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## Self, Society and Everyday Life

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Overlooking the garden of their suburban house on a lovely summer's day, a man and woman talk quietly. Both regularly look over to where their children, a girl and a boy, play in the sunshine. The children are busy making mud pies, and their laughter reassures the man and woman that their children are content entertaining themselves. As the couple look away from their children, they return to a conversation about plans for a forthcoming holiday. There are flight reservations and hotel bookings to be made; discussing these plans, the woman makes notes about the intended weeks away from the routines of family life, commenting that she must check with her parents to see that they can look after the children. Their conversation is briefly disturbed when a call is taken on a mobile telephone; it is a business matter, and the man quickly switches from his previous conversation to the world of finance. Meanwhile, the woman briefly glances across at her children; reassuring herself that all is well, she returns to making plans for the holiday.

This might well be regarded as a typical scene in the life of an economically secure family in contemporary Western society. But what is going on here at the level of social interaction? In particular, what might this episode have to tell us about the nature of the self? The study of the minutiae of social interaction in everyday life is treated of major importance by many sociologists, in part because it is at the level

of human interaction and interpersonal relationships that the fabrication of the self arises. There are several traditions of sociological thought that study the self in the context of social interaction and daily life, and these traditions can be used to develop interesting interpretations of self, society and their mutual interaction. In the situation of the family sketched in the foregoing paragraph, we might, for example, focus on what sociologists term the 'contexts' of conversations and encounters navigated by the self. This would mean looking in some detail at how the man and woman make the necessary shifts in conversational positions between their own private talk, the practical accomplishment of maintaining this conversation while monitoring the activities of their children, and the suspension of their interpersonal conversation to engage with another style of talk altogether – in this case, that of business. Alternatively, we might instead concentrate on the children rather than the adults, giving special emphasis to their play. Some sociologists argue that, in children's play, we can detect the imitating of adult actions, and thus experimentation with different forms of self. In the making of mud pies, for instance, these children are most likely enacting their observations of adult cooking; the boy and girl might play at being father and mother, or chef and waitress. In effect, through such play-acting, these children are experimenting with different ways of being a self. Or perhaps we might look at this situation from another perspective, focusing on how a sense of self is sustained through institutional, and perhaps global, processes. Planning a holiday to some far-away country with ease, or the reception of an overseas phone call through new communications technology: here the self is seen as interacting with social forces that are global in scope.

We will look in this chapter at several different sociological approaches to the self and self-identity. In the first part of the chapter we will concentrate on the symbolic dimensions of social interaction and daily life, with particular emphasis on the importance of language, communication and symbols in the constitution of the self. The theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism will be introduced, and the writings of G. H. Mead and Herbert Blumer will be discussed. We will then move on to analyse the importance of different forms of

social interaction in everyday life for studying the self, and the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman will be considered. After this we shall consider more recent developments in sociological theory that connect self and society in the context of global institutional processes, giving particular attention to the writings of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens.

## Self, Symbols and Others: Symbolic Interactionism

We often think of the self as primarily a private domain, an inner realm of personal thoughts, values, strivings, emotions and desires. Yet this view, which seems largely self-evident, is in contrast to the way in which sociologists study the framing of personal identity and the self. Sociology demonstrates the need to look at the impact of other people, the wider society, as well as cultural forms and moral norms, in the making of the self. Particularly for sociologists interested in the dynamics of interpersonal interaction, the self can be thought of as a central mechanism through which the individual and the social world intersect. As such, the self, along with the attendant interpretations and definitions of situation and context that individuals routinely make in daily life, must be fully taken into account for the purposes of social analysis.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is widely considered the founding father of a general tradition of theoretical thinking concerned with the self: symbolic interactionism. Interestingly, Mead did not refer to himself as a symbolic interactionist; he more typically thought of himself as a philosopher or social psychologist, and spent most of his professional life teaching at the University of Chicago. Mead's theoretical influences were wide-ranging. He had immersed himself in continental philosophy, as well as the developing American pragmatic tradition that included sociologists, psychologists and philosophers such as Charles H. Cooley (1864–1929), William I. Thomas (1863–1947), Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952). He drew liberally from these various

authors to develop a powerful account of the emergence of a sense of self. While this in itself might sound a little daunting, it should be noted that Mead elaborated his theory of the self in a very clear style; hence his key ideas about the self can be set out without too much difficulty.

In *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934 [1974]), published after his death and constructed from the lecture notes of his students, Mead develops an interpretation of the social nature of the constitution of self. Broadly speaking, Mead places great emphasis upon the social self; each of us, as individuals, fashions a sense of our own selfhood through engagement with other selves. No clear dividing line can be drawn between our own sense of self and the selves of others, according to Mead, 'since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also' (p. 164).

