

The Self as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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Using a combination of psychoanalytic and symbolic interactionist ideas, this article portrays the development of the self as a self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP). A prominent psychoanalytic version of this idea is presented by Lacan's two mirror theories of the self. A prominent and more familiar symbolic interactionist account of the self as self-fulfilling prophecy is the formulation by William I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas, which suggests that once situations are defined as real, they are real in their consequences. The aim of this article is to show that these two perspectives can be reconciled in interesting ways, because both recognize that emotions are part of the world "out there" of external goals and the world "in here" of the person's inner life. Emotions are therefore "bilevel." The SFP creates a fault line in the self and a consequent emotional vulnerability when that line is engaged or disturbed. This article explains how this self-fulfilling prophecy works and explores the weaknesses it inflicts on the self.

The idea that some psychoanalytic and symbolic interactionist concepts of the self are compatible came to me when I was thinking about suspense movies and how they sometimes give me a sinking or shuddering feeling in the pit of my stomach. Lacanian film critics (Leonard 1996) interpret this feeling as a normal sign of the decentered self under pressure. The Lacanian self is barely held together, always in danger of collapse, and vulnerable to any number of symbolic threats, suspense movies being one. I think the symbolic interactionist notion of the self as self-fulfilling prophecy can do the same work, perhaps more parsimoniously, as the Lacanian hypothesis.

This article has three sections. The first presents a bilevel theory of emotions, the second analyzes the self as a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the third gives a detailed comparison of Lacan with Cooley and Mead.

EMOTIONS AS BILEVEL

Human emotions tend to be present simultaneously at two levels. They are "out there" in our relation to our goals, the environment, and other people. However,

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they are also “in here” in response to the inner life of the self. The outer level of emotions assumes a preexisting self that has successes and failures in coping with the world. The inner level concerns that very preexisting self, which is also coping with its own continued existence and the dangers of dissolution. Consider an automobile driving along the road. The external problem is reaching one’s destination without an accident. The internal problem is preventing a breakdown of the car itself. The self, like the car, is always in danger of disrepair. It can run a lot better if fixed properly. But it can also break down if too stressed.

The thinker with the most striking bilevel theory of emotion is Jacques Lacan ([1966] 1977a). Lacan suggests that even as people cope successfully with everyday life, they are also constantly experiencing fundamental vicissitudes of the internal self, ranging from the ecstasies of smooth functioning to the terrors of paranoia and implosion.

Combined, the various sociologists associated with Blumer’s depiction of symbolic interactionism have a powerful but less explicit bilevel theory of emotion based on a self-fulfilling prophecy, itself highly dependent on belief and confidence. The leak or flaw comes from the tendency of all self-fulfilling prophecies to break down if confidence in them weakens. Thus, in their own way, symbolic interactionists have their own bilevel theory of emotion based on their own theories of the self.

Although Lacan seems quite different from the pragmatists, particularly in his mirror theory of the self, he has a strain of thinking much like theirs. Lacan has two versions of the looking-glass self. The better-known version is one in which the child identifies with his or her mirror reflection, allegedly seeing more unity and coherence than is really there. Consequently, the child suffers from a “misrecognition” or delusion of grandeur that is a permanent weak spot. This identification makes the self image-based or “imaginary” in Lacan’s neologistic sense of the word.¹

Lacan’s other version is the familiar idea that the child depends heavily on the reflection he or she gets from intimate others, especially close caretakers like the mother. The mother’s approval, recognition, or “look” is sometimes combined with the misrecognition idea, as though the two were equivalent. But his two looking-glass selves are really quite different. The former is a highly original if debatable idea. The latter is remarkably similar to the one Charles Horton Cooley saw operating in his own children (Cooley [1922] 1992:184). It should be added that throughout his writings Lacan leans more heavily on the Cooley version, though he seems to think this is the same as his imaginary looking glass.

