Grounding the Postmodern Self
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GROUNDING THE POSTMODERN SELF

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In postmodern discourse, self is displaced as a central presence in experience and reappropriated as yet another personal signifier. This paper describes key postmodern views, then reframes postmodern vocabulary in terms of interpretive practice. It argues that the postmodern framing of self is too abstract and that a distinctly modern discourse focused on the deprivatization of interpretive activity can account empirically for features of postmodern "presence." Comparative ethnographic and narrative material is offered in illustration. We conclude by suggesting how self can be retrieved for classical sociological commentary and research.

The self has come on extraordinarily hard times. Challenges are abstract and ontological, whose leading theme is the postmodern denial of self as a central presence in experience. The sharp turn follows decades of more grounded critique that presented the self's trials as stemming from moral uncertainty, inequality and domination, organizations and the technical rationalization of everyday life, and their related "anonymizing" tendencies, all of which have roots in classical social theory.1

The most recent and serious challenge—the postmodern—is less concerned with conditions of social organization, conveying instead the liquid, imaged "self" of electronic media and consumerism.2 It denies the relevance of classical sociological commentaries that directed us to processes of rationalization, modes of production and differentiation, and collective representation (but see Pfohl 1992). In the context of the postmodern, the idea of the self as a central presence dissolves and is replaced by the radicalization of what Derrida (1978) calls the "play of difference," whose objects are ontologically enlivened and deadened by floating signifiers, eclipsing substantiality. In the condition of postmodernity, the self is no longer a metanarrative, as Lyotard (1984) might put it, but one term among others for representing experience. Moreover, the self is polysemic, that is, attached to, and articulated with, multiple systems of signs. While supporters of this view see new possibilities for the expression of experience, detractors consider it a philosophical smokescreen for the abdication of responsibility and gratuitous powerlessness (see Lash and Friedman 1992).

Has the self, whether traditional or modern, disappeared from everyday life? If it has

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not disappeared, is there any sense in which self can be concretely described using postmodern terms? In this paper, we argue that by grounding the self in everyday interpretive practices of self-definition, we can see that self remains a substantial presence for those who depict experience in relation to it. We begin by specifying how self is elided in postmodern context, move on to consider contrasting postmodern concerns, and then examine empirically how self’s presence might be conceptualized to coincide in some fashion with postmodern sensibilities. Our aim is to appreciate these sensibilities while preserving the self for classical sociological consideration.

THE POSTMODERN “SELF”

Postmodernism applies to a variety of contemporary views. The version that we characterize is gleaned largely from the influential work of Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. In Lyotard’s (1984) expression of the postmodern, master narratives evaporate, as do master vocabularies. In their absence, the signal terms of classical social theory—like the self among other terms such as society, class, community, value, attitude, sentiment, and reason—no longer apply in the same way. In postmodernism, one necessarily writes the terms with quotation marks, if, indeed, it is still possible to write them at all. How have the terms changed to require this style of reference? We turn to Lyotard’s (1984) The Postmodern Condition for an answer because it not only is a leading statement of postmodern consciousness, but it also offers a basis for grounding the ostensibly groundless.

Lyotard’s Introduction describes the postmodern (and by implication the “self”) as a condition of knowledge in highly developed societies, where we can no longer simply speak, write, or refer to objects in the way we had before the late nineteenth century (p. xxiii). We can infer that before this, words in principle referred to things separate from the words themselves. Of course, words could incorrectly represent things, and in that sense transmute knowledge, but the “thingness” of things was not so much at stake as was their accurate representation. For example, one could misrepresent the self or incorrectly read other selves, but the discrepancy between representation and reality was taken as a matter categorically separate from self’s presence.3

According to Foucault (1973), this provided the primary empirical questions of a variety of intellectual disciplines, from studies of the history of self to the psychology and sociology of self-organization and self-presentation (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, chap. 7). The disciplines aimed to reliably and validly describe the empirical self in its manifold relationships with the conditions affecting experience. In the Anglo-American context, the social and behavioral sciences favored a scientific vocabulary of self, which resonated with prevailing individualistic and reformist sentiments (Rorty 1992). That uniquely American brand of sociology, symbolic interactionism, focused its narrative on an essentially present self, variously theorizing it as a solid, reflexive, labeled, performed, or situated entity (Stone and Farberman 1970; Reynolds 1990).

Lyotard considers the hallmark of postmodernity to be a “breaking up” of these epistemological or grand bases of the disciplines (pp. 15 and 31–41). “Simplifying to the extreme,” he writes (p. xxiv), “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.” With respect to the social and behavioral sciences as narratives of the self, we take him to mean that theories of self can no longer be accepted as principally about the thing they represent. The incredulity stems from the possibility that the theories are also about
themselves. One might argue, for example, that through its words and theoretical formulations, symbolic interactionism constitutes the object of its descriptions. A discipline has tacit ontological rules about how to proceed in “doing” or constituting the reality under consideration. What is postmodern about this is the view that such rules constitute what the rules are about, making the real game-like in Wittgenstein’s (1958) sense.

Postmodern narratives cannot be evaluated in terms of their truth value. Instead, narratives—ordinary, grand, or otherwise—are appreciated in relation to their situated acceptability within “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980). This centers issues of “truth” squarely within and between language games, not in the relationship between narrative and the things narrative ostensibly references. In postmodernism, things become matters of narrative competence, invention, and aesthetics.

