

### III. CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

#### The Self is not Culture: Toward a unified theory of self, identity and culture

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Probably forests and much mental fuel have been used up in writings on the concepts of self and identity. The two concepts are viewed in one of three ways: 1) having nothing to do with each other; 2) having some kind of interaction as separate concepts; or 3) interchangeable. The definitional and operational (*i.e.* how they are used) problems with both concepts typically converge on the issue of reification. Once one posits a self, then it has to be and do something; but where is the self?<sup>1</sup> The same goes with identity, the problem of where it is and how it works, not the "workings" of its content (though that is another problem), but the mechanisms of its operations, are nowhere (to my knowledge) seriously considered. For instance, contemporary researchers of the self and identity, often eliminate such considerations by averring that either concept is "illusory" or "invented" via social embeddings (*e.g.*, Ewing 1990 for self; Bucholtz, Laing, and Sutton 1999 for identity). This just displaces the problem; one wonders who is doing the inventing? What homunculi reside in the self (or in identity) pulling the social or psychic strings, to what puppets? It is no wonder that Lewellen (2002) and others have written that identity (not to mention "the self") is a "vague" concept.

The purpose of an academic discipline (I hope) is to try and shed light on concepts, elucidating, and putting them into focus so that we can use them in ways that we all agree on (or at least to shed light on why there is a disagreement on the meaning of a concept). In this paper I propose an explicit nomothetic theory of self, identity and cultural models as a set of integrated mental systems. By including the concept of cultural models as the missing link, I reduce the [conceptual] load on both concepts and provide an entry into (or a lens to view) the dynamic, robust and contingent but patterned nature of the relationship between: (1) the social realm of status, roles and hierarchy; (2) the cultural realm of symbol systems by which we "make meaning" (from Garro 2000: citing Bartlett 1932); and (3) the psychological realm of the individual mind

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique and literature review see Victor de Munck 2000; further, one needs only read a few more recent publications on the self to realize that the issue of reification remains firmly (albeit tacitly) entrenched in the use of the "self" concept.

that recognizes itself in actions, has a singular conception of a continuous self life history, and views itself as an agent.

Before I plunge into a discussion on this theory I want to discuss by examples the substrate of reified thinking on which most writings on the self and identity rest. Though the discussion below focuses on either self or identity the exact same problems hold for writings on both concepts. First, once one posits a "self" – however it is defined (*e.g.*, multiple, individualistic, porous, fragments, emergent from, as narrative, invented, *etc.*) – one is stuck with the self as the agent that thinks, feels, acts and does. This then begs the question of "where is the self"? To recall (somewhat inexactly) an apt remark by Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1996) with reference to culture, if the self does something, then where is it, "in a cloud over Cincinnati"?

More recent writings on the self have tried to resolve this confusion by either turning to a highly "minimalist" view of the self or a highly complex "narrative" self (for a review see Gallagher 2000). The minimalist conceptions mostly spring from a neuroscience approach. The neuroscience approach views brain systems, particularly of schizophrenics, to identify self ascription of actions (*i.e.*, "I am the agent of actions") and ownership of actions (*i.e.*, "those actions are mine"). Schizophrenics often ascribe their own actions to other agents (*e.g.*, "an alien is moving my hand") or assign ownership of actions that they did to other beings. If one can compare the functioning of their brain systems to those of non-schizophrenics, then one can find the locus of both self "ownership" of and self agency for actions (and thoughts and feelings). Neurocognitivists have sought to define a minimal self (*Ibid.*) by positing that the self as the affordance of brainwave activity. The problem on this "side of the fence" (*i.e.*, the side that views the self as located in the brain) is that there is no clear way to move from the substrate or "low-level" of neurological connects to the high-level strata of abstract concepts such as self and identity. The problem lies in the fact that elementary particles do not have any notion of the "self" and even were molecules to form a cluster that is associated with a mentalistic notion such as "self" or "other", we would have to be able to develop a way of reading the molecular dynamics of brain patterns as they flicker on and off in massively dynamic changing patterns just to map the process of greeting a friend. To proceed from the lower level of molecular-chemical-physical substrates to higher level ideas would "instantly get [us] bogged down in the infinite detail of unimaginable numbers of interacting micro-entities... the most efficient way to think about brains that have symbols – and for most purposes, the *truest* way – is to think that the microstuff inside them is pushed around by ideas and desires, rather than the reverse" (Hofstadter 2007: 176).

Narrative self theories focus on this higher level of "ideas and desires" and are prevalent in anthropology. In brief, these higher level theories rely on one of two notions that are often linked: the first is rooted in the self as relationally constructed and the second in the self as illusory; in both instances (that is why

they are linked) the self is presented as a necessary narrative by-product of social interaction (the self-other dyad) and emplacement (self in context). There are two main problems with both these approaches, to put it curtly, it takes a lot of convoluted writing to discuss the self as illusory without a theory explaining just how an "illusion" (the *deus ex machine*) works; second, one must ask, "where do the narratives come from; who is making them up?" For instance, in an otherwise ethnographically rich paper Ernestine McHugh writes,

Considering the self as part of a system... allows investigation of the relation of cultural and social forces to selves in ways that are rich, intricate, and illuminating. These perspectives challenge us to explore the relation of self-other boundaries to cultural ideologies and political and economic systems not in abstract and general terms, but in reference to the particulars of relationship and experience within which subjectivities are forged (McHugh 2002: 210).

In this particular quote a positive spin is put on vagueness. While perhaps unfair to the author to only quote one passage, I could not find more concrete passages to cite.

Another narrative approach to the self gives primacy to the observation that humans are language users and spin stories which inevitably are either entangled in the (illusory) construction of a self (Dennett 1991; Ewing 1990; McHugh 2002) or are the agents who construct stories (Modell 1993; Thornborow and Coates 2005; and the authors of the edited volume by Bamberg, de Fina, and Schiffrin 2007). One of the themes that ties the contributors of a recently published edited volume on identity and self together is (according to the editors): "Rather than cementing an identity as an ontology of the person by use of language varieties or by use of discursive repertoires or narrative inscriptions of the self all contributions start from the assumption that narratives form something like a playground – a ground that allows us to test out identity categories" (Bamberg, de Fina, and Schiffrin 2007: 6).