According to Mead, language is at the heart of the constitution of the self. Human beings, unlike the lower animals, communicate through symbols – hence the subsequent use of the term 'symbolic interaction'. Symbols represent objects in our own minds and in the minds of others; when we learn, in childhood, to think of an object symbolically – whether the object is a parent, sibling or doll – we are making an initial step on the road to reflective thinking and autonomous agency. Language is pivotal in this connection. Without access to language there is no access to the symbols necessary for thinking and acting as a self in a structured world of symbolic meaning. Symbols, says Mead, have a universal quality for the social groups in which they are meaningful; symbols are a common currency through which individuals forge a sense of self and interact with other people. There is thus a certain commonality to being a self, which means that, by looking at our own thoughts, feelings and attitudes, we can interpret the actions of others. To take the attitude of another is, in a sense, to identify with the other's viewpoint, position or feelings. A death in the family of a friend, for instance, will elicit feelings of sadness and sympathy, as we try to 'look at' our friend's situation by imagining how we might feel. We feel we know, almost exactly, the way that our friend feels, and the different ways he or she might react, partly because

we try to imagine ourselves 'in their shoes'. The poet, Mead points out, relies on such commonalities when creating a pattern of words to evoke in others an experience of intense emotion.

The self for Mead is at once individuality and generality, agent and recipient, sameness and difference. Bluntly put, what this means is that the self is the agency through which individuals experience themselves in relation to others, but also an object or fact dealt with by its individual owner as he or she sees fit. We routinely construct our experience of daily life in exactly this manner: prodding, pushing, suggesting, advising, admonishing, criticizing and praising as we create the flow of our actions in the social world. 'Well done!', or just as easily 'you idiot!', we might say to ourselves when surveying the results of our actions; the crucial point for Mead is that such surveying of the territory of the self is always carried out with reference to the reactions of others. To possess a 'self' then necessarily implies an ability to take one's actions, emotions and beliefs as a unified structure, viewed from the perspective of significant others, as others would view and interpret actions of the self. Seen from this angle, the self is a social product through and through, an outcome of social symbolic interaction – of emergent, ongoing creation, thinking, feeling, the building of attitude structures, the taking on of roles, all in a quest for coherence and orientated to the social world.

Anyone who reflects on the dynamics of conversation and dialogue will know that ideas, attitudes, dispositions, tacit understandings and emotions cross and tangle between discussants, such that we manage to take away from a 'good conversation' something of the other person's concrete understanding of his or her identity and relationship to others, as well as the wider world. This is what Mead was driving at when he commented that the individual self is peopled with 'the attitude of others'. Across the entire spectrum of social life, we learn to view ourselves as other people see us, adjusting and transforming our self-understanding in the light of ongoing social interaction and dialogue. This ongoing dialogue between the self and others is what Mead termed 'the conversation of gestures', involving the exchange of symbols and the monitoring of interpretation and definition in all

interaction. Social interaction is organized around such conversational gestures, as the individual travels along a biographical trajectory from a preliminary or rudimentary sense of self in childhood to an adult identity, one geared to the values and moral dispositions of culture.

Child development in particular is central to Mead's understanding of the self. Mead places considerable emphasis on the play of infants and young children in conceptualizing the emergence of a sense of self. For it is through play, notes Mead, that the small child learns about the social world and interacting with it. Play tends to be at once rebellious and structured. It is rebellious in the sense that it drifts without apparent structure or order, especially among very young children. It is structured in the sense that the child adopts a series of symbolically defined social roles. Consider, once more, the boy and girl playing in the garden as their parents look on. In the making of mud pies, the boy and girl might be trying on the hats of father and mother one moment, and then shopkeeper and customer the next; in doing so, the children have all the attitudes and responses, more or less adequately defined, worked out. The boy and girl are able to manipulate a series of characters, imitating what they have seen their parents do, or similarly what they have seen actors do on television. This is what Mead termed 'taking the role of the other', a key way in which the self becomes attuned to the demands and pressures of society. In fact Mead thought that, in the play of children, one could glimpse the rudiments of a differentiated social order: different roles interact, complement and reciprocate responsibilities and duties. And this pattern becomes part of the self.

I said before that the self from the perspective of symbolic interactionism is a social product, but this now needs to be qualified somewhat. Mead makes a crucial distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' in conceptualizing the self. The 'me' is the socialized self, made up of the internalized attitudes of others as experienced in the early years of life. The 'I', as Mead uses the term, is the unsocialized self, an assortment of personal desires, needs and dispositions. These more spontaneous wants and wishes of the 'I' serve to distinguish the self from others, and can be said to inject something new, creative and innovative into the social process. The achieve-

ment of self-awareness, says Mead, arises when the self is able to distinguish the 'me' from the 'I', and hence attain a level of reflective distance from the demands of society and culture. This conceptual move also allows Mead to avoid the charge that his theory of the self is deterministic – that is, that the self is a mere reflection of the attitudes of general society, or an internalization of social structure. Mead's theory of the self is at some considerable distance from such determinism, since he holds that each individual responds to social relations in a particularistic or unique fashion. 'The attitudes', writes Mead (1974, p. 198), 'involved are gathered from the group, but the individual in whom they are organized has the opportunity of giving them an expression which perhaps has never taken place before'. Mead's distinction between 'me' and 'I' thus introduces a level of contingency and ambivalence to each social encounter: the 'I' reacts to the 'me' in a social context, but we cannot be sure exactly how that 'I' will react. Accordingly the 'I' in interaction with the 'me' plays a role in the transformation of social structure.