Is “self” in postmodern context, then, an arbitrary, “up for grabs” (Sica 1993, p. 17), “anything goes” entity (Gergen 1991, p. 7; Featherstone, 1992, p. 266), a perpetual “con game” (Berman 1992)? Lyotard suggests otherwise, implying that the postmodern self is, first, a condition of knowledge. It is a “self” necessarily referenced in quotation marks because the nature of our knowledge of self is markedly changed from its substantial modern form. Self no longer simply references an entity, a presence or presences. It is possible to speak of the diversity of self in both modern and postmodern discourse, but modern diversity is substantial while postmodern is constitutive, insubstantial. Neither the old fashioned idea of a core self nor the more recent notion of a nonpathological, multiple, and performative self can represent its postmodern condition.

Second, in this condition of knowledge, the word “self” becomes a discursive horizon for presence, a “floating,” but socially organized signifier, flexibly yet systematically constituting self according to alternative vocabularies. To speak of the postmodern self is to set a discursive and experiential stage (or stages), as it were, upon which further references, exchanges, repairs, and resistances are played out. Using the Wittgensteinian terminology that Lyotard favors, the self is a language game whose leading constitutive rule specifies a central location in experience for itself. Another version of the rule might specify multiple locations, but nonetheless locations in experience.

Third, postmodern sensibilities counterpose self and nature. As a floating signifier, self does not naturally represent any particular thing or domain of experience. If it significantly represents anything in practice, it is of cultural, not purely natural, significance. We might say that in some cultural contexts, self centrally represents experience while in others it only marginally does, drawing in each case on a shared, working language of representation.

FROM HYPERREALITY TO PRAGMATICS

Still, the postmodern self, according to Lyotard (1984, p. 15) does “not amount to much.” Nonetheless, it remains an object of discussion, something that postmodernists continue to describe and debate. There are two important ironies here. One is that postmodernists want to erase presence because there is no warrant for it, yet they tell us what that lack of presence is like. This, of course, requires presence or at least some semblance of substantiality. There needs to be something essentially modern about the postmodern for the postmodern to be about anything other than an instantaneous swirl into itself or no-thing. Second, as irascibly reluctant as postmodernists are to be categorized as pre- or post-anything, they do bring intellectual (re)sources with them to their projects. While they
resist the idea of “source,” the irony is that modern theoretical differences—from structuralism and critical theory to hermeneutics—are carried into descriptions of the postmodern condition. For example, what postmodernist Denzin (1988, 1991, 1992) conveys about self and experience reflects his deep involvement in the symbolic interactionist tradition and discourse (see, for instance, Lindesmith, Strauss and Denzin 1988). This contrasts with the postmodern vision of, say, Baudrillard (1983, 1988), whose point of departure once was modern critical theory (see Baudrillard 1981). Old-fashioned, modern (re)sources work to articulate the postmodern so that there is modern theoretical diversity in reports of the postmodern condition.

It is useful to think of these two ironies in relation to imagined, empirical sites, that is, metaphorical scenarios for communicating and theorizing “what it’s like,” even while in the postmodern context there is no substantial “it” to liken. For example, Baudrillard locates the postmodern condition in what he aptly terms “hyperreality.” We use this as a point of contrast for what we believe to be a more grounded site, namely, the concrete locations for self-constitution suggested by Lyotard’s term “pragmatics.”

First consider Baudrillard’s hyperreality. Baudrillard writes of the postmodern condition in parallel to electronic, not print media. The print media are linear, “wordy,” and relatively slow. They present our selves, others, and the world in terms of before, now, and after. A grand theme of the modern thus undergirds the written media: time is ordered sequentially and divided into periods; space is allocated within time so that we peruse one news location, another, and then another.

According to Baudrillard (see Kellner 1989), electronic media, especially television, changes this. Through television, we are taken instantly to distant and disparate places. Space in terms of distance doesn’t seem to matter. In seconds, contrasting images of, say, the self, are juxtaposed, jarring a modern sensibility that usually keeps them apart. An advertisement for cotton fabric, sung in the mood and phrases of existential longing, flashes into the fantastic glitz and dizzying pastiche of football’s halftime activities, which soon whizzes into an ad for the coolness and masculinity of light beer and fast cars. And if that isn’t enough, the viewer can increase the speed and collapse space by “channel surfing” via remote control.

The site conveys the hyperreal. Reality, or modern time and space, are “cranked up” to the point where the order and borders normally associated with them no longer apply. Substantiality becomes a matter of images as simulations supplant the actual. Presence is thrown to the sidelines of a literally mindless project. Significances are so flattened that signs cease to have any reference to things, becoming a playful site of signs—signs of other signs and other signs of signs. The site offers the Gulf War to the American public in the shape of a media simulation or video game—sheer events with no center (Baudrillard 1991a, 1991b). As Kellner (1992, p. 147) describes it, television is a site of “pure noise,” “a black hole where all meaning and messages are absorbed in the whirlpool and kaleidoscope of radical semiurgy, of the incessant dissemination of images and information to the point of total saturation.”

Self hardly matters in this site. It is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, totally abstracted, rapidly flitting before us in myriad versions without reference to experience. It is strutted about on news programs, in sound bites from talking heads. We hear its authentic secrets as the pained, troubled, and morally triumphant speak on talk shows of their inner sorrows, deepest feelings, and private desires. The profoundly personal is conveyed facilely and artificially, plasticizing the genuine.
In Baudrillard's hyperreality, the self is totally on display, multiply commodified for mass consumption. We receive the sights and sounds of a thousand inner spaces. A mere flick of the switch or flip of the channel selector offers an array of "we's" and "them's," of what we were, are, and can be. It is impossible to harbor or protect privacy. Indeed, in postmodernity, privacy is tantamount to pathology. The intimate is made public, the private is totally exposed, with no space for inner life.

