Who are "I"?:

A Sociology of My Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern Selves

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It is not something of which I was always afflicted, but only recently, in the last five years, did I begin to question it. It has become more and more challenging for me since I had always believed that I knew myself, my passions, my desires, and my beliefs without reservation, doubt, or hesitation. But despite the years past and my increased education, I have begun to realize that I know little about myself and its composition. Using a **phenomenological** approach, I will treat my inability to strictly adhere to one set of beliefs as a problematic in order to understand why it puzzles me and why I have an urge for change, even if the change proves to be unnecessary. Through this investigation I hope to explore my **self concept** in both personal and global contexts.

In this quest I have begun to view myself in a seemingly uncharacteristic way, a way that invites the notion of inner multiplicity. I have begun to identify myself by accepting and investigating my multiple selves. These newly discovered and emergent selves have complicated my simplistic notions of the self resulting from prior socialization, somewhat confusing my **self-identity**. Is the true "self" a cut and dry construction that displays one personality over the other, founded on solid beliefs, or can the "self" be the sum result of all the various internalized roles, displaying inconsistency? Is admitting to think and feel one way at a given moment but to also think and feel differently about the same issue at another given moment a sign of hypocrisy or of balanced sincerity? I ask these questions, questions that echo the many conflicted thoughts I battle with daily, in order to understand myself more deeply in relation to society and the world.

The critical assessment of the type of woman I want to be and the fashion in which I want to carry out my life and raise my children are issues that I am presented with daily. The questions are chronic, oftentimes disruptive, and begging to be examined and maybe even resolved. Do I want to be a mother and homemaker or a professional woman? Do I want to be the monogamous and loyal wife or the single lover of many? Do I want the simple life in exchange for the complex? Am I conservative or liberal? These questions are easily answered by many, but not by all, and certainly not by me, at least not yet. So, to what can I attribute this discrepancy? Is it a result of my modern upbringing? A traditional quest for balance and harmony in my everyday affairs? Is modern society overwhelming tradition, including in my inner life?

Having grown up in the distinguished Irish-Catholic section of Boston, my family and personal history is steeped in community and custom. My struggle to discover my true self among the many contradictory drives in my life arises from the battle between the traditional and the modern. My parents are happily married and have been so for thirty years. As a child, I attended Catholic school, made my First Holy Communion and received my Confirmation into the Catholic Church as a teenager. I

played Catholic Youth Organization (C.Y.O) sports for many years, hung out at local community centers before graduating to the corners, and I never missed a St. Patrick's Day parade. At the same time, however, I did deviate from the norms of my community in many other areas. I have often done things differently than most people of my age in South Boston: for instance, I did not go to a Catholic high school, but chose to go to a public examination school and had a diverse group of friends with varying ethnic and religious backgrounds. I never took Irish-step dancing and never dated anyone from the town; I listened to different (i.e. "**deviant"**) genres of music. I enjoyed learning, debate and discussion. I questioned Catholicism and, overall, I was more liberal socially than those in my community. I was never an outcast, however. In fact, I was popular. This popularity kept me in the middle: I was not forced by either side to migrate to one extreme or another.

I was socialized into my community through ritual and custom. Because both of my parents had always been more open-minded than the average person of the town (my mother slightly more than my father), I was fortunate enough to understand that I had choices in regards to my behavior, and I began to analyze and observe the world around me. In my observations of my community, friends, and family life, I realized that because of my moderate nature I could not commit to any solid philosophical position about my life; they always seemed too extreme. Is it because of my less consistent life experiences and thoughts that I am less certain about the woman I am, or the type of woman I want be? I am certainly less certain than my parochial hometown friends who practiced and continue to practice more regularity in their daily routines, teachings, and beliefs, and I am also less certain than my super-liberal friends at work and school. So which approach to understanding my life and my

self is more useful, the singular or the plural model?