Another significant figure in symbolic interactionism is Herbert Blumer. A pupil of Mead, Blumer sought to explicate the implications of Mead's theories for the analysis of the self in the social sciences. Blumer argued that what was peculiar to the social sciences was that human agents interpret and define their own action, as well as the action of others, instead of merely reacting to human behaviour in a mechanical fashion. This meant that those sociologists (and there were many at the time) who believed that the objectives and logic of social science were the same as those of natural science were in error; the study of human conduct is, in fact, considerably different from the analysis of the movement of objects and events in nature. According to Blumer, a naturalistic perspective in social science can have no proper grasp of the distinctive symbolic qualities of the self. Human interaction, says Blumer, is 'mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions' (Herbert Blumer, 'Society as Symbolic Interaction' in A. Rose (ed.), *Human Behaviour and Social Process*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p. 180). To raise the issue of interpretation here is to question the process by which selves attach meaning to human experience. Objects, accord-

ing to Blumer, are not simply stimuli for action; they are rather perceived through a process of 'making indications to the self' (ibid., p. 181). Conscious life, the life of the self, is an ongoing process of self-indication. What this means, in effect, is that everything perceived in social life refers back to the self, and is given meaning by self-interpretation. Individual action, says Blumer, is thus 'a construction and not a release' (ibid., p. 184), developed in an ongoing process through constant monitoring and interpretation of self-indications, of what others are intending and doing, of the roles they are taking on, and the like.

For symbolic interactionists, therefore, the study of social life is closely interwoven with the analysis of the meaning of human action that individuals actively construct and interpret. Such an understanding of the creative involvement of the self has led to a sensitivity, on the part of some sociologists, to the complexity of social interaction – to the context in which individuals communicate, including the interpretations such individuals have of that context, and of the identities of those involved. Sociological interactionists pay close attention to the explanations, tacit understandings and meanings individuals give to their own actions, as well as the action of others.

However, symbolic interactionism has several weaknesses, which limits its attraction as a general theoretical framework for the study of the self. One major criticism is that the model of the self outlined by Mead and his followers is too rationalistic, conscious and cognitive. For many critics, the self painted by symbolic interactionists is primarily a matter of thinking, not of emotion or passion. Now Mead tended to associate 'feeling' with the physiological realm, a realm that he separated off from the self. Accordingly Mead's account of the self sometimes appears as peculiarly disembodied, something that many influenced by the writings of recent feminists and postmodernists would consider inadequate for developing a critical theory of the self.

Similarly the emphasis on the cognitive at the expense of the emotional realm in symbolic interactionism has been criticized as inadequate by authors influenced by the insights of Freud into unconscious elements of motivation of the self. The self for Freud, as we will see in the next chapter, is struc-

tured by unconscious promptings – desires, wishes, fantasies. By contrast, Mead's theory of the self does not rely on a theory of unconscious forces at the centre of mind and the self. The self is seen as primarily cognitive by symbolic interactionists because the seeds of self-consciousness are understood to derive from individuals consciously manipulating and constructing identity in accordance with that 'conversation of gestures' established through engagement with the social process. From a Freudian standpoint, however, Mead and his followers set up a conception of the relationship between self and society that is too smooth. As the self is constructed entirely through interaction – the individual looking at the self, as it were, as others see him or her – there would seem to be little or no conflict between the individual and society. There is no recognition of the tension, say, that Freud referred to in books like *Civilization and its Discontents*: between individual desires, wishes and fantasies on the one hand, and the requirements for social control and cultural order on the other. Mead claims that access to language permits us to become self-conscious agents, reproducing the values and morality of society through our developed capacity for self-awareness and self-understanding. However, there is no sense of the slippage or tension in Mead's vision between self-consciousness and other levels of experience, including bodily experience and unconscious forms of thought.