In this article I use Lacan’s ideas as a contrasting case to highlight the position of the symbolic interactionists. With Lacan in the wings, I explain the symbolic interactionists’ bilevel theory of emotion, itself stemming from their theory of the self. In other words, their self is a social construction, living off a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The bilevel theory of emotion, then, is the idea that emotions can be experienced by the self in two ways—in the self’s goal-seeking behavior and in the self’s own efforts to simply stay intact. The two levels tend to be in sync: they occur together and

cause each other, although they also may operate somewhat independently of each other. I will give some examples of how they may be connected.

Most strong emotions are experienced as bilevel. Take failure: you want something and you go after it. You engage in activities that are appropriate to the goal. You expend all your effort and you perform well. You really want this, and you can almost taste the victory. Still, even though it looked like you would win, something goes wrong and you fail. Someone else gets the job. You do not win the game. Your body lets you down. A girl or boy dumps you. The contract goes to someone else. The prize escapes your fingers. At the outer level you experience the disappointment of failure. Sadness and grief enter your field of consciousness. And even if you did your best, you will feel an inner grief as well. At the inner level we think of this sadness as depression. The normal concomitant of outer disappointment is inner sorrow. This depression may have elements of internalized hostility, but it is usually more like a decline in self-confidence. For a while everything will seem harder to attain.

Unless the person has a tendency toward depression, the inner grief should go away soon. This kind of grief has a beginning, middle, and end. You can cry or talk it out, recall victories or failures that played themselves out. Alternatively, if you just hang on, something good might happen. In the bilevel theory the emotion is therefore both external disappointment and internal mourning. If the disappointment is great enough, it backwashes into the self, where it produces an internal shuddering or shakiness.

Most strong emotions have this double level: external humiliation coincides with inner shame. Intense fear can cause panic. Culpability will usually be accompanied by guilt. Vague threat causes anxiety. Further, sexual victimization may be accompanied by at least a moment of self-blame. The positive emotions are similar. Victory may cause pride; love will give self-confidence; recognition will give self-esteem. And paying for a mistake will give peace of mind.²

In social theory, Hegel's implicit theory of the self is also bilevel, in that it is based on the origination and continuation of recognition. The recognition or approval of intimate others gives a person's life meaning in the first place. And the subsequent stream of recognition allows the self to live well. His two emotional levels, then, are living and living well (Hegel [1807] 1979:111–19).

The early pragmatist James Mark Baldwin used the concept of desire as an offshoot of Hegel's recognition. He listed the objects of desire as follows:

We have the end of desire stated alternatively, i.e. as 'an object,' 'the possession of an object,' 'the enjoyment of self,' 'the self who enjoys,' 'self-realization,' 'the attainment of a better self.' The theories, in other words, travel all the way from the object to the self. (Baldwin [1897] 1973:258)

In my terms Baldwin distinguished ordinary desire from a deeper level (or desire from DESIRE). The former is desire for specific things. The latter is desire for realization of the self. Baldwin's two levels could be called the part and the whole.

Lacan was certainly familiar with Hegelian ideas and some pragmatist ideas, and these influenced his concept of desire, which was comparable to Hegel's concept of recognition. Unlike ordinary desire that is for ordinary things, a more fundamental desire is for a half-remembered unity with mother. The unity we got from misrecognition in the mirror is a lie, and down deep we know it. The unity we think we got from mother is also a lie, but down deep we are convinced of it.

Bilevel emotionality can tilt toward one side or the other. If the attention is primarily to the external feelings, which is the more superficial level, the internal emotion will be slight and perhaps unnoticed. If the emphasis is on the internal, the outer feelings may be muted and out of play. There are always two levels even though sometimes we only notice one.

There is also self-feeling for anything that becomes part of, or is attached to, the self (Wiley 1994b:110–20). I interpret self-feeling as another form of Durkheim's religious emotion of "mana," now transferred from the gods to the sacred self. And just as there are gradations of mana, depending on how close we are to the sacred, there are also gradations of self-feeling. Accordingly, I think there is more self-feeling for the internal reaches of the psyche than for its externals or environment. The self has priorities, and the inner self is usually the main one. In addition, all self-feeling is from a single source and all the strands influence each other. This is another way of saying the inner and outer emotions come together and are connected.