Let me do a brief comparative interpersonal study. Sandy and I are best friends and have been so for at least ten or twelve years. We used to be inseparable, but that changed as we grew older. Sometimes I feel as if she never grew up, as if her growth halted or mine excelled, or both. She is a twenty year old single mother who moves from job to job, living from paycheck to paycheck. She is street smart and tough, a great mom, and unafraid to fight for her honor and that of her loved one. She cares very little for extravagance or flair, but lives day to day and is amazingly content with doing so. At first glance, having a three-year-old daughter at twenty seems outrageous and unconventional, but to Sandy it is customary: she does not believe in abortion. Sandy operates her life through favors-cycles of giving and taking. If it were not for the help she received, financial among others (babysitting, errands, networking, etc.), Sandy could not function in her society. Under modest circumstances, I am more than happy to offer this help, help that has come to be viewed as obligatory in our community.

George Herbert Mead's notion of **symbolic meaning** can help outline this example of an everyday issue that communicates my confused identity. When Sandy calls, the phone rings, and the simple act of it ringing which may mean nothing to another is an extremely telling **"gesture"** to me. Sandy relies on others too greatly for support—ninety percent of the time when the phone rings it is her calling. This gesture has acquired an additional symboling meaning for me. When the phone rings now, I dread answering it because I know that I must come to her aid or defense by somehow providing, giving, or ensuring something. The mere act of the phone ringing, not even the act of Sandy asking for the favor, but simply the phone ringing, ignites a negative response in me. This negative re-

sponse leaves me feeling confused. On the one hand, I want to be there unconditionally for Sandy with the ability to provide her with whatever possible, but, on the other hand, I selfishly want to spend the time or money I would donate to her on myself. The ambivalent interpersonal allegiance has thus split me into two: for me Sandy does not only exist as an external entity since I have subconsciously internalized her and allowed for her to exist symbolically within me. I am torn between a self that wants to help her and a self that wants to escape her. The conflict arises as a result of the social interaction between these two different selves.

According to Mead, an individual engages in social interaction with him/herself (**self-interaction**) through the practice of "**taking the role of the other"** (Wallace and Wolf, 200). By doing this, he begins to develop and come to know particular selves that are needed to carry out certain roles in particular situations. According to Mead, there are two phases of the self: an "I" phase and a "Me" phase. The **"I" phase** is subjective and displays innovation and creativity resulting from less constrictive social interactions. It is unorganized, spontaneous, and represents the part of the self that is impulsive. The **"Me" phase** of the self is an affected object. It is shaped by social forces and has a more organized and concrete set of ideas based on the assumed attitudes of others in society. The "Me" phase of the self is more easily influenced by others' ideas and assumes certain viewpoints based on the perspectives and habits of others. So, following Mead's notion, my "Me" selves are conflicted too, each having both traditional and modern beliefs reflecting the conflict existing in the society at large. In the example above, my caring and avoiding "Me" selves associated with Sandy and unconventionality are expressions of my traditional and modern (individualistic) selves. So is this split common, necessary, detrimental? If detrimental, is there an "I" in me that can help bridge this gap?

Mead attributes the development of these multiple selves to social self-interaction and taking the role of the other. Through this interaction we are able to undertake certain roles and see how we view ourselves in them. If we are aware of this process, we can ultimately decide if we feel comfortable in those specific roles and either accept or reject them. A basic example of this idea can be noticed in our everyday "mood swings." When someone has a dramatic shift in mood or disposition, it can be seen as an emergent self attempting to oppress the preexisting self. My swinging from caring self to avoiding self, somewhat representative of traditional and modern values in society, is a good illustration of this mood swing.

In the film *Twelve Angry Men* Henry Fonda's character puts himself in the shoes of the elderly witness to the defendant's alleged murder of his father, in order to test the old man's account of the situation. He maps out the distance, walks with a limp, and discovers that it would have taken the old man at least 40 seconds to walk from the bedroom to the downstairs front door, which is inconsistent with his testimony of roughly 15 seconds. Other characters continue to take the role of the other by "supposin'" they were the one on trial. **Self-interaction** is important in this film because it displays how each character begins to understand himself more deeply after having viewed himself as an other. It is inferred and can be assumed that the jurors who were more convinced of the defendant's guilt but who later changed their votes had to battle with their own many multiple selves.