Finally, symbolic interactionism has difficulty assessing more political issues concerning the self and self-identity, such as the complex ways in which processes of cultural exclusion work to harm and damage the development of the self. Mead argued that the issue of social control was not in fact problematic for the individual because of the manner in which the demands of society entered into the construction of the self. As Mead develops this, 'self-criticism is essentially social criticism, and behaviour controlled by self-criticism is essentially behaviour controlled socially. Hence social control, so far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality.' Taken too far, however, this viewpoint might occlude any conception of political domination. The writings of the French historian Michel Foucault, whose work is

discussed in chapter 3, presents by contrast a far less benign view of the social fabrication of the individual self in relation to the social network. For social theorists influenced by Foucault, or indeed by his contemporary, the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, the structured world of social interaction can be far more crushing of individual expression than that which is acknowledged in the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

Yet if symbolic interactionists never quite spell out the various forms in which social and political relations of power and domination enter into the construction of the self, it remains the case that this general theoretical framework highlights the extremely subtle process by which symbolic interpretation shapes identities and defines the interaction between self and others in the course of day-to-day social life. At its best Mead's work underscores certain themes that have come to be very important to contemporary discussions about the self: children develop a sense of identity through active, creative engagement with others and the wider world; language and communication are pivotal to the fabrication of personal identity and the self; and the development of self-consciousness is intimately interwoven with taking on the role of others.

## Presentations of Self: Goffman

Erving Goffman (1922–82) is widely considered one of the most brilliant and innovative sociological observers of daily life, social interaction, and the production of self. He analyses our day-to-day activities with reference to the metaphor of the theatre, looking at what is most common and habitual in the ways that individuals perform roles and stage-manage impressions within specific social settings. The self consists for Goffman in an awareness of the multiplicity of roles that are performed in various situated contexts; such performances involve individuals in continually monitoring the impressions they give off to, and make upon, others; public identity is thus performed for an audience, and the private self knows that such performances are essential to

identity and to the maintenance of respect and trust in routine social interaction.

One might suppose, from these introductory remarks, that Goffman develops a sociological overview of the socially constructed self. This is partly accurate, as Goffman emphasizes the importance of symbolically defined roles, statuses and relationships that individuals engage with in creating impressions of the self for others – and to this extent his work reflects the imprint of the tradition of symbolic interactionism. (Goffman undertook his graduate studies at the University of Chicago in the 1940s, where he came under the influence of Herbert Blumer). Yet, although Goffman is sometimes portrayed as a symbolic interactionist, his work in fact conceptualizes the self in exactly the sense that symbolic interactionism does not consider – that is, the individual is viewed by Goffman as at once drawing from and transcending specific roles and norms in the strategic manipulation of impressions in everyday life. In other words, identity might be constructed through the adoption of, and adherence to, social roles and their validation by social institutions, but the individual is the creative and reflective agent who decides – and in doing so constitutes self-identity – on how to carry out such roles as well as the staging of role performances.

In his most celebrated book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman analyses with great wit and verve the routine or taken-for-granted details of face-to-face interaction. His central preoccupation is with the dramatic techniques by which the self displays agency to others. Dismantling conventional assumptions that equate selfhood with inner character or personality, Goffman writes that the self:

does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to the performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited

or discredited. (*The Goffman Reader*, ed. C. Lemert and A. Branaman, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 23–4)

To speak of identity as a ‘dramatic effect’ is, in short, to dismantle the customary equation of self and mind. If identity is performed, then the self is an effect, not a cause. We might tend to think of the self as the source of our activities, ideas, beliefs or ways of being in the world, but in fact we retroactively attribute private intentions and subjective capabilities to our identities through the realization of skilled social performance.

Consider, for example, what Goffman terms ‘role distance’. Role distance is conceptualized by Goffman as the means whereby an individual expresses a separation between role and self. Thus the university student who works as a shop assistant during the summer holidays is not symbolically defined by this social role because of the social meanings attributed to being a student and the status of holiday work. In drawing attention to the separation of role and self, however, Goffman does not suggest that identity is concealed behind roles, nor that performers can be seen in a more accurate light as standing behind their performance. On the contrary, role distance allows an opportunity for the individual self to constitute himself or herself with due seriousness and credibility. Hence a doctor who engages in some small talk with patients might be able to lessen the anxieties of patients about the medical consultation and thereby provide reassurance as to his or her medical competence. In this sense role distance can promote the professional credibility of the self.

We can draw out the intimate connections between productions of self and contexts of interaction, according to Goffman, by looking closely at the ‘face’ or ‘façade’ that individuals seek to achieve in the stylization of their conduct and behaviour with others. All presentations of self, says Goffman, are situated within interactive frameworks involving social conventions, ethical assumptions, and the positioning of bodies in relation to the physical features of settings. In seeking to present a self-image that is acceptable within any given interactive framework, individuals must necessarily come to make certain distinctions between what Goffman calls ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions. The frontal aspects

of self-presentation routinely involve the bracketing-out or screening-off of aspects of identity which are felt to be inappropriate to the social setting or encounter that is staged. Thus the 'face' of authority that a television newsreader seeks to present (using the dress props of a jacket and tie) may contrast significantly with the jeans he is wearing, but which cannot be seen on screen. In most areas of social life the 'up-front' performances of individuals contrast with back-region behaviour, where individuals do not have to worry so much about the face they seek to project. In some sectors of social life – for example, in restaurants – the distinction between front and back regions is reasonably well defined and fixed. But the use of regional demarcations is essential, in Goffman's view, to the contextuality of all human interaction and dramatization of self.

