries are not so absolute as in the modernist or Newtonian views.

Jung and the Collective Unconscious

In contrast to Freud, Jung identified the ego as the conscious personality and then developed a more complex understanding of the self which incorporated the ego, 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 difficult to distinguish between the realms of the unconscious; however, regardless of their realm, they exert their influence. Although consciousness is also important in Jung's theory, to view it as primary is a mistake.

The collective unconscious presents 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; there is an interconnected quality in human beings. It is also important to note that Jung believed in the wisdom of the unconscious in contrast to Freud who viewed the unconscious with greater suspicion.

Transpersonal Psychology, Spirit, and the Self

Transpersonal psychology focuses on the role of the spirit or the spiritual in the self (Cortright, 1997, Sleeth 2006, 2007a, 2007b). It is interested in a variety of transpersonal experiences or experiences which transcend the boundaries of the self or the personal (Daniels, 2005). Similar to Jung, this calls into question the distinct boundaries of the self. Although going beyond the self or beyond the personal suggests there is a self, it concurrently suggests that elements of the self extend 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.

Wilber (2000b), 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 in contrast to 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. The self is more of a witness (active voice) than an entity; a witness not contained within boundaries, but in a state of no boundaries. Wilber (2000a) also speaks of a spiritual self which is one with God or Brahma. Wilber (1998) states,

The Self is "not this, not that". . . . The Self is not this, not that, precisely 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).

Cultural and Gender Issues

Western psychology emerged during a period in which individualism was largely assumed. For much of Western history, collectivist ideas were given very little consideration. Psychologists today, however, are remiss to not take into consideration collectivist 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 apart 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)

Cultural competency and sensitivity in therapy and psychological theory mandates that therapists develop the flexibility to work with clients with a variety of conceptions of the self. The practice of therapy often assumes a particular view of the self. As therapists often are unfamiliar with the diverse conceptions of the self, they may assume a certain understanding of the self and impose it on clients without recognizing they are doing so.

An Existential-Integrative Ending

The Need for a Myth of Self

As a practicing psychoanalyst I find that contemporary therapy is almost entirely concerned . . . 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. . . . 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 . . . 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 . . . 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, although 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 (Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008). 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 paradoxical self, provide alternatives to radical deconstruction of the self.

The self is too integral a myth in Western society to be completely abandoned. 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 have suggested that Schneider's (1999) paradoxical self, although not the only healthy alternative, is a strong myth of self for postmodern times. As illustrated in the review of conceptions of the self, the paradoxical self is sufficiently broad to integrate diverse perspectives, from religious to quantum physics, and sufficiently flexible to allow for different cultural viewpoints. In this section, we develop several points of integration across theories of the self.

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

Both conceptions of fluid reflect a potential for expansion, growth, and development. Although existential psychology has often been associated with the search for an essential self, it has been frequently misperceived as advocating that this essential self is a stable self. As illustrated in the writings of Sartre, May, and Schneider, the existential view of self is one of fluidity.

Schneider's conception of awe points toward what is beyond the self. Existential thought has maintained a tenuous relationship with religion; sometimes collaborative while at other times antagonistic (Hoffman, 2008b). In essence, existentialism is definitively neutral in its stance on religion. By using the concepts of awe and mystery as the basis for spirituality in existential thought, a broader framework is established for working with a variety of belief systems. However, it is important for existential thought to engage with the religious and spiritual dimensions in a manner respectful of the client's beliefs.

Jungian and transpersonal psychology, along with religion, suggests there is a metaphysical reality that is beyond the self, but also part of the self. Similarly, quantum physics emphasizes the interrelated or intersubjective nature of the self. This forms another potential paradox within the existential integrative framework. The self is independent and bounded while also being interrelated or interconnected (Tillich, 1957)

Finally, cultural and gender 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. Although partially rectified in Schneider's (2008) *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy*, which incorporates several perspectives on cultural diversity, sexual orientation, and gender issues, it is imperative that existential-integrative psychology continue to address this issue.

As primarily an illustration of the need for discussions about diversity, existential philosophy and psychology have been decidedly individualistic in their focus throughout much of their history. Although, as discussed earlier, there has been a tipping of the hat to relational, social, and cultural influences, this lacked the necessary depth to be a force in a postmodern, pluralistic world. The individualist focus provides a challenge in applying

existential psychology with diverse individuals, particularly those from collectivist cultures. As Serlin (2008) indicates, this is also a limitation when working with women.

The paradoxical self, if developed and applied appropriately, has potential to address this weakness in existential thought. The individualist and collectivist tendencies can be understood as polarities within the paradoxical self. The tendency in Western culture is to err to the extreme of the individualist, whereas the tendency in Eastern culture is to err to the side of the collectivist impulse. Balance can be, and often is, achieved by Western and Eastern individuals. The optimal balance or integration for psychological health, however, may be culturally determined.