Hyperreality has its detractors, however (see Featherstone 1988; Poster 1988; Best and Kellner 1991; Lash and Friedman 1992; Seidman and Wagner 1992). For example, Featherstone (1988) cautions that while Baudrillard attempts to describe hyperreality as an empirical site epitomized by television, Baudrillard offers few clues to how the hyperreal relates to practice:

For all the alleged pluralism and sensitivity to the Other talked about by some theorists one finds little discussion of the actual experience and practice of watching television by different groups in different settings (p. 200).

Referring to the postmodern penchant for sitting experience in channel-hopping and multi-phrenic imaging, Featherstone also notes that "evidence of the extent of such practices, and how they are integrated into, or influence, the day-to-day encounters between embodied persons is markedly lacking" (p. 200). In the Introduction to Selected Writings from Baudrillard, Poster (1988) lists some additional criticisms, even while he later appreciates Baudrillard's contributions to our understanding of the impact of electronic media on society:

[Baudrillard's] writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world from that limited base (p. 7).

These shortcomings, especially a seeming blindness to class, age, and gender differences, combined with a pervasive nihilism (Best and Kellner 1991), demand an alternative treatment. While we appreciate Baudrillard's political economy of signs, we aim to show how several aspects of postmodern abstraction are concrete features of ordinary, day-to-day interpretive practice. It is one thing to write abstractly of the condition of experience in an electronically-mediated, fast-paced, sign-consuming world; it is quite another to describe and document existing actions in relation to hyperreality.

Lyotard fails to offer us a method, but he does provide perspective in his description of the "pragmatics" of knowledge. Drawing on Wittgenstein (1958), Lyotard (1984) likens the current, dizzying array of experience to socially organized, language games. This would locate the self at "the crossroads of pragmatic relationships," that is, in the midst of everyday, practical activities. Borrowing from Foucault (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, chap. 3), we might add that the language games of the self have become institutionalized discursive formations. What there is to self is located at "nodal points" of communication (Lyotard 1984, p. 15), the intersection of multiple language games.

Lyotard is aware of the overdetermination implied by institutional sitting. Asked to speak of the postmodern self, he might argue that while self can be thought of as "moves"
in language games located in diverse institutional settings, "We know today that the limits the institution imposes on potential language 'moves' are never established once and for all (even if they have been formally defined)" (p. 17). What Lyotard apparently has in mind is the idea of language games linked to institutions as the location of rationalized and routinized, but not determined discursive offerings, akin to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus (also see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, especially pp. 113–158).

DEPRIVATIZATION, ORGANIZATIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS, AND INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE

The choice of institutional practice as the empirical site for postmodern language games of the self relates to a complex change in the idea of privacy. For half a century, sociologists and social commentators have debated the importance of privacy in contemporary life (see Parsons 1971, Parsons and Bales 1955, Riesman 1950, Sennett 1974, Skolnick 1973). Initially the argument was that the most authentic aspects of our selves and lives were revealed, if not produced, within the cloistered confines of the household, family, or close community. Dissenters, however, argued that life is increasingly conducted in the public realm. Some went so far as to say that the traditional sanctuary of privacy—the home—was being "invaded" by other institutions. As Lasch (1977) wrote in Haven in a Heartless World, "the family is besieged," with the home's traditional functions of nurturance and socialization displaced to public arenas.

The debate suggests that the most intimate details of self and family are increasingly matters of public documentation, public record, and public definition (Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Holstein and Gubrium 1994a), a paradox of an explosion of deprivatization and simultaneous desire for privacy. What is considered real or genuine is, more and more, descriptively deprivatized, that is, interpreted within organized, public circumstances. At the same time, privacy and authenticity still are arguably the bedrock of personal and domestic experience. The combination leads us directly to the postmodern self.

Contrary to the inclination of postmodernists to see a radical break between modern and postmodern experience, we view the postmodern self as not so totally new. Rather, self's social and intellectual conditioning over the years has dislodged it from traditional analytic and experiential moorings. While some would say that this self has ceased to exist as a significant category of contemporary life, we contend that it is the self's voicing that has noticeably changed.

Increasingly, large and small organizations are engaged in articulating and evaluating practices that, taken together, embed and accordingly give voice to self-definition. If a process of experiential rationalization concretely occurs anywhere, it unfolds in sites of interpretive practice. From courtrooms, community mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals, schools for the emotionally disturbed, to aftercare programs, self-improvement courses, support groups, counseling, and welfare agencies, the self remains a central category for attaching subjective meaning to experience (cf. Weber 1947, p. 88).

While electronic media present diverse vocabularies of self, the media offer few clues as to how the flux of experience is embodied in relation to self. However, a focus on organizationally-embedded interpretive practice—the ordinary procedures through which persons understand, represent, and manage their realities—provides a point of departure. For several years, we have been documenting empirically the everyday processes that
constitute self in diverse organizational settings and have begun to incorporate elements of the postmodern into a constructionist perspective on social forms. The constructionism is distinctive in being less concerned with the large scale rhetoric of self or other social forms (see Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993; Spector and Kitsuse 1987) than with self’s everyday, naturally-occurring articulations (see Gubrium 1993a; Holstein and Gubrium 1994b).