I too am able to better understand myself in regards to my community by reminding myself of my prior self-interactions and taking the roles of others. I would undertake various roles like "the bully," "the tough chick," "the unquestion-

ingly loyal friend," and "the racist," all prominent traditional features of my community that did not come naturally to me because my home environment did not produce or perpetuate them. By reflecting on such self-interactions I am able to conclusively know that I was not the bully, I was not the tough chick, I was not the racist, and I was not always going to be blindly loyal to a friend if I disagreed with the specific circumstances or her motivations. Seeing myself in an unfavorable light was difficult, but helped me define those things that I am not.

As a child though, it was sometimes difficult to stand up to opposition, and though I would never join in anything of which I did not believe, I would condone it for fear of reprisal or opposition. Though I was unaware, the process Charles Cooley called the **looking-glass self** may have contributed to the perpetuation of my behavior. I did come to view myself based on the imagined perceptions of others: I believed I had to act in one or another way towards Sandys of the world in order to be accepted in this or another community. According to Berger and Luckmann, "the self is a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others toward it" (Charon, 35). My **primary socialization** contributed to my strong social bond and, when my unconventional self acted peculiarly in response to other social pressures, it forced me to ask, "Do they think I'm different? Strange? Disloyal?"

Patricke Heine (1971) explains that, sociologically speaking, identity crisis has much to do with social setting, explaining that "modern society presents us with many possibilities of role and identification… that the core of the problem is related to successful internalization…[that] in the presence of choice, there is an incapacity to choose, in the presence of decision, indecisiveness" (Heine, 140). Erving Goffman's **dramaturgical theory** incorporates the idea of social setting as a theater by asking us to view our everyday social interactions with others as if we were actors on stage. He suggests that we project those images of ourselves that we want to be seen and remembered by others. As a child I gradually learned to absorb a sense of the **generalized other** through **primary** and **secondary socializations**; but, despite having also a sense of my own identity without the need of another person to act as reflecting board, I sometimes felt the need to project a safe image of myself that would not reveal my strangeness or contrasting viewpoints that were in conflict with the traditional **norms** of the society that I had been raised in. Conversely, in situations where my unconventional self would have been the norm, I felt the need to keep hidden my conventional self. This process of hiding particular selves is well illustrated in "The Drinking Matrix: A Symbolic Self Interaction" (2003), when Neo Morpheus describes how "we… try to block out and alter our selves to deal with some sort of pain" (Morpheus, 13). The urge to dramaturgically keep my opinions and opposing beliefs hidden was not always easy to do, but oftentimes necessary in order to eliminate any potential pain that might arise as the result of being labeled a 'deviant' or a conformist.

Rational Choice theorist James Coleman explains how families play a major role in socializing children and establishing the norms of society. His concept of **social capital** focuses on aspects of society that allow individuals to achieve certain things more easily or more effectively. Strong familial bonds can be a type of social capital and Coleman, like Durkheim, worries that the long-term ability of society to maintain cohesion and enforce social norms is in jeopardy, especially with the decline of the family as the primary agent of socialization (Wallace and Wolf, 361). **Exchange Theory** proposes that individuals enter into relationships based on the perceived benefit to them. Sandy approaches me because she perceives the possibility of gaining some

extrinsic benefit from our interaction. My traditional "Sandy" self would like to help her, perhaps simply for **intrinsic benefits** in return. However, my unconventional non-Sandy self, seeing no extrinsic rewards in return, shuns Sandy. The conflicted family life that Sandy was socialized into did not allow her the opportunity that I was afforded to find or create an unconventional "I" self, the self that broke boundaries and did things differently. Sandy was physically, verbally and emotionally abused by her mother prior to her parents' divorce. The partnerships that she has since established, including her partnership with me, work to her benefit because she is now continually supported. The inner conflict of my traditional and modern selves is an expression of the clash between traditional and modern modes of exchange, of "rational" action. The inner conflict I have in regards to the external Sandy is perhaps itself a result of the conflict between traditional and modern lifestyles and their respective "**dysfunctions**" in society.

