The Self in a World of Going Concerns

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While commentators on the postmodern scene have dismissed or trivialized the personal self, it nonetheless remains a central experiential construct, articulating a sense of moral agency for everyday life. This article examines self-construction in the context of a world of proliferating going concerns—social institutions—that increasingly shape the discursive contours of subjectivity. Both the negative and the positive sides of this development are examined, the analytic implications of which can move us in strikingly different directions. We conclude by offering suggestions for tying the study of the contemporary self to the variety of discursive environments and practices that set the conditions of possibility for who and what we are or could be.

Times are tough for the personal self. This stalwart social form was conceptualized as being at the heart of social action. But now the self is increasingly beleaguered by claims that postmodern life decenters and trivializes its presence in experience. In this view, who we really are is constantly in question. What we can or should be swings in endless response to the demands of the moment. Postmodern life provides one identity option after another, implicating a dizzying array of possibilities for the self.

Perhaps this situation is the inevitable result of a fast-paced world. With daily living swirling about at unprecedented speed, some say that the postmodern self is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is fleeting and evanescent, a mere shadow of what the self once might have been. If it was commonly viewed as the central presence in experience, some observers of the postmodern scene now tell us that the
self is arbitrarily “up for grabs” (Sica 1993:17). It is an “anything goes” entity (Featherstone 1992:266), if not an insidious con game (Berman 1992). In Jean Baudrillard’s (1983, 1988) electronically mediated “hyperreality,” the self comes to us in a shifting mélange of images. It is insubstantial, perennially on display, and commodified multiple times for mass consumption, dislodged into a far-flung phantasmagoria of postoriginary presence. The media flaunt the sights and sounds of myriad inner spaces, making the intimate public, exposing all that might otherwise be private. In Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984) description of the postmodern condition of knowledge, he bluntly tells us that our self “does not amount to much” anymore (p. 15).

Perhaps most disturbing, even symbolic interactionist bellwethers and fellow travelers express strong “self” doubts (see Denzin 1991; Gergen 1991; Gottschalk 1993). Oddly enough, at the same time that such commentators portray the self as having come undone, actors in the world of everyday life seem to be unflinchingly committed to the belief that a singular, authentic self resides within. This self occupies an inner sanctum, insulated from the moral ravages of today’s world. Social life may shape who we are, bestow glowing or blemished identities; it may confuse our public personas beyond recognition, but we still believe that a “true self” lies somewhere inside, in some deeply privileged space. As besieged or hidden as the self might be, in the world of everyday life it remains resolutely available as a beacon to guide us. It is taken for granted that in our most private recesses we do not need to divide ourselves between countless identities but rather feel it is still possible to get in touch, and be at one, with our true selves.

Culture plays a strong hand in this belief. We place great stock in the Western notion of an inner beacon, in a self that stands fundamentally apart from the social world. We harbor this inner self as a key ingredient in our everyday lives. Although it may be socially influenced, the self ultimately exists separately from—outside of—our social transactions. It is immersed in social affairs, to be sure, but its autonomous agency is also a leading theme of those affairs. Our cultural sensibilities articulate selves virtually owned by individuals, independent and distinct from the social marketplaces in which people acquire their identities. This personal self repeatedly surfaces in familiar phrases such as “the individual versus society,” “the core, true self,” and “who I really am” as opposed to who I appear to be.

What are we to make, then, of the cacophony of charges that the basic contours of this subjectivity have vanished into thin air? Has the personal self really been lost in the swirling experiences of postmodernity? Has the self been battered beyond recognition or into trivialized submission? Does it indeed not amount to much anymore?

Our view is that, even while some commentators have written the personal self’s epitaph, it is still the leading experiential project of our era. There is overwhelming evidence, we believe, that if these indeed are trying times for the self, it is not because the personal self has disappeared from the social landscape but just the opposite. The personal self remains our primary subjectivity—a self we live by—but it is now produced in a proliferating and variegated panorama of sites of self-knowledge. These
are domains whose participants regularly turn their attention to questions of who and what they are, or could be. From counseling centers, therapy agencies of every stripe, and support groups to spiritual fellowships, Internet chat rooms, and television talk shows, personal selves have become big business, the stock-in-trade of a world of self-constituting institutions, which increasingly compete with each other for discerning and designating identities.

THE SIEGE OF THE PERSONAL SELF

To set a background for discussing these issues, we turn first to exemplary commentary on the siege of the personal self (also see Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). Perhaps the most poignant recent account is offered in Kenneth Gergen’s *The Saturated Self* (1991). Relying on compelling autoethnography (see Ellis and Bochner 1996; Ellis and Flaherty 1992), Gergen argues that the self desperately needs to be sheltered from the identity storms that currently overwhelm it, saturating it with endless demands. According to Gergen, this frenetic and multidimensional postmodern world is so full of meanings and messages that it routinely floods the self, leaving it with no life of its own. Filled to overflowing, the self is diluted, with little sense of a true identity. This self breathes easily only when it escapes these relationships; it is most at home when it is separated from the madding crowd. The self comes into its own by seeking haven in the quiet, private, sequestered hideaways of experience. Only there can it sustain a genuine sense of being who and what it is.

