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Author(s): Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein
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INDIVIDUAL AGENCY, THE ORDINARY, AND POSTMODERN LIFE

Jaber F. Gubrium*  
University of Florida

James A. Holstein  
Marquette University

The postmodern challenge to sociological notions of individual agency assails its experiential substantiality, conveying agency instead in philosophically abstract terms and fleeting media images. In opposition to this, we argue that everyday interpretive practice reflexively constructs agency, utilizing resources drawn from the ordinary contours of experience. Narrative and ethnographic material collected in diverse settings, both formal and informal, illustrate how enduring features of the ordinary—locally shared meanings, biographical particulars, and material objects—are used for the production of manifold selves with recognizable substantiality.

The newest challenge to sociological notions of individual agency stems from the postmodern assault on the self as a centered presence in experience. Postmodernism can feature the self as an ephemeral, liquid image, tossed, turned, and decentered by rampant consumerism and disembodied electronic media. In postmodern life, the notion of individual agency, centered on a self with the capacity to effectively act upon the world, ostensibly dissolves and is replaced by floating signifiers, transforming agency into a passive cacophony of language games in which “all that is solid melts into air” (Berman 1983).

Our intent is not to dismiss postmodernist observations. Empirically, the “postmodern moment” can appear as a proliferation of shifting signs and meanings, rapidly changing images seemingly lacking enduring substance. From a sociological perspective, however, the postmodernist preoccupation with the demise of the self appears overly abstract as well as oblivious to the many and varied circumstances that provide substantive resources for the production of agency. Selves, after all—whether one’s own or that of others—are neither conveyed nor received in a social vacuum. The polysemic and floating character of the postmodern media self can be deconstructed to reveal the self’s substantial groundings in local interpretive practices, in which individuals actively represent and manage their identities (Featherstone 1988, p. 206). The totalized media of postmodern thinking, where “TV is the world” (Baudrillard 1983), do not speak in one voice (Shalin 1993, p. 318), nor are these voices encountered directly, as if individuals face the media without mediating social circumstances “symbolic work” of their own (Willis 1990, pp. 26-27).2

*Direct all correspondence to Jaber F. Gubrium, Department of Sociology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-7330.

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Moreover, we are not merely interested in augmenting the growing critique of postmodernism. While appreciating the postmodern questioning of presence and the related need to conceptualize agency in terms pertinent to contemporary experience, we seek to reassert the utility of a more modernist perspective for sociological analysis, centered on the local, everyday practices of self-construction, by reappropriating agency’s ordinary, yet polysemic social moorings (see Williams [1958]1993). As Paul Willis (1990) suggests in a study of what he calls “grounded esthetics” among British working-class youth, “common culture” can easily be overshadowed by heady postmodern debates about the eclipse of selves. The ordinary—the mundane elements and circumstances of everyday life—is cast as an evanescent site for self-construction, bereft of symbolic control in matters of agency. Our argument is that a constructively active view of the ordinary shows diverse substantive resources for the enduring production of agency, including the manifold selves regularly used to inhabit and animate contemporary life.

Agency need not be conceived as the centered source of action but as a reflexive product of it (Mehan and Wood 1975). As Alan Wolfe (1993) notes, “We are, in [Charles] Taylor’s [1985] phrase, ‘self-interpreting animals,’ in the sense that what we are is indistinguishable from how we understand ourselves.” In the matter under consideration, practitioners of everyday life produce the selves that they, as practitioners, use to assign agency to their conduct. In talk and interaction, agency serves to accountably describe and explain what is said and done by those concerned. As C. Wright Mills (1940) once argued about motives, agency is both the provision of, and responses to, reasons for why, say, people have done what they did, why they act as they do, who they conceive themselves to be, and what they expect to do in the future (see also, Scott and Lyman 1968; Hewitt and Stokes 1975). As such, it is possible for individual agency to be constituted in the interpretation of everyday life but without the analytically prior trappings of a centered self.

ORIENTING TO PRACTICE

Our approach orients simultaneously to the process of interpretation and to the substantive resources used to assign agentive meaning to experience. Interpretive process refers to the mundane reasoning that articulates a sense of agency (Pollner 1987). Substantive resources comprise the locally recognizable understandings and vocabularies, biographical particulars, and material objects available for constructing selves—resources for the assignment of meaning. This article deals with the resources used for self construction. While postmodernist images of the self can render it both empty (lacking in substance) and overly saturated (phretically suffused with meaning), empirically we can still watch people methodically construct viable and well-ordered selves (again, for members and others) using what is ordinarily available.