Goffman argues that the individual must continually display competence of self to others and to the social world. This involves the chronic monitoring of self-identity. But it also goes further, involving a kind of watchfulness over the most seemingly trivial aspects of social behaviour – including the control of bodily management. Goffman describes one category of our attempts to remedy lapses in self-watchfulness as 'response cries'. 'A woman', notes Goffman, 'rapidly walking to a museum exit, passes the door, catches her mistake, utters *Oops!*, and backtracks to the right place' (ibid, p. 193). The woman's response cry ('*Oops!*') might at first sight appear impulsive, expressive or unsocialized; her blurted cry, after all, does not seem to be directed at another. Not so, says Goffman. In uttering such a protective-like cry, he suggests, the woman demonstrates to others around her some presence of mind, indicating an awareness of her incompetence, and thus confirming for others that it was only a lapse. We employ response cries to demonstrate self-monitoring and self-control to others; 'response cries', says Goffman, 'do not mark a flooding of emotion outward, but a flooding of relevance in' (ibid., p. 196).

Goffman's theory of the self is not without its difficulties. To begin with, there is something a little disturbing in Goffman's social vision of performance, in which everyone is cynically manipulating appearance and staging inauthentic representations of the self. Such is the view, at any rate, of

the American sociologist Alvin Gouldner, who argues in a celebrated critique that Goffman presents us with an amoral social universe. For Gouldner, Goffman's work is expressive of some of the most insidious ideological aspects of American mass culture, a culture in which marketing, manipulation and media reach all the way down to the textures of personal identity and the self. One way of grasping this criticism might be to frame Goffman's performing self in the image of Woody Allen's oddest character, Leonard Zelig, a man so lacking in selfhood that his life completely dissolves into role-playing. Zelig is focused to such a degree on making a good impression on others that he, literally, takes on the personality of whomever he is with – at one moment, in a jazz club, he becomes a black musician; at another moment, when eating spaghetti in a restaurant, he becomes Italian; later he turns up in Germany as a member of Hitler's Nazi party. Understanding Goffman's performing self in terms of Allen's movie *Zelig* is useful perhaps only up to a point, but it does offer us a grim sense of the psychological costs of impression management in a culture in which a premium is put on appearance.

While Goffman undoubtedly emphasizes the performative dimension of self-constitution, it is not altogether clear that he sees people as mere performers putting on a show or manipulating impressions. Indeed Randall Collins argues that Goffman's sociology suggests precisely the opposite, with the self portrayed as moral through and through. According to Collins, people routinely engage in interactional rituals geared towards moral order, in which respect for others, social tact and interpersonal trust are expressed. From this angle, moral order is not the upshot of an internalization of ethical obligations – as with, say, Mead. Rather morality is part of the process of the production of the self; morality is not just a set of external rules or prohibitions, it is rather a binding feature of the complex ways in which individuals achieve a consistent definition of their worlds in daily interaction.

Whether one concludes that there is or is not a moral sensibility at the heart of Goffman's account of skilled social performances, it remains perhaps hard to see why the performing self might in any event be worried or anxious about impres-

sion management – for Goffman’s theory of self says surprisingly little about the emotional or psychosexual dynamics of personal life and social relationships. Goffman, to be sure, maintained that there is a self standing behind the multitude of roles that any individual performs in daily social interaction; the problem, however, is that Goffman is very vague on the psychic orientations or emotional dispositions that shape the acting self. A psychoanalytical interpretation of Goffman’s performative self, for example, might view such undue concern with impression management as symptomatic of deeper anxieties of the self – anxieties stirred perhaps by narcissism, and damaging to the individual’s sense of self-worth and autonomy. It is not easy to see how Goffman’s theory of self could be used to analyse such disturbances of personal identity.

Questions of desire, then, do not enter into Goffman’s reflections on the self; but the image of the self as situated performer surely also throws into doubt the emphasis on a ‘true self’ that modern culture valorizes, and which is evident in many forms of social thought – including some versions of psychoanalytical theory. In debunking the idea that the self is stabilized according to the internalization of moral norms and cultural ideals, Goffman transforms the way in which individual subjectivity is conceived. This involves a shift from seeing the self as outcome (a product of, say, family, society or history) to a more fluid conception of the self as situationally defined. Much social theory, in particular postmodern theory, is devoted to a view of personal identity and social life as filtered through surfaces, images, performances, fragments and constructions. Goffman’s theory of the performative self might well be understood as a precursor to such postmodernist sensibilities.