The first chapter of Gergen’s book, “The Self Under Siege,” is revealing. From the start, it is apparent that it is the author himself who is overwhelmed, whose self is under fierce assault. Gergen is wrenched in all directions at once. He wants to control his affairs, but they spin out of control at every turn. He begins with a vivid account of how unraveled he feels. Recalling the scene that awaited him after a brief trip out of town, Gergen writes:

An urgent fax from Spain lay on the desk, asking about a paper I was months late in contributing to a conference in Barcelona. Before I could think about answering, the office hours I had postponed began. One of my favorite students arrived and began to quiz me about the ethnic biases in my course syllabus. My secretary came in holding a sheaf of telephone messages, and some accumulated mail. . . . My conversations with my students were later interrupted by phone calls from a London publisher, a colleague in Connecticut on her way to Oslo for the weekend, and an old California friend wondering if we might meet during his summer travels to Holland. By the morning’s end I was drained. The hours had been wholly consumed by the process of relating—face to face, electronically, and by letter. The relations were scattered across Europe and America, and scattered points in my personal past. And so keen was the competition for “relational time” that virtually none of the interchanges seemed effective in the ways I wished. (p. 1)

While most academics would envy the attention, Gergen senses that something is missing, something that might signal a feeling of being at one with oneself. He soon
tells us what that is: “I turned my attention optimistically to the afternoon. Perhaps here I would find moments of seclusion, restoration, and recentering”—three remedial features of a distinctly modern self (p. 1: emphasis added). Gergen conveys the personal shape of the self he desires, one that apparently has lost its distinct moorings to the fast pace and diverse spaces of postmodern life. This self realizes its authenticity by escaping from the daily rat race. Undoubtedly, social experience nourishes such a self, but, ironically, it is most true to itself when it is apart from the social swirl. In seclusion, it can take stock of, and restore, itself.

In Gergen’s view, the self resides naturally at the heart of personal life, not at the constant mercy of diverse and competing social influences. He cringes from the exponential growth of these influences, which are “producing a profound change in our ways of understanding the self” (p. 6). According to Gergen, we are no longer coherently thinking or deeply feeling entities but incorporate into ourselves a “multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self” (p. 6). He bemoans a variety of negative consequences as the “authentic self” is shattered and displaced to myriad social locations.

For everything we “know to be true” about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all. (Pp. 6–7)

The saturated self has a telling experiential geography. It is battered and bullied by forces external to itself. Its strength derives from its interiority. Familiar metaphors of volume and, especially, depth elaborate this image of the self. Competing demands of social life might fragment the self, but it remains a substantial repository with an impressive inner capacity and an ability to hold out against intruders and assailants. The deeply authentic self, while socially nurtured and informed, must fend off the social influences that can spoil who it truly is. Paradoxically, the very conditions of interaction and communication that nurture the self become its tormentors. Still, at its greatest depth, the self can be secured against the vicissitudes of daily living.

The working struggle between the inner self and these exterior forces is perceptively depicted in Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (1983) account of the managed heart. Hochschild’s book makes extensive use of similar metaphors to chronicle how the personal self manages to stave off an increasingly commodified sociability. Focusing on the commercialization of feeling in the airline industry, Hochschild introduces her reader to the “emotion work” of flight attendants. Their job is to keep customers happy. Hochschild describes how the attendants try to safeguard their true selves in the face of nagging demands to selflessly, cheerfully serve customers.

Hochschild’s presentation is not a lament over the state of the personal self, as Gergen’s is. Rather, it is a story of resistance, a tale of how we protect our true selves from exploitation. Hochschild provides a strategy for combating the satu-
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rated and commercialized self, a way of preserving the authentic “me” we feel in our heart of hearts. Speaking of flight attendants, but hoping to strike a more general chord, Hochschild writes about how people might respond to a world in which feelings are bought and sold and emotion management is rife. In such a world, she explains, the true self is overrun by false selves that have been mobilized to ward off the growing demands of daily living. As outside interests inundate the self, it retreats inward, leaving only uncomfortable false personas directed toward others. We preserve our selves by seeking inner shelter from the social onslaught.

The “false self” is a necessary conspirator in this resistance. As Hochschild states, it is a “disbelieved, unclaimed self, a part of ‘me’ that is not ‘really me,’” yet necessary to protect the “real” self (1983:194).

The false self embodies our acceptance of early parental requirements that we act so as to please others, at the expense of our own needs and desires. This sociocentric, other-directed self comes to live a separate existence from the self we claim. In the extreme case, the false self may set itself up as the real self, which remains completely hidden. More commonly, the false self allows the real self a life of its own, which emerges when there is little danger of its being used by others. (l? 194)

Clearly, false selves perform an important, self-preserving function. They can be set up in service to others, protecting the authentic, core self. They serve as buffers between external demands and an internal core that may be at odds with such demands. According to Hochschild, false selves maintain the true self while living civilly among others who make so many contrary demands on us.

With the true self hidden within, how do we know it continues to exist? Emotions, Hochschild explains, are the beacons of our authentic selves. Every emotion serves a “signal function,” she argues (p. 29), noting that “it is from feelings that we learn the self-relevance of what we see, remember, or imagine” (p. 196). Emotions put us in touch with the personal “me,” providing us with an inner perspective for interpreting and responding to experience. Social life becomes problematic, however, in that it often demands that we harness our feelings. This emotion management, Hochschild maintains, interferes with the signal function of feelings (p. 130), diluting or confusing a person’s sense of self. As emotion management is commercialized, we must manipulate our feelings and, in the process, our selves, for purely instrumental ends. Consequently, our feelings are given over “more to the organization and less to the self” (p. 198). The upshot is “burnout” and “estrangement.”

