

## Reconceptualizing the Self Phenomenon: Toward an Emic Conception of the Self

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*In sociology, the self has been conceptualized as either self-concept or the process of self-reflectivity. Both notions of the self have been traced to the early thinkers – William James, Charles H. Cooley, and George H. Mead – who laid the foundation for the scientific study of the self phenomenon. In this article, I propose a revised conception of the self based on a re-reading of the classics. I argue that the self is related to but not the same as self-concept or the process of self-reflectivity. The self is an emic object, that is, the entity that one takes oneself to be. More specifically, the self is the empirical existence of an individual perceived by the individual to be his or her own. As the identity the individual finds in his or her existence in a world shared with others, the self is a product of both self-reflection and self-enactment. Implications of this reconceptualization for some broad issues related to the self phenomenon are also discussed.*

Keywords: Charles Cooley, emic, William James, George Mead, identity, self, self-concept

While the idea of self had been around before antiquity (Seigel 2005; Taylor 1989), the attempt to study the phenomenon of the self scientifically began with William James a century ago. In 1890, William James published a ground-breaking book, *The Principles of Psychology*, in which he defined the self as a legitimate subject for scientific investigation. Ever since then, research on the self has emerged in many subfields of social science, concentrating in psychiatry, psychology, social psychology, and sociology. Over the years, James' initial conception of the self has been modified and recalibrated by numerous scholars, among whom Charles H. Cooley and George H. Mead are regarded as most influential in sociology. The different ideas of the early thinkers have left their imprints on subsequent inquiries, including the common conceptual ambiguities and inconsistencies that are found in today's research on the self (Katzko 2003; Leary 2004; Raeff 2010; Strawson 1994).

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In sociology, a distinction between “self” and “self-concept” has been drawn: the self refers to “the process of reflexivity” that “emanates from the dialectic between the ‘I’ and ‘Me’,” whereas the self-concept is “a product of this reflexive activity” which is “the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being” (Gecas 1982:3). The sociological study of the self, however, has mostly focused on self-concept (Demo 1992; Rosenberg 1981). As “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to oneself as an object” (Rosenberg 1979:7), self-concept has two major dimensions: cognitive (i.e., thoughts and beliefs) and affective (i.e., feelings and emotions), both of which belong to the subjective realm of the mind, consisting of an aggregate of thoughts and feelings an individual has of him- or herself.

However, neither the “process of reflexivity” nor the “product of reflexivity” definition of the self fits well with the conception of self originally formulated by James ([1890] 1918); moreover, neither definition matches the notion of self used in everyday life. For example, in such expressions as “That was not my true self” or “Be your best self,” “self” clearly means something more than a mere concept in one’s mind or the psychological process of self-reflectivity.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on inspirations from the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce (see Colapietro 1989) and the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur (1984), some sociologists came to define the self as a “sign” to be interpreted by the individual through linguistic communication with others (Kerby 1991; Wiley 1994). The self thus construed is a narrative accomplishment, an autobiographical story constructed intersubjectively through both soliloquy and dialog with others (Athens 1994; Ezzy 1998). The purpose of this article is to continue this line of effort by proposing an “emic” approach to the self phenomenon that remains true to the core of the conceptions of the early thinkers while eliminating the ambiguities and inconsistencies found in their original formulations.

I argue in this article that, to properly conceptualize the self, it is necessary to draw a distinction between *a thing as it is* (i.e., a “first-order” entity) and *a thing as is seen* by a perceiver (i.e., a “second-order” entity), with the latter being further divided into a thing as seen by others and *a thing as seen by the thing itself*. In generic terms, the self is not a thing as it is; rather, the self is a thing perceived by the thing itself as itself. In other words, the self is not an object *per se*; it is instead a *perceived object* identified by the perceiver as itself or “me.” This insider’s perspective on the insider itself is called an “emic” viewpoint. Initially coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike (1967) and further elaborated by the anthropologist Marvin Harris (1976), the “emic” viewpoint refers to the perspective *from within*, which stands in contrast to the “etic” viewpoint — the perspective *from outside*. The self is the empirical existence of the individual perceived by the individual as his or her own.

Not all objects have the reflective capacity to identify themselves. Humans are among the few select species in the animal kingdom that are known to have this capacity (Gallup 1970; Hurley and Nudds 2006; Parker et al. 1994). According to the early thinkers, the human self is *the object that a human individual takes him- or herself to be*. This object is not the individual *per se* because the self is a reflected

second-order entity; nor is the self a concept that the individual has of him- or herself, for a *perceived* object and the *perception* of an object are not the same thing; for that matter, neither is the self a process of reflectivity, as reflectivity is a cognitive *capacity* required for the formation of the self. Nonetheless, reflectivity, self-concept, and self are closely interrelated, and their combination constitutes what is called here the *self phenomenon*.

In the sections that follow, I examine the conception of the self originally formulated by James and the modifications of it introduced by Cooley and Mead. I point out the contributions as well as the mistakes the early thinkers made and their impacts on the present conceptions of the self. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the self phenomenon, but to trace the lineage of a notion of self that I describe as the “emic conception.” After a critical review of the classics, I delineate the emic argument that I propose in this article, showing that this conception of self retains the key ideas of the early thinkers without the ambiguities and inconsistencies found in their original formulations. In the final section of the article, I discuss several broad issues raised by the proposed reconceptualization and reflect on the implications of this reformulation for future research on the self phenomenon.

## JAMES' ORIGINAL CONCEPTION OF THE SELF PHENOMENON

In his seminal chapter on the “Consciousness of Self” that appeared in *The Principles of Psychology*, James ([1890] 1918) presented an emic conception of the self phenomenon that consists of three essential elements: *first-person perspective*, *extracorporeality*, and *temporality*.

### First-Person Perspective

James starts his examination of the self with two presuppositions: (1) the empirical existence of the individual in the world, and (2) an incessant stream of consciousness or “passing thought” occurring within the individual’s mind. Metaphorically, James calls the successive passing thought within the individual the “thinker” or the “I,” and the empirical existence of the individual known by the “I” the “me:”

We may sum up by saying that personality implies the incessant presence of two elements, an objective person, known by a passing subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time. Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought. (371)

The “me” is, therefore, the individual seen from the standpoint of an “inside observer,” which is the “I” of the individual. This me, viewed from the first-person perspective, is what James calls the “empirical self:” “The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of *me*” (291).<sup>2</sup> The self is thus a “second-order” object, that is, the individual perceived by the individual as him- or

herself. In other words, the self is the identity found by the “I” of the individual in his or her own existence in the world.