## Reflexivity and the Self: Giddens

The influence of Anthony Giddens’s work in sociology is comparable to that of Goffman. Both have developed powerful interpretations of the self. Yet while Goffman developed his theory of the self on the basis of observations drawn from

interpersonal interaction, Giddens ties his account of the self much more to institutional and global forces. Giddens (b. 1938) spent the better part of his academic career at Cambridge University, and subsequently became Director of the London School of Economics. He has written an extraordinary number of books – on social theory, philosophy, politics and the history of sociological thought. In the 1990s he became increasingly preoccupied with the role of the self in social analysis, and his books *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) have strongly influenced debates in recent social theory.

At the core of Giddens's theory of the self is the concept of 'reflexivity', a concept of immense significance for grasping the production of personal and social life. Reflexivity can be defined as a self-defining process that depends upon monitoring of, and reflection upon, psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life. Such information about self and world is not simply incidental to contemporary cultural life; it is actually constitutive of what people do and how they do it. 'The reflexivity of modern social life', writes Giddens, 'consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, p. 38). In one sense, what is underscored here concerns the richness of the sense-making process, primarily the mixings of certainty and anxiety that allow an individual to *read* cultural life and its textured flow of social action. This imperative to read cultural signs with some degree of sophistication is perhaps an index of our postmodern, speed-driven information age, evident in everything from serious social criticism (in which commentary refers to previous commentary, which in turn is premised upon prior commentary) to the latest trends in pop music, which routinely invoke parodies of style and genre. In another sense, reflexivity stretches beyond the cultural and subjective, deeply rooted as it is in institutional social life. From mapping the demographic characteristics of cities to monitoring the changing flight paths of aircraft, the intrusion of expert reflexive systems into daily life is pivotal to the world of modernity.

Consider, for example, the connections between marriage, the family and self-identity. There are few areas of social life that more directly affect the self than that of marriage and the family. Traditionally, the marriage tie was primarily structured as an economic arrangement: the husband used the marriage as a place from which to organize his activities in the public world, while the wife concentrated on children and the home. The idea of romantic love significantly weakened the power of such economic considerations, although marriage as an institution within patriarchy has undoubtedly remained intimately interwoven with economic power. Marriage of the late modern type, in Western societies at any rate, has provided an institutional context in which men and women can pursue the achievement of intimacy, respect, love, equality, autonomy and self-integrity. Notwithstanding changes in the relationship between the sexes in recent decades, the notion of romantic love remains psychologically central to the pursuit of personal and sexual fulfilment within marriage. Alongside this, marriage has been a key arena for the psychic development of the self, as this is organized through attitudes associated with childhood, adolescence and the nurturing of intimate sentiments within general social relations.

However, these days 'till-death-us-do-part' marriages seem the product of a bygone age. In many of the advanced societies nearly half of first marriages end in divorce, and the statistics are worse for second and subsequent marriages. But what are the broader cultural consequences of our separating and divorcing society? What impact are divorce, remarriage and the rise of de facto relationships having at the level of personal experience and the self? How is the texture of individuals' personal lives altered by the disintegration of family ties that bind? For conservative social critics, marriage breakup is perhaps the key sign of society's moral decay. In this critique the weakening of marriage as an institution is related to sexual permissiveness, as well as a moral deficiency, which the decline of the patriarchal family has created. A number of long-term social influences are usually identified in this connection, including the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the rise of feminism, the spread of alternative lifestyles, pornography and the drug culture.

Under the impact of these social forces, according to conservatives, the self withdraws from public life and political obligation, moral bonds recede in favour of an overwhelming desire for instant narcissistic gratification, and intimate relationships fragment into short-term, provisional and episodic encounters.

Yet this view, which has gained considerable currency in the political sphere in recent times, is in fact premised upon a defensive rejection of the actual responses of people to the complex, contradictory experience of divorce and remarriage. In the conservative critique, individuals appear as largely passive in their reactions to transformations in intimacy affecting self and culture. Against this backdrop, individuals cannot help but appear shut out from an emotionally rewarding and satisfying life. But it is simply not the case that individuals passively equate the end of marriage with the disintegration of self; nor is it the case that people give up hope of refashioning their identity and sense of well-being.