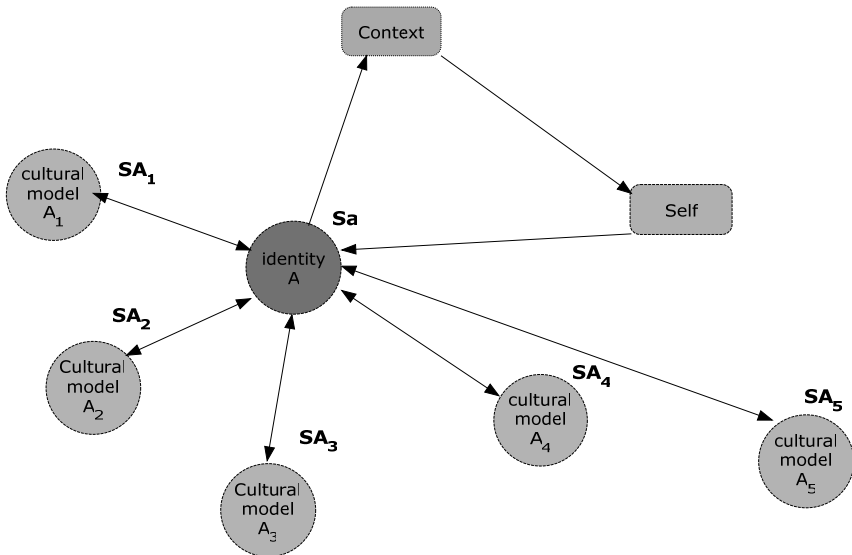
Akin to McHugh's quote regarding the self, this quote regarding identity and the self highlights how concepts of identity are also "vague". What is curious in both of the above quotes is that the respective authors are uncomfortable with nesting self or identity narratives in linguistic nests and seek to supply an empirical foundation to their work (*e.g.*, the use of the word "system" and "particulars" by McHugh and "ground" and "test" by Bamberg *et al.*). Yet this empiricism is undercut, it seems to me, by a failure, to address the foundational axioms of empiricism: (1) there exists an empirical reality and (2) we can represent that reality with increasing accuracy through better methods and more knowledge. This failure is epidemic in cultural anthropology and leads to an epidemiology of reification.

I begin now with a summary statement of the proposed theory. Self, identities and cultural models are interactive, dynamic and interdependent systems that connect the biological, psychological, social and cultural dimensions of human

life. Our understanding of cultural models and schemas can be much advanced by the development of an effective theory of the self as it activates identities. Conversely, our understanding of the self can be much advanced by the development of an effective theory of identity and cultural models. Identities are the means by which the self engages with the outside world and cultural models are the symbol complexes which the self, via an identity, relies on for generating sensible output and making sense of input. Thus, a theory of the self entails a theory of identities, which, in turn, entails a theory of cultural models.

The primary function of the "self" is to bestow self-consciousness on an identity. Identities are sites of perspective – each is a self-organizing site of cultural models which provide it with dimensionality (*e.g.*, gesture, emotional stance, logic, speech code, style, *etc.*). An identity is a categorical node constituted of a self-organized cultural model that may contingently "pull" fragments or attributes of other cultural models into its orbit, and which, all-together, is felt and perceived as the performing "self". After taking on an identity one orients him or herself to the world accordingly. Figure 1 (Relationship between context, self and identity) schematizes the function of the self as posited by this theory, as an active symbolic device that mediates between context and identity, selecting an appropriate identity for a particular context and deictically orienting that identity as an aspect or manifestation of the self.

**Figure 1.** Model of the relationship between context, self and identity



In this figure, the self perceives a context and acts to select an appropriate identity to engage for that context, in this case Identity A. Identity A is constituted of a constellation of cultural models (more on this a bit later). These cultural models, variably or together, are instantiated to engage with the context. Identity A thus stands for a system comprised of a series of interacting subsystems – *i.e.*, the constellation of cultural models. Identity A is also linked to other identity systems and can be linked to their subsystems (*i.e.*, cultural models) to instantiate actions.<sup>2</sup> For that reason the arrows connecting identities go both ways, since, as identity A is activated and receives feedback from the actions of alters in a particular context, it may potentially activate and draw into action aspects of cultural models (cf. again, seen as subsystems) in the constellation of other identities. Robust cultural model systems are those that have been effective in specific contexts and are quickly and collectively recruited whenever their associative identity is activated (this is more fully discussed in the identities section). An identity [selects] a constellation of cultural models to express itself.<sup>3</sup> Over time a constellation of cultural models coheres to a particular identity to form a robust, but still dynamically contingent, system. When an identity is activated it automatically considers itself to be the "self". It does so, as I will discuss later, through a diffuse active self symbol that selects the identity and then diffuses a self symbol (S) onto the identity which in a sense basically signals "me" or "I" or "self" to the identity and the identity acts as if it is a part of or is the self. In short an identity has two functions: one, as a system of cultural models that are instantiated to produce action, expressing the "self"; and two, to serve as a docking port for the self.

Identities exist as cultural models and are shared among the members of a culture, some, or many, of whom also don those identities. In the cycle of donning, discarding and donning identities we require the latching on of the self to the identity not only to anchor us in a stable continuous self, but also to facilitate the process of shifting identities and give the enacted identity a subliminal sense of its own transience and linkage.<sup>4</sup>

Further, I propose that identities themselves are organized into larger organization clusters, which I refer to as *idniches* (short for identity-niche). I argue that these higher-level, superordinate identity organizations serve the purpose of cognitive ease as they make it easier for the self to target an appropriate identity for any action. Three high-level idniches are proposed – the solitary or

<sup>2</sup> I will discuss systems, particularly relying on Bateson's (1958) notion of systems in the final section "putting it all together".

<sup>3</sup> Brackets [ ] are used throughout to qualify a term, in this case identities are not agents that actively select; more on this process in the identity section.