Shifting back to Lacan, for whom the self is actually a psychiatric symptom, it is a defense against an underlying meaninglessness. The Lacanian self is a hoax by which we normalize an incoherent inner reality. This reality is constantly reasserting itself so that the self is always resisting, to a greater or lesser extent, the tug toward dissolution. Unlike the body, which has a strong, healthy equilibrium and a moderate pull toward sickness and death, the Lacanian self is primarily in disequilibrium, papered over by a thin veneer of coherence. Lacan's inner emotions then result from the constant fight between the fragile self and the underlying forces of incoherence. This level is, if anything, the primary arena of human emotion, and the emotions of outer living can usually be reduced to it.

Returning to the more familiar territory of symbolic interactionism, Cooley explained his version of the looking-glass self as follows:

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 comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. ([1922] 1992:184)

Cooley does not mention here that we tend to change our behavior to conform to other people's expectations, but it is implicit in his formulation. However, there is an even more fundamental idea of the looking-glass self. This idea, which deepens Cooley's insight, is clearer in Mead's thought (Westby 1991:446–51).

Mead (1934:152–64) described the stages in the socialization of the child as a progression from "play to the game to the generalized other." Before the stage of

play, however, there is a point of ontogenesis when the infant acquires a self. Mead does not give a formal name to this stage, but he does give a powerful explanation. This explanation is in terms of role-taking and reflexivity, the latter being a more abstract version of Cooley's looking glass.

I have now distinguished three theories of the looking-glass self. For Lacan, the looking glass literally became the self; that is, we identify with the specular copy we see "out there" in the mirror. For Cooley, the looking glass was simply the opinions of intimate others. We tend to become what we think our intimate caretakers label us as. For Mead, the looking glass was an internalized function or power. When others communicate meanings to us, we can reflect these meanings in a process Mead called role-taking. Further, when we communicate meanings to others we can reflect these meanings, again in our consciousness, in what Mead called the meaningful or significant gesture.

Mead was also interested in phylogenesis, the process by which primates became human. He described this as a transition in which nonsignificant gestures become significant ones. The primates who gestured did not originally have a reflexive understanding of their own gestures. They lacked concepts or meaning. When they developed this understanding, the how of which is still unknown (Wiley 1994a), they became human, acquired language, and developed into selves. Humans now have this understanding naturally as a characteristic of their species, but each newborn still has to actualize these capacities anew. In other words, the infant, like the species-bridging primate, also has to transform nonsignificant gestures into significant ones. When this is accomplished the birth of the infant's self comes in a bundle with the other, closely related symbolic capacities: reflexivity, thought, and language.

The infant is born nonsymbolic and without a self, though it does have the preconditions for acquiring one. The parents, however—to view them at their best—see baby as a self from the beginning, talking as though he or she can understand them and finding meaning in baby before any is there. Mother and father are off to a running start, which is probably all to the good.

Broadly speaking, the parents are communicating two things to baby: "We love you" and "You are there." They are pouring love and also existence into their baby. Or, in more technical terms, they are giving "recognition" and selfhood to the child. For Hegel ([1807] 1979), the human self was born through recognition, itself an offshoot of the master-slave relationship. The parents are not engaged primarily in a fight with baby during that first year, however. Rather, they are freely giving love and recognition. Of course, they want love back as soon as the baby can give it, through glowing eyes, smiles, baby talk, and body-molding hugs. The parents are not consciously trying to create something out of nothing, or a self in a brute animal. Still their actions have this effect.

For the baby, the link between recognition and becoming a self is trust. The baby must have the guts to communicate symbolically. Communication for Mead entails the ability to take the point of view of the other through role-taking. It appears as though the infant first learns role-taking as the one who receives messages rather

than as the one who gives them. Then the baby learns to role-take as a communicator, that is, by sending symbols to the parents. Meaningful smiles and gurgles probably come well before the “DaDa’s” and “MaMa’s” of early baby talk (Stern 2002). However, to engage in this role-taking, this receiving and giving, is to take a chance on becoming a self.