Flight attendants’ emotion work provides a case in point. Hochschild explains that flight attendants are not only asked to smile as they serve their customers but are actually trained to feel and project a warmth and sincerity that convinces others that the smile is genuine. But as emotions are managed to meet these demands, the distinction between real and projected selves begins to blur. Hochschild questions this confusion.

What happens to the way a person relates to her feelings or her face? When worked-up warmth becomes an instrument of service work, what can a person
learn about herself from her feelings? And when a worker abandons her work smile, what kind of tie remains between her smile and her self? (Pp. 89–90)

The answer is obvious: flight attendants become estranged from their selves, as, by implication, do the rest of us in our own ways become estranged from our selves.

Still, people know that social circumstances forever influence their behavior and feelings. We all are routinely asked to present images and emotions that do not flow from what we take to be our inner, authentic selves. We convey impressions and emotions that are shaped by interpersonal relations, organizational policies, and the like. Our emotion work, Hochschild notes, shields our true selves and deep feelings as much as it manages social situations. It is a way of resisting social intrusions, a technique for counteracting the impact on our true selves.

But as we shelter the true self, we also isolate it. As Hochschild observes, “We make up an idea of our ‘real self,’ an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard we wear on our back or whose smile we paste on our face. We push the ‘real self’ further inside, making it more inaccessible” (p. 34). The more threatened it becomes, the further we push the true self inward. Ultimately, our defenses against the social siege can be the self’s undoing. As we hide our personal self deep inside, we risk losing sight of who we are.

SOURCES OF THE SELF

These commentaries ring familiar. We routinely draw on a similar vocabulary to describe experience when the pace of life increases and demands on our time overwhelm us. Such talk concedes that the complex and varied circumstances of daily living are at odds with personal identity and integrity. Laments over such trying times cast social life as the personal self’s ordeal, if not its antagonist.

But is social life truly so much at odds with the personal self? Must social interaction always involve a holding action against the apparently destructive infringements of the outside world? The central tenets of pragmatism would tell us that this is shortsighted. Harkening back to George Herbert Mead (1934) and other early pragmatists, and tracing symbolic interactionist thought up to the present (see Blumer 1969; Hewitt 1997; Schwalbe 1983; Stryker 1980), reassures us that the self remains essentially a social structure, arising and flourishing, even coming undone, within social experience. Its sources and destiny lie in the very same social world that some critics view as perilously challenging it.

The Social Self

From the start, the self unfolds in and through social life, never separate from it. If a personal self exists, it is not a distinct private entity so much as it is a concoction of traits, roles, standpoints, and behaviors that individuals articulate and present through social interaction. The self is not so much the cloistered core of our being as an important operating principle used to morally anchor thoughts and feelings
about who and what we are. As we interact in everyday life, the personal self takes shape as the central narrative theme around which we convey identity. Indeed, commonplace experiences and everyday folk psychologies tell us that the personal self is the principal experiential agent of our culture (see Cahill 1998). It is the primary lived entity we comprehend ourselves as being as we go about everyday life.

Interaction and communication are key constituents. As we talk with ourselves or with others, we learn and inform each other about who and what we are. In a sense, we talk our selves into being. But not just anything goes. Social selves are not without design or restraint; they are not impromptu performances. What we say about ourselves and others is mediated by recognizable identities. We speak of ourselves in meaningful ways within the social contexts in which we communicate who we are. Selves do not just pop out of social interaction but are deftly assembled from recognizable identities in some place, at some time, for some purpose.

Decades ago, Mead (1934) brought this practical character of self-construction to light as part of a pragmatist formulation of mind, self, and society. Following William James and others, he cogently apprised us that the self was as “ordinary” as the everyday social relations that organize our lives. A malleable structure that constantly unfolded in the course of social interaction, the self, according to Mead and James, was as varied as the relationships that mediated its formation. For the pragmatists, a socially untainted state of being was experiential fiction, a philosophical mirage, not empirical reality.

Mead held that self-formation involved more than sheer communication. He envisaged a self that was deeply and consequentially engaged in the everyday world, one whose concrete encounters shaped its contours. For Mead, the self was actively formulated in ways that permitted individuals to cope with the ongoing demands of daily living. In Mead’s view, the self was a social structure because it grew out of the ongoing projects of life. Indeed, the self was a working entity responsive to the lived conditions of its construction (Gubrium and Holstein 1995b, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b).

Years later, Erving Goffman capitalized on this notion in his book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), underscoring the social self’s dramatic realization. Goffman shows how the socially constructed self is deeply and actively involved in defining and managing social situations. Displays of self, he argues, reveal and control information about who we are, what we are likely to do, and what others can otherwise expect from us in the circumstances. As situated actors, we present selves to accomplish particular, socially situated moral ends. In the process, self-presentation necessarily implicates integral social conditioning.

Going Concerns

As important as social situations are in mediating who and what we are, we must take care not to focus too narrowly on strictly situational influences on self-production. Mead and other pragmatists, for example, remind us that the environ-
ment for meaning-making is tremendously variegated and multifaceted. Perhaps most significantly, today’s postmodern scene is widely and diversely populated by groups and organizations that are explicitly or incidentally implicated in self-production. This landscape of growing concerns provides much more than immediate, face-to-face contexts for designating who and what we are.

