THE SELF IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: TOWARDS NEW PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Interrogations about the self are as ancient as humankind and the “who am I?” question seems to have travelled across historical times only to be posed more acutely than ever in our postmodern age. This essay will start by reviewing definitions of the self as well as the main problems psychologists are confronted with when theorizing the self. I will argue, in supporting the vision of the self as being a social structure, that both tendencies to “individualize” and “discursify” fail to acknowledge the intersubjective nature of the self and its genesis within me–other relations. This particular approach will be further developed by connecting the self to the social context of representations, attributions and culture. In the end, the notion of “synergetic self” will be introduced and developed with an emphasis on its dynamic, transformative, emergent and creative dimensions. I will explain how this new standpoint manages to overcome old dichotomies in the psychology of selfhood and to offer a truly social and contextual account of the self.

Cuvinte-cheie: self, abordarea individualistă, abordare discursivă, intersubiectivitate, cultură, reprezentări, atribuiri, sinergie.

Key words: self, individualistic approach, discursive approach, intersubjectivity, culture, representations, attributions, synergy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite its ontological and epistemological centrality and the vast literature on the topic of selfhood there are still no agreed upon definitions of the self. Most authors tend to avoid the “unanswerable” question of what self is and their constructions are based more on implicit understandings than clear-cut descriptions. As with the concept of consciousness, the self is catalogued among those notions that are never clear, univocal and straightforward (Harré, 1998).

Pioneers in the study of self (see Mead, 1934) considered that the experience of the individual takes place in the mind but only the development of a self makes the person realise that the experience is its own. More recently the self has been conceptualized either as a site, the place from where the person perceives the world and acts towards it (Harré, 1998; Benson, 2001), or as “selving”, a dynamic and

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collective process (Markus et al., 1997). Other definitions focused on the idea of properties (divisible, boundary diffusible, unifiable, possessable, introspectable – Jopling, 1997) or on discovering operational criteria for “detecting” the existence of selfhood (reflexive consciousness, interpersonal being, executive function – Baumeister, 1997).

In understanding what lead to these diverse conceptualizations we must identify the problems theorists are confronted with when approaching this topic:

a) the complexity of the self as a quintessence of human psyche and sociality;

b) the difficulty of measuring the self since it lacks materiality (although peculiar experiments tried to determine its weight – Gergen, 1991) and remains invisible and internal (the “true self” can only be inferred – Ichheiser, 1949);

c) the need for conceptual delimitations since the self often appears as synonymous with consciousness, personality, psychic and especially with identity (in this regard most authors agree that identity is a subset of the self – Tajfel, 1981; Duveen, 2001);

d) the inflation of terms and the analytical “dissection” of the self: self-concept, self-esteem, self-presentation, self-awareness, self-identity, self-knowledge, etc.

e) the numerous ways in which the self has been understood, starting from what we may call “lyrical” approaches (like the existentialist, phenomenological and humanist ones, emphasising the becoming of the self), to “epic” (sociological perspectives studying daily interactions – see Ellis, 2001) and “dramatic” approaches (focused on inner psychoanalytical conflicts or on contextual and socially constructed multiple selves – see Wetherell and Maybin, 1996);

f) the challenges of the postmodern culture (technology, travel and communication, social connectedness) that eliminate previous romanticist or modern views and scatter the self into a plurality of voices (Gergen, 1991) turning it into a grammatical fiction (Harré, 1998);

In light of all above one may legitimately ask whether there are enough valid reasons for even talking about the self. This article will try to demonstrate not only that the self is worth considering but that it is pivotal to all our undertakings (Gergen, 1991), our orientation in the world (Benson, 2001) and social functioning (Ichheiser, 1949). Throughout the presentation a personal definition of the self as a synergetic, evolving and creative psycho-socio-cultural system will emerge.

2. LOCUS OF THE SELF: THE “INNER” VERSUS “OUTER” DILEMMA AND THE RECOVERY OF PAST SOLUTIONS

How is the self social? Due to its theoretical and practical consequences this is one of the most animated and important debates in the psychology of self.