I do not think this is easy for baby. At least it comes a lot more slowly if the love and recognition are thin, for these are the foundations of baby’s trust. For any baby to assert itself into the social world is a risk. It is more peaceful and effortless to remain silent and symbiotic. Once role-taking and communication set in, they become rewarding and explain their own persistence (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975 is the classic analysis of the infantile separation from the mother). The parents are saying take a shot at it, smile, be cute, make little noises with your mouth, and we’ll love you no matter how you do it. We’ll mirror what you do, possibly with some minor corrections or suggestions, but no matter what you do, we’ll applaud you. You can trust us no matter what. Start crawling out of your cute little body and we’re sure you’ll like it. And we’ll reward you beyond your wildest dreams. When parents act as cheerleaders in this way they are like midwives trying to assist at a birth. Of course, baby’s body was born earlier when it entered the world, but its self must be brought into the social world.

Lacan thought that intrapersonal recognition, at the mirror, created the self. And Hegel thought that interpersonal recognition created the self. Cooley and Mead’s arguments have affinities with both Lacan and Hegel, but they are still distinct. Particularly for Mead, the creation of a self is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

THE SELF AS A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

For Lacan, the creation of the self is based on an error, a misrecognition, and the result might be called a false self. According to this view, we spend our lives, even after the Oedipal transition, trying to hide this secret from ourselves. For Hegel, the self is based on interpersonal struggle for recognition, for what one gets the other loses. This also creates instability in the self, for recognition is never secure and can always be lost.

For Mead, the baby’s self is brought to life by the parents’ prediction that this social self will be born. They are saying trust us and leap into the symbolic world. It may be scary, but we will catch you if you fall. The prediction or prophecy here is that if you try you will succeed. You *can* engage in symbolic flight, you *can* soar into the semiotic world. Just believe us, and if you do, that very belief will create you as a self. The result is that, little by little, the infant does take the leap, and the aerodynamics of the symbolic atmosphere allows him or her to fly. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy because it will come true only if you believe in it (Collins 1988:265–67; Merton 1957).

Actually, all of culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy (Krishna 1971). William I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas (1928:572) made this point when they said, “[I]f men

define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” By this they meant that social reality is rather flexible and vague. It is subject to a wide variety of interpretations or definitions. If a particular society defines a given sociocultural element in a certain way, that way will become meaningful and true for the people in that society. In other words, in the semiotic realm, if you say something is true and the larger community agrees, it is true for all practical consequences. In culture we operate on a consensus as much as on a correspondence theory of truth.

It may make sense, therefore, to modify the Thomas theorem as follows: If people define selves as real, they are real in their consequences. The theorem of W. I. and Dorothy Thomas was a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people define things in a certain way, that definition will be true for them. And if Moms and Dads define their babies as selves, this will become true, and the babies will become selves.

But there is still a weakness or flaw in these symbolic interactionist selves. They are not based on misrecognition, as in Lacan. Instead, they are based on a leap of faith. Self-fulfilling prophecies sometimes collapse. And the prophecy about a baby becoming a self is based on parents’ love, the infant’s trust and self-confidence, and a steady stream of synergy in the child–parent relationship. Something can always go wrong.

Earlier I described parents at their best, when they display strong parenting skills. The average parent has average skills, which means the recognition, love, and consequent trust will be more moderate. The baby will therefore find it somewhat harder to make the leap, and the tendency to backslide into a pre-self in a brute state will be stronger.

At the other extreme are the parents who are lousy at parenting. The recognition, love, and trust that flow between baby and these parents will be at an unhealthily low level. These infants may take much longer to become selves; that is, they are developmentally delayed. When they do take the plunge, it will be with understandable and realistic concern.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the self’s Achilles’ heel is the constant possibility of losing trust and self-confidence. We are blown-up balloons and it is always possible for the air to come out. The recognition and love that created a baby’s self, moreover, have to keep flowing throughout life. It is not enough for our parents to get us started as humans. We need continued support to keep developing and going as selves. If recognition dries up, in particular if negative recognition hits the now-grown infant, the air can come out of the balloon.

There is a sense in which this symbolic interactionist theory implies a misrecognition, but a different and more general one than Lacan’s. It’s in the emperor-has-no-clothes problem. Culture in general and selves in particular are based on “hot air”—on shared belief. As with all self-fulfilling prophecies, if the community accepts the belief, it will remain solid. However, if confidence erodes, the belief will turn sour and lose its validity.