We borrow the term “going concerns” from Everett Hughes (1984) as a way of characterizing relatively stable, routinized, ongoing patterns of action and interaction. It is another way of referring to social institutions but underscores their actively discursive quality. For Hughes, going concerns could be as massive and formally structured as government bureaucracies or as modest and loosely organized as a group of friends who gather on Thursday nights to play bridge. Large or small, formal or informal, each represents an ongoing commitment to a particular moral order, a way of being who and what we are in relation to the immediate scheme of things. Hughes was careful not to reify going concerns; he did not view them as static social entities. Rather, he oriented to them as patterns of concerted activity. For Hughes, there was as much “going” in social institutions as there were “concerns.”

From the myriad formal organizations in which we work, study, pray, curse, play, and recover, to the countless informal associations and networks to which we otherwise attend, to our affiliations with racial, ethnic, and gendered groupings, we multiply engage in a panoply of going concerns most of our lives. The self is a product of this engagement. Many of these going concerns explicitly structure or reconfigure personal identity. All variety of human service agencies, for example, readily delve into the deepest enclaves of the self to ameliorate personal ills. Self-help organizations seem to crop up on every street corner, and self-help literature barks at us from the book spindles of most supermarkets and the shelves of every bookstore. “Psychobabble” in the public media, radio and television talk shows, and Internet chat rooms constantly prompts us to formulate (or reformulate) who and what we are. Whatever self we might have is thus increasingly deprivatized, constructed, and interpreted under the auspices of these decidedly public going concerns (Gubrium and Holstein 1995d, forthcoming; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b).

Interpretive Practice

Because selves are interactionally presented and constructed in the context of going concerns, they are not conjured up willy-nilly out of thin air. As strategic as it might be, we do not make just any claim about who or what we are, cavalierly ignoring time and place. Self-construction is always accountable to the institutional preferences and the pertinent biographical particulars of one’s life (Gubrium and Holstein 1995a, 1995c). Broadly speaking, the self emanates from the interplay among institutional demands, restraints, and resources, on the one hand, and biographically informed, self-constituting social actions, on the other.

Both experience-near and experience-far (Geertz 1983), this interplay consti-
tutes what we have called interpretive practice—the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality (in this case, subjectivity or the self) is apprehended, understood, organized, and represented (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 1994, 2000b). It occupies a space now replete with going concerns, implicating both face-to-face processes of self-construction and the institutional conditioning of self-realization.

Social process, of course, has been the traditional bailiwick of symbolic interactionism. Conditions and possibilities, however, have often been treated skittishly by symbolic interactionists for fear of reifying social structure. Perhaps surprisingly, Michel Foucault (1977, 1988) concurs that we must contend with both interpretive process and substance—the ongoing hows and the broad whats of self-construction. In one of his later interviews, Foucault (1988:11) argued that he was interested in “the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self. . . [These practices] are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested, and imposed upon him by his culture, his society and his social group.” Such an approach points the way toward an understanding of the institutional influences on self-construction but without reifying them. Employing a broad view of practice, it is possible to attend not only to the discursive practices of self-construction but also to the discourses-in-practice that supply the resources and interpretive possibilities for self-designation (Holstein and Gubrium 2000b).

These represent two reflexively related components of interpretive practice. Although Foucault worked in an empirical register that highlighted the historical contours of discourses-in-practice, in principle his position is not antithetical to explanations of self-construction at the interactional level. Indeed, his views on practice resonate with even the staunchest ethnomethodological position on the reflexivity of social action and social structure (see Garfinkel 1967).

DISCURSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Since the mid-twentieth century, social life has come under the purview of countless going concerns whose discursive environments function increasingly to assemble, alter, and reformulate our lives and selves. By “discursive environments,” we mean interactional domains characterized by distinctive ways of interpreting and representing everyday realities. Schools, correctional facilities, clinics, family courts, support groups, recreational clubs, fitness centers, and self-improvement programs, among other institutions, promote particular ways of representing who and what we are, furnishing discourses of subjectivity that are accountably put into discursive practice as individuals enter into their interpretive purview.

Such going concerns pose new challenges for the concept of a personal self. They are not especially hostile to the personal, nor do they necessarily saturate a vessel already filled to overflowing. Rather, today’s discursive environments for self-construction provide complex and variegated institutional options for who we could be. While, taken together, these environments might be seen as an over-
whelming surfeit of self-constructive challenges by some, they may also be viewed as a burgeoning supply of possibilities for who and what we might be.

Institutional Selves in Postmodern Context

Discursive environments set the "conditions of possibility" for subjectivity, as Foucault (1977) put it. They establish general parameters for producing recognizable and accountable constructions, including even the core self. With more going concerns than ever entering the self-construction business, we might characterize today's world as increasingly populated by institutional selves (Gubrium and Holstein forthcoming).

In some institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals and counseling centers, selves are officially constructed in terms of "too much" or "too little" of every conceivable combination of thought, feeling, and action. This can range from too much restlessness, talkativeness, and grandiosity, which are among the diagnostic criteria of manic episodes, to too little passion about life or "not caring anymore," which are signal features of depression. Taken together, such discursive environments comprise a virtual "troubled identity" market, geared up to construct more kinds of problem-ridden selves than ever.