Like several recent critics of postmodern agency, we are reluctant to abandon empirical groundings, especially the ordinary meanings available for interpreting experience. Dmitri Shalin (1993, p. 319), for example, argues that postmodernists have been “too hasty in giving up on truth.” Referring to Kenneth Gergen’s (1991) description of the so-called saturated self, Shalin wonders, “Should we conclude with Gergen (1991, p. 7) that ‘selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics—such as rationality, emotions, inspiration, and will—are dismantled’?” Shalin answers “no” and suggests that the practice of defining what he calls an “emotional core” is evidence of an enduring self. Our own view is that selves are ubiquitously revealed, from core to surface, as an active, empirical feature of contemporary life.
Especially in the Western context, selves in various measure are found everywhere, in interpretively massive proportions and with diverse attributions (Hewitt 1989; McGeer 1993).

Who is the agent that produces agency? Our approach to the problem of agency has ethnomethodological underpinnings (Garfinkel 1967) and is informed by the “common cultural” perspective of cultural studies (see Gray and McGuigan 1993). At the same time, it resists an ethnomethodological penchant for the radically reflexive that elides substantiality (Pollner 1991). Treating selves as products of situationally conditioned, interpretive practice, we focus on interactional and discursive production, directed toward ego or others, as agents of experience. The emphasis on practice explicitly acknowledges the features of everyday life that give concrete meaning to agency.

While the construction of selves is interactionally artful (Garfinkel 1967), it is structured in relation to local interpretive conventions and resources. This sense of structure is not nearly so determinant as the conception typically offered by conventional sociological approaches. Instead, it suggests a social conditioning of the possibilities for how interpretation, including self-construction, is carried out (see Foucault 1977). The circumstantial availability and conventionality of resources for constructing agency provide familiar ways of structuring experience but do not dictate particular interpretive by-products. In the course of everyday life, individuals adroitly construct selves using locally available and meaningful materials shaped to the specifications and demands of the interpretive task at hand.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984, p. 15) has stated the postmodern claim that the self “does not amount to much.” Our view is quite the opposite. If self is taken as a culturally paramount set of attributions characterizing agency, then the self amounts to just what is made of it, so to speak (Gubrium 1986b; 1992; Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985). Self remains central to (but not centered within) daily life precisely because participants, in practice, continue to cast themselves and others as agents of ongoing activity.

**FEATURING THE ORDINARY**

For leading postmodern commentators, selves in contemporary life are fleeting philosophical entities, moments of “hyperreality” likened to the swirling signification of video games and MTV (Baudrillard 1991a; 1991b). Gergen (1991), for example, extrapolates from his experience on the academic “fast track” to portray a self that hardly resembles ordinary presence, whose terms of reference and crisis are pervasively ontological.

In contrast, as a problem of everyday living, agency can be viewed as concretely located in the ordinary flow of the “here and now,” the “there, then, and later,” for “whatever reason,” as those concerned refer to the spaces that meaningfully circumscribe their actions. However familiar or unfamiliar, in the ordinary, life goes on, as it were. It goes on even while individuals are born, play, grow up, suffer, have crises of confidence, enjoy cheerful and rewarding moments, reason, experience change, encounter the strange, relish the routine, complain of the boredom of daily living, and die. Life goes on even while philosophical crises arrive and depart. As philosophical movements are popularized, some everyday realms are touched by them (deShazer and Berg 1988; Efran, Lukens, and Lukens 1988); other realms continue to revolve around more commonplace constructions, such as the lively generation of children’s selves in playground and classroom interaction (Corsaro 1986; Thorne 1993) and the envisioned self-entanglements of frail elderly with family members’ alternating caregiving identities (Abel 1991).
Of course, in order to describe just what constitutes the ordinary, the ordinary itself is theorized. In this respect, the ordinary is as much a philosophical invention as is the extraordinary. But starting from the ordinary allows us to approach the language and content of selves from the bottom up, rather than from the abstractly neat top down (Silverman and Gubrium 1994). Reappropriating the ordinary for self-construction is not intended to be antiphilosophical. Instead, it treats philosophical discourse as a constituent feature of practice. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958), our view of the construction of selves involves seeing how philosophy is commonsensically put to use as concrete meaning is generated in terms of individual agency (Gubrium and Holstein 1994; 1995; Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994).