But, how does this “I,” which is a continuous stream of thought, come to recognize the existence of the individual as “Me?” James did not directly address this question, noting instead that the existence of a successive stream of consciousness in the individual is an undeniable fact and there is no need to “look beyond” that fact (401). An explanation of how the “I” comes to recognize “Me” was later offered by Mead (1934) using the analogies of “role-playing” and “game-playing.”

This first-person perspective is crucial to the understanding of the self phenomenon (Jopling 2000; McIntosh 1995; Zahavi 2005). The empirical existence of the individual can be examined from the perspectives of others as well as the individual. The self is the individual perceived from the standpoint of the individual him- or herself. However, such a definition of the self smacks of a tone of solipsism that James was eager to dispel. James emphatically points out that while it is seen from an insider’s standpoint, “[t]his me is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known:”

Thus the identity found by the I in its me is only a loosely construed thing, an identity “on the whole,” just like that which any outside observer might find in the same assemblage of facts. We often say of a man “he is so changed one would not know him;” and so does a man, less often speak of himself. These changes in the me, recognized by the I, or by outside observers, may be grave or slight. (372–73)

In other words, the first-person perspective of the inside observer, “I,” is essentially no different from the third-person perspective of “any outside observer,” and this suggests that the individual correctly perceived by the “I” should be the same as the individual correctly perceived by others. This equation of the first-person perspective with the third-person perspective turned out to be a major error that led to a number of logical inconsistencies in James’s conception of the self.

### Extracorporeality

According to James, the empirical existence of the individual includes not just the corporeal entity of the individual but also its extracorporeal extensions. “In its widest possible sense,” as James put it, “a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his” (291). Specifically, the constituents of the empirical self include three hierarchically structured components: material, social, and spiritual. The innermost part of the material self is the body of the individual, the needs of which is the “primitive object, instinctively determined, of my egoistic interests” (324). Derived from their association with the body are other parts of the material self, which includes one’s clothing, immediate family, and home. Strictly speaking, notes James, the corporeal part of the material self is called “me” and the derived parts are called “mine,” but James acknowledges that in real life “between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw” (291):

We see then that we are dealing with a fluctuating material. The same object being sometimes treated as a part of me, at other times as simply mine, and then again as if I had nothing to do with it at all. (291)

The reason that the boundary of one's material self fluctuates is primarily because the "nucleus of the self" may shift over time. James observes that the "central part of the me is the feeling of the body" (371), and the change of such feelings in the individual alters the boundary of one's material self:

The nucleus of the "me" is always the bodily existence felt to be present at the time. Whatever remembered-past-feelings resemble this present feeling are deemed to belong to the same me with it. Whatever other things are perceived to be associated with this feeling are deemed to form part of that me's experience; and of them certain ones (which fluctuate more or less) are reckoned to be themselves constituents of the me in a larger sense. (400)

The point is that the boundary of one's material self is not fixed, and it changes in accordance with the changes in the "feeling of the body." As such, the empirical existence of the individual "felt to be present at the time" by the individual may not necessarily be the same as the empirical existence of the individual perceived by others at that time, and this implies that the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective may not always converge. Apparently, James was oblivious to the possible contradiction in equating the first-person perspective with the third-person perspective on the empirical existence of the individual.

The social self of the individual, which is placed on top of the material self, consists of "the recognition which he gets from his mates" (293): "A man's fame, good or bad, and his honor or dishonor, are names for one of his social selves" (294). The reputation of the individual is part of the individual's self because it directly affects the individual's feelings: "to wound any one of these images is to wound him" (294). However, where does a person's social self reside? According to James, one's social self resides in the minds of others: "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind" (294). The social self of the individual is therefore his or her images in the eyes of others, particularly, "in the eyes of his own 'set'" (295), or "in the mind of the person" "about whose opinions he cares" (294). The more significant the others are to the individual, the more important are the images of the individual they carry in their minds.

James acknowledges that "[t]hose images of me in the minds of other men are, it is true, things outside of me, whose changes I perceive just as I perceive any other outward change" (321). But, how do I come to know my images in the minds of others? Moreover, how can I find out whether the images of me in the minds of others that I perceive are the same images others have of me in their minds? James never really addressed these questions. Perhaps to James this is a mute issue: as the "me" is "an assemblage of facts objectively known," the individual and others should have the same perception of these facts. This was clearly an unrealistic assumption,

and this error was later corrected by Cooley through the introduction of the concept of the looking-glass self.

Another mistake James made in the articulation of the social self was the conflation of the images others have of the individual and the individual's effort to project an image of him- or herself to others. After pointing out that the individual has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of people who carry the images of the individual in their minds, James notes:

He [the individual] generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his "tough" young friends . . . . From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; . . . . (294)

The multiple selves James was referring to in this paragraph are not the images of the individual that others carry in their minds, but the images the individual seeks to project to others which may or may not be accepted by others. More appropriately, these projected self-images should be included in the category of what James calls "self-seeking," or "social self-seeking," to be more precise.<sup>3</sup>

The third and the top layer of the empirical self is the spiritual self. The spiritual self is "a man's inner or subjective being" comprised of (1) the individual's "psychic faculties or dispositions," and (2) the stream of the individual's "personal consciousness" (296). Unlike one's social self that resides in the minds of others, one's spiritual self resides in one's own mind.

### Temporality

The empirical self has a "history" — the iterative evolution of the different parts of the "me" in a temporal sequence: from the past segment of the empirical self felt present at the current moment (part 1) to the resulting "self-feelings" such as pride, conceit, vanity as well as modesty, shame, and mortification (part 2) to the activities of "self-seeking" which is one's effort to better one's material, social, and spiritual selves in the future (part 3). This iterative process going from the past empirical self to the present self-feelings to the seeking of the future possible self and then back to the past empirical self constitutes the history of the enactment of one's ideal and potential self, "the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent Me which I seek" (316).

In James' formulation, the fundamental motives for self-enactment are instinctual. One's primitive egoistic interest, which is "instinctively determined," is the fulfillment of one's bodily needs (324); one's "fundamental instinctive impulses" also include "those of social self-seeking, and those of spiritual self-seeking" (307). Finally, underlying the feelings of self-satisfaction and shame is the "computation of the sensible pleasures or pains" that are "direct and elementary endowments of our nature" (306). This pronounced emphasis on the instinctual underpinnings of the

self phenomenon was counterbalanced in the works of Cooley who placed primacy on the impact of the social forces.