Needless to say, not all identities are medicalized, nor do they all become the targets of psychotherapeutic efforts. Self-construction extends across the wide variety of human service institutions and beyond, to the pastoral care and spiritual fellowships offered by churches and the behavioral rehabilitation programs imposed on violent offenders in prison. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for example, is decidedly nonmedical and construes uncontrollable drinking as a moral failure. Failure here entails a refusal to recognize that one's actions are not self-governed but are lodged in "higher powers."

There also are plenty of going concerns that feature mainly positive self-images, seeking to valorize or glamorize the self rather than to cement and reformulate troubled identities. Formalized avocational affiliation, for example, puts people in touch with significant resources for self-construction. From international associations like the Sierra Club to local senior centers, recreational organizations offer activities, training, and challenges that both explicitly and implicitly supply self-building opportunities. Mountain climbers, cyclists, and go-cart racers, along with martial artists, wilderness skiers, scuba divers, and myriad others, find that the social sites of their activities provide not only recreation but also diverse ways of viewing and articulating identity. Such discursive environments may be just as consequential for self-construction as those that construct and heal the troubled.  

The ubiquity and variety of venues for self-construction suggest an important transformation in linkage between the personal and the social self: in a postmodern world, the traditional relationship between the personal self and society is reversed. From a modern point of view, while the personal self is viewed as socially influenced, it also is believed to have its own private location separate from society, a space centered in personal experience. In this context, social life is important for
growth and development, but, in excess, it can be portrayed as besieging, saturating, and commodifying identity. As we have noted, this view still thrives in our cultural belief system. From this perspective, the personal self is currently being inundated by the heartless intrusions of public life and its engaging social institutions. Commentators from Gergen and Hochschild to prominent critics such as David Riesman (1950), William H. Whyte (1956), Richard Sennett (1974), and Christopher Lasch (1977, 1979) have painted this disturbing picture.

In a world understood in postmodern terms, however, the relationship between the personal self and society dramatically changes. Social construction moves to the foreground, as the personal self is decentered from itself and relocated into myriad going concerns. The personal self, however, does not vanish from the postmodern scene. It persists in the popularly held tenet that an individual agent or subject exists inside or behind the surface appearances of our actions. Most significantly, in a postmodern context, we can see that the sense of a personal identity is being constructed in more social settings than ever. A thriving landscape of institutions serves up myriad selves, providing more and more occasions for constructing who and what we are.

This amounts to a field of possibilities and constraints that extends well beyond what Mead, or even Goffman, could have imagined. As with any social context, in each of these environments we must present ourselves in locally familiar terms or risk being seen as eccentric, if not outrageous, in the immediate scheme of things. If we do not proffer recognizable identities, our claims to selfhood might readily be treated as nonsense. To say, for example, “I’m a bloody warclub”—implying “that’s me”—does not usually make much sense in our society. It is not a readily recognizable identity. But its meaning may be perfectly clear in a going concern whose vocabulary of identity makes frequent reference to a band of unruly warriors beset by dreams of bloody sacrifice. In fact, it might even make sense in our own society if we found ourselves among members of a survivalist group who share a premonition of enduring a battle with a world rent with evil (cf. Mitchell 1998). The conditions of possibility for self-construction that Foucault spoke of have been extended in countless ways, across the broad horizon of contemporary life’s institutional encounters. While some view contemporary life as saturating the self, it also can be seen as providing countless options for what we could be, markedly expanding our potential for self-expression.

New and Diverse Options

No single discursive environment determines who and what we are. An individual who presents himself or herself for counseling at a psychoanalytically oriented therapy agency, for example, is likely to witness the self formulated in terms of the familiar Freudian idiom of psychic structures and depth understanding. Troubles for this self would be formulated in the guise of unconscious turmoil in relation to psychosexual development, embedded in the relational past. In contrast, individuals receiving counseling from a “solution-focused” therapy agency would find the self
articulated in the very concrete terms of the present, relating to everyday conduct and routine competence. The vestigial past is of no concern for the self here, nor is deep-seated pathology. Troubles are viewed as solvable everyday problems of living, pure and simple (see Miller 1997).

In today’s world, the individual has diverse options for self-construction. To some degree, one can choose the environment(s) in which one’s self will be constituted. A good deal of personal expression and empowerment is implicated, for example, in choosing between alternative psychotherapeutic modalities. Opt for psychoanalysis and one is apt to become a seething cauldron of unconscious conflicts rooted in early childhood and parental relationships. Select “brief” solution-focused therapy and one is likely to find oneself defined as a generally competent, if confused or misguided, practitioner of everyday life, who merely needs to decide on how he or she will solve surmountable problems of living in the present.

Such freedom of choice is a fairly recent development. Today’s range of discursive environments was unheard of a century ago; it was hardly evident until the 1970s. Our forebears likely constructed selves within a relatively narrow range of spiritual, familial, or communal identities. They simply did not encounter the profusion of going concerns and discursive offerings that engage us today. Their lives were not spread across the plethora of sites and situations that now call for distinctive kinds of self-presentation. Self-construction was more straightforward to be sure, and its possibilities were decidedly limited, if indeed self was even separated from other social forms to designate subjectivity.