Our approach claims a middle ground between modernism and postmodernism in that we recognize the constitutive fluidity and multiplicity of social forms, including the self, that is associated with modernity, yet we tie this diversity to socially organized variability in the circumstances of self production. The approach capitalizes on a theoretical minimalism informed by ethnomethodology. Rather than elaborately theorizing the relationship between organizations, interpretive practice, and the characterization of self from the top down, we document from the bottom up participants’ own “theory work” or practical reasoning (Garfinkel 1967) about self in the varied settings where this occurs.5

We have studied self production among a spectrum of lay and professional persons: support group participants, counselors, judges, lawyers, human service and health care personnel, troubled youth, and family members, among others. They make the self topical using diverse interpretive resources. Some settings offer highly crystallized resources, centered on official understandings of the nature, structure, and development of selves, such as treatment philosophies grounded in behavioral principles or psychoanalytic vocabularies. Other settings offer a bare minimum, their interpretive resources limited to the accumulating, day-to-day contributions of participants, such as a past week’s stories of self-actualization shared by members of a support group.

We refer to these interpretive resources as “local cultures,” collective representations writ small (Durkheim 1961; Gubrium 1988, 1989; Gubrium and Holstein 1993). The concept is a way of being sensitive to the practical delimitations of metanarratives (culture writ large) while keeping the radically relativizing impulses of ethnomethodology from dissolving all meaning into constitutive moments (Pollner 1991). Being local, culture is not so totalized as to completely fix participant’s practical reasoning, but neither is it so ongoingly contextualized as to be reconstituted from the ground up on each interpretive occasion.

RECASTING POSTMODERN VOCABULARY IN TERMS OF PRACTICE

Postmodernists regularly refer to the decenteredness of experience, polysemy, the play of difference, and the perpetual present. It is a highly abstract vocabulary used to describe how the postmodern condition differs from, say, the modern or traditional. How might these terms relate to interpretive practice where self is concerned?

In the following sections, we present ethnographic and narrative material from studies of interpretive practice that demonstrates how an ostensibly floating postmodern self is empirically grounded. The settings formalize the commonplace. Like other formal settings, they offer standardized answers to questions of self and mediate interpretation according to highly textualized processes (cf. Smith 1987, 1990). While we focus on some specialized institutional sites, we realize that questions of self also arise in other settings, such as within households or in friendship groups. As informants make abundantly clear in the form of accounts of “at home thoughts” and of “friendly discussions” among peers, considerations in institutional sites reflect and refract, as well as interact with, discussions at home, among friends, and elsewhere.
Authenticity, Decenteredness, and Polysemy

Gergen (1991) notes that underlying the “centered” modern self is an authentic presence that is knowable, where “the very concept of personal essences is [not] thrown into doubt” (p. 7). Whether the authentic self is cast romantically and defined in terms of feelings and moral fiber, or has a rationalist tone highlighting reason, choice, and predictability, the self is nonetheless “present” (centered) in experience.

How does this authentic, centered self take postmodern form and become seemingly decentered to the diverse discourses of a deprivatized world? A comparative ethnography of two family counseling programs shows one way in which the authentic selves of family members, in particular their competence or incompetence, is constitutively embedded in contrasting organizational images of home life (Gubrium 1992). In practice, self’s presence is articulated through the organizations’ respective sign systems, making the self polysemic.

The two programs, located in different facilities, share the view that healing the family cures the person, linking the self to local cultures of domesticity. In one facility—an outpatient counseling center called Westside House—domestic order is understood in terms of power and hierarchy. Anything family members present in therapy is taken to be a possible sign of authority. Informed primarily by the idea that domestic order (or disorder, as the case might be) is a system of authority relationships, the healthy household consists of clear hierarchical lines of decision-making, parents or adults in charge, preferably fathers at the head, and children dutiful. An unambiguous, gender-flavored hierarchy contributes systemically to each and every family member’s competence and domestic well-being. Cross-cutting lines of authority prompt domestic disorder, causing problems such as depression, addiction, and truancy, which in turn increases domestic disorder.

Signs of authority are remarkably ordinary. At Westside House, they are seen in family members’ postures, their verbalization, and members’ seating arrangement during therapy sessions. Erect posture, assertive verbalization, and centrality of seating position signal authority. Domestic order is never actually seen; participants only see its signs, which link the very abstract, in this case domestic order and personal competence, with the mundane, that is, posture, seating arrangement, and verbalization.

To illustrate how authenticity is realized in this interpretive context, consider how the posture and seating arrangement of family members—read as a system of signs—serve to embody authority and cast a mother and her sons as particular types of persons. In a meeting of family counselors reviewing a videotape of the mother and sons’ therapy session, participants are told that the mother is divorced and depressed, and that her twin sons are repeatedly disruptive at school, “out of control,” so to speak. In the following extract from the proceedings, note how, in the counselors’ talk, the sons’ status as troubled youth is embodied in mundane signs and interpreted in relation to the prevailing local culture of domestic order. Just before the videotape of the therapy session is played, Leila Korson, the counseling intern and former schoolteacher who is presenting the case to the other counselors, summarizes the so-called family situation. As they play the tape, the counselors (Gary Nelson, Nancy Cantor, Tammy Horton, and Donna Reddick) turn to the monitor, where they expect to “see” the family situation. The counselors listen as Korson, on tape, inquires of the boys how it feels to grow up as twins. Nelson then asks Korson to put the tape on pause and identify the persons on the monitor. As Korson
proceeds, she comments on the seating arrangement, designating posture as a clue to the 
“problem in this home.”