### COOLEY'S CONCEPTION OF THE "SOCIAL SELF"

In a certain sense, Cooley's conception of the self can be seen as a reaction to the contradictions in James' formulation regarding the first-personal nature of the self phenomenon. On the one hand, James defined the self as the identity the "I" found in its "me," namely the empirical existence of the individual perceived by the individual to be his or her own; on the other hand, James maintained that the same identity could be "objectively" found also by others, which means that the empirical existence of the individual perceived by the individual should be no different from those perceived by others. If this were indeed the case, however, the first-person perspective of the "I" would certainly lose its distinctiveness.

Cooley ([1902] 1956) agrees with James on the first-personal nature of the self phenomenon in the sense that the self phenomenon is intimately tied to the perspective of the individual whose self it is. In his words, the self is what the individual refers to by "the pronouns of the first-person singular:"

It is well to say at the outset that by the word "self" in this discussion is meant simply that which is designated in common speech by the pronouns of the first person singular, "I," "me," "my," "mine," and "myself." ... What is here discussed is what psychologists call the empirical self, the self that can be apprehended or verified by ordinary observation. (168)

However, Cooley's conception of the self differs from James' formulation in two important aspects. First, the meaning of the "I" has changed. In James' formulation, the "I" stands for the reflective "knower," the "passing thought," or the "stream of personal consciousness," which gives rise to the "known" or "me;" in Cooley's conception, the distinction between the "knower" or "I" and the "known" or "me" is dropped, and the "I," along with other pronouns of the first-person singular, for example, "me," "my," and "mine," stands for an entity that represents "personal emotion," "self-feeling," or "excitement of a certain sort:"

As Professor James says in his admirable discussion of the self, the words "me" and "self" designate "all the things which have the power to produce in a stream of consciousness excitement of a certain sort. (170)

I do not mean that the feeling aspect of the self is necessarily more important than any other, but that it is the immediate and decisive sign and proof of what "I" is; there is no appeal from it; ..." (170)

According to Cooley, the self-feelings that are associated with the pronouns of the first-person singular are mostly instinctual, designed to motivate the individual to engage in self-seeking activities:

The emotion or feeling of self may be regarded as instinctive, and was doubtlessly evolved in connection with its important function in stimulating and unifying the special activities of individuals." (170–71)

Second, the constituents of the self have changed. In James' formulation, the constituents of the self or "me" consist of three parts: material (corporeal and extracorporeal), social, and spiritual. In Cooley's conception, the self is primarily reduced to a "self-idea." To distinguish it from other meanings of the self, Cooley sometimes refers to the self-idea as "social self:" "The social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own" (179). Moreover, this self-idea is emotion-filled: "Since 'I' is known to our experience primarily as a feeling, or as a feeling-ingredient in our ideas, it cannot be described or defined without suggesting that feeling" (172). Cooley's social self is, in a sense, akin to the social self in James' tripartite empirical self, that is, the images of the individual in the minds of others, except that, in this case, these images exist in the mind of the individual through imputation, namely "in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are affected by it" (184). Put another way, the social self is one's feelings about the imputed attitudes of others toward oneself. Specifically, this social self comprises three elements:

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. ... The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. (184)

Self-images are thus imputed images, that is, one's imagination of how one appears in the minds of others, which may be different from others' actual images of the individual, and the resulting self-feelings are influenced by the imputed attitudes of others toward the individual, which may be different from others' actual attitudes toward the individual. "A social self of this sort," notes Cooley, "might be called the reflected or looking-glass self" (184).

Cooley's looking-glass self successfully resolves the related contradictions in James' formulation. The imputed images and attitudes are not an assemblage of facts "objectively known" as James insisted; rather, they are an assemblage of facts *subjectively known*. This new conception fits well with the subjective nature of the first-person perspective that characterizes the self phenomenon. However, the price Cooley paid for achieving this logical consistency was essentially the purge of the entirety of what James had called the "material self," that is, the corporeal and extracorporeal components of the empirical self:

As many people have the impression that the verifiable self, the object that we name with "I," is usually the material body, it may be well to say that this impression is an illusion, ... It [the "I"] refers chiefly to opinions, purposes, desires,



claims, and the like, concerning matters that involve no thought of the body. ... It should also be remembered that "my" and "mine" are as much the names of the self as "I," and these, of course, commonly refer to miscellaneous possessions. (175–76)

This interpretation of the self was probably be the origin of what is now known as the "self-concept" argument, where the self is defined exclusively in terms of the thoughts and feelings a person has of him- or herself as an object. It should be noted that, without the corporeal and extracorporeal components delineated in James' formulation, self-ideas and self-feelings are not necessarily solipsistic, for, as Cooley explains, one's thoughts and feelings are developed through communication with others: "What we call 'me,' 'mine,' or 'myself' is then not something separate from the general life," (181), and "[t]here is no sense of 'I,' as in pride or shame, without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they" (182). Imputation and imagination notwithstanding, one's ideas and feelings about oneself reflect, in the final analysis, those held by others.

#### MEAD'S ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE OF THE "I"

Like James and Cooley, Mead (1934) regards the self as an entity associated with the first-person perspective. Mead maintains that the existence of the individual as a "physiological organism" is essential to the self, but the physiological organism in itself is not a self because an organism is "surrounded by things and acts with reference to things, including parts of its own body" (137). In Mead's words, the self is "an object to itself ... which is a reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and object" (136–37). An entity is reflexive when it "becomes an object to itself, and hence self-conscious" (172), and "the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself" (142).

However, unlike James and Cooley who attached greater importance to the affective aspect of the self, that is, self-feelings, Mead seeks to emphasize the cognitive aspect of the self — what he calls "the internalized conversation of gestures:"

Cooley and James, it is true, endeavor to find the basis of the self in reflexive affective experiences, i.e., experiences involving 'self-feeling;' ... The essence of the self, as we have said, is cognitive: it lies in the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds. (173)

What lies at the center of the cognitive aspect of the self is "the question as to the nature of the 'I' which is aware of the social 'me,'" (173). James posited the existence of the "I" in the form of the "knower" or "a stream of consciousness" without explicating the processes through which the "I" becomes aware of the "me;" in the case of Cooley's looking-glass self, the "I" as a knower was purged and reflectivity was simply assumed rather than examined. Mead seeks to find out what exactly this reflective "I" is and how it reflects the "me."