This is where Giddens enters the debate, bringing his account of reflexivity to bear on marriage, divorce and the self. According to him, individuals today actively engage with fresh opportunities and dangers that arise as a consequence of dramatic and shattering transformations affecting self-identity, sexuality and intimacy. For Giddens, divorce is undeniably a crisis for the self, involving significant pain, loss and mourning. Yet many people, he argues, take positive steps to work through the emotional dilemmas generated by marriage breakdown; in addition to dealing with financial issues and matters affecting how children should be brought up, separation and divorce also call into play an emotional engagement with the self. Charting territory of the past (where things went wrong, missed opportunities, etc.) and of the future (alternative possibilities, chances for self-actualization, etc.) necessarily involves experimenting with a new sense of self. This can lead to emotional growth, new understandings of self, and strengthened intimacies. Against the conservative critique of irredeemable breakdown, Giddens sees the self opening out to constructive renewal. Remarriage and the changing nature of family life are crucial in this regard for Giddens. As he develops this point:

Many people, adults and children, now live in stepfamilies – not usually, as in previous eras, as a consequence of the death of a spouse, but because of the re-forming of marriage ties after divorce. A child in a stepfamily may have two mothers and fathers, two sets of brothers and sisters, together with other complex kin connections resulting from the multiple marriages of parents. Even the terminology is difficult: should a stepmother be called ‘mother’ by the child, or called by her name? Negotiating such problems might be arduous and psychologically costly for all parties; yet opportunities for novel kinds of fulfilling social relations plainly also exist. One thing we can be sure of is that the changes involved here are not just external to the individual. These new forms of extended family ties have to be established by the very persons who find themselves most directly caught up in them. (Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991, p. 13)

Marital separation, as portrayed by Giddens, implicates the self in an open project: tracing over the past, imagining the future, dealing with complex family problems and experimenting with a new sense of identity. Further experimentation with marriage and intimate relationships will necessarily involve anxieties, risks and opportunities. But, as Giddens emphasizes, the relation between self and society is a highly fluid one, involving negotiation, change and development.

The manner in which current social practices shape future life outcomes is nowhere more in evidence than in the conjunction of divorce statistics, the reckoning of probability ratios for success or failure in intimate relationships, and the decision to get married. As Giddens rightly points out, statistics about marriage and divorce do not exist in a social vacuum; everyone, he says, is in some sense aware of how present gender uncertainties affect long-term relationships. When people marry or remarry today, according to Giddens, they do so against a cultural backdrop of high divorce statistics, knowledge of which alters a person’s understanding and conception of what marriage actually is. It is precisely this reflexive monitoring of relationships that, in turn, transforms expectations about, and aspirations for, marriage and intimacy. The relationship between self, society and reflexivity is a dynamic one, involving the continual overturning of traditional ways of doing things.

Despite the influence and interest of Giddens's work for many social theorists, others have responded with bemusement and disbelief to Giddens's claim that the self is a self-mastering, self-monitoring project. For Giddens's critics, the reflexive project of self-making and self-actualization exhibits a distinctively individualistic bent, in a social theory that reduces struggle over power and politics to mere personal interest in change. The core concern here is that Giddens's theory of the reflexive self fits too neatly with the liberal ideology of individualism – the notion that the sovereign individual self lies at the heart of society. My own view is that such criticism is somewhat misplaced, since Giddens is at pains to underscore the increasing interconnection between personal life and globalizing social influences. The reflexive self is not then so much self-mastering (though Giddens sometimes implies as much) as reflexively implicated in the thrills and spills of social life. Yet there is a difficulty with the almost excessive emphasis that Giddens places on the tacit knowledge and self-understanding of social agents – excessive since it threatens to break the link with issues of social power and political domination that Giddens recognizes in his writings elsewhere. Particularly for social theorists and cultural critics influenced by post-structuralist and postmodern accounts of domination and powerlessness, the individual – through knowledge and experience of social practices, cultural codes, and moral norms – can be critically analysed in terms of enacted restrictive performances or repressive forms of self-actualization. From this angle, what Giddens takes as a sign of reflexive agency is, in fact, a form of social control.

It would seem that Giddens's attempt to situate the self in terms of reflexive monitoring is also destined to clash with psychoanalytic constructions of subjectivity in terms of fantasy and repressed desire. Psychoanalytic critics, as will be discussed in the next chapter, have used a variety of strategies to connect Freudian thought to the current ambivalences and evasions of culture and politics. Of core importance in this connection is the multiplicity of unconscious ties and attachments as manifested in the self's relations with others; in contrast to traditional understandings of the individual as self-identical and rational, the individual is revealed in psychoanalysis to exhibit a range of subjective identifications

available in fantasy. The notion of multiple subjective identifications, as experienced in unconscious fantasy, is potentially troubling to Giddens's self-monitoring reflexive self – primarily because it threatens a range of conceptual oppositions upon which his work rests, including active/passive, knowledge/desire, and mind/body.

This criticism can be made more concrete by returning to the example of intimacy and marriage. Women and men, we can agree with Giddens, pursue intimate relationships today against a cultural backdrop of dramatic transformations governing sexuality, love, marriage, the family, and work. Many embrace these social changes wholeheartedly; others may have mixed impressions; some no doubt try to carry on by ignoring current shifts in gender thinking and practice. Yet these social and sexual issues undoubtedly press in on everyone as personal matters and interpersonal crises. Giddens is surely right, then, to tie self and society ineluctably together around our reflexive discontents over sexuality and gender. But however aware of the current historical moment we may try to be, we are all linked to specific emotional pasts and prior generational histories – and this is where Giddens's work runs into difficulties, as he seems to downplay the degree to which the influence of emotion, memory and desire can limit or conflict with our conscious attempts to order our lives and make sense of the world in more reflexive terms. Thus a person who has suffered emotional abandonment by a parent in childhood might display a quite defensive emotional need to embrace, or equally to deny, intimacy; such needs and desires, while not automatically in conflict with reflexive knowledge of the self and world, do not reduce to the language of social practices.