KORSON: This one twin [Johnny] was kinda quiet at first. I couldn’t get him to say 
anything. Later in the session, he moved over here [points to his current 
seating position] and then he started to talk more, like he was the boss 
around home. I think he’s the dominant one [twin]. Look at the way he’s 
sitting. [Johnny sits upright and forward in his chair.] He’s like that all the 
time, even when he was sitting over here [points to the seat at the right, out 
of camera range].

CANTOR: Now he’s in the power seat and he feels more comfortable [pause] more like 
himself.

HORTON: Yeah, like he feels at home.

REDDICK: The mother, to me, is giving mixed messages to the boys about living at 
home and going to the father [who lives nearby]. She tells them if they 
don’t behave, they can just get out of the house and go to their father. Then 
she tells them that they better behave or they’ll turn out just like him.

HORTON: [Pointing to the monitor as she restarts the tape] Yeah [pause] and just look 
at that kid [Johnny]. Look at how he sits at the edge of the chair [pause] like 
he’s going to jump all over Mom if she dares to cross him. Just look at him! 
It’s written all over him. That look he’s giving her. My God, it’s just telling 
her [mother] that he’s in charge. And he knows it. If she crosses him, he’ll 
just march over to Dad and live there.

CANTOR: And would you look at the other one [twin]. He’s watching his brother real 
close-like, waiting to see what to do. And would ya look at Mom! [All 
watch the monitor for a few seconds] Look at how she looks down at the 
floor all the time, like she’s being stepped on when Johnny gets going. You 
can see what a bad scene it is. That’s not a very healthy home. No wonder 
those boys are delinquent.

Counselors view and point to the monitor as if they were actually witnessing domestic 
order and the competence of family members before their very eyes. With comments such 
as “Look at Mom”, “Just look at him,” and “That’s not a very healthy home,” the speakers 
sound as if they are observing the household’s social order and, at the same time, how the 
twins as persons figure in. Mundane signs are used to concretely and locally reference and 
constitute the abstract, in this case, “not a very healthy home” and “delinquency.” John-
ny’s dysfunctionally dominant self is mediated accordingly, its authenticity embodied in 
observable “evidence,” in locally-understood terms.

In the comparison family counseling program, located in an inpatient treatment center 
called Fairview Hospital, a contrasting culture of domestic order prevails. Evidence again 
is presented in the course of practical reasoning in relation to mundane signs. While 
Fairview considers itself therapeutically eclectic, the overriding image of domestic order is a 
configuration of emotional bonds. Domestic disorder, it is said, stems from uncom-
municated feelings. Anything that blocks the expression of feelings or hinders active 
listening spells trouble. Power is at the heart of troubles, the local nemesis of communication. 
As staff members say and family members soon learn, “power trips” ruin the family 
and are the source of most social and personal ills.
According to Fairview staff, the healthy household is like a democracy of emotions. Each and every family member or significant other has feelings. No one is without them, not even the youngest child or a seemingly insignificant member of the household. Feelings—especially love—are the bedrock of domestic order. A household in which it is possible to express feelings and whose members actively listen to each other is a healthy home, where individual self-esteem democratically integrates the membership.

A democracy of emotions is very abstract, not something readily observed. As at Westside House, a system of signs links the abstract with the mundane. At Fairview, signs of domestic order can be seen in the same words and gestures as at Westside. Seating, posture, and verbalization are significant. At Fairview, however, seating refers more to being seated than to the seating arrangement of family members. Sitting down is thought to be more conducive to communication and the reception of feelings than standing up. The father who sits down while describing his unruly son’s behavior is more likely to convey authentic feelings and be truly heard than the father who stands up and intimidates listeners. Posture, for example, sitting back, reflects communicative receptivity. The mother who not only sits down to communicate, but sits back in her chair, is seen as better equipped to empathetically listen to her daughter’s anxious complaints about a boyfriend’s drinking than the mother who sits at the edge of her chair and appears ready to cut her daughter off at any moment. Verbalization is read in terms of voice modulation. Those who speak in an inviting and calm tone of voice and who, in turn, show evidence of being prepared to “actively listen,” facilitate the expression of feelings.

While the signs of domestic order and disorder are similar, they mean different things in the context of the two programs, and thus the understanding of authenticity is polysemic. At Westside, staff interpret a parent who during a therapy session seats him- or herself prominently in the room, presents confidently, and speaks forcefully, as being in authority at home, as it is locally believed parents should be. As a rule, parents, especially fathers, counseled at Westside do not present in this way, which typically serves to explain domestic troubles. Or fathers might overpresent, which signals domination and possible abusiveness. At Fairview, staff would view such fathers as intimidating and thwarting effective communication. The two programs' local cultures of domestic order, in effect, provide resources for interpreting signs relating to self and competence in opposite ways.

How do the brief extract, the interactions, and their organizational embeddedness convey a kind of postmodern self? It is evident that the modern idea of authenticity is still intact. In both settings, participants search for the core or essential meaning of conduct; what behavior “actually” means; what someone “genuinely” feels; how someone “really” is. At Westside, counselors pursue seating arrangement, posture, and verbalization for clues to the “presence” of authority, which in its proper domestic distribution signifies order. At Fairview, the search targets the contrasting authenticity of feelings. Feelings at Fairview are present at the core of experience, even while power and authority may make it appear otherwise.