According to Mead, the “‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (175). Thus defined, Mead’s “me” is essentially the same as Cooley’s imputed images that reflect the attitudes of others. However, unlike Cooley’s looking-glass self that lacks an “I” capable of reacting to others’ attitudes (Denzin 1988; Erickson 1995; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983), Mead’s self contains such an agentic “I.” As Mead observes, “The ‘I’ reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I’” (174). Without this agentic “I,” argues Mead, the self would simply be a passive reflection of the attitudes of others and “there would be nothing novel in experience” (178).

The cognitive ability to take on the attitudes of others develops in the individual over time through communicating with others. In the early years of life when one’s reflective capability is at a low level, a child learns to take the attitudes of particular others through “role-playing” with specific individuals, mostly their caretakers; as the child becomes older and the cognitive ability improves, the child learns to take the attitudes of the “generalized other,” that is, the values of a whole community, through “game-playing” with groups of people. In Mead’s own words, “[t]he organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘the generalized other.’ The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (154). In the sense that one’s “me” is developed over time through interacting with others, “[t]he self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience” (140).

However, the individual does not take the attitudes of others passively. The “I” of the individual reacts to the attitudes of others in a way that can create “novelty” (209) in self experiences. By “novelty” Mead refers to those “values” held by the individual that differ from the attitudes of others, “which attach particularly to the ‘I’ rather than to the ‘me,’ ... which involves a reconstruction of the society, and so of the ‘me’ which belongs to that society” (214). Here, the “I” becomes an opposition to the socialized “me,” a force that is capable of “breaking through a deceptive crust of institutional behavior” (Turner 1976:991–92). Mead’s emphasis on the struggle between “I” and “me” reflects the Freudian influence that focuses on the tension between biological impulses and normative regulations:

Impulsive conduct is uncontrolled conduct. The structure of the “me” does not there determine the expression of the “I.” If we use a Freudian expression, the “me” is in a certain sense a censor. (Mead 1934:210)

If the “I” is an impulsive force rooted in the biological organism of the individual and the “me” is a normative force imposed on the individual by society, then what is the self? Is the self an impulsive force or a normative force? Mead’s answer to this question has been unequivocal: the self is the socialized “me” resulting from taking the attitudes of others. However, in a number of places in his book, Mead also

provided a different definition of the self that deviates from the notion of self as a socialized “me:”

The self is not so much a substance as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalized within an organism. ... This process of relating one’s own organism to the others in the interactions that are going on, in so far as it is imported into the conduct of the individual with the conversation of the “I” and the “me,” constitutes the self. (178–79)

This may have been the origin of the argument for “self-as-process,” an idea that remains influential to this day.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is a clear logical inconsistency in this argument: if the self is defined as the socialized “me,” then the interaction between the organismic “I” and the socialized “me” cannot be “me” or the self anymore; likewise, if the self is defined as the process in which the “I” interacts with the “me,” then the “me” has to be something other than the self. The interchange of these two different conceptions of self in the literature has caused much of the terminological confusion in research on the self phenomenon.

### THE EMIC CONCEPTION OF THE SELF

The above review of the three early thinkers’ deliberations on the self reveals a number of convergent as well as divergent points. First, all three thinkers associated the self phenomenon with the reflections of the individual upon his or her own existence. This assumes the co-presence of two factors: the empirical existence of the individual in the world, and the individual’s subjective reflections on his or her empirical existence. However, there were differences among the early thinkers in the emphasis they placed on these two factors. In insisting that the self is “an empirical aggregate of things objectively known,” James placed a premium on the empirical aspect of the co-presence; in arguing that the self is mostly a “system of ideas,” Cooley attached greater importance to the subjective aspect of the co-presence; and in noting that the self is “not so much a substance as a process,” Mead appeared to be dodging the question. A reconceptualization of the self that emphasizes both the empirical and subjective aspects of the duality is therefore needed.

Second, all three thinkers stressed the importance of the influence of others in shaping the individual’s perception of his or her own existence. The self cannot exist without others in the sense that the individual’s thoughts and feelings about him- or herself reflect the way others view and feel about the individual. However, the three thinkers differed in the extent to which they saw the individual as an autonomous agent. While Cooley was adamant about the primacy of social appraisal in shaping the looking-glass self, both James and Mead also recognized the fact that internal biological constituents such as instincts and impulses could serve to counteract normative regulations. It is the interaction between the organismic “I” and the socialized “me” that, as Mead put it, gives rise to the self. A more robust definition of the self must incorporate a notion of agency that transcends both the organismic impulses

and the immediate social environment such that it enables the individual to see him- or herself in the context of the totality of his or her life experience.

Third, all three thinkers agreed that communication with others plays a critical role in the formation of the self. A key component of human communication is language, a symbolic system that allows for the exchange of meanings and abstract thoughts. James did not explicitly discuss the connection between language and self, but the importance of linguistic communication was underlined in his discussion of the stream of consciousness and thoughts that gave rise to the self. Cooley was more explicit about the impact of language on the emergence of the self, as he directly linked the self phenomenon to the “phenomena of language and the communicative life” (1956:180) in arguing that “where there is no communication there can be ... no developed thought” (181). Mead went even further in this direction and ended up creating a theory of symbolic interaction that provided an account of the “genesis of the self” (1934:149). This linguistic dimension has been further accentuated in contemporary research on the narrative construction of the self (Kerby 1991; Wiley 1994).

Drawing on the insights from the classics, I propose here a reconceptualization of the self that retains the core of the concept of self advocated by the early thinkers while eliminating the ambiguities and inconsistencies found in their formulations. I name this new approach the *emic conception* of the self, which defines the self as *the identity the individual finds in his or her existence within society*. More specifically, this definition consists of four major elements: (1) the empirical existence of the individual in the world (“being”), which serves as the substrate of the self; (2) the individual’s perception and recognition of his or her own empirical existence (“emic perception”), which may differ from others’ perceptions of the individual’s empirical existence; (3) the totality of the individual’s biographical experience (“biography”), which involves the interplay between the individual’s biological being and social being over the lifespan; and (4) the individual’s conscious efforts to enact his or her perceived existence according to self-values (“agency”). This emic self is neither the empirical existence of the individual nor the individual’s perception of his or her empirical existence, but the integration of the two in the context of the totality of the individual’s biographical experience.

### Individual’s Empirical Existence in the World

The empirical existence of the individual refers to the individual’s existence in the world as a biological and social being. As a biological being, the individual is a sentient organism and must satisfy the essential survival needs of his or her biological body, for example, the need for food, water, and sleep; and as a social being, the individual is a member of society and must meet the normative expectations of the society to which he or she belongs, for example, fulfillment of one’s moral and legal obligations to others. Continued satisfaction of one’s bodily needs and social obligations is a requirement for one’s existence in the world.