<sup>4</sup> This point is written with more whimsy than confidence, but is retained because it seems to me that an identity is a temporary cyclical phenomenon and hence a residual function of the latching on of the self is that the identity has some hint of the peripatetic nature of the self by experiencing traces of these identities.

alone idniche, the intimate idniche, and the public idniche. There are undoubtedly other organizational schemes plausible and at play in the organizing of identities or cultural models but this scheme, adapted from Simmel (1950), seems to me the most reasonable and efficient. Thus identities are constituted of a constellation of cultural models and are themselves organized into idniches.

In this paper I wish to lay out the organization and functions of these three interacting systems: the self, the social realm (idniches), and culture (cultural models). The work is theoretical, conjectural, and incomplete. I have not fully laid out how this organizational structure functions as a system, but I will offer a set of hypotheses that show how this theory can be tested and how it helps explain the relationship between self, identity, and culture.

This paper is organized as follows: 1) a functional description of the deictic self; 2) a discussion of identity and a survey of the three idniches posited here; 3) a section on cultural models; 4) putting it all together and showing the interplay of self, identity, and cultural models using empirical data collected on the courtship process in the US.<sup>5</sup> 5) In the conclusion I discuss the implications of this theory for further research and, more importantly, for human culture.

## 1. The deictic self<sup>6</sup>

Those who think of the self as a central processor usually rely on a homunculus or some essential self inside the head that is the conductor over all the roles we play. This kind of approach to the self [solves] the problem of the common-sense feeling of a single continuous self. Unless disoriented or schizophrenic, we usually do not question that we are the same person today as we were yesterday. At the same time, no one doubts that significant changes have occurred to our "self" over time; certainly our 6-months, 4-years, 14-years, 25-years, 40-years and 80-years selves are different. The magnitude of these changes does not shake our belief that we are one body/one self. Indeed, the fact that we can re-create remembered experience over the life cycle reinforces our one body/one self belief. This notion of continuity has to be there for "us" to be sane and to adapt to the stream of external and internal stimuli.

For those who posit multiple selves, porous selves, dividual/individual selves, *etc.* their argument is explicitly or mostly implicitly grounded in the notion of the self as an emergent property of the culture-psyche interface that varies cross-culturally. The emergent property argument is also used by evolutionary psychologists who argue that the self is an adaptive response and indeed a requirement of a consciousness evolved beyond that of a mosquito's (Hostadter 2007). For evolutionary psychologists, the self becomes a cover term for our capacity to act in terms of our genetic self interest.

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<sup>5</sup> The courtship process is presented here because it is the subject of my current research.

<sup>6</sup> The term deictic was suggested to me by David Kronenfeld.

Ewing (1990), among others, pointed out that the notion of a unified single self is a "necessary illusion" to maintain wholeness or continuity. Thus the self is an emergent property of narratives or patterns of behavior. However, in this scenario the self, itself, has no, indeed, cannot have, a particular function and, for Ewing, it is a narrative by-product of forgetting the actual fragmentary lives we live via the different social roles we play. The self construct, according to Ewing, is a product of some mysterious internal dialogue of unity.

I posit that the self is "necessary" and not an "illusion"; it has the Godelian function of alerting consciousness that it is really self-consciousness. The self is a dynamic contingent permanent deictic self-referential feedback loop. Besides "selfing", or alerting consciousness that its self-consciousness, the self's other main function is to orient consciousness toward a context, and, in the act of orienting, the self foregrounds some set of identities from which the self selects the appropriate identity by latching onto it. The self as it latches onto an identity activates that identity. By activating the identity, the identity, in turn, activates the constellation of core cultural models that are in its "gravitational field". Other cultural models may also be pulled in as extensions from this core.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the activated constellation of cultural models can pull in attributes of other cultural models as needed. An identity is activated by the self and forms a kind of ecological niche for cultural models which, in turn, are organized into a core constellation for an identity and which may also draw in features of other cultural models. This cultural model complex is then instantiated into a schema. The schema, as the instantiation of the core cultural models and extensional features of other cultural models, is a contingent gestalt, formed to generate corresponding actions (or to be further instantiated into actions).

I need emphasize, that *the self must be distinct from context* and is the perceiver of context recognizing minimal salient cues by which it activates an identity. The self cannot act on context! The main problem with all theories of the self that I am aware of is that they do not distinguish between the self and consciousness or the self and interiority or the self and culture or the self and context. Parfit (1984), Hofstadter and Dennett (1982), Dennett (1991), Wegner (2002), and Hofstadter (2007) are among the more recent scholars who have thought to uncover the mysteries of the self, but all have started with the premise that the self is somehow or other coterminous with what one thinks, feels and does. Thus, they, as others, begin with a premise of the self as equivalent to the reflective, embodied mind. I am arguing that this very premise, however it is manifest, is plain wrong. The main reason people work from this premise is that they do not take culture into account and consequently usually attempt to stuff culture (that is the stuff that makes meaning) into the self. Once this is

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on extensions read Kronenfeld, Armstrong, and Wilmoth 1985; Kronenfeld 1996.

done the self, itself, becomes weighed down with too much meaning, it becomes overdetermined.

If the self acted on context, then it would be a thinking feeling behavioral complex – in short an identity. In that case, why stop at just one identity? The self could be the locus of all identities and all cultural models. This cannot be, it is like stuffing too many people into a telephone booth or on earth, and this scenario, the most common in the writing on the self, turns the self into a big mess. There has to be an efficient division of labor in the psyche, and that of the self is limited to two functions: one, the self-referential loop of stating that "I am I"; and two, the job of receiving context input and selecting an appropriate identity that will provide the appropriate output.<sup>8</sup> Previously, by following Douglas R. Hofstadter (1981), I had posited that there is a diffuse self symbol that is triggered whenever a "subself" (roughly akin to a status-role) comes into play (de Munck 1992, 2000). This notion fits in with notions of a multiplicity of selves inhabiting consciousness. While I felt as if I was on the right track, I had not gone far enough in exploring this necessary and evolutionary function of the self. It is evolutionarily necessary across species to have a primary single body/single self because one needs to have direct access to previous information, warning for example, to avoid that water hole or plant, or noting that person Z is a friend.