I had often viewed this conflict in myself as a weakness. It seemed that indecision was the only reality I could depend on. My conflicted identity was a pressing issue on the forefront of my everyday affairs and often still is. It can be observed in my quest to choose a political party, my decision to remain single or in a committed relationship, and it is alive in the battle between duty and pleasure. Does **labeling theory** explain why I feel compelled to make a decision—i.e., to avoid being labeled by one community or other as being different? Yes, it is more likely that labeling theory is the reason why it has become impossible to make that decision. Nobody wants to be viewed as deviant by their peers. Thus, if my traditional and conservative friends sensed any deviance on my part from their strict beliefs they would label me as deviant. But, if I allowed myself to conform by applying a particular self to fit the particular situation, I would not be labeled as such.

Despite the detriment to personal well-being that dramaturgy as a theory in action can cause, by doing this throughout childhood, adolescence, and even today, I was and am not held to certain convictions or dogmatic beliefs. My views of myself and society thereby become fluid and always changing.

The PBS documentary *Affluenza* warns American consumers that they themselves are being consumed by the unhealthy cycle of earning and spending that our modern ***capitalist*** society creates. It asks consumers to consider an alternate lifestyle by practicing voluntary simplicity and reverting back to more traditional and customary living arrangements and behaviors through the desertion of the unhealthy, modern, and complex lifestyle. The documentary illustrates how some American families, realizing the harmful effects of the rigid consumer-lifestyle, have begun to live together in small familial communities, sharing food, water, chores and pastimes. ***Modernity*** is viewed as a threat to society and tradition, pushing more and more Americans away from each other and into seclusion.

The documentary addresses the American family and stresses one of the most pressing issues in regards to the battle among tradition, modernity, and post-modernity. I dream to one day have a large, loving family, but I often wonder if that can be achieved in a society that values individualism over community, ***Gesellschaft*** over ***Gemeinschaft***. I have a large extended family, but only two brothers. What if they decide not to marry or have children? Where are my children's cousins? Where is their sense of family, community, and love that I was so fortunate to grow up with? Will their socialization into society be markedly different from my own?

Why is ***pluralism*** and heterogeneity subconsciously avoided in American society despite the conscious respect for the "melting pot"? Is sitting on the fence a sign

of weakness? Are you perceived to be a stronger and more powerful individual if you conform and stick to one set of beliefs without faltering? Catholicism is a religion guided by **metanarratives**, universal truths or habituated structures of thinking: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord" (The Apostle's Creed). I have been influenced heavily by this **tradition** where 'apparent' unfailing and divine truths have been revealed to humankind. But aside from my religious upbringing, my daily life is full of these presumed truths about society, from epistemological ideas about what constitutes knowledge, to popular medicine, to ideals of beauty and fashion, and politics. In "Repairing The Soul: Matching Inner Beauty with Outer Beauty" (2002), Kristy Canfield explains how the **social construction of reality**, the taken-for-granted realities that are constructed by television, media, and peer groups among others, made it possible for her to believe that she was inferior to others because of her speech impairment, enabling her low self esteem to flourish (Canfield, 25). By feeling compelled to choose one "self" and one identity over others, am I oppressing myself by perpetuating society's oppressive ideas about universal truths? When we believe in these metanarratives are we imprisoning ourselves in a **carceral society** that Foucault described?

According to Paulo Freire, to be fully human is to live "in an incessantly liberatory process of intersubjective dialogical praxis, of united critical reflection and applied action" (Tamdgidi, 5). Since I can be regarded as oppressed by certain structures of society that place emphasis on labels, categories, and 'sides,' it seems as if my traditional and modern selves are battling each other to imposed themselves on one another, thus, in certain situations, both selves becoming oppressed and oppressive in the I/Me cycles of everyday life. **Reifica-**

tion suggests that society often forgets its own ability to author and re-author itself because it has come to view certain societal structures as firm and fixed. Because I now understand that I can be creative and that I have choices in regards to my beliefs or disbeliefs, my old sense of conflict is transforming into a new sense of equilibrium. I no longer feel compelled to choose a singular drive. Given the dialogical interaction I have had with my selves and others and my critical reflection of it, the only practical action I can take is to accept the multiplicity of my self-concept. To be compelled to choose either tradition or modernity is oppressive and non-liberating, and understanding that I do not have to choose allows me to feel more free.