The world in which human individuals live is a shared world. No individuals can live as humans without other individuals. This is true in the following senses: (1) no individuals came into this world by themselves — everyone was brought into the world by someone else; (2) no individuals can grow up to be an independent being without first being dependent on someone else — everyone must be cared for by others before being able to care for him- or herself; and, more importantly, (3) no individuals can live and function as humans without the cultural artifacts they procured by being with others, for example, language, knowledge, and skills — everyone lives in the “shadow” of others. Being part of this shared world, the empirical existence of an individual is intimately intertwined with the empirical existence of others:

By “Others” we do not mean everyone else but me — those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself — those among whom one is too. ... By reason of this *with-like* Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. (Heidegger [1927] 1962:154–55)

Being in such a shared world, an individual’s life is distinguishable but inseparable from the lives of others, and the way in which one is related to others becomes the way one is.

The empirical existence of the individual has a finite temporal span. From birth to death at any given point in time, the individual’s existence in the world consists of three segments of duration: (1) that which is past, (2) that which is present, and (3) that which is yet to come. A defining characteristic of human existence lies in the openness of the future. Although the influence of the past and the conditions of the present narrows the options for the future, the individual is always faced with “certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past” (Ricoeur 1988:191). As Charles Peirce notes, “Were the ends of a person already explicit [and antecedently fixed], there would be no room for development, for growth, for life” (cited in Colapietro 1989:77). In this sense, the essence of an individual’s being in the world is *to be*, and the empirical existence of the individual is defined as much by what the individual is or has been as by what the individual can and will be.

Parallel to this temporal span, the individual’s empirical existence has a spatial extension. The spatial realm of the individual’s existence in the world can be divided into two parts: corporeal and extracorporeal, each containing two dimensions: material and ideational. The corporeal-material part comprises the biological body and the corrective/decorative artifacts that are associated with it; the corporeal-ideational part comprises the individual’s mental processes and the resulting thoughts and feelings; the extracorporeal-material part comprises the individual’s actions, possessions, and social relationships; and the extracorporeal-ideational part comprises the individual’s images and reputations in the minds of others. The sum total of all these parts, including their past, present, and future, constitutes the totality of the individual’s empirical existence in the world. However, this “empirical aggregate of things” *in itself*, that is, unreflected, is not the self of the individual.

## Individual's Perception of Own Empirical Existence

The empirical existence of the individual as an “aggregate of things” can be perceived by others as well as the individual him- or herself. To *perceive* is to notice and comprehend, and a *perceived object* is the noticed part of the original object plus the meanings assigned to it by the perceiver. Yet, due to differences among perceivers, others are likely to perceive the empirical existence of the individual differently than the individual does. In ethnography, the standpoint a researcher assumes as an outside observer of the group being studied is called the “etic” point of view, and the standpoint a researcher assumes as an inside member of the group is called the “emic” point of view (Harris 1976). “Etic” and “emic” are two distinct perspectives, each having its own perceptual privileges as well as blind sights. The self is an “emic object” (Zhao 2014) in the sense that it is the empirical existence of an individual perceived by the individual to be his or her own.

Not all perceiving organisms have the capacity to perceive *and* recognize their own existence. To know is one thing, to know that one knows is another thing. A pigeon, for example, is able to see its image in the mirror, but unable to recognize it as its own reflection. Humans, along with a few other select species, are endowed with an *innate* capability for self-awareness. Once activated, this capacity allows human individuals to become an object to themselves, reflecting and acting upon their own empirical existence.

The self is what the individual perceives to be his or her own existence. This emic definition is compatible with the idea of self as “the identity found by the I in its me” (James [1890] 1918:372), “that which is designated in common speech by the pronouns of the first person singular” (Cooley [1902] 1956:168), and the individual that “is an object to himself” (Mead 1934:142). However, two important points of clarification are in order. First, while the emic perception is an integral part of the self, the self is not an emic perception. The self is an *emically perceived object*, which is the unity of both perception and existence. In fact, this “unity” is characteristic of all perceived objects. For example, the ceramic cup on the table that I perceive is not a mere perception I have in my head because, if my perception is right, I should be able to go and pick up the cup from the table and use it to drink water. Likewise, my self is not just a self-concept I have in my mind, as the self consists of an empirical dimension that I can act upon in the same sense that I can with the ceramic cup on the table.

Second, what the individual thinks he or she is may not be what the individual actually is. The empirical existence of the individual is not entirely transparent to the individual. As perceiving organisms, we all live in a changing world of experience, yet only a portion of this experiential world is consciously perceived, and the rest of it remains largely opaque to our consciousness. The self is part of the consciously perceived world that the individual takes him- or herself to be and thereby “becomes recognized as ‘me,’ ‘I,’ ‘myself’” (Rogers 1951:497). As such, the emic perception is, by definition, *biased* by one’s unique standpoint, which consists of, among

other things, one's perceptual limitations and wishful thinking. Specifically, the self is a concoction of two elements: (1) those that are "empirically grounded," and (2) those that are "fictitious" (Maines et al. 1983), and as to what the totality of one's existence in the world really is one may never know.<sup>5</sup>

### Biographical Constitution of the Emic Perception

If the self is an emic object — that which the individual perceives him- or herself to be, what factors determine the emic perception of the individual? In other words, why does an individual perceive him- or herself in a certain way? James, Cooley, and Mead were unanimous in pointing to the influence of society: the emic perception of the individual is shaped by the attitudes of the significant and generalized others of the individual. It is by taking on the views of others that the individual comes to understand him- or herself, hence the "looking-glass self." However, the early thinkers also acknowledged the importance of the experience of the individual as a sentient organism influenced by instinctual feelings and impulses that come with the biological body. As James notes,

My own body and what ministers to its needs are thus the primitive object, instinctively determined, of my egoistic interests. Other objects may become interesting derivatively through association with any of these things . . . . ([1890] 1918:324)

Such instinctual drives act as a primitive force that energizes the individual, centers the individual's feelings and emotions, and directs the individual's "self-seeking" activities toward the goals of meeting their innate needs. It should be mentioned that contemporary sociologists tend to shun the biological factor in explaining human interaction (Dingwall et al. 2003). The price to pay for treating human individuals as social robots or cultural dupes is the difficulty in accounting for what Mead (1934) calls the "novel experience" in humans.