The single-self proposition allows for more immediate means to access varied stored information about the self to the self and also helps explain how the self orients itself to itself and to its environment. The problems of self referentiality, that is that introspection is biased and that the self cannot examine itself, are turned into assets because in my proposal the self is not conceived of, nor is its function to reflect, interpret and act on the outside world, but rather to make the self-referential statement to (indirectly) the outside world and directly to the self that whatever actions or thoughts are occurring are "mine". Second, through having experienced all one's identities and really, all actions and thoughts by a person, the self has the most immediate access to this storehouse of identities which it triggers for action. I suspect it does this through a kind of connectionist scan of identities vis-à-vis particular contexts, matching them up and activating the identity most closely associated with the context.<sup>9</sup> The function of the self is to serve as an active self symbol which selects particular identities for being-in and acting-in the world and to repeatedly squeak "me" or "I"

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<sup>8</sup> Logically speaking the receiving input and the selecting of an identity are two not one functions. I leave it at two because this has not been fully worked out yet, and second the receiving of input is performed in order to select an identity so the two acts are, if we do not put to fine a point on it, part of the same function.

<sup>9</sup> I am neither a neurologist nor an expert at connectionist modeling; nor is it necessary at this level of generality – speaking about the self and identities – however, I would be happy to discuss how such modeling would proceed.



when status-roles are selected and employed. Its function is not to "think" or "feel" but to deictically orient the person to contexts by finding appropriate identity forms to latch on to which are then identified as "me" or "my self". Douglas Hofstadter (2007) is right: the self is a "strange loop" and one of its functions is to point to itself. But I think he is wrong in that he does not deal with the magnitude or scale of the self, he still sees it as equivalent to all memories, thoughts, and feelings; in a word with consciousness. He invariably sees it as not just a "strange loop" but as also including all the content that the strange loop points to. As a consequence, Hofstadter notes that we can feel empathy or "know" someone else only if their "self" indirectly enters our consciousness. To explain this phenomenon he employs the useful concept of interiority, noting that in everyday life, to varying degrees, we experience other people in our consciousness, thus there are many selves that enter and careen around in our cranium and this allows for empathy, even true love.<sup>10</sup>

For Hofstadter the scale of other "souls" or "selves" entering a Self varies from the driver in front of you who slams on her brakes and thus forces you to slam on your brake to the married couple who have learned to see the world, feel, think, and even look like each other. Needed here is a theoretical-conceptual division of labor. I suggest that the transporting of "interiority" that is central to Hofstadter's notion of multiple selves and the fact that selves do not just inhabit one body but can, to an extent, inhabit other bodies is too leaden or heavy of a concept. He has to continue to talk about transported selves because there is no other way in his theory of self to explain interiority or empathy, he has to transport the other's self into ego's self. He explains that through the transporting process the other's self becomes somewhat blurry because it is not directly connected to the hardwiring and memories of the Grand Self located in the ego body. Hofstadter is still stuck in the analogy he is trying to get away from – one body, one mind. This is so for two reasons: first, he does not limit the magnitude of the self to a set of specific functions; and second, he does not have a theory of identities and cultural models!

Our ability to empathize, that is to import someone else's state of mind and feelings into our self, comes not through transporting selves, but through sharing the same identities (*i.e.*, constellations of cultural models). Let me give one more example from Hofstadter to illustrate my point. In his book *I am a Strange Loop* Hofstadter (2007) writes in a moving and insightful way about his thoughts and feelings after his wife unexpectedly died. He concludes by stating that she, like all of us, continue to live on in the minds of those people who are closest to us or who have been influenced by us. He notes that part of

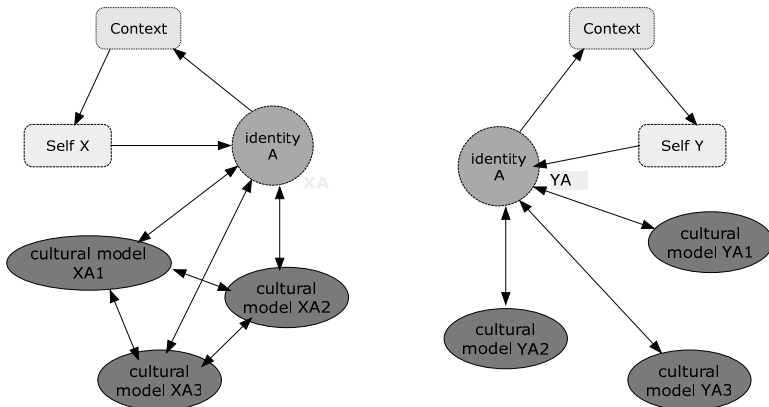
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<sup>10</sup> A problem with this however is he does not explain the mechanism by which one's self has access to the patterns of other selves when they are inside the consciousness of the self. That is, the other self may still be impenetrable by the ego's self even if it is located inside the same brain. To be fair, he does use the metaphor of overlapping radio waves but does not explain how this works. Instead the many selves are still discussed as independent units inside ego's brain.

her personal history, how she felt and thought and acted at particular times can be recalled by him and through the recollecting he blurrily feels and sees with "her eyes", particularly when the recollections concern their children. He notes that his reconstructions of her life are "blurry" and of course not replicas of how she would feel or think about those acts had she recalled them herself. The primary self always recounts more directly and hence with clearer recall. Nonetheless, when we, for instance, read *Catcher in the Rye* we feel ourselves transported into Holden Caulfield's "self" or rather his self is exported into our mind and we have a sense of the interiority of what it feels to be Holden Caulfield. In the long run, Hofstadter writes, it does not matter if it is a fictional character or not, because we sense the interiority of that self in the locus of our own consciousness.