We even find some traditional parameters of self-construction newly reconfigured. For example, Hochschild’s recent book, The Time Bind (1997), suggests that the traditional experiential relationship between work and home has been reversed with respect to where we seek our identities (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). Most American adults, Hochschild argues, now work outside the home and, thus, engage daily in the institutional life of organizations large and small. This fact represents a major departure from work life earlier in the century. According to Hochschild, for some, the workplace, rather than the home, has become a preferred sanctuary for the personal self, where one finds himself or herself to be most centered and whole.

The family-friendly company called “Amerco,” where Hochschild conducted her study, is a case in point. Amerco operates under a Total Quality (TQ) management system, replacing the traditional top-down, scientific framework. It provides a discursive environment that ostensibly empowers workers to make decisions on their own. Amerco’s TQ principles not only offer a nurturing atmosphere for workers but also seek to heal the troubled selves that employees often bring to, or develop, in the workplace. In fact, the self itself is firmly recognized as critical to company policy and subject to redesign, as the following description indicates.

At Amerco, employees are invited to feel relaxed while on the job. Frequent recognition events reward work but also provide the context for a kind of play. Amerco’s management has, in fact, put thought and effort into blurring the dis-
tinction between work and play (just as the distinction is so often blurred at home). . . . [T]here are even free Cokes, just as at home, stashed in refrigerators placed near coffee machines on every floor.

Amerco has also made a calculated attempt to take on the role of helpful relative in relation to employee problems at work and at home, implicating the social selves in question. The Education and Training Division offers employees free courses (on company time) in “Dealing with Anger,” “How to Give and Accept Criticism,” “How to Cope with Difficult People,” “Stress Management,” “Taking Control of Your Work Day,” and “Using the Myers-Briggs Personality Test to Improve Team Effectiveness.” . . . Amerco is also one of about a hundred companies that enrolls its top executives in classes at the Corporate Learning Institute. . . . One can, at company expense, attend a course on “Self-Awareness and Being: The Importance of Self in the Influence Process.” (Hochschild 1997:205-6)

Hochschild points to an unanticipated consequence of TQ’s cognitive and emotional involvement in workers’ personal lives: it turns the workplace into a home of sorts, a place for self-repair and recentering. This, in turn, encourages a particular kind of self-surveillance. TQ puts a premium on expressing feelings, sharing emotional labor, and cooperating in family-like corporate responsibility. This also puts TQ in the business of reconstructing its participants’ personal selves for the greater good of the company and its employees.

A corporate workplace results that competes with the home as a source of identity, and extends even to the core self. According to Hochschild, the enticement to put in long hours at work—called the “time bind”—upsets the traditional work-family balance. A “third shift” emerges for workers that prompts them to distance themselves from the time-pressured and increasingly rationalized household so that they can devote themselves—their selves—to the emotional allures of the company. For many of Amerco’s employees, the workplace is more of an experiential haven than they find at home: Amerco offers emotional relief and interpersonal sustenance away from the tumult and turmoil of the domestic front. This arrangement inverts the traditional cultural geography of privacy, making the workplace more of a self-sustaining refuge than the household.

The inversion is not necessarily bad or good. But it cogently illustrates the changing possibilities and options for self-construction at the verge of a new millennium. The proliferation of going concerns and their discursive environments may complicate or relocate self-construction, but it is also enabling in terms of the options presented for constructing and repairing who and what we are, both in the immediate realm of daily living and throughout the life course (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000a).

Inequality of Opportunities

Lest we sound overly sanguine, we must also recognize that these institutional options are not equally distributed across the contemporary social scene. As ubiquitous and varied as self-constructing institutions have become, their discursive envi-
ronments are not options for everyone. Not everyone is subjected to or has access to the same field of possibilities. For the economically and socially privileged, the landscape of contemporary self-building opportunities may appear to be a smorgasbord of identities, while the less advantaged are more likely to be selectively filtered through the self-constructive processing of going concerns of last resort such as homeless shelters and prisons.

Take the advantages and opportunities for sexual identity of relatively privileged, white, middle-class university students. Susan Chase (forthcoming) writes of the dilemmas of self that confront gay students who struggle with decisions about going public with what some view as tarnished identities. Her study of the related discursive environments of two different college campuses reveals a dramatic contrast in dialogue concerning sexual diversity and acceptability. One campus cultivates open dialogue about sexual diversity, providing a supportive community for students to come out and be comfortable with homosexual selves. On the other campus, the prevailing silence on issues of sexuality, coupled with undertones of intolerance for sexual diversity, leads students to closet sexual nonconformity in response to an institutional preference for heterosexuality. While Chase's research teaches us that discursive environments differentially mediate sexual self-expression, it also suggests that students who can afford it can virtually shop around for school environments that accord with their sexual preferences and associated identities.

The less advantaged are not as fortunate. Their self-identifying choices are likely to be severely limited. For those who are disturbed, addicted, impoverished, or otherwise destitute, such as individuals seeking admission to shelters or community mental health programs, the selves they become are soon lodged in one of the few relationships they can afford. They are left with the option of presenting selves that are socially tolerated in order to avail themselves of desperately needed services (see Snow and Anderson 1987; Spencer forthcoming; Weinberg forthcoming). As Michael Schwalbe (1993:341-42) notes, materially disadvantaged persons frequently must submit wholesale to institutional demands on self-presentation as a matter of sheer survival.