Not all biological organisms are capable of producing novel experiences. In fact, most animals are captives of their biological givens, driven by instincts and impulses. When instinctual bodily needs are fulfilled, "the animal, satisfied, asks nothing further" because "its power of reflection is not sufficiently developed to imagine other ends than those implicit in its physical nature" (Durkheim 1951:246). In the case of humans, on the other hand, new needs and goals emerge in the process of seeking to satisfy the instinctual ones, and the satisfaction of the emerged needs and goals leads to still new ones. Because imagination of these new ends and desires takes human individuals beyond the horizon of their natural instincts, Karl Marx called the social production of such derived needs as "the first historical act" (1998:48).

As Durkheim noted, imagination of new needs requires an innate "power of reflection" that humans possess, and this capability enables human individuals to go beyond the impulsive feelings to examine and evaluate the current situation in the context of the possibilities of a future envisioned from the hindsight of the past. The development of this reflective power is a process involving not only the cognitive

capacity itself but also the biographical experiences of the individual. In the early years of life, the attitudes of others, especially the significant others, exert a primary influence on the self-understanding of the individual; however, as the individual grows older, personal experiences gained in the past play an increasingly important role in interpreting for the individual the needs of the present and the goals for the future. Past experience, in this sense, serves as a “self-schema” (Markus 1977) that guides the emic perception in the present situation:

While a self-schema is an organization of the representations of past behavior, it is more than a “depository.” It serves an important processing function and allows an individual to go beyond the information currently available. ... the result of this organization is a discernible pattern which may be used as a basis for future judgments, decisions, inferences, or predictions about the self. (64)

Specifically, a self-schema helps the individual comprehend perceptual data by simultaneously performing two important functions: descriptive and evaluative. The *descriptive* function helps the individual *identify* what is being perceived, for example, “that is my reputation among my friends,” or “that is me viewed from behind;” and the *evaluative* function helps the individual *assess* what is being identified, for example, “my reputation among my friends is good,” or “me viewed from behind is embarrassing.” To evaluate one’s existence, one must have *self-values*, that is, beliefs about what is desirable in life (Rosenberg 1979). This life preference is a result of the interplay between one’s instinctual feelings and the attitudes of others in the context of one’s biographic experience.

### Agency of Self-Enactment

Like all living organisms, human individuals are also endowed with the capacity to enact their existence in the given environment. To enact its existence, a living organism needs to perform the activities necessary for sustaining its life, and biological instincts in animals are genetically programmed to drive and direct such enactment activities. However, genetically programmed instincts and drives are insufficient for enacting the perceived existence of the individual in the human world. Living in a human world involves “an ongoing commitment to a particular moral order” that regulates the social life (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:102). After birth, human individuals grow culturally as well as physically so that they learn how to conduct themselves in being with others. Human self-enactment is a particular form of enactment that involves a conscious effort to maintain or reconstruct one’s perceived existence according to one’s life preferences.

Human self-enactment is, therefore, a process of seeking a preferred life for oneself. This process is “internally referential” in the sense that “[t]he key reference points are set ‘from the inside,’ in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history” (Giddens 1991:80). One’s self-values and expectations, rooted in one’s biographic experiences, serve as a “second nature” that drives and directs



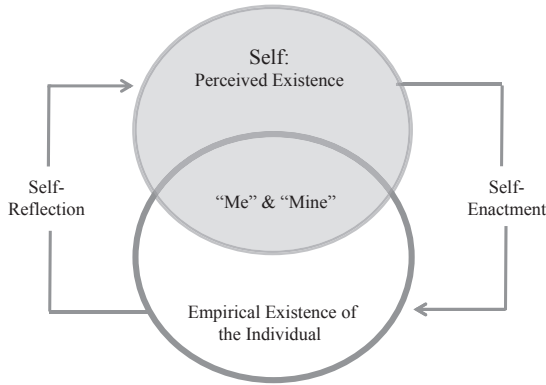


FIGURE 1. The Emic Conception of the Self Phenomenon

one’s intentional action, which includes words as well as deeds, to alter or reproduce one’s perceived existence in the world. However, despite one’s conscious and arduous effort, the results of one’s self-enactment are not always what one intended because one lives in a world that is not entirely of one’s own choosing. New rounds of self-enactment will then be launched, with revised goals and redoubled efforts, aiming for an improved accomplishment, hence a better life.

Figure 1 illustrates this dynamics of the self phenomenon. The unshaded circle at the bottom represents the empirical existence of the individual. It consists of four parts: corporeal-material, corporeal-ideational, extracorporeal-material, and extracorporeal-ideational, each of which containing three temporal realms: past, present, and future. The corporeal-material part, which is a primordial component of the individual’s empirical existence, comes with an innate capacity for self-awareness. Once activated through social contact, this capacity enables the individual to perceive and recognize his or her own existence in the world, and this emically perceived existence is the self of the individual, which is represented by the shaded circle on the top. While the corporeal parts of the individual’s existence are recognized as “me,” the extracorporeal parts are recognized as “mine.” The shaded circle does not fully overlap the unshaded circle because the individual’s perception of his or her empirical existence is mediated by the existing self-schema, a part of the individual’s corporeal-ideational existence that results from the interplay between natural instincts and social appraisals in the context of the biographic experience of the individual.

The self of the individual is thus an outcome of *self-reflection*, a process of identifying and evaluating one’s existence in the world from one’s emic standpoint. The innate capacity for self-reflection is activated in the early years of life as a result of the individual’s cognitive and social development (Harter 1999; Stern 1985). Concurrent with this development is the gradual emergence of the capacity for *self-enactment*, the process of consciously altering or reproducing one’s perceived existence in the world according to self-values. The development of one’s full capacity for self-enactment,

however, is a life-long process involving not only cognitive and physical growth but also the accumulation of social experiences, skills, and resources. The iterative and cyclic process going from one's empirical existence to one's self-reflection on one's empirical existence, to one's self-enactment of one's perceived existence, and back to one's empirical existence constitutes a continuous feedback loop that keeps returning until the end of one's life.<sup>6</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE EMIC CONCEPTION

The reconceptualization of the self phenomenon proposed above has been based on three important distinctions. First, the distinction between "what one is" — the empirical existence of the individual and "what one thinks one is" — the empirical existence perceived by the individual as his or her own. The self is what one thinks one is, that is, the object one takes oneself to be. Second, the distinction between self and self-concept. The self is one's *perceived existence*, the unity of one's perception and existence. The self-concept, on the other hand, is one's *perception* of one's own existence, that is, the totality of thoughts and feelings in regard to oneself as an object. Third, the distinction between self-reflection and self-enactment. Self-reflection is a *mental process*, an effort to understand one's existence in the world, whereas self-enactment is a *mode of action*, an effort to alter or reproduce one's existence in the world. These three distinctions are essential for clarifying many of the confusions in existing research on the self.