Hofstadter's use of the concept of interiority is insightful, but I do not think that what we are doing in order to obtain interiority of alter (or what I will call "alterity") is transporting selves. Rather, what is actually happening is that we share similar identities and their associated cultural models and when X is employing a particular identity that we also possess then we have the means to access X's interiority. We do not need to import X's self, all we need to do is remember X's recounting of his/her experiences and apply our shared identity to empathizing with or evoking X's feelings at the time of those experiences. To the degree we share similar repertoires of identities and employ more or less similar cultural models (*e.g.*, as parents with children, professors and classes, tourists in foreign countries, lovers, divorcees, Buddhists, aging single adults, unemployed, chronically ill, and so forth); to that degree we have access to "alterity" (the interiority of others). A model of how alterity works is presented below, in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Model of how alterity works



$$XA1 + XA2 + XA3 + XAn = XA \sim YA = YAn + YA3 + YA2 + YA1$$

In the above model we have Self X and Self Y where X and Y stand for the person. When X and Y engage in the same context (say attending a football game), they both activate *identity A* (being fans at a football game). These two identities are similar but not necessarily the same, hence identity A becomes XA and YA respectively, indicating that different selves are attached to the identity. Each identity – XA and XB – pulls in a set of similar cultural models. I am not sure, but I do *not* think it is necessary for the self symbol to attach to cultural models because the "work" of these cultural models has to do with behaviors such as cheering, getting peanuts, talking about the game, fashion style – what one wears; gestures and actions, and so forth. The extent to which similar cultural models are used to shape identity A is also the extent to which X and Y have alterity (or access to each other's interiority).

Let me now go a bit further by defining the complex – context-self-identity-cultural models – as a primary experience and that these experiences form the basis of episodic memory or memory operational packages (Schank 1990, 1983). Thus a key to how we remember and also how collective memory works is to understand this complex or experience system.

Experiences can correspond to one another even across identities via connections between foregrounded or highlighted cultural models. A model is highlighted by referring to it or a feature of it. For example, let us say X went to a football game and was upset because of the loud music that constantly blared over the speaker system. On top of that the food was too expensive and the hot-dogs were cold, the bathroom line too long and the bathroom filthy, and there was gridlock into and out off the football stadium. To top it all off, X's team lost because, X thought, of a bad call by the referee. Years later as his two sons reached their teen-age years, they were playing music in the house at a decibel level reminding him of the football game and, to his own surprise afterward, he became unreasonably angry, grounding them for a week. While it is too far-fetched to say that X's experience at the football game caused his overreaction to his sons playing loud music, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the cultural model of loud music in the identity of being a fan at the referenced football game was foregrounded and the whole experience of that particular football game and *fan* identity was activated in X's *father* identity by the loud music played by his sons. An experience can be mapped onto another experience vis-à-vis any correspondence between the cultural models of the respective identities. Again, the identities need not be equivalent. This, I posit, is how analogies work: via cultural models that are attached to identities which are attached to the self.

I want to push this line of reasoning a bit further, specifically to respond to Douglas Hofstadter's musing about death and how the dead person's self may continue on in the self of others. From the perspective posed above, I would extend the notion of "interiority" to collectivities, and reframe the notion of death

as a death of the self but not of one's thoughts and feelings as these are mostly shared by hundreds, if not thousands, or millions of people. The self deictically selects and latches on to identities. We know that identities, but not selves, are distributed across members of a culture. Further, identities select and organize cultural models into a constellation which is loosely affiliated with an identity (more on this organization in the cultural models section of this paper). The self, itself, has no active symbols that address feelings or thoughts, rather cultural models are themselves, organizations of active symbols. Hence, when the self dies, what dies are only some of the thoughts, feelings, identities, behaviors and schemas (used here as similar to cultural models but those that are unique to a person and therefore not distributed; I will however use schemas in a slightly different way later). We can invoke and gain access to the alteriority of the dead and living simply through using cultural models that they all shared. However, as cultural models are not attached to a self our recollections of cultural models are depersonalized, but if looked at aright could be seen as a way we do connect to thousands, if not millions of people alive and dead. Second we do recollect the experiences of another person (*i.e.*, context-self-identity-cultural model complexes) and to the extent we can recollect these, we can recollect the person. In this case we foreground the attached self on the experience to personalize the recollection. As I recollect my father, now dead for more than fifty years, what I recollect best is the self unattached to any particular identity but reflecting a particular idniche of self identity. That is, I recollect his smiling kindly fatherly face. On occasions I recall father-son activities as canonical father-son identity activities and not in their specifics. What gives my remembrances depth is the foregrounding of my father's self through the iconic recollection of his calm smiling face. The face is the personification of the self. My point is that death is not the end nor is birth the beginning of most of what we do, say, think, feel or belief. However, we think death is the end because we think that all of what we are is somehow packed into the self and when it dies the identities, experiences, and whatever else that is part of that self also dies. This, I hope to have shown, is not so.

## **2. Identity: function, context or "idniches", and system**

I begin by pointing out that there are three ontologies of identity: the first is internal and the one to which the "self" latches onto; the second is its socio-cultural niches in which it acts; and the third is its history. Each of these ontologies serves as a rich universe for research. By ontology I mean a locus of potential action. The first locus is the psyche, the second is in social context and interaction, and the third locus is the genesis and continuing transformations of an identity to the behavioral environment of which it is a part. My concern is with the first and second of these ontologies. Recall that I view identities as synthetic systems articulating self with culture. More crudely, they are adap-

tive devices which the self uses to orient both to itself and to the external world. Identities are constructed through iterated interactions. Contrary to the self, an identity is always a socio-cultural construct that has a history. Put another way, an identity is a communicative, integrating, adaptive device and serves as the platform by which an individual engages his or her behavioral environment. Recall that identities are loci where the self latches and where the identity node attracts or selects a congeries of cultural models that coalesce over time to form an integrative identity. The identity is the locus where the self symbol attaches and also is the "center of gravity" around which the cultural models congregate.<sup>11</sup> As a constellation of cultural models, identities are constituted of a subset of the following superordinate level cultural models which are further subdivided into basic and subordinate levels (discussed in the cultural models section): 1) a socio-cultural history; 2) a core content; 3) a generalized attitude; 4) feeling dispositions that correlate with attitude; 5) goals; 6) a particular register of speech; and 7) practiced relational stances to equivalent and alter identities.<sup>12</sup>

Not all the above dimensions of identity are simultaneously present or equally well constructed but they are all necessary potentialities of an identity when the identity is triggered. However, when identities are instantiated they become murky due to the way each individual draws on identities in variable ways, depending on personal experiences, one's espousal of the identity, and the situation. A simple example of this is that with graduate students a professor may espouse a friend/colleague disposition and register of speech in one context and a boss-employee disposition in another context. Thus identities are not entities but they may well be conceived as such by the participating individuals when they are instantiated in any particular context.