Dire exigencies of all sorts may force individuals into constructing particular selves. Those seeking to escape their drinking habits, for instance, may turn to AA for help. Cognizant of no plausible alternative and unaware of the demands of AA, new members may voluntarily enter the twelve-step program, but the price will be the acceptance of an "alcoholic self" that conforms to a distinctly patterned and ritualized organizational discourse (see Pollner and Stein forthcoming). For every work site like Amerco, there is a "heartless," "faceless" bureaucracy that homogenizes employee selves, consigning them to "Dilbert"-like cubicles that work to ensure that each member remains anonymous and institutionally undistinguished. For every potential client shopping the middle-class psychotherapy market, there is a coerced recipient of court-mandated behavioral therapy or prison-imposed, cognitive self change (see Fox forthcoming). This is variety, yes, but always at a price.4
ANALYTIC CHALLENGES OF A POSTMODERN SELF

As unequally distributed as these options are, taken together they offer increasingly complex and socially differentiated opportunities to the personal self. This situation, in turn, raises its own challenges for the conceptualization and empirical appreciation of the self as a social form. We conclude by addressing some of these challenges, noting prospects and implications for future studies of self-construction.

Beyond Talk and Interaction

One implication is that we can no longer examine self-construction solely in the realm of talk and interaction. “Institutional talk” (Drew and Heritage 1992; Heritage 1997) must share the stage with talk within institutions. To be sure, talk and interaction remain the operating vehicles through which individuals construct selves. But interactional moves—discursive practices—do not fully specify the concrete selves we live by. Neither are selves unfettered performances or situationally convenient presentations. Selves are not just locally presented but are also artifacts of discourses-in-practice, reflecting the moral agendas and material constraints of the diverse going concerns and discursive environments of postmodern life. Self-construction always relies on culturally and historically located ways of constituting subjectivity, no matter how artful and creative that process might be (see Foucault 1977; Geertz 1984).

If the discursive conditions of a landscape of going concerns is to assume equal footing with social interaction as a basis for self-construction, symbolic interactionist, dramaturgical, ethnomethodological, and other interactionally oriented sociologies need to broaden their traditional analytic horizons. This need is adumbrated in all of these approaches, but the time is now right to take the impulse a step or two further. Goffman (1967, 1983), for example, informed us that there is always more at stake for the self than ongoing social interaction; there is an “interaction order.” This concept was his way of recognizing factors above and beyond immediate face-to-face encounters that condition identity (see Rawls 1987). Our observations of the expanding institutional terrain of the postmodern scene suggest that we must move above and beyond even this, so to speak, casting our gaze, as Foucault might suggest we do, across the interaction order toward the institutional practices of self-construction.

If we ask Goffman to make room on the conceptual stage for more institutionally accountable analyses of self-construction, those following Herbert Blumer’s (1969:2) programmatic symbolic interactionist “premises” might also create analytic space for institutional mediations. As inspirational as Blumer has been in calling attention to the interactional sources of meaning, he stopped short of specifying how going concerns figure into the meaning-making process. It remains for us to prod Blumer’s insights into human group life in directions that acknowledge the substantial interpretive sway that particular institutions have over the relation between meaning and social interaction.
The Professionalization of Troubled and Untroubled Selves

Looking beyond but not ignoring talk and interaction, we come upon concrete sites of self-construction and the sources of identity they purvey. For better or worse, the expansion of the human service industry represents an explosion of professional self-constructive venues. Its agents and outlets can be viewed as veritable factories for the production of selves.

In the world of human services, of course, the self is usually located at the heart of social and personal problems and their solutions. In practice, these institutions construct the troubled selves that they need to do their work (Gubrium and Holstein forthcoming). Indeed, each helping profession, with its underlying disciplinary commitment to a particular view of troubles and solutions, is the source of a distinctive kind of troubled identity. The professional gaze deploys subjects that are at the very heart of a “helping” enterprise (Rose 1990, 1997).

Foucault again is relevant here. Not only did he adumbrate the professionalization of subjectivity, but he would have cautioned us not to read the demise of the self into our recent concerns for its troubles. Indeed, he would contend just the opposite. Writing in relation to human sexuality, Foucault (1978) proffered the counterintuitive argument that the Victorian Era did not evince a decline in popular interest in sexuality. Rather, the myriad attempts at sexual repression represented a piqued social concern that reveals a society more preoccupied with sex, not less. The same might be said for the self. The more we argue over or lament its decline or demise, the more we contribute to its construction and proliferation as a social form.

This not only yields a broad spectrum of troubled selves, but an equally broad range of untroubled ones. For all the troubled selves that are being produced, there are also institutional mandates to replace each and every one of them with an untroubled self. Each organization, agency, or profession that designates a self-in-trouble is likely to be charged with repairing that troubled self, turning out its untroubled counterpart. More broadly, each instance of a troubled self also serves to show us what we are not, populating an equally large counterlandscape of positive identities. As Emile Durkheim (1964) taught us long ago, we need the visible presence of the "pathological" to assure us of what is "normal," suggesting that just as we have more troubled selves than ever before, we now have more untroubled ones as well.