But what is present and centered in local understanding is variable and decentered in interpretive practice. While something like Gergen’s so-called romanticist self is viewed as authentic at Fairview, a more rationalist self embodies authenticity at Westside. The contrast underscores self’s polysemic character. What is more, there is extensive evidence in each setting that what is considered authentic in the other setting is thought to be damaging to the self and domestic order: Westside counselors show little patience for the expression of feelings; Fairview therapists wallow in it, denigrating expressions of power and authority.
Inasmuch as the two settings conduct family, not individual, therapy, individual selves are further embedded in the systems of interpersonal relations treated on the premises. While selves still make sense in the facilities, their dynamics are caught up in the family systems undergoing therapy, further decentering self and multiplying its “authentic” meanings.

**Difference and Presentness**

Postmodernists also write of the play of difference and collapse time into a perpetual present. The question is how “playful” is difference? Can it be likened to the alleged swirling, dizzying signifiers and significances of MTV, where a perpetual present displaces any concrete sense of the past or future? How might an authentic, centered self with a past, present, and future reveal itself in these terms and yet be grounded in interpretive practice?

Consider first how the meaning of self is diversely constructed in involuntary commitment proceedings where the hospitalization of persons thought to be mentally ill is reviewed. The proceedings orient to standardized criteria which stipulate that the candidate patient should be hospitalized only if he or she is a danger to self or others, or is gravely disabled, that is, unable to provide the basic necessities of life (see Holstein 1993).

Proceedings typically provoke multiple reality claims as discourse coalesces around competing professional understandings and vocabularies of functional ability, potential for havoc, and dangerousness. At first glance, the situated constructions of self clearly suggest the “overabundance of meaning” (Denzin 1991, p. 8) that “saturates” (Gergen 1991) the postmodern self. Typically, divergent self characterizations are posited for the candidate patient. For example, in Arlene Bluman’s commitment hearing (Holstein 1987), a psychiatrist initially characterizes Bluman as a “schizophrenic, disorganized type.” In the psychiatrist’s words:

Arlene is often quite delusional . . . . Her reality orientation is very poor. She has difficulty separating fantasy from reality. She displays an insidious reduction in external attachments, relationships—a pathological indifference or apathy that infringes on her ability to function socially.

Following testimony from the candidate patient, the District Attorney (DA) arguing for Bluman’s commitment appeals to the presiding judge to hospitalize Bluman because of her inability to function and her recurrent social impairment:

[Bluman] has a repeated history of failure in noninstitutional settings. There is abundant evidence that she has trouble keeping herself together when she’s released. She has trouble managing her money. She has trouble with almost everything—interacting with others, getting along with people, taking her medications. She simply isn’t ready to resume a normal life at this point . . . . She is a very sick woman who needs a lot of care.

Bluman’s Public Defender (PD) responds, claiming that Bluman is capable of managing life in the community, offering her own characterization of the candidate patient:

My client has a place to live. It’s everything a woman needs. The landlord, a Mr.
Dietrich, has agreed to rent her a room with a kitchen . . . He lives in the building and says he’ll look in on her from time to time. Arlene has some problems, but she’s aware of them now. She just needs a little help. This woman will not be much trouble. How much trouble can a woman like her be? She won’t cause anyone any harm. Looking after a woman in that situation won’t require very much . . . Miss Bluman can manage very well with him [the landlord] helping take care of her.

The judge rejects the PD’s plea skeptically, offering his own assessment of Bluman:

It seems that Arlene might be taken care of all right. But that’s what worries me. Would we be doing the right thing by placing this woman in the care of some strange man? . . . I don’t feel good about a woman living alone in this kind of arrangement . . . . This makes me very uneasy. A woman is very vulnerable. I’m concerned about her safety. I’m concerned that this may not be the most proper thing to do.

And the PD responds:

We have no reason to believe that anything improper at all would happen. Just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean she has to be protected from every male that’s out there . . . . What this woman needs is just a little help to get by. Should we distrust anyone who offers to help?

The judge answers “No,” and reiterates his worry that Bluman’s vulnerabilities as a woman raise the risk of her being exploited:

We’re talking about a woman’s best interest here. A woman’s. And I’ve got to make that the basis for my decision. Ms. Bluman’s not well yet, and even if she were, I don’t know as I’d recommend her living in a place like this. It’s important that there would be someone there that could take care of her. I’m sure he would, but that’s my worry. That he would take care of her, if you know what I mean.

Borrowing from poststructuralist formulations (e.g., Derrida 1973, 1976, 1978), a postmodernist might characterize this exchange as a process of free-floating signification. Meaning, the postmodernist would argue, is not produced in a stable, referential relation between subject and object, but within the intertextual play of signifiers (Best and Kellner 1991). The meaning of a thing or concept, such as Bluman’s character, is “necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts by the systematic play of difference” (Derrida 1973, p. 140). Characterizations of Bluman’s self continuously and infinitely shift in a swirl of ungrounded signification.