Following Harrison White (1992), it is posited that the adaptive function of identities in idniches is to gain control over both internal and external environments. This control is motivated by a desire to eliminate or minimize contingencies and accident as both threaten the well-being of the identity and more significantly the person. Thus the feedback system between identity and idniche provides a person with a stable footing in the world and a way of orienting to the world and to other identities both within and outside the skin. Identities (as constellations of cultural models and thus as objects for orientation) have boundaries and the boundary of an identity delimits a theory of specific identities and, potentially, identities in general. The boundary theory of an identity establishes the *reach*, or dispersion of that identity. The diffuse self symbol attaches to an identity which provides a mooring for the self. Each identity has a conceptually delimited boundary at the individual level but a fuzzy and varia-

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<sup>11</sup> "Center of gravity" was taken from Daniel Dennett's book *Consciousness explained* (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Some of these features were suggested by David Kronenfeld via personal communication, unpublished writings and from his recent book (2008).

bly defined boundary at the collective level. For instance, a tenured professor's identity as a "professor" likely has a wider reach across contexts than an adjunct's identity as professor.

Despite fuzziness at the boundary of an identity, there exist some core logical and structural properties, social history, an emotional timbre and motivational valences that conceptually "lock" that identity (Kronenfeld 1996). Often an identity will embrace and link some combination of values (or hierarchy of values), high level goals (with, perhaps, guidelines for realization in lower level goals), and acceptable or presumed effective kinds of action; the mix of these will vary with the identity – and with the perspective.

"Perspective" raises another issue. Thus far I have been writing as if the "self" linked to identities was ego's own self. But, as social beings, we each interact with others – that is, other beings whom we presume each to have selves like our own, with attached identities. These external identities need not be totally filled out, but may only focus on aspects that are germane to public discussion or that directly affect our own lives. We seem to fill in these external identities on the basis of a combination of intersubjectivity, categorizations of the actions (good vs. bad, useful vs. not, comprehensible vs. not, *etc.*), and feeling disposition – that is, "what kind of self identity might lead them to act that way to me in this situation?" Our self identity attempts to adaptively and proactively respond to this assessment of external and germane identities. What I mean here is because the self is attached to and hence identifies with "its" identity, any identity expressed by a person is self-perceived and seen by alters as a self identity (even if it is a false or staged self).

What follows is a discussion on three superordinate levels of identity: alone, intimate and public. I refer to these superordinate levels as idniches, a neologism that merges identity with ecological niche. Eugene Odum stated that "The ecological niche of an organism depends not only on where it lives but also on what it does. By analogy, it may be said that the habitat is the organism's 'address', and the niche is its 'profession', biologically speaking" (1957: 11). Animals live in and adapt to a specific idniche, similarly identities emerge from, live in and adapt to specific idniches. The superordinate (that is overarching, general) idniches that I am referring to are the *alone idniche*, the *intimate idniche*, and the *public idniche*.

The parameters of an idniche can be illustrated in the case of an *alone idniche*: When someone is alone, say in their house, they act differently than when they are with their lover or spouse and children (an *intimate idniche*), and again they act differently than when they have a party at their home and invite friends, fellow workers, neighbors and so on (a *public idniche*). I use this example to emphasize that it is not the site itself, in this case the house, that leads to the structural adjustment in behavior, but the kinds of alters that are present or not present. My use of the term idniche refers to the conditions of being

alone, with intimates or with the public. It is other people and who they are (or the absence of other people) that constitute the "address" and "acts" of the human performing an identity. Performing identities is what humans do. In the animal world, idniches refer to the "address" (or environment) of a species and what it does; similarly in the human world, our identities perform not so much in physical as in "behavioral environments".<sup>13</sup> With regard to identities, idniches, as behavioral environments, provide the means to develop a taxonomy of identities based on what people do. The condition of being alone theoretically offers freedom and "reach" (discussed later, but defined as the control over an identity), that the other two kinds of identities do not.<sup>14</sup> There is an inverse relationship between kind of identity and freedom and reach; the more people within an identity idniche the less freedom and reach, all else being equal. My reason for discussing identities only in terms of these three idniches is because this seems to be the most efficient means to organize all the possible types of identities. Consequently this is the place to begin in understanding what identities are and how they work.<sup>15</sup>

Thus in this section I will examine the different parameters of these overarching identities without discussing specific types of identities within these idniches. Each of these three superordinate identities is described below.

### 1) Alone identity-niche:

Simmel (1950) remarked that "pure freedom" is only possible when one is alone, for only then does the possibility exist to satisfy personal preferences without having to accommodate other people's preferences. Being alone removes the individual from the social and empowers the individual to do what he or she wants to do. You can, for example, eat greasy pizza in bed, turn on the TV to any station you want, and burp without fear of reprimand. More virtuously, the world renouncer, hobo, sage, and solitary traveler illustrate various alone idniches. In all these idniches the person is the solitary human in the own idniche. Alone identities are characterized by actions that emerge from the process of feeling unencumbered by others. Theoretically, solitary identities have high internal control but no controlling reach over their external environ-

<sup>13</sup> The term "behavioral environment" is taken from Irving Hallowell (1955).

<sup>14</sup> "Reach" is a term that was coined by David Kronenfeld in an unpublished paper co-authored by us on identity.