We illustrate the substantive ordinariness of agency from ethnographic and narrative material collected in both formal and informal settings, where matters of experience related to individual agency are regularly made topical. These include support groups, community mental health programs, and counseling sessions. Matters of agency are topical in the sense that questions of who we are, what we are doing, and why we are raised, with answers routinely formulated in relation to the interpretive resources at hand.

In presenting the following material, we show how ordinary features of everyday life provide the substance of meaning from which individual selves are constructed. By implication, we also reveal what the philosophical lens of the extraordinary, which is so typical of postmodern discourse, fails to bring into view. As Erving Goffman (1959; 1961; 1967) has argued, self-construction is a matter of everyday work concretely located in time and place, albeit now more massively multisited and public than ever.

Theoretically, we accept that in constructing agency people make use of what is shared and available in their immediate circumstances, such as the concepts a particular group, profession, or organization might conventionally use in everyday description. People make use of biographical particulars, too, such as the poignant commentary of a support group participant about how she personally deals with self-doubt. People also draw on undistinguished material objects surrounding them, whose personal meaning is used to construct agentive identity through complex metaphorical linkages with experience. Indeed, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981) view household objects, for instance, as actual sources of self-construction. As Robert Rubinstein (1987) suggests, a widow might affirm her "wonderful" marriage by pointing to the frayed armchair she cherishes despite its shabbiness because, as she explains, it sustains her view of herself as having been a good wife and reminds her daily of her husband, who sat in it on "those many pleasant evenings we spent together."

Accordingly, within the framework of an approach oriented to interpretive practice and featuring the ordinary, we consider three categories of substantive resources for the construction of selves: (1) the locally shared, (2) biographical particulars that participants bring with them, and (3) meaningfully available material objects. Respectively, the categories reference the communal, personal, and concretely physical dimensions of ordinary experience used to convey agency.

In the following sections, we illustrate the ordinary substance of self-construction in these terms as points of contrast with the empty and abstract postmodern self. Taken together, the contrasts instruct us that selves in contemporary life are neither empty nor conjured up ontologically full-blown but constructed in practice in terms akin to Claude Levi-Strauss’s (1966) process of “bricolage,” in which agency is produced from what is endurably available.
THE LOCALLY SHARED

The substance of shared resources for the construction of selves varies across social settings. In some settings, there are highly formalized vocabularies for depicting agency. For example, psychiatric and psychological treatment centers, self-help programs, and support groups offer defining frameworks and professionally developed languages for self-construction. A classic example is the use of the specialized therapeutic vocabulary employed in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step fellowships. As participants present themselves with locally promoted self-characterizations such as “I’m a recovering alcoholic,” they convey selves meant to be understood as permanently troubled yet manageable with the proper effort and guidance. Local elaborations convey the interpersonally recognizable nuances of, and possibilities for, recovering but never fully recovered selves. This contrasts dramatically with the inchoate vocabularies of informal settings such as households, where members routinely cast each other as viable agents of their actions.

We have referred to these sited constellations of shared resources as “local cultures”—categories, typifications, and conventions associated with discernible interpretive circumstances (Gubrium 1988; Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Holstein 1993; Holstein and Gubrium 1994). Being local, we take culture as not so totalizing as to resemble the socially encompassing and determinant configuration conjured up by conventional positivist sociologies or similarly totalizing postmodernists, where culture exerts its influence wholesale, from the “top down.”

The substance of what is locally available is always partially indeterminate in the sense that those engaged in acts of interpretation must reference and enact what is taken to be shared. The substantively available is reflexive in that its stock of resources is assembled at the same time it is referenced. Local culture is not so much a fixed repository of shared meaning as it is a dynamic, partially predefined assemblage of interpretive possibilities. Yet, what comes to be locally recognized and applied is not arbitrary. Accountability structures (which are themselves reflexively recognizable) have a way of containing what might otherwise be seen as idiosyncratic and capricious, especially as these structures become part of institutional practice (Heritage 1984).

Reliance upon the locally shared is perhaps most evident when we observe conscientious acts of self-construction across social settings. Consider, for example, the way local images of what is “normal” and “deviant” are used to affix agency in settings where mental health is a central concern. While these images resonate with diverse public views, their interpretive utility is tied to matters that are circumstantially salient. In the following illustration, a rural community in the upper Midwest developed a community support program (CSP) to provide informal counseling and other help to people living in the community who were diagnosed as chronically mentally ill. When asked to describe a typical CSP client, the program’s director, Linda Peete, a social worker by trade, offered a portrait that included multiple constructions of agency:

These are people just like you and me, only they have some persistent problems that make their lives a little more difficult. Take Jason Elam. He manages to get along from day to day. Real stable, no trouble at all. No acting up, not freaking out, not getting in people’s hair. Nothing to make you think he’s got a problem. But he can get moody so that he doesn’t want to have anything to do with anyone else. When he goes into his shell like that, it’s our job to go in there to see if we can help pull him out of it.
In this instance, note how a self is fashioned by reference to very mundane features of a local image. Elam’s relative normality is constructed through a comparison with the hyper-ordinary, so to speak, as Elam is likened to “you and me.” In addition to vernacular terminology that conveys the commonplace, Peete constructs an active self for Elam out of everyday understandings that are never fully specified, yet are assumed to convey shared meaning. “Real stable, no trouble at all” are established as attributes of self in terms of commonplace activities that are offered to document personal steadiness and social order. A local vocabulary of the ordinary focused on personal attributes provides the interpretive substance of a troubled self, with CSP participants orienting to the affective and social well-being of clients, using descriptive resources that complement and display that concern.

Compare this to the construction of clients as agents of their lives in a different site in the same rural community. Asked to assess CSP clients, a judge from the local court system, who encountered many of these clients in the course of involuntary commitment hearings (see Holstein 1993), proceeded to describe them:

By and large, it’s a harmless bunch, but we have a community responsibility to look out for them as well as keep them from inflicting harm upon themselves or the community. I remember one guy we had to send to Braeman [the state psychiatric hospital] who was a complete menace, a real danger to himself and others. Got in all sorts of jams, and sometimes got the police involved. But you couldn’t call him a criminal because he didn’t really have control over what he was doing.

Once again, we see aspects of the local and ordinary interpretively exploited in the process of conveying aspects of the client’s self. But in this case, the language of the ordinary is distinct from that employed by the CSP social worker. The vocabulary of troubled selves shared by CSP personnel is supplanted by an alternate terminology less focused on personal affect than linked to interpersonal havoc and considerations of social control (Holstein 1984, 1993). While personal attributes are brought to the court’s attention, client description in the court orients to safeguarding public order. Like other judges, this one interpretively constitutes the CSP client in the language of harm, disorder, and possible criminality. Indeed, involuntary commitment laws accountably provide the mundane courtroom with resources for constituting agency in terms of “danger to self and others” (Holstein 1993). Although the judge admittedly “couldn’t call [the client] a criminal,” the term “criminal” also draws from a stock of interpretive resources particularly salient and useful in the judge’s line of work and shared by his colleagues in the court setting.

While the self-constructing vocabulary of one setting would certainly be intelligible in the other (indeed, in myriad alternate sites), participants, speaking as representatives of their respective circumstances, call upon what is presumed to be locally recognized and significant as terms of self-description. Grounded in contrasting, yet working applications of local culture, agency is constituted in relation to the shared interpretive resources of the sites and their respective orientations to client selves.

Self construction often capitalizes on contrasts that are artfully constituted but also locally meaningful as well as used to affirm what is shared (see Holstein 1993; Smith 1978). For example, when the CSP social worker offers a description of a male client that includes the observation that “this man is no teenager,” she implicitly assigns to the client qualities of maturity and responsibility by specifying what he is not, in this case, an immature, irresponsi-
ble adolescent. Locally shared understanding provides the basis for the meaningful contrast. Self is thus constructed through the act of interpretive juxtaposition, demonstrating both the artful and partially structured sides of interpretive practice.

**BIOGRAPHICAL PARTICULARS**

Agency may be interpretively assembled from the biographical particulars of individual lives, from what we have done, been, or experienced. In response to the question of who or what we are, were, or will be, ordinary features of individual lives may be used as baselines or sources of comparison for assigning meaning to our lives. A biographical particular may be as mundane as adult daughter Karen’s description of her success at caring for her aged, demented mother at home, which serves as an informal standard of comparison for the kind of adult daughter Cynthia claims to be in dealing with her own mother’s forgetfulness. Biographical particulars may be appropriated from a person’s own earlier life experience. For example, Marian, the participant of a parent effectiveness class offered by a facility treating emotionally disturbed children (see Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979), identified herself as “not the mother I used to be,” referring to her past failure in parenting her eldest daughter. In comparison, she described how she was a better parent in raising her youngest son. The biographical particulars of the self in other roles can be resources, too, such as Mike’s consideration of his success at managing employees, which he later learned in a men’s support group can, with effort, be used as a model for how he could be a better father.