Thus the self-system, from a symbolic interactionist’s view, is never completely secure. My earlier examples of mourning, shame, guilt, anxiety, and self-blame, as

well as the positive cases of pride, self-confidence, self-esteem, and peace of mind, are all variations of the self-fulfilling prophecy. There are many ways in which the inner self can do well or not do well. These are the inner emotions that I set out to describe in this article.

The notion of bilevel emotion is also evident in the work of Alfred Schutz, the phenomenologist and disciple of Mead who spoke of the “fundamental anxiety.” For him, this was the fear of death. Schutz (1973:228) suggested: “I know that I shall die and I fear to die. This basic experience we suggest calling the fundamental anxiety. It is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate.”

Schutz thought that our conceptualization of the main or everyday world entailed concealment and repression. Cultures exaggerate some things and ignore or deny others. Schutz (1973:228) compared this process to Husserl’s “*epoche*,” or suspension of disbelief. And for Schutz, the major denial of culture was the denial of death, making it the fundamental anxiety. As Maurice Natanson says in his introduction to Schutz’s *Collected Papers*: “The fear of death is here the fear of my death, and it might be suggested, though Dr. Schutz does not develop this idea, that the *epoche* of the natural attitude includes within its brackets the awareness that I will die” (Schutz 1973:xliv).

Although Schutz is right to suggest that death is denied, it is also true that the flaw in the self is denied. By definition, if the self is a self-fulfilling prophecy, we cannot admit this. We must conceal and deny; otherwise the leak will get bigger and we risk falling into an abyss.

Lacan’s argument is similar. People must protect the (for Lacan, false) unity of the self, or they risk losing it. This anxiety and denial, I would argue, is even more fundamental than the denial of death. And it is the glue that holds together the main reality. For symbolic interactionists, the denial of the gravitational pull toward psychological collapse, or, to state it in reverse, the assertion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, underlies all the other definitions of a culture.

LACAN, COOLEY, AND MEAD

I have already mentioned that Lacan leans heavily on Cooley’s looking-glass self, sometimes even equating this social mirror with the physical one he thinks we identify with. At times Lacan’s mirror identification is asserted as a literal description of what happens, but at other times it is just a metaphor for any self-defining response we might get from the external world. As he says, “[T]he idea of the mirror should be understood as an object which reflects—not just the visible, but also what is heard, touched and willed by the child” (1949:567; see also Rose 1982:30). Lacan usually tries to keep his notion of the mirror to the actual physical mirror.

The physical mirror, for Lacan, produces its misrecognition because it flatters the way our body looks, picturing it as more coordinated and coherent than it actually is. Whether Lacan is right on this point or not, it simply does not come up with responses based on what we hear, touch, or will. Our mother’s voice may flatter us,

but it is hardly just a fiction hiding incoherence below. It does not produce misrecognition. Instead her voice is the self-fulfilling prophecy that we use as a ladder to climb into the human world above. What is initially untrue—the parent’s assertion that we are selves—gradually comes true. It is a misrecognition that becomes recognition and selfhood.

For Lacan, the fully developed, post-Oedipal self is primarily the subject of the linguistic system. It is the “I” of language and not the I in some extralinguistic, ontological sense. The child’s self shifts from the imaginary to the symbolic or linguistic by successfully steering through the Oedipal or Electra complexes. This expands the powers of the self.

According to Mead, the self is also the subject of language, but in this case the language is that of inner, not outer, speech. For Mead, the self was the I, the me, and the field of meaning in which they interact. Mead’s concept of the self is therefore located in a different linguistic system, and it is internally divided into two linguistic poles.

In addition, the inner subject does not blink on and off the way the subject of outer language does. The linguistic “I” disappears with the cessation of speech. The personal pronouns of inner speech also disappear at times—presumably during sleep or passive daydreaming. But Mead’s pronominal self is “on” most of the time. It is the subject, not only of inner speech, but also of consciousness generally. And when it is “off” it seems more like a pause than a blank in which the subject ceases to exist.