<sup>15</sup> I am aware of the more than vast literature on identity that exists out there, and while my position has some affiliation with the early work on identity by Erikson who saw it as "*the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*" (1968: 22; italics in original), as well as with Hall's well known position of identity as a "point of *suture*" between discourse of social placement and our production of subjectivities (1996: 5), neither these positions nor those ranging between the psychological and cultural provide a point of insight or resonate, to my knowledge, with the theory proposed here, except distantly that of Brubaker and Cooper 2000 and works in cognitive anthropology on the nature of self/social identity which, nonetheless, do not address the problem or hint at the conceptual architecture I develop here.

ment and one would assume that their ontogenesis is relatively late in human history. The distinguishing feature of the alone identity is that it represents the "free and unencumbered life".

### **2) The intimacy identity-niche:**

Constraints present themselves once one enters the social realm. Intimacies are relationships that: (1) are incommensurable (each member is theoretically considered irreplaceable); (2) enduring; (3) exclusive; (4) valued; (5) lighten boundaries between the co-participants; and (6) allow for multiple registers of speech and topics of conversation. Intimacies are marked by the importance of emotional affiliation or attachment in the creation and maintenance of the relationship. The first point is, I believe, the most salient: intimacies are, by definition, incommensurate. This is not to say, that members of an intimacy are literally irreplaceable, but that theoretically and in terms of the legitimacy of the intimate identity, members must perceive themselves not to be expendable. Each member brings qualitative rather than quantitative resources to the identity. Intimacies voluntarily "cocoon" individuals into a private, exclusive world, heightening the sense of boundary between the intimates and the public. The idniche for intimate identities are all those contexts which permit intimacy, the prototypical one in the US is the home. The car, locations in nature such as cabins, camping, beaches, getaway vacations, and booths are sites of symbolic privacy in public spaces. They are secondary loci adapted for intimacies and suggest the importance of intimacy as a value and motivational force of late capitalist penetration into public and natural spaces (see also Ilouz 1997).

### **3) The public idniche:**

Public identities (or *publics*) are characterized by a diffuse emotional orientation to the group which is shaped by "objective" interests. Objective is placed in quotes because it is a nominal designation that refers to the presumed rationalized interests associated with the source identity. Publics are organized as dominance hierarchies, each with a specific array of key symbols and register of speech, and each identity has "objective" (identity interest-based) criteria for decision-making and social exchanges. Further, as incommensurability was a core attribute of intimacies, commensurability is a core feature of publics. The larger the size and scope of an identity, the more the participants perceive themselves and other members to be commensurate.

By commensurate, I mean that individuals can convert qualitative differences into quantitative measures. Individuals in large public identities are seen, by other individuals, as comparable and therefore, dispensable. Intimacies are motivated and defined in terms of qualitative criteria (*e.g.*, the personal traits of a person, the affective nature of the bond); publics are motivated and defined in terms of interests. These are not dichotomous identities but along a continuum in which I am defining the prototypical and generalizable features of both intimacies and publics.



Commensurate identities have two properties: first, participants in such an identity recognize that they are replaceable without the identity itself being affected; and second, they also unify the set of participants in the identity regardless of the degree of social stratification within the identity's reach because their differences, while qualitative, can always be, and are, interpreted as quantitative differences thus all individuals in a public are [essentially] similar to one another. For example, an identity as an anthropologist both disciplines the individual members of that identity, and unifies its members, in part, by establishing (a) common, identity-universal, value dimension(s). In turn, the valuation of those status differences helps establish goals that instigate actions and, thereby, lock control mechanisms into the identity system. Public identities are always commensurate and it is this notion of the "essence" or "coreness" of the social identity, rather than the notion of an essential individuality (which is, by definition, incommensurate) that provides the triggering potential for unity in public identities. Even, to take an example, drivers stuck in gridlock share a common identity that expresses unity and solidarity under circumstances where it is collectively triggered.

Increases in population lead to deeper, more complex, hierarchical structures which, in turn, increase social, economic, knowledge and skill differentiation. Building on Simmel's analysis, Blau hypothesized that the "...erosion of extended kinship is the result... of the sheer size of contemporary societies" (1977: 134). The more humanity clumps together, as mussels on pier pilings (to paraphrase E. P. Thompson) and the more nomadic or geographically mobile they are, the greater the ratio of strangers to acquaintances and family. As a result, there should be a greater proportion of time individuals interact with one another in publics and alone when they are not in publics. Thus there is likely to be, a relative decrease in intimacies with increasing population densities, and a relative increase in both publics and alone idniches. The shift to publics and alone idniches coincides with Giddens's (1991) argument that in the future romantic love will be replaced by, what he calls, "confluent love" – a temporary sequence of relationships aimed at providing (primarily sexual) and terminating when the costs outweigh the benefits. Indeed, Lindholm (1990, 1998) who is otherwise critical of Giddens, conjectures that in the future charismatic movements, sporting events, and public venues and forms of entertainment will replace romantic love. Both Giddens and Lindholm argue that in the future publics will subsume traditional forms of intimacy. For Giddens this is exhilarating and entails that individuals are now "free" from the shackles of family and religious morality; but for Lindholm this is depressing because it eliminates the possibilities for transcendence through intimacies, and conjures images of an Orwellian 1984 world.

**Summing up the three identity forms**

Intimacies and publics differ in three critical ways: 1) in intimacies boundaries between the participants are lightened and there is no specific register of speech and topics of conversation that fold over each other and switch around, much as TV "channel surfing" is done; 2) intimacies are characterized by subjectively framed encounters, whereas encounters in publics are typically objectively framed; and 3) in intimacies the self and alter are seen as incommensurate, in publics both self and alter perceive and recognize that both are dispensable and not necessary for the public to exist. The alone identity differs from the other two kinds of identities in that the alter is either projected or imagined and exists by its negation.