In contrast to the fleeting, polysemic differences of postmodern consciousness, selves are regularly clarified, defined, or evaluated in ordinary personal and interpersonal comparisons. Judgments are not arbitrary but made systematically in the sense that self-understandings and conjectures are matched with available biographical particulars as bodies of evidence. Mike, for example, called upon “the kind of manager and person” he claimed to be at work as a basis for suggesting what he could be at home if he “tried hard enough.” Each and every biographical particular, our own or others’, is grist for the elaboration of agency.

Consider in detail how the biographical particulars offered by Kitty, another parent in the parent effectiveness class, are used by a distressed and disappointed mother named Liz to articulate a more positive self. Class discussion initially led to Liz’s son Ned being characterized as an incorrigible liar and troublemaker. Interpersonally elaborating the membership category (Sacks 1974), Liz parsimoniously constructs herself in a related manner, worrying that she has failed as a mother. The exchange in the following extract begins after Kitty has explained how she started to view a change in her own son Steve when she realized that she herself was contributing to his misbehavior by never “actively” listening. While programs to teach active listening are packaged and sold by the therapeutic culture industry, what it means in practice to be an active listener is articulated locally in relation to biographical particulars.

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**Liz:** It’s good to know that someone is getting somewhere with these kids. I was really, really worried that nothing could be done. As you know, Ned [her troublemaking son] is not just your plain old mischievous kid. He’s a handful. Lying, stealing, swearing, running at all hours of the day and night, God knows where. It makes my blood boil. Really stresses me out. [pause] But, like Kitty says, maybe there’s light at the end of the tunnel, huh?
Kitty: I don’t want to give you the impression that it was easy, Liz. I wondered sometimes how Steve [her youngest son] could be our kid. Sharon, the oldest, always was a sweetie, you know, kind to her brothers, always listened to Mommy and Daddy, what you’d call a model child. And my oldest boy [David], well, he’s as different from his brother as night and day. Ask David to help out around the house and he’s there in a flash. Ask him to run an errand, no complaining. Bill [her husband] used to ask me, kinda joking, “Is this our kid?” Then he’d kid me that maybe he wasn’t the father, that I’d shacked up with a real winner and Steve was the result. Well, inside, I didn’t think that was very funny.

Now I know that us parents need help, too, right? I know I’ve got to get help for myself, get real serious and listen before things go wacko again. I’m hopeful, but I need

Liz: [interrupting Kitty] No, that’s good to hear. I’m not going to hold my breath, but I am going to think about that, that we [she and her husband] might be part of this, maybe how we’ve dealt with Ned could be part of the problem, you know, the inconsistency and stuff, not listening like you said, Kitty.

A long discussion of parental inconsistency and active listening follows this, during which the participants agree that the vicissitudes of contemporary life can adversely affect children’s moral development and that parents, after all, are not completely at fault for their children’s misbehavior “these days.” The popularly touted relation of active listening to effective parenting is locally softened by artful references to “the things modern parents can’t do much about.” In the next extract, Liz links aspects of this discussion with her own and Kitty’s experiences. Note how Kitty’s understanding of the part she played in her son’s development is generalized and appropriated to the common parental experiences of participants Gary, Judy, Beth, and Janet. Indeed, depressed mother Janet’s remark toward the end of the extract suggests that biographical particulars can become instant marks of shared identity. What initially is an individual characteristic is recognized as something collectively representative, adding to the substance of local culture and its related personal identities.

Liz: I can see how Ned might have never learned how to be respectful, like you said, Kitty. That’s a real thought. But I guess I never saw how much we could be involved in this, like what we did or should have done. [elaborates]

Judy: Gary, how does a dad think about this? What do you make of what Kitty said? Do you think we’re at fault just as much as the kids?

Gary: I think she has a point. I’m not sure I’d go as far as sayin’ that it’s my fault that Fred [his son] is off the wall half the time, but you know what they say, it takes two to tango. Anyway, it does make you think.

Beth: It does, really. Remember how we got into this sort of thing a couple a months ago? Remember, Gary, how you thought Fred might be reacting to you being too hard on him, that you—how’d you put it?

Gary: I think I said that times have changed and maybe I can’t boss Fred around like my old man used to do me. Kids want to be independent nowadays. [elaborates] So I had to learn listen, to give him a little rope, and [laughing] hope that he doesn’t hang himself.
Liz: I’m glad you mentioned that, Gary, because that makes sense, [turning to Kitty] like what’s going on with Steve [Kitty’s son] and kids these days and how you began to deal with it. [elaborates] I think, myself, maybe that’s part of it. [pause] Hey, I’m willing to try anything, right? [talking to herself] So, girl, wake up and smell the coffee!