The Popularization of Self-Construction

The human service professions, of course, are not solely responsible for the propagation of troubled identities. The scientific and academic communities as well as the popular media also serve up troubled and untroubled selves. Indeed, self-construction is now also being undertaken in opposition to professional efforts. On any given Sunday, for example, local newspapers announce literally dozens of self-help groups, which offer innumerable self-constructive opportunities for persons
from all walks of life: victims of depression, parents of the troubled or gifted, alcoholics, codependents of substance abusers, cancer sufferers, survivors of cancer, Gulf War veterans, victims of sexual assault, perpetrators of domestic violence, AIDS victims, the friends and significant others of Alzheimer’s disease sufferers, and transvestites and their spouses, among many others. We look for ways to construct identity on our own, so much so that Robert Wuthnow (1994) estimates that 40 percent of the U.S. population now participates in such discussion groups.

Add to this the human interest programming we see on television, in the cinema, and in print, and it is clear that identity-conferring opportunities are amply available. Ordinary life has become an emporium of self-constructive options. Images of special or sullied selves come alive and are acted out before our very eyes on television talk shows, facilitated, if not encouraged, by the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Jenny Jones, and Ricki Lake (see Lowney and Holstein forthcoming). We see models of every conceivable kind of persona one might become, from cover girls to superstar athletes to serial killers, cocaine addicts, and road ragers.

And, like it or not, the “sciences of the self”—from psychology and psychoanalysis to sociology and anthropology—have lent their voices to the popular cacophony. Public discourse often commandeers the language of the academic disciplines to describe their senses of everyday subjectivity. Roles, status, peer pressure, socialization, culture and subculture, self-esteem, reinforcement, defense mechanisms, denial, and countless other technical terms are now familiar to just about everyone, regardless of education or training. The popular discourse of the self brings the academy and the clinic right into the living room, if not fully into the bedroom. Postmodernity may well be a time marked by the dedifferentiation of academic, clinical, and popular discourse (Lash 1990). What began with intellectual forays by James, Mead, and Cooley is now integral even to the self-constructive rantings of Dr. Laura and Jerry Springer. Everyday parlance echoes them all. The challenge on this front is surely obvious, the analytic implication being that we can no longer view these discursive environments in isolation. Rather, we need to consider the myriad overlapping, intersecting going concerns that shape the self.

The Moral Climate of the Postmodern Self

Last but not least, these developments implicate a complex moral climate, challenging us to view them in positive as well as negative terms. For some, such as Gergen and Hochschild (especially in The Managed Heart), the social landscape has become a coercive, “iron cage-like” environment of options for the self. Cast this way, institutions tyrannically impose limited conditions of possibility for self-construction, bordering on molding, if not determining, the selves we become. The numerous institutional demands placed on the self heighten the sense that self-construction is now beyond personal control. This is the dark side of a postmodern world as it relates to who and what we are, and can be.

Another, more optimistic, overlay suggests that contemporary life presents us
with an ever-expanding, even emancipating, horizon of possibilities. Today, we are offered unprecedented opportunities for what could be done to construct selves that comfortably accommodate the biographical particulars of our lives. A thousand going concerns provide us with these opportunities; a thousand more proffer new and different chances for further growth, as well as a basis for challenging existing constructions. This is the positive side of a postmodern world.

Going concerns play a pivotal role in how we view and express ourselves and what we accept within our deepest reaches. To the extent that we inhabit a world of multiple institutional affiliations, we encounter diverse options for discerning even what we presume to be our core identities. We might experience this as either threatening or empowering. Social life is fully penetrating and engrossing; it completely permeates our lives. We cannot escape the social because it is built into our very beings. But the important lesson now is that the social is also built out of the eminently variegated going concerns that supply us with identities. Following Gergen, we can read this situation as an indictment of the self-saturating diversification of the postmodern world. But the possibilities for self-construction offered by an unprecedented and expanding horizon of identities can also be morally compelling. Our ability to choose between options—indeed, to use some options in order to resist others, or to construct new ones—can be as liberating as it is overwhelming and debilitating.

NOTES

This article is an expanded version of the Society for Symbolic Interaction's 1999 Distinguished Lecture titled "The Self We Live By," which was presented by Jaber F. Gubrium at the society's annual meeting in Chicago. The article is informed by the coauthors' continuing research and writing on institutional practice as it relates to self-construction.

1. Other commentators view this as too loosely stated and overdrawn (see Best and Kellner 1991; Featherstone 1988; Poster 1988; Shalin 1993). Michael Schwalbe (1993), among others, argues that the contemporary condition from which the self emerges is better characterized as late capitalism, or perhaps modernism run amok (see Agger 1990; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984).

2. This is especially the case in those realms of educated, Western culture within which discourses of self and subjectivity are prevalent. In the contemporary United States, this extends to all consumers of the popular media, where self-definition in one form or another is a daily preoccupation.

3. Richard Mitchell (pers. com. 1999) brought this to our attention. He points out that we are increasingly encountering recreational activities that center on challenges designed to elevate and affirm positive self-conceptions. In these going concerns, troubled selves are left behind as participants strive to achieve physically serene and cognitively exalted identities.

4. To be sure, the field of institutional self-construction opportunities on the contemporary scene is uneven. Nevertheless, that field is broader than at any time in history. Even if possibilities are unequally distributed, more options fall to even the most disadvantaged. And even if the institutions confronting the disadvantaged are often coercive with respect to self-construction and presentation, they are not impervious to resistance. As we have already noted, structural circumstances may condition, but they cannot fully control, the selves that we situationally construct (see Fox forthcoming; Hopper forthcoming; Loseke forthcoming).
REFERENCES