Krippner and Achterberg (2000), in their review of the research literature, demonstrate that there is a strong foundation for the assertion that what is healing, in both physical and psychological realms, is at least partially determined by culture. Hoffman and Kurzenberger (2008) further develop this conception maintaining that mental illness, psychological suffering, and various forms of healing vary across culture and historical epochs. For example, perceptions of depression as a mental illness change the way an individual experiences depression as opposed to when it is experienced as a normal aspect of human experience. From an existential perspective, a major aspect of the epidemic of depression and antidepressants in Western culture is directly tied to the resistance to existential depression (i.e., normal depression), therefore creating a neurotic depression.

The nature of the self entails various existential givens (Yalom, 1980). In introducing the idea of paradox, these givens often are in the form of paradox, such as the polarity between the individualist and collectivist pulls. Although the paradoxical self warns against the dangers of the extremes, it does not necessitate a specific answer to this paradox. In other words, it does not necessitate a certain stance in relationship to the individualist-collectivist paradox. Finally, integrating the cultural understanding suggests that different stances, as long as they avoid the extremes, may represent psychological health for different individuals, and which stance represents optimal health may be partially, or primarily, culturally determined. Although we do not mean to suggest that the individual cultures emphasize a bounded self and collectivist societies emphasize a no-self, there are inherent differences within these two approaches in understanding the boundaries of the self and how the self is related to culture.

The paradoxical self, from an existential perspective, can also address the challenges which postmodernism often refers to as multiple selves. Another way of conceiving experience labeled as different selves is to

construe this process as encompassing different aspects of the self which are activated in particular interpersonal settings; the self and these aspects of the self are also fluid or changing over time. Although this conception may be more a way of labeling experience than describing an ultimate reality, we have maintained throughout this article that such ideas and language do matter. The assumption that language and conceptions of reality have no real impact on one's experience is naive and serves to cut off aspects of experience. Additionally, this perspective fits better with May's conception of the self as centered integration. Centered integration does not necessitate clear or specific boundaries; it allows for the self to be conceived in different ways. It allows for different and permeable boundaries. Yet, it does so without removing a fulcrum from which one could impact the world, or agency.

The integrated center, which incorporates the various aspects of the paradoxical self and its relation to the existential givens, is the root or source of agency. Rationally, many theorists want to place clear boundaries around this agent, but it is not necessary. The self can remain somewhat ambiguous with permeable boundaries without discarding the will and intentionality. However, it is more doubtful that we can retain the will and the accompanying responsibility without any conception of the self.

Last, it is necessary to address the paradoxical tension between self and no-self. In many ways, these represent the extremes of individualism and collectivism. Individualism often focuses excessively on the self; conversely, collectivism de-emphasizes the self. Although collectivism and the de-emphasis on the self do not necessitate the conception of no-self, they do move in this direction. No-self can be seen as an extreme of the self lost in the collectivist system. All of the major world religions include some warnings against excessive self, or excessive self-focus. This excess can also be understood as being represented in extreme personality styles, such as anti-social and narcissistic personalities. The dangers of no-self are easily illustrated in representations in religion and psychological health. The major world religions all stress levels of personal accountability and development, even if the goal in mind is to eventually achieve the recognition of no-self. The lack of self, similarly, can be seen in the extremes of dependent personality patterns, in which the sense of self is attained through others. Partially represented through the collectivist-individualist tension, the extremes of self and no-self both carry psychological and emotional liabilities. This is not to say that the Buddhist goal of no-self is a pathological end; however, consistent with Buddhist thought, it does suggest that shortcuts to no-self have high costs and may be dangerous.

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)

What is the ideal for mental health, then? A lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death, and reality; one honest enough to follow its own commandments: I mean, not to kill, not to take the lives of others to justify itself. (Becker, 1973, p. 204)

The self is not an easy thing to locate, define, or describe. Maybe this is why after more than 100 years psychologists still intensely debate its existence. We hold no delusions of grandeur that we have solved the problems of the self; however, we hope that we have provided a solid argument to not throw away the concept of a coherent or integrated self too quickly.

We have maintained 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 and their fit to the individual's culture, beliefs, and value system. Healthier myths of self are adaptable and able to facilitate growth and development. In this manner, healthy myths of self balance the constrictive and expansive, individualist and collectivist, and other needs of the individual. Additionally, we have advocated for Schneider's (1999) 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.

Referring to the self as socially constructed and as a myth in no way is intended to suggest that there is not a real self or that this real self cannot be experienced. Rather, it indicates that the self is something that cannot be definitively known; it cannot be isolated from its surroundings and studied in a reductionistic manner. The self may be at one time distinct and yet indistinguishable; this may be the ultimate paradox of the self. But even the extremes of no-self cannot abdicate some responsible agent even if that agent is part of an impermanent larger whole. Indeed, the self is so complex that it is unknowable in the ultimate sense, which is part of why different cultures and individuals experience the self so differently. Even if it is our life mission to study the self, in the end we will fall short of complete understanding. It comprises us, yet is undeniably beyond us.

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