This “play” of meaning, however, is serious business and can be seen as contextually structured when examined in terms of interpretive practice. While ontologically naive, participants systematically characterize self in ways that belie the postmodern swirl. Interpretive practice reveals a structure to the play of difference. While the self remains an emergent descriptive project—an “artful” congeries of qualities and traits, as Garfinkel (1967) might put it—characterizations are parsimoniously formulated (Sacks and Schegloff 1979), tending to revolve around a limited number of well-known, locally-sanctioned categories or typifications. Using a particular category implies a constellation of ancillary features commonly associated with the category, such as the “grandfatherly gentleman” implying harmlessness. The application of a categorical description thus provides a working narrative rule for ascribing other characteristics, attributes, and motives (Sacks 1972).
In the first extract from the commitment hearing, the psychiatrist characterizes Bluman in technical, behavioral terms. Bluman’s self is composed from psychic elements, disorders, pathologies, and states of well-being, articulated in professional psychiatric discourse. Her schizophrenic self is real in the same terms. While not directly contesting this characterization in the other extracts, the two attorneys and the judge employ contrasting vocabularies, which are themselves professionally grounded in concerns for community order and protection from the havoc associated with mental illness (Holstein 1993). Their characterizations of Bluman orient to how well she might be able to carry on in the community as well as to her vulnerability. Their descriptive vocabulary of self reflects these orientations. The PD argues for release, using a discourse of manageability. Bluman is easy to control and contain. The minimal assistance of a kindly landlord is all that is necessary to make community living viable for the “harmless” Ms. Bluman. However, the language of vulnerability is resurrected by the judge, referring to a well-intentioned “stranger” (the landlord) who, the judge argues, actually might be a sexual predator.

The preceding exchange is replete with difference: alternate vocabularies cast and recast the practical reality of Bluman’s personality. Yet, the flow of interpretation is socially organized, reined in by the hearing’s communicative agendas, which in turn are linked with speakers’ professional concerns. The PD stresses the connection between gender—a seemingly straightforward attribute of self—and manageability, seeking to articulate how easily managed Bluman would be and, in the process, rhetorically invoking “what everybody knows” about femininity. The judge constructs Bluman’s vulnerability by playing off of a different constellation of implied meanings for gender, associating being female with helplessness and sexual susceptibility. The competing versions of what it means to be female rise and fall in the give-and-take of the exchange, but the shifts in meaning are neither arbitrary nor capricious. They are tied to local, organizationally-circumscribed discourses that play on distinct cultural configurations.

Analogously, the use of the personal past, present, and future to define constituents of self is also locally grounded, making life history a present-time enactment. This, too, is evident in the commitment hearings, where the various participants formulate personal histories according to distinctive interpretive agendas. Lives are narratively constructed, made coherent and meaningful, through the “biographical work” that links experiences into circumstantially compelling life courses (Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt 1994). The process is artful, a complement to the play of difference, but it is locally informed and organized.

To illustrate, consider how candidate patient Andre Wilson’s life course is revealed in the competing scenarios offered by the psychiatrist who testifies regarding Wilson’s mental condition and the judge who decides to have Wilson hospitalized. While the psychiatrist and judge agree on the need to hospitalize Wilson, they articulate Wilson’s life history quite differently. First, the psychiatrist offers his version of Wilson’s past and a prediction for Wilson’s future:

My diagnosis: Mr. Wilson is a schizophrenic, chronic undifferentiated type . . . . Mr. Wilson has been hospitalized in the Metropolitan City area seven times in the last five years. His record indicates that as long as ten years ago, he’s shown symptoms of deteriorating reality orientation. He is severely delusional. We have noted delusional claims for ten years. He has reported instances where he thought he was a member of the police force, times when he claimed he was a doctor who had a cure for cancer, and he has claimed that people on the hospital staff have been stealing his belongings while he’s been at Metro [the mental hospital]. This history of delusions and mental deterio-
ration indicates psychosis, that he's severely disturbed. It's likely he'll get worse if he is not hospitalized.

Following other testimony, the judge orders Wilson's hospitalization, offering the following rationale:

I tend to agree that Mr. Wilson has problems that make it difficult for him to manage his affairs. Squandering his disability checks is not a good habit. I'm also troubled by the history of encounters with the police. He doesn't seem to be able to get along with others very well. [Turns to Wilson] Mr. Wilson, you probably won't like this, but I think you are going to end up in jail if we don't get you some more help. You've gone off your medications in the past and you don't seem to listen to anyone who tries to help with your meds. It seems the only way we can get things under control is to have the hospital look out for you for a little while longer.

As Foucault (1975) might put it, a psychiatric "gaze" focuses the doctor's description on Wilson's mental status, which is expressed in terms of symptoms, psychoses, and delusions. Wilson's biography is marked by repeated psychological breakdowns and encounters with psychiatric professionals. The pattern of past delusional behavior is projected into the future, culminating in the prognosis of worsening illness. Contrastingly, the judge constructs Wilson's life history in terms of custodial concerns, relating to the candidate patient's past ability to take care of himself or others' inability to deal with him. Wilson's past is not so much a psychiatric history, as a series of community management problems.

Both trajectories warrant hospitalization, according to their speakers, but are conveyed in terms of speakers' circumstantially relevant vocabularies. While the contours of Wilson's personal past (and future) are assembled in the present, and in that sense exhibit postmodern "presentness," the respective time lines are taken by participants as real features of perceivedly distinct chronological realms. The present provides interpretive resources for constructions of Wilson's relevant life course, while biographical work sustains and concretizes the causal and justificatory reality of Wilson's conduct over time.

CONCLUSION

Decenteredness, polysemy, difference, and presentness are a ubiquitous terminology of postmodern texts. The vocabulary is increasingly subject to fast, loose, and overly abstract application. Against this tendency, we have argued for an appreciation of the postmodern critique of self, but grounded in interpretive practice. The complex change in the social conditioning of self that we have called "deprivatization" shapes practice, so that the self emerges empirically in fluid, "postmodern" form. As the preceding materials show, this self is decentered; it is mediated by diverse local cultures, competing discourses, and the gambits of practical reasoning. Variation in interpretive practice provides for self's multivalent and polysemic reality. This does not mean that self is a floating signifier akin to the postmodern radicalization of Derrida's play of difference (cf. Norris 1990). If self floats, its does so within the bounds of its social and descriptive organization.