Kitty: I’m not saying we should take all the blame. For Christ’s sake, he’s a big kid and has a mind of his own. But we gotta figure that we’re a part of their lives. I figure it’s good to remember that.

Janet: Well, ladies and gentlemen, it keeps happening, doesn’t it? You’re all depressed and, bingo, someone like Kitty tells us to wake up to the caffeine—the wake-up gang.

Liz: How do ya like that? [chuckling]

Liz: We’ve got a case of “Kitty troubles.”

Gary: Is that what we have? I’d say we’re learnin’.

Liz: Seriously, though, I can see how I—maybe all of us?—I can see how I might be able to deal more effectively as a parent, like Kitty and, well, like Gary too, if I think a bit more about how involved I am in what Ned is doing to himself and what these kids are like nowadays.

In the discussion, the parents refer to one another to construct who they are as agents of their parental experiences. In the process, they circumstantially transform particulars into what defines them as a whole—in this extract, as the “wake-up gang” and as having “Kitty troubles.” Biographical particulars are thus constructed into something recognizably shared. In turn, the locally common serves as an evolving interpretive resource in its own right. Liz not only construes a possible future self through Kitty’s particular experience, but she, along with the others, articulate through the shared and mundane rubric of “Kitty troubles” the possible yet limited part each parent can play in the overall drama of contemporary emotional disturbance.

**MATERIAL RESOURCES**

In most circumstances, material resources are available for metaphorical construction, providing visible bases for self-representation (cf. Hodder 1994). As ordinary an object as a ticking clock can be used to represent oneself considering the decision to place an increasingly frail loved one in a nursing home, apparent in the comments of the wife of a demented and declining husband for whom the wife has been providing home care. Pointing to a ticking clock, she remarks, “That there clock’s me. It’ll keep ticking away until it’s time [to decide] and won’t stop for a minute, until it winds down I guess.” “Winding down,” we soon learn, refers to the gradual decline and eventual ill health of the caregiving wife who does not keep an eye on the proverbial clock, needlessly wasting herself away being the martyr for someone who has become the “mere shell” of a former self.

The ticking clock communicatively embodies agency; its characteristics metaphorically yet concretely convey to the wife and those with whom she shares caregiving experiences what the experience of dementia care is like. The clock is a visible representation of self that otherwise might not readily be communicated. Indeed, for some, the inner experience of no longer being recognized as a husband or wife by one’s lifelong and now demented spouse cannot be put into words, shareable only in what “plain words” cannot communicate, except in such modes as poetry, song, or story (Gubrium 1988).
The use of material objects for constructing selves is not wholly idiosyncratic. The material object "shell," for example, is a virtual cultural cliche, recognized by all concerned as the sign of a lost mind and broadly disseminated, even sold, through the growing public culture of the Alzheimer's disease movement (Gubrium 1986a; 1993). What this means in practice is articulated locally, in this case, in terms of its implications for the caregiving wife's, not just the husband's, identity.

Other objects, such as a hardy weed, while less commonly appropriated for self-construction, can readily become part of what is locally recognized and thus methodically embody agency. This is illustrated in the following extract from a caregivers' support group discussion (see Gubrium 1986a). Fieldwork indicates that this is the first time the weed has been used as a descriptive device by group members. Subsequent discussions show that the imagery gradually becomes part of the group's local culture, representing, among other things, the caregiver's stamina. Uncommon usage is turned into a shared identity centered on "what it's like to keep on going."9 The extract begins when an elderly caregiving spouse, Maude, speaking of "the energy it takes," notices a weed growing vigorously into the room from under a door to the outside. Other caregivers—Henry, Vera, Sam, and Anne—respond:

Maude: Would you look over there at that!  
Sam: What? What're you looking at? The door?  
Maude: No, Sam, the weed. That little weed over there. See it? It's growing under the door from the outside.  
Henry: It's coming into the room for shelter. It's getting nippy out there and wants to come in.  
Maude: That weed's got it rough out there by that busy street. [elaborates] But it's makin' it. All that dust, grime, and traffic. It's hard on a weed. Kinda like us, I guess I was thinkin'. All the energy it takes. If we didn't have that kind of energy, we'd be dead by now.  
Vera: All shriveled and dried up. No good to no one.  
Sam: Ya got to give it to the weed. It's a survivor.  
Anne: Well, I ain't a weed. But if that's what it takes, ya keep right on agrowin' and gettin' to where you can survive and keep going. [elaborates] Gosh, sometimes I think I won't be able to make it. He's [her demented spouse] gettin' awful heavy and he really can't help me anymore. I'm going to need all the strength of that there old dandelion plant or I ain't goin' to make it.  
Maude: If that weed can make it, so can we. That's what I'm thinking. You've gotta get up all your strength and just do it! [getting up from her chair] I think I'll give that little old weed some water. We all need a boost and a bit a kindness, right?