The proposed emic conception has broad implications for understanding the relationships among self, others, and society. I address three such issues here: (1) what constitutes an adequate emic self? Is it possible or even desirable to make one's perceived existence perfectly match one's empirical existence? (2) What is the difference between the emic self and the narrative self? Is the emic argument compatible with the narrative argument? And, (3) how is the emic self related to others and society?

### Adequacy of the Emic Self

The emic self has been defined here in two slightly different ways: (1) the broad definition: the self is the object that one takes oneself to be, or the existence that the individual perceives to be his or her own; and (2) the narrow definition: the self is the identity the individual finds in his or her existence, or the empirical existence of the individual perceived by the individual to be his or her own. While the broad definition does not delimit the object of perception, the narrow definition restricts it to the individual's own existence. These two definitions have been used interchangeably under the assumption that the object one perceives to be oneself is, *for the most part*, indeed oneself. When this assumption is significantly violated, the resulting self will be considered by others as "abnormal" or even "pathological." In practice, however, the validity of self-perception is difficult to evaluate (Kruglarski 1989; Robins and John 1997), and there are a number of reasons for this.

First of all, there is a lack of complete access to the empirical data. Certain areas of the empirical existence of the individual, such as the corporeal-ideational realm (e.g., how the individual thinks and feels about him- or herself), are directly accessible only to the individual, and other areas of the empirical existence, such as the extracorporeal-ideational realm (e.g., how others think and feel about the individual), are directly accessible only to other individuals. This differential accessibility to the “empirical aggregate of facts” makes it virtually impossible to intersubjectively verify the accuracy of all aspects of an individual’s self-perception.

Moreover, in some instances it is difficult to distinguish between perception and reality. For example, “to be,” or what one is to become, is an important part of one’s being in the world. However, the possibilities for one’s future are somewhat open-ended, contingent upon many things, one of which is how the individual perceives and acts toward it. If the individual sees his or her future as being bleak and stops working on it, his or her future is likely to be bleak in consequence; on the other hand, if the individual is always hopeful about the future and never gives up, the future may indeed become brighter as a result of his or her tenacious effort. Is this self-fulfilling prophesy, a reflection or constituent of one’s empirical existence? Due to such mergers of perception and reality, it is not easy to determine whether one’s “self-enhancement” tendency is a perceptual bias or behavioral impetus (Funder and Colvin 1997).

In other instances, the issue is not so much what one’s empirical existence is as what it ought to be. Being with others in a shared world, one is faced with many choices in life that have ethical and moral consequences. Should I lie to others? Should I take advantage of the vulnerable? Should I help those in need? Should I sacrifice my personal interests for the common good? There are invariably different answers to this type of questions in society, and one needs to make moral decisions on those matters based on one’s personal values and convictions (Taylor 1991). Here, the issue of “perceptual validity” is not about whether one’s views are factually accurate or inaccurate, but whether they are ethically right or wrong.

Obviously, there are also instances in which one’s emic perception is expected to precisely match one’s empirical existence. For example, one is supposed to know accurately things like one’s own name, where one lives, whether one’s limbs are real or just phantom parts, and whether the voice one hears is a true voice or a mere delusion, and any misperception of such factual matters will be considered abnormal or pathological by others, and are bound to cause confusions and problems in one’s daily life. But even in such areas, the line between normal and abnormal may still be difficult to draw: for example, what is the difference between being thin and too thin? Being proud and arrogant? Being tenacious and stubborn? Being brave and crazy? In all those cases, to be normal and non-pathological in self-perception is to match one’s emic views with the “generalized attitudes” of others, for the actual status of the matter remains either unknown or irrelevant, and it is what others can vouch for that really matters.

In fact, the discrepancy between one's empirical existence and the existence one perceives to be one's own is not necessarily a drawback. Not all aspects of "reality" are equally important to the task at hand: some are crucial and others are trivial. The purpose of the emic perception is not to reflect every single detail of one's empirical existence as a copy machine does, but to *selectively* focus on those aspects that are "relevant to the practical goals of the actor" (Franks 1985:37). To reflect on one's existence is to find out what is important in life, what one ought to be doing, and where one should be headed for — these are tasks that require imagination, critical thinking, and value judgment, rather than simply photocopying what is out there.

What constitutes an *adequate* emic self, given that it is invariably a mixture of facts, fictions, and wishes? An adequate emic self is not an replica of one's empirical existence, which is neither possible nor useful; it is instead a creative sculpture of oneself that one carves with words and deeds, and serves as an inspiring model for the enactment of one's existence in a shared world.

### Emic Self and Autobiographical Narratives

The human self is not only an emic self but also a narrative self. All selves are emic, including animal selves; but only human selves are narrative. Humans are the only species on earth who use a syntax-based language that fundamentally transforms the interaction among individuals and the construction of the self. The symbolic nature of linguistic communication frees the human mind from the tight reign of external stimuli in forming a "semiotic triad" of "I-me-you, present-past-future" (Wiley 1994:14) that gives rise to a narrative self.

However, there are different interpretations of the narrative self. A common ground for all narrative arguments is the recognition that autobiographical narratives are indispensable to the formation of human selves. Autobiographical narratives are stories about an individual's life told by the individual him- or herself in an attempt "to establish connections among life events" (Gergen and Gergen 1983:255). In the process of constructing a self-narrative, an emic self emerges. As Thompson (1995) put it,

To recount to ourselves or others who we are is to retell the narrative — which are continuously modified in the process of retelling — of how we got to where we are and of where we are going from here. We are all the unofficial biographers of ourselves, for it is only by constructing a story, however loosely strung together, that we are able to form a sense of who we are and of what our future may be. (210)

Departing from this common ground, there are two divergent narrative approaches: radical constructionism and realist constructionism. *Radical constructionists* extend the narrative nature of the emic self, a second-order entity, back to the empirical existence of the individual, which is a first-order entity, in arguing that the life of the individual itself is also a product of linguistic construction. In other

words, both the story *and* the life which the story is “of” or “about” are narratively constructed. One’s life is therefore equal to the story one tells, and one can change one’s empirical existence by simply reconstructing one’s self-narratives.