The same idea of oppression is further illustrated in the movie *The Matrix* when the machines destroy society by breeding human beings into slavery in order to nourish the development of their own civilization. The matrix world eliminated altogether human beings' ability to function to their full capacity. In the matrix world humans were unable to think critically about their enslavement and take practical steps to liberate themselves from oppression, mentally and physically. Like Neo I need to awaken to my oppression by metanarratives of tradition and modernity, engage in dialogue with others and myself, and seek critically and practically to do something about it—tough I realize that full liberation requires similar actions by all in society. According to Freire, "the oppressed realize, or should begin to realize, that they can only liberate themselves by liberating the whole humanity" (Tamdgidi, 7).

The **postmodern** attitude allows tensions to exist among multiple modes of knowing and liberates one from the pressures that mount when forced to make a choice between two apparent truths. Thus, in order to remove impediments against imaginative exercises of social interaction,

we must practice more "open systems" in regards to individual thought and action (Farganis, 443). **_Relativism_** is an essential component to the postmodern theory. As stated by Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Postmodern knowledge… refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Farganis, 435). Because postmodernists see reality as a social construct, there are no universal truths to adhere to, and human beings are free to investigate, explore, and invent without the authoritarian limitations of **_Bureaucratic_** society.

A perfect current example of the freedom provided by a postmodern approach in a global context can be illustrated through a historical overview of the computer operating system, Linux. Linux was created by Linus Torvalds in 1991 when the problematic Minix, a UNIX operating system (OS), was denied modification for improvement by its creator, Allen Tanenbaum. Though the concept of "free software" had been advocated by MIT's Richard Stallman since the early 1970's, Linux created a revolution. When Torvalds created the Linux "kernel," or original main component of an OS, he posted it on a message board on the Internet and asked other computer programmers to contribute to what is now the largest global collaborative project in history. There are thousands of different distributions or versions of Linux that cater to an array of particular user needs, making it more versatile, reliable, stable, and cost effective. The open source revolution has those at the oppressive, closed-source, mega-corporation Microsoft worried about its future. Linux, the not-for-profit business endeavor, has created a new era in computing, because "the Linux user are not just a passive subject reacting to what the OS lets you do but an active 'developer' [who] can mold the OS to what you want" (Linux Online). Lyotard discusses a similar idea in his "The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" when

he describes science as a model of an 'open system,' stating that when there is a division in the scientific community between decision makers and executors a major obstacle is in fact impeding the development of knowledge (Farganis, 443).

In the film _Billy Elliot_, Billy was able to free himself from oppressive patterns in his **class** and **_gender socialization_** and expectations by rejecting the norms of his culture and embracing difference and modification. He was socialized to believe that boys must traditionally play games such as boxing. Because Billy wanted to dance ballet many people also assumed that he was homosexual. Billy disproved and resisted such social **_stereotypes_**. His rejection of the oppressive and traditional role of boxer enabled him to experience freedom in choosing his career. Postmodernism also plays a part in the film _Erin Brockovich_. Erin needed to balance her family life with her career. The dialectical convergence of these two generally opposite lifestyles, the family representing tradition and the career representing modernity, crossed boundaries and faded into one another. The balanced lifestyle is an increasingly desired characteristic in postmodern society. Erin's challenge in the film, or in her real life, was to find a way to balance the two rather than be forced to choose one over the other.

For me, seeking the postmodern means seeking freedom from the urge to make impossible decisions between dualized pathways, freedom to think and act according to diverse selves in diverse social settings. Postmodernism deconstructs society's constructed realities, not to prove them impossible, but to prove that anything possible. Though some deconstructive interpretations of postmodernity suggest that the theory is a denouncement of both tradition and modernity in favor of neither, I believe in a **constructive postmodernist** approach that is open to all that has come before it. I agree with the view that "this type of postmodernism is not simply antimodern, since

it is not calling for a return to the premodern, nor is it rejecting rational, enlightened thought; it arises as a response to the threats posed for humanity—and, indeed for the survival of our world—in the face of modernism's materialistic epistemology and its negation of the spiritual and ecological impulses of [the] human being" (Thoday 2004). Freedom from social oppression in politics, from bureaucracy, from stereotypes, from norms, and from assumed truths can revitalize society. Constructive postmodernity allows us to reclaim our power as creative beings of praxis that can facilitate ***social change*** and experience true freedom in both personal and global contexts.

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