The exchange drifts into talk of other matters. But the "little old weed" is not forgotten as participants return, time and again, to this material reminder of their challenges as caregivers. Whenever they broach the topic of "keeping going," the group refers to the weed to describe the kind of person it takes to deal with dementia care alone on a daily basis. As the weather changes and the weed withers, it methodically takes on additional meaning, categorizing their identities accordingly. Group members use its withered condition to warn of possible things to come, of the effects of the rigors and stresses of caregiving. In the context of the progressive burdens of care, the withered weed embodies the gradual exhaustion of the caregiver.
Contexts of reference to the weed complicate its meaning. In relation to "what it takes," the thriving weed is a local resource for materially representing stamina. In relation to the continuing burden of "thirty-six-hour days" of care, the withered weed signifies something recognizably less sanguine. It becomes a material resource for contrasting communicative projects, both of which articulate the self in the circumstance of sharing the meaning of caregiving.10

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these and related empirical materials bear on the postmodern challenge to sociological notions of agency. First, against excessively abstract postmodernisms, the material illustrates how ordinary and by implication how ubiquitous the substantive resources are for constructing agency. From locally varied images of the normal and the deviant to complex descriptive appropriations of material objects, the ordinary is actively used to construct and reproduce identities. Agency is not constructed tout court with each consideration but in practice is interpretively constituted in terms of the meanings and materials at hand.

Second, as circumstances for the construction of selves are increasingly deprivatized in the Western world, construction takes place in myriad public forums—typically conducted under organizational auspices—such as hospitals, schools, counseling agencies, professional offices, and support groups (Lasch 1977; Presthus 1978; Wiley 1985; Foucault 1977; Ahrne 1990; Giddens 1992; Drucker 1993).11 Increasingly, we learn who we are as able-bodied citizens, responsible parents, or caring adult children as much within the self-representing forums of organizations as at home with family members or in front of the television. This contemporary world is vastly meaningful, providing seemingly endless resources and sites for constructing agency.

If postmodern life is concretely upon us, a massive fund of local opportunities and mandates makes self as diversely substantive as it is ephemerally electronic. Contemporary Western life has become a virtual factory for the production of selves. While historian Michael McGeer (1993) suggests that a "persisting sense of human agency" can no longer be interpreted as generating uniform, totalized selves, such as depicted in David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd (1950) or in William Whyte's The Organization Man (1956), we have found that agency is diversely articulated in relation to the variety of circumstances and ordinary cultural resources, which, perhaps ironically, serve to construct, differentiate, and reinforce agentive autonomy. As Michel Foucault (1980) might have put it, the increasingly varied self-defining domains of daily life "incite" more person production than ever. Self has hardly disappeared from contemporary life. It persists as a way of interpretively specifying agency and is enduringly constructed from the ordinary.

Third, our illustrations and other empirical material do not suggest, as postmodernists typically do, that agentive substantialities are so fleeting as to be without order. The rapidly colliding, seemingly random "contexts" of MTV do not convey the practical boundedness and descriptive organization of the complex and ordinary substantive meanings from which agency is constructed. The experiential meaning of a material object (like a weed) does not merely fit about everyday life. The weed is actively appropriated to represent self according to specific categories and contexts of understanding. In turn, its embodiment reflexively displays common experiences in relation to discernible categories of meaning. The thriving weed is used to represent the striving and successful caregiver, the dead weed an alternative biographical category implicating contrasting experience. In interpretive practice, the biological order of living things is applied in recognizable fashion to the vicissitudes of caregiving.
As we noted at the start, our aim has not been to dismiss postmodernist commentary on the decentered, media-driven self. Postmodernism has certainly sensitized us to ways in which individuals relate to commodified signs and media fantasies to create polysemic selves and identities. But the electronic culture industry has not supplanted the mundane bases of everyday life, as Jean Baudrillard (1988a) would have us believe. America is not just Disneyland or Las Vegas. (Indeed, Las Vegas is not just “Las Vegas,” being encountered and understood in quite ordinary terms for the most part, with its fantastic simulacra locally mediated, especially for permanent inhabitants.) Evanescent electronic media images are neither totalized nor totalizing; they are themselves locally articulated, made concretely meaningful and useful in relation to what is circumstantially available, recognized, salient, or pressing.