In addition to Lacan’s theory of mirror self-recognition, there is a theory of mirror self recognition in pragmatism too (Wiley 1994b:172–75). According to this view, the important thing that happens when a baby recognizes his or her self in the mirror is not physical or specular. There is no flattering misrecognition of the body. Instead what is recognized is the structure of the self as inner speech. Even before the mirror recognition, which usually happens between twelve and eighteen months, every baby has been talking to his or her self, albeit with imperfect linguistic tools. Every baby has been engaging in early forms of inner speech but without any clear idea of how this process works. The fact that small children talk out loud when they are thinking suggests that they do not yet have a clear idea that inner speech is silent and therefore private. They do not yet fully distinguish it from public or audible speech.

When the baby recognizes his or her self in the mirror, the body is discovered. But the more important discovery, as I see it, is of the other pole of the inner dialogue. When the viewing self recognized itself and the two babies, the viewer and viewed, smile, the child is not only smiling out of recognition of its body. It is also smiling out of recognition of its mind; body and mind being discovered in the same “eureka.”

The mirror experience for Cooley or Mead does not suggest a misrecognition or flaw. It suggests an internalized *verstehen* in which the self is first clearly seen as dyadic and it bears a resemblance to Descartes’s “*cogito ergo sum*.” The smiling face

in the mirror represents the other pole of the inner conversation. The mirror reveals the I's partner in dialogue. The movement is (1) from self, (2) to mirror, (3) to self-recognition, (4) to the discovery of the conversational partner (and then reflexively back), (5) to a deeper understanding and control of one's dialogical self (for a perceptive description of this movement, see Merleau-Ponty 1964:129). For Lacan, the mirror does not lead back to the self. Instead it becomes the self. We identify with our mirror reflection as external to us.

The mirror experience is a victory because the self-fulfilling prophecy, which we believed from our parents, is becoming more credible. Before, we could role-take with others but only confusedly with ourselves. Now we are more able to converse with ourselves, that is, to take the role of the other in the internal dialogue. This is because we have seen an icon of the dialogical partner in the mirror. What we were challenged to do, to become selves, we are now able to do in a much more developed way.

The concept of the other operates in important ways for Lacan and Cooley and Mead. Lacan uses the term "other" in several senses. One's self is "other" first because it is based on an external reflection in a mirror, externality indicating otherness. And after the Oedipal-Electra crisis it is based on cultural systems that are external and hence "other." The self is always outside or other to us, so to speak, and therefore alienated from us.

From this starting point, Lacan tends to call a lot of things the "other." When he uses Cooley's version of the looking-glass self and sees us as being constructed by the intimate other (mainly the mother), this other too is equated with the self. Thus the intimate other, to whom we owe the crucial early love and recognition, is "ourselves." We are the mirror, whether in a physical or a metaphorical sense. Thus mother (sometimes called the (m)other) is a second meaning of "other" in Lacan.

He also refers to his idea of the unconscious as the other. Lacan does not have a precise notion of the unconscious, particularly of what's in it, and his idea also shifts at different stages of his career. But the unconscious, as with Freud, harbors profound truths about us. It is "other," but like the mirror self and the mother, this "other" is a powerful element of our identity. Lacan uses the term in additional senses, but these three give the flavor. The other is something with which we are in intimate but dialectical relation—and this harbors a great deal of distance and tension.

The Cooley-Mead other is also a dialectical partner of the self but in a more ordinary, conscious sense. A person with whom we communicate, in Mead's terminology, is called a "particular other." The first particular other is the mother, a person so primordial that she probably precedes awareness of the self. Her importance, however, is not primarily as someone we identify with, in the sense in which Lacan's baby identifies with the mirror reflection. Rather she is the one who gives us psychological resources and helps us to sprout the human capacities. As Chodorow (1978) suggests, she midwives our hearts and minds. This is done through role-taking in which we learn to see and feel things as others do, mother being the first other. We role-take her hopes and dreams for us, giving us a model for what we may become and how we might become it. Since mother is the first interactional partner,

the first communicative “other,” she becomes a background figure for all subsequent particular others.