I began this book by questioning the idea that the self is more a psychological than a social, or even political, concept. I also argued that individual subjectivity, far from being an agency through which the self sustains and reproduces identity, might be more a product of how the individual internalizes, and responds in the process to, the obligations of culture and the demands of social life. Now we can see that how individuals form conceptions of identity is a central problem for any sociology. To emphasize the impact of social forms and

cultural traditions on the self is not to imply that the individual is merely the product of external forces. On the contrary, the cultural resources and socio-symbolic materials from which individuals draw in the construction of personal experience and identity are always creatively engaged with, interpreted and transformed in the process of being reproduced. This emerges very clearly from Mead's account of the social origins of the self. According to Mead, the self is a symbolic project which the individual actively constructs and develops, drawing on symbolic resources to construct a sense of identity in the context of engagement with familial figures and the 'generalized other'. Symbolic interaction of this sort, upon which the making and remaking of the self depends, is not removed from the material conditions of daily life, nor the cultural forces that influence social interaction. The capacity to engage with the self and with others in contexts of socio-symbolic interaction is anchored in the routine, practical situations of day-to-day life. We have seen some of the problems that Mead's sociology of the self encounters in trying to relate these aspects of individual self-construction to socio-symbolic forms of interaction. Part of the problem, I have suggested, arises from Mead's failure to develop a conception of social differentiation, as well as his failure to account for processes of personal and social transformation.

That the self is a *knowledgeable agent* emerges clearly from the work of Mead and other symbolic interactionists. However, as Goffman's work shows, knowledgeability of self is fundamentally tied to the thousands of small interpersonal settings in and through which day-to-day life is organized. Thus individuals routinely 'repair' or 'shore up' the self through engaging in 'remedial practices'; by helping others to save face; and, above all, through the monitoring and manipulation of appearances in focused interaction. Most of us recognize, most of the time, that appearances are fundamental in our dealings with others that we come upon. Goffman's theory of the self provides a detailed conceptual account of why this should be so, although many critics have argued that the self is reduced in his work to the level of cynical manipulator of appearances. I have suggested that Goffman's account of the self is considerably more complex than such criticism seems to acknowledge; trust and tact are binding

features of social interaction, and hence crucial to the constitution and reproduction of personal identity. It is, in fact, arguable that Goffman's theory of the self describes a highly moralized world of social relationships; his work shows that morality enters into the most practical accomplishments of the self.

Some contemporary critics are likely to be worried by the problem of the relationship between the individual self and social interaction, or between identity and social structure. In the account I sketched of Giddens's sociology of self-identity, I tried to show that there is a great deal more at stake here than the way in which personal identity is structured by existing social relations. For the self, according to Giddens, should be conceived as a continuous process of reflexivity, in a world in which vast institutional transformations associated with modernity enter into the fabric of who we are and how we conceive of ourselves. In Giddens's sociology, the capability for autonomous thought and reflexivity permits a sort of emotional regrooving of self in the broader context of contemporary social transformations sweeping the globe. Here Giddens has in mind the current phase of globalization transforming modern societies, particularly in the areas of politics, economics, culture and communication, migration, environmental issues, public policy and military affairs. By showing how complex processes of globalization are reshaping the self, Giddens's work highlights, in a sophisticated theoretical manner, the ways in which identity and social structure continually interweave. Critics of Giddens's account of the self divide between those who rather enthusiastically promote the reflexive orientations of identity in the late modern or post-modern age and those who insist, more pessimistically but perhaps more plausibly, that the reflexive capabilities of the self are overshadowed by various forces – including the system of social relations, of desire and of language.

What the various sociologies of the self that I have been charting fail to see is that identity also belongs to the peculiar kind of emotional needs that all of us experience and express in our personal and social worlds. By 'emotional needs' I refer not to something outside our social determination, but rather the complex affective ways in which individual selves interact with others in the social world.

Twentieth-century sociological theory, as this chapter has suggested, provides a refined theoretical armoury to understand the constitution of the self. Yet sociologies of the self, however much they may explore the trajectories and transformations of intimacy and personal life, have scarcely shown much concern with the internal world of self-experience. Giddens seems aware of this dilemma in his own way, and it is perhaps for this reason that he has sought to take the sociology of the self in a more personal or emotive direction in recent times. However, the century has also provided other, somewhat darker, theoretical visions of the self, which we can now turn to examine.