The postmodernists’ fleeting sense of agency—depicted as a self that allegedly does not amount to much—seems far less ephemeral when viewed in relation to ordinary social moorings. Contemporary agency is as concrete and varied as the everyday practices and sites that call forth and supply its meanings. Can there be agency without a centered self? Focusing on interpretive practice and ordinary resources, we maintain there can be. Individuals continue to construct subjectively meaningful selves for themselves and others. These selves are interpretively tied to the ordinary offerings and conditions of their production. As interpretations of contemporary experience are more and more deprivatized in a region of the world culturally and historically fixed on autonomous agency, the individualized self becomes an increasingly commonplace and diverse project of daily living.

NOTES

1. Variations of this postmodern self have been described in Baudrillard (1988b), Best and Kellner (1991), Denzin (1991; 1993), Gergen (1991), Kellner (1988), Lash (1990), Lyotard (1984), Rogers (1992), and Seidman (1991). Differences are as much rooted in long-standing theoretical perspectives as they are reflective of the ostensible condition of individual agency in contemporary life. We direct our attention to the increasingly popular electronically defined self, recognizing that not all variants center on this imagery.

2. It is ironic that, as much as postmodernists rally against totalization, they frequently totalize the “contemporary conditions” of postmodern life. Especially prone to totalization is the experiential saturation of the ever present stimuli of mass media. As it did for the German critical theorists in the earlier decades of the century, who engaged in a critique of mass culture (see Jay 1973; Held 1980), this totality comes in crisis proportions. However, unlike the critical view, for postmodernists it is a “crisis” necessarily without moral contours.

It is important to recognize, too, that references to “contemporary conditions” and the “crisis” of those disciplines that find it increasingly difficult to describe and understand contemporary life are, respectively, Western and the crises of disciplines nurtured on Western life. In that regard, sociological notions of agency are as much cultural commentaries as they are theoretical attempts to capture the shape and substance of identities, including contemporary selves as objects of experience.


4. See Gubrium and Holstein (1994) for a critique of postmodernism focused more on the process of interpretation.

5. This is distinct from more structurally oriented approaches to agency (e.g., Ritzer 1992, chap. 15; Sewell 1992; and Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994).

6. We recognize that, especially as focused on the individualized self as constructed agent, these are characteristically contemporary and Western usages that might very well be reduced, expanded, or recon-
figured in the interpretive practices of other traditions or cultures (see Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985).

7. Erving Goffman’s (1974) situationally oriented work on the process of framing is useful in tracing the articulation and depiction of agency that flows with how situations are defined and how their related vocabularies are used. Its shortcoming, from our point of view, is that, with the exception of Goffman’s (1961) work on what he called “asylums,” little of the research is systematically related to institutional practices and thus lacks a broader sense of structures that contain and shape the framing process.

8. See Holstein (1990) for an alternate local usage of the category “teenager” that conveys qualities associated with “sexual appetite and prowess.”

9. Local culture is always both old and new. Participants inventively add to, embellish, and subtract from what and who they are to themselves and each other. As they speak of their experiences and use what is said to convey a sense of agency, what they share becomes collectively representative of particulars. Material objects, especially, can develop into virtual totems of common identity (Durkheim 1961; Gubrium 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 1994).

10. As Goffman (1959) has so eloquently shown, material resources also tangibly distinguish the very circumstances within which they are used to make meaning. In Maude’s support group, the weed not only became a complex embodiment of participants’ self-constructions but also a circumstantial marker prompting caregiver talk centered on thriving and withering.

11. As we noted earlier, our analysis primarily addresses the use of the ordinary in the Western context where affiliation with and participation in organizations are commonplace. While this might be viewed as most prevalent in urban, middle-class circumstances, it also can typify others’ experiences. The reach of the welfare state brings personal aspects of our everyday lives under the scrutiny of bureaucratic agencies, so that being economically marginal, for example, does not make one organizationally impoverished. Our modern sense of the postmodern in contemporary life derives from the view that, taken together, the many and varied circumstances that provide substantive resources for the production of agency are more prevalent than at any time in history. A related point is that, while the construction of agency may not be so organizationally embedded in non-Western contexts, we would still argue that it is locally mediated by whatever forms of substantive understanding present themselves in the circumstances of daily living.

REFERENCES