Identities differ across idniches because the alters (those with whom interaction is anticipated) vary across idniches. The wider the reach of an identity the greater its control over the agented self and the more these control efforts are standardized. Thus in large public arenas, defensive or highly conformist sorts of strategies may be used to exercise control (by limiting exposure), whereas in smaller groups more assertive personal control efforts may be implemented. For the alone identity the agented self is, theoretically, paramount; but such an identity also has minimum "reach". Thus, I hypothesize that there is an inverse relationship between agency and reach of identity, with public identities having a maximum reach but less individual agency than intimacies or alone identities.

The primordial motivating force for identities is the exertion of control by the self over the messiness of both the inside and outside environments. Control is established through the formation of identities which act as agents of control and control over environment, that is the spatio-temporal reach of an identity tends to be in an inverse relationship with the agency of the self in that identity. Agency and hence, self-control over an identity is greatest in alone identities and intimacies, but as the control of the identity over the social environment expands the control of the self (*i.e.*, agency) over the identity decreases.

Intimacies have environments distinct from publics. This theory of identity leads us to hypothesize that as technological innovations allow upper-middle and upper class Americans to increasingly inhabit "lifeworlds" constituted of intimacy idniches while, at the same time, avoiding public idniches, these Americans will increasingly favor and promote intimacy identities over public identities. This, I hypothesize, will lead to schismogenesis between upper-middle/upper classes and the lower-middle/lower classes who will be inhabiting publics in increasing proportion. Individuation and what Bellah *et al.* (1986) have called the "unencumbered self" will mark identity processes for the upper-middle to upper class who will seek to increase self agency through intimacies, while the lower middle to lower classes will seek agency through the formation

of public identities which offer power to groups but not to individuals (except of course the leaders of those groups).

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper I have proposed a new cognitive-ecological theory of the relationship between the individual as a psycho-biological entity and his or her social and physical environment. This theory integrates three distinct systems – the self as a psychobiological system; identities as adaptations to idniches of different scales; and cultural models as providing the symbolic resources for shaping identities adaptive to societally variable and various idniches.

By synthesizing Locke's (1999 [1694]) notion of the self as the "mind's eye" with Baldwin's (1968 [1897]) concept of the socius we arrived at a conception of the self as agent. Simmel's discussion of monads and dyads, combined with Harrison White's theory of identity and control, specifically his theory of "the principle of self similarity", guided the development of my notion of identities as nested eco niches. Recent work on cultural models and connectionist theory provided the clues to linking self, social identity and culture. As always, more needs to be done. The proposed theory needs to be further fleshed out, particularly by testing hypotheses that can be derived from this theory with empirical data.

This theory (thus far) is limited to the relationship between constructs and not the behaviors that are generated from them. This is because I propose that identities are fleshed out from cultural models but that each individual, due to differences in their life histories and genetic makeup, constructs a different schema of identity using the symbolic resources he or she accesses from various cultural models. For example, most cultures undoubtedly have a prototypical model of the good father, but one can only predict very general patterns of behavior from knowing the cultural model of that identity. In this sense, this theory distinguishes between cultural models as ideal types (first order), schemas as a self instantiation of that cultural model (second order), and the actual behavior as the third-order instantiation of the cultural model.

It is further proposed that there are three superordinate categories of identities that are adapted to and at the same time help construct their respective idniches: being alone, intimate and public identities. Each of these eco niches has resources and structural properties which shape and orient the particular identity. "Alone" identities are oriented toward the rejection of a relationship with alter and are associated with "freedom" from cultural constraints (*e.g.*, the hobo and sannyasi); intimate identities are associated with subjective and affective dispositions towards alter (*e.g.*, family, friends, lover); and public identities are characterized by rationalized, interest-based orientations to alter. Within these idniches, identities are more or less well formulated based on the cultural models for the basic level identities nested in each of the superordinate categories. For example, the sannyasi "being alone" identity is considered virtuous and is

rewarded with public displays of respect and support in India but, more than likely, looked at askance and disgust in the US. The romanticized prototypical "being alone" identity in the United States may be the hobo, or more pejoratively, the "bum". While the hobo/bum and sannyasi identities carry very different statuses in their respective national cultures, both are associated with freedom and living outside the socio-cultural system.

As Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, I rely on connectionist theory to help understand the relationship between self, identity, and cultural models. Note, for example, that the cultural identity with the lowest threshold of activation in a particular context is the one that the self latches onto or activates. Following Harrison White, I have also argued that the function of an identity is to acquire control over both internal and external environments. The potential reach of control is directly correlated with the type of identity and is inversely related to the ideological and behavioral constraints on that identity. Thus, an "alone" identity has great freedom but little to no reach; whereas a public identity has potentially great reach but concomitantly constrains the range of accepted ideological and behavioral repertoires of the individual who evokes that identity.

Lastly, and emphatically, I argue that in the context of this theory cultural models are collectively shared idealizations of identities that have no agency in themselves. Thus, the notion of "motivated" cultural models or that cultural models somehow "direct" behavior is a serious conceptual fallacy. A cultural model has no agency and can be defined as a collective systemic input-output communicative medium that has historical depth and develops as a generalized adaptation to some iterative conditions, events, or things in the environment. A cultural model has no agency and can be defined as a collective systemic input-output communicative medium that has historical depth and develops as a generalized adaptation to some iterative conditions, events, or things in the environment. And either identifying with them because the self finds them satisfying to latch on to or they are rejected as alters which the self has to deal with and cannot be ignored.

Agency has been returned to its proper source – the self – but it receives shape and direction from the identities it inhabits which are, in turn, drawn from the cultural models that serve as collectivized and internalized representations of alterity and affiliation.

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**Abstract**

The paper presents a new theory of a deictic minimalist self – its function is to attach an "I" or "me" to identities. Identities consist of an organization of cultural models; some of the cultural models are core models of an identity, others are more contingent and situationally dependent. The notion of ecological niches for sets of identities is presented and developed. Identities have "reach" in terms of how many people are members of an identity – an identity with a large reach is popular, but individuals within that identity (all things being equal) have relatively little power compared to members of singular or dyadic identities. The theory solves classical problems of how the self, cognition, culture and the social environment articulate with each other in a dynamic rather than static way.

**Keywords:** self, identity, cultural models, ecological niches, theory, reach, intimate identity, public identity.