Mother’s teaching also contains rules of various kinds, including the general ones by which we think and live. She gives us a microcosm of the culture. We internalize these meanings and rules, and they become incorporated into the self. For Mead, this taking in of the culture becomes a resource in the inner dialogue by getting lodged in the “me.” Mead’s me has affinities with Freud’s superego, but it is less exclusively emotional and includes the cognitive and logical rules. Of course, I am not suggesting that there is one uniform moral code or set of rules in the United States or any other country. But for this discussion it is convenient to sidestep social conflict and subcultural differences and pretend there is a unitary culture.

Mead refers to the culture that we internalize in the me as the “generalized other.” When we communicate and role-take with any particular other, we are sharing his or her meaning system. But when we communicate and role-take with ourselves, as Mead’s “me,” we share the entire community meaning system. What could have simply been called “culture” Mead personalized by calling it the generalized other. When Mead makes the culture into a sort of person or self he enables it to be directly confronted in the dialogical process. We may “draw on” our cultures, but we actually talk to our generalized other. For Mead, the community fully enters into this dialogue.

The Lacanian other(s), then, is central to Lacan’s notion that the subject is inherently flawed and structured as a symptom. The force of otherhood pervades our psychological landscape, and we must stay in a finely calibrated relation to these others to maintain our coherence. But all of Lacan’s others are psychiatric threats, quick to pull us under if we do not maintain a balanced dialectic with them.

Cooley and Mead’s others, both particular and general, are more out in the open and less dangerous. They are the crucial resources for maintaining selfhood. The gradual unfolding of the self-fulfilling prophecy is primarily the work of their sense of others. Further, when something goes wrong with the prophecy, that too is largely the work of the others. But in contrast to the Lacan other, Cooley and Mead’s other is primarily a shield against our inner flaw, whereas Lacan’s can become the flaw.

In summary, Lacan’s theory does much the same work as that of Cooley and Mead, but there are crucial differences. These are in their views of the looking-glass self, the relation of the subject to language, the mirror self-recognition experience, the meanings of the “other,” and the manner in which the self is decentered and fault-lined.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic interactionist self is a self-fulfilling prophecy, enunciated by parents concerning their newborn children. Symbolic interactionist theory has always held that sociocultural elements are self-fulfilling prophecies, so to apply this point to the self is merely to draw out an already existing implication. In addition, this argument

sheds light on various qualities of human beings, their strengths and weaknesses, their self-control and agency, and the way they have risen beyond their primate origins.

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NOTES

1. Lacan thought the infant would be with the mother, probably in her arms, during the mirror self-recognition experience. He also thought baby would be getting an approving look from mother while giving a similarly approving look in the mirror to him or her self. This may be why he got the two notions of the mirror—physical and social—mixed up. In fact, the infant is not necessarily with mother during this experience. There are various ways baby might be alone at the mirror. But alone or with mother, the physical mirror is distinct from the social mirror.
2. My concept of inner emotions is both similar to and distinct from the self-conscious or self-regarding emotions, recently discussed in the literature (see Lewis 2000 for a representative analysis). These emotions, such as pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment, are feelings about our selves, not just about things we are related to. They are reflexive in that the self is the object of the emotion. But my notion of inner emotions is not just appreciations of the self. These are feelings about the fundamental coherence of the self, expressed in response to an increase or decrease in coherence. They also go a step further than the self-conscious emotions by locating the underlying cause in the self-fulfilling prophecy.

The psychoanalysts, especially Freud and Lacan, have inner emotions like the ones I am referring to; that is, emotions that relate to the constituent rules of the self. Constituent rules concern what a thing is, and regulatory rules concern what a thing does (Searle 1969:33–42). For these thinkers, the emotions of shame, guilt, and pride and the other self-regarding emotions are at the regulatory level, while the Oedipal complex and castration fears are at the underlying constituent level. Similarly Helen Lewis, whose insights sparked the recent concern with shame and guilt, traced these emotions to the deeper problem of a malfunctioning superego (Lewis 1971:14). The self-regarding emotions, then, particularly intense shame, can overlap with my inner emotions, but they are not the same thing.

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