Grounding the self in this way offers both theoretical and methodological guidelines for research, as well as a particular disciplinary orientation. First, before we too hastily cross
“the postmodern divide” (Borgmann 1992), it is important to consider how, with the appropriate modifications, the modern, analytic narratives of classical sociological theory can address a postmodern condition of self. We have argued that this can be done when interpretive practice is foregrounded as a mode of production. Tying the “real” to interpretive practice avoids the postmodern dilemma of criticizing what is substantial or present in experience from a groundless position. It avoids the ultimate irony of attempting to research no thing (nothing) at all.

Second, at the same time, we must not turn away from the seminal theoretical challenge of postmodernism, which maintains that the realities of social life are constitutively tied to their working discourses. If we modify Weber’s (1947) classic concern with rationalization so that it is attuned to practice and sensitive to local culture, we see rationality as a discursive process suffusing everyday life. Acknowledging this, theorists of self should at least initially eschew totalized metasociological formulations and attend to the descriptive organization of the ordinary situations and vocabularies that fuel self’s embodiments. Beginning with “mundane reason” (Pollner 1987), we can make various and complicated embodiments of self visible from the bottom up and feature their contemporary ubiquity.8

Third, we need not assume a priori that a universalistic criterion of authenticity is the final test of self knowledge. As we have shown, authenticity continues, directly or indirectly, to be an indigenous concern across situations. Participants take account of its local understandings and interpretations, looking for the “true,” the “genuine,” the “real.” Authenticity is thus a member’s criterion, not an analytic standard.

Fourth, inasmuch as self’s postmodern form is shorn of presence, it is bereft of responsibility. It has no occasion to be moral, powerful, or powerless. Grounding self in interpretive practice, however, ties morality and politics to local understandings, conditions, and resources. Responsibility is concretely situated in, and oriented to, local accountability structures (Gubrium 1993b; Holstein 1993), frameworks within which actors and actions are defined or define themselves in circumstantially relevant terms with reference to situated values. This provides both space and motivation for agonistic and resistive micropolitics of the sort adumbrated, but not fully developed by, say, Foucault or Lyotard (see Best and Kellner 1991). Linked to local culture, the self is both responsive and responsible to the practical contingencies and moralities of choice and action.

Finally, the orientation to interpretive practice points in two methodological directions. First, research must attend to the ineluctably local. The varied domains of everyday life harbor separate and distinct understandings of the nature of self and criteria of authenticity, local cultures of self. The emergence of myriad organizations whose business includes defining the self has been a significant recent development. Related constructions of self’s organization, working senses of self’s relation to collective life, and ordinary views of how self develops over time, are situated resources for depicting self and informing courses of action toward it. Within and between organizations we find additional circumstances that further specify and localize self’s shape and substance. Even so-called national or international perspectives are locally mediated as they are conjured up, invoked, and communicatively linked to matters of immediate concern to participants.

At the same time, local culture is not set in stone, which suggests a second methodological direction. Culture does not govern the self’s constitution; its elements are part and parcel of interpretive practice. Practical reasoning articulates the substantive elements of what local culture is otherwise taken to be about. Practice is both about culture and is the use of culture to indicate and produce practitioners’ concrete concerns. Procedurally,
the grounding of the postmodern self is made visible in the documentation of culture as, and in, interpretive practice.9

Ultimately, the postmodern challenge to the self extends to the very disciplines that theorize and research it, casting doubt on their privileged status as sciences. As noted earlier, the position we have taken settles on a middle ground; our project is a kind of constitutive and critical empiricism, focused on social and discursive practices. The perspective is classically concerned with the significant, representative objects of our collective experience—the self among them—but is decidedly attuned to the objects’ ontological status in everyday life. The approach recognizes the need to adjust conceptually and methodologically as disciplines to both emerging challenges and traditional footings.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Mills’ (1951) discussion of the manipulation and selling of self, Riesman’s (1950) depiction of the inner- and other-directed self, Goffman’s (1959) presented self, Berger, Berger and Kellner’s (1973) homeless mind, and Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton’s (1985) self that is lived for itself and through others, all of which lead us, classically, to Gergen’s (1991) view of the saturated self. Equally important are commentaries deriving from feminist, gay/lesbian, cultural, interactionist, critical, psychiatric, and political economic perspectives.


3. See Ichheiser’s (1970) work, especially his book Appearances and Realities for an example of this genre.


5. Giddens’s (1984, 1992) concept of structuration tries this from the top down and the result is an overly neat and idealized depiction. See Silverman and Gubrium (1994).

6. The names of persons and organizations have been fictionalized throughout.

7. Rosenau’s (1992) characterization of postmodernism as either affirmative or skeptical would suggest that it is the skepticals who are overly abstract in the use of this vocabulary. It might be argued that an affirmative postmodernism informs our own grounding in interpretive practice. While our bottom-up orientation to the empirical contrasts with Giddens’s (1990), he seems to have the same distinction in mind and similarly situates his approach, calling it “radically modern,” not (skeptically) postmodern.

8. Analysts might also consider other challenges posed by the postmodern, including questions addressing less discursive issues like self’s ultimately emotional (see Denzin 1993) or impulsive properties (see Turner 1976) and their circumstantial conditioning, for example.

9. For further discussion of the relation between interpretive practice, local culture, and inter-
pretive resources, see Gubrium (1992), Gubrium and Holstein (1990), Gubrium et al. (1994), Holstein (1993), and Holstein and Gubrium (1994b).

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