*Realist constructionists*, on the other hand, seek to maintain a difference between life and the story about the life. The *life* of an individual is subject to the influence of a multitude of factors, many of which the individual is not even aware of, whereas the *life story* told by the individual is a linguistic product purposefully created by the individual. It is certainly true that the life stories one created can affect one’s life, but one’s life encompasses more than the stories one constructs; moreover, the “discursive practice of self-construction” is constrained of the “discourses-in-practice that supply the resources and interpretive possibilities for self-designation” (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:103):

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 the one’s life. (102)

Beyond the self-narratives of the individual, as realist constructionists would argue, there exists something of “prenarrative quality” (Ezzy 1998:244) that the individual is unable to change simply through narration. Words are deeds, but not all deeds are words, and both are part of a larger world in which one’s life, including the narration of one’s life stories, is embedded.

This realist constructionist approach is compatible with the emic perspective proposed in this article. The familiar world of everyday life in which we live is an “emic world” we appropriated to ourselves out of an empirical world that exists “in itself,” and just as the life of an individual is more than the life stories told by the individual, so is the universe in which our world is situated larger than the world we constructed.

### Emic Self, Others, and Society

The self is the identity the individual finds in his or her existence within society, and the society is a world the individual shares with others. Who are others? According to the emic conception, others are not those against whom one stands; rather, others are “those among whom one is too” (Heidegger [1927] 1962:154). As one’s perceived existence includes not only one’s own corporeal body but also others whom one loves and their imputed attitudes toward oneself, “one is for the other what the other is for oneself” (Levinas 1987:83). It is within those intertwined social relationships that one comes to find one’s identity and, at the same time, affects the selves of others.

Society is a shared world constructed by individuals. However, not all individuals are equally influential in the construction of society. The extent to which a particular individual contributes to the social construction of reality depends on his or

her capacity to engage in the social process. Personality, life experience, and one's position in the institutional hierarchies all come to play, and those with more power have more influence in shaping the metanarrative that becomes the "generalized attitudes" of the community.

The influence of society on the self can be temporally divided into two parts: contemporaneous and diachronic (Hewitt 1997). Contemporaneous influence is the influence exerted on the individual by the others one is concurrently interacting with, and diachronic influence is the influence exerted on the individual by those one was in contact with in the past. When young and inexperienced, one is most susceptible to the attitudes of the significant others in one's immediate environment; as one becomes older and intellectually more mature, the influence of the contemporaneous others is increasingly mediated by one's lived experience and diachronically formed beliefs and values. Sooner or later, one starts to influence others by promoting one's own values and judgment. The influence of society on the self must therefore be examined in the context of the biographical development of the individual, taking into account both the individual's own lived experience and the social influence of the past.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed emic conception of the self calls for the expansion of research from the study of self-concept to the study of the self. To study the self is to examine the relationship between the individual's empirical existence in the world and the individual's perception of his or her own existence. Others' attitudes affect the individual's self-perception, and the individual's own engagement in the shared world also has an influence on how the individual thinks and feels about him- or herself, as well as how others think and feel about him or her. The looking-glass self, which is primarily the imputed attitudes of particular others, may not be the same as the individual's emic assessment of his or her empirical existence. This is precisely why both social appraisal from others and social comparison by oneself play an important role in self-evaluation (Rosenberg 1981).

To study the self is also to examine the impact of self-reflection on the individual's self-enactment. One's self-concept, once established, can become a force that acts back on one's existence in the world. The core of self-concept is one's cherished self-values (Erickson 1995; Hitlin 2003). Biographically constituted, self-values incorporate one's own lived experiences as well as the influence from others in defining what is desirable and possible in life and what one ought to become (Higgins 1987; Markus and Nurius 1986). As Perinbanayagam (2000) observes, the self is present in one's every conscious act, and through those conscious acts, narrative or otherwise, one seeks to actualize one's self-concept and change one's existence in the world.

To study the self, we also need to examine the individual's attempt to shape others' attitudes toward him or her. How one thinks oneself is one thing, and what one wants

others to think of oneself is another. In the sense that one's self and the self one would like others to see can differ, the self one presents to others, including one's self-narratives, may just be a mask one puts on for impression management rather than an honest display of one's real self. However, as Goffman (1959) points out, the fostered impressions one presents to others have real consequences, and, in this sense, self-presentation is a form of self-enactment.

Finally, to study the self we need to examine the larger society in which one's life is embedded. One lives in a world that is not entirely of one's own choosing, and the conditions under which one's life unfolds shape one's values. When one feels that one's personal values are at odds with the attitudes of the community in which one finds oneself, the problem of "true self" emerges (Turner 1976). While society is socially constructed, there are other individuals with whom one needs to cooperate as well as compete in the construction of the shared world.

This emic conception is distinguished from radical constructionism on the one hand and materialist determinism on the other. Unlike radical constructionism that denies the existence of a world "in itself," the emic conception recognizes the empirical existence of the individual as the substrate of the self, that is, a first-order entity; unlike materialist determinism that denies the importance of consciousness, the emic conception recognizes the constituting power of the individual's perception of his or her own empirical existence. It is the unity of one's empirical existence and one's perception of it that gives rise to the self. As an emergent "second-order" entity, the emic self reconfigures the first-order stratum through the individual's purposeful self-enactment in a world he or she shares with others.

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## NOTES

1. In the literature, "reflexivity" and "reflectivity" have been used interchangeably to refer to the process of, or the capacity for, reflective thinking. In this article, I choose to use "reflectivity" to avoid confusion with the word, "reflexive," which can mean an act of mere instinctual reflexes involving no conscious thought.
2. In the literature, the "I" is sometimes called the "I-self" or "self as knower" and the "me" the "Me-self" or "self as known" (Allport 1961). The "I-self" or "the self as knower" is a confusing misnomer because "self" to James is "the identity found by the I in its me" ([1890] 1918:371). It is therefore the "me" not the "I" that is what James meant by "self."
3. This is an aspect of the self phenomenon known as "impression management," which became the focus of Goffman's (1959) research on the dramaturgical presentation of the self.

4. The idea of “self-as-process” was later further elaborated by Blumer (1969), who argued that “I wish to stress that Mead saw the self as a process and not as a structure” (62), and “this reflexive process takes the form of the person making indications to himself, that is to say, noting things and determining their significance to his line of action” (63). Blumer named this process of reflexivity “self-interaction” or “self-indication.”
5. Flanagan refers to what a person really is as the person’s “actual full identity,” which is something the person will “come to see with clarity on Judgment Day, when all memories are restored and all distortions are removed” (1991:135).
6. One’s perceived existence itself can be perceived and reflected upon again in the ensuing rounds of self-reflection, and this process of perceiving the perceived and reflecting on the reflected can go on infinitely.

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