In an attempt to “localise” the self and decipher its complicated existence many have pointed to biology, evolution and, more specifically, genes. By treating the person in the social world just as any other specie in its habitat (Stevens and
Wetherell, 1996), the radical biologic argument (biology as destiny – Reicher, 2004) achieved an embodiment and desocialization of the self. Since human agency depends on brain processes (Toates, 1996) determinism and universalism are brought into the scene while the self becomes nothing more than a module “justified” by two adaptation purposes: depositing social feedback and understanding the intentions and behaviours of others (Forgas and Williams, 2002).

A critical evaluation of such a standpoint soon reveals its flaws. Biology can never explain the entirety of the self, nor its origin (Mead, 1934) and even less the cultural variations in self expression. However, denying “the body” is obviously futile and most accounts (Toates, 1996; Benson, 2001) argue for a cultural completion of our “unfinished” genetic endowment (Geertz, 1993, cited in Reicher, 2004).

More perseverant than the biological perspective in rejecting the social is the individualist stance. Resting on Descartes” dictum, individualism portrays a central and lonely self, always thinking, doubting, reflecting (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Consciousness, rationality, uniqueness, efficacy and self-esteem lay at the heart of this conception. The social “other” is not only peripheral but also dangerous since it can only oppose or perturb the self (Sampson, 1993).

The “self-separate, self-contained, independent, consistent, unitary, and private” image of the self (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p. 221) came under severe criticism especially from social constructionists. First and foremost, cultural studies have shown that this glorification of agency, this empowered and liberated self is a Western tradition originating in the late-eighteenth-century thought (Lyons, 1978, cited in Gergen, 1991; Sampson, 1993; Adams, 2003). Its obvious essentialism (Parker, 1997) is sustained only through the linguistic illusion of the unitary self (Gergen, 1991) that allows metaphors such as the inner self or true self (Lakoff, 1997).

Even more, individualism is totally incapable of dealing with the problem of development. The infant is not a self at birth but becomes one through social interaction with significant others (Mead, 1934) and greater cultural and historical contexts “particularise” the concept and expression of the self (Markus et al., 1997).

In recovering the social the “locus of the self” shifted from the inaccessible interiority to the spacious exteriority linking the self to structures, relations of power and discourses. For many social constructionists and critical theorists society “inhabits” the very essence of personhood (Sampson, 1989), and the self becomes a gift from others (Sampson, 1993). The centre of attention passes from the individualistic “me” to the overwhelming “other” and social control comes to substitute individual agency.

The most representative perspective in this regard is that of Michel Foucault. His position is that power constitutes our subjectivity (in a kind of “subjectification”) from the moment in our childhood when we enter the language system (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996). This radical approach within critical psychology
offers a rather grim picture of individuals living under the oppression of certain “regimes of truth” with diminished opportunities to generate “counter-discourses”. The social and political mechanisms that manipulate through the means of language and internalised discourses are considered out of reach, supra-individual (Parker, 1997).

Several consequences of such a standpoint are of maximal importance. The self stops being the internal centre of gravity but “spreads” into the social, becomes distributed in a field of discourses and relationships (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996), continuously changing and dividing between roles (Gergen, 1991). The resultant multiplicity and depersonalisation replace the idea of a unified “biography” with that of countless “biographemes” (Barthes, 1977, cited in Wetherell, 1996).

As expected, radical discursive psychology has been accused of dissolving our individuality and subjectivity into language and by this rehashing the old behaviourist image of the mind as a black box (Parker, 1997). Maybe its greater deficiency is the downplaying or denial of agency and resistance.

Nevertheless, the turn to discourse outlined the importance of language and the fact that each person is exposed to a variety of narrative forms. Discourses are capable of constructing the self; they not only state but also “do” things, they are not a simple reflection of the world but also make sense of it (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996). In the light of these assumptions the idea of a narrative self takes shape. Telling stories is both an individual and social act and implies the existence of one or multiple narrative threads. If from a foucauldian viewpoint power networks speak through the person (the death of the author), the general outlook proposed by the narrative self tries to accommodate both author and society (Gergen, 2001), both the private and public narratives (McAdams, 1997). Overall it is considered that: “our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our own sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us” (Bruner, 1986, cited in Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p. 258).

The aim of the narrative self is to offer a sense of coherence and continuity in a world of diverse and often opposing discourses, to build a singular life history, a guiding story that, although is under constant transformation, provides the internal milestones of a personal trajectory. Even if the exclusion of all “sub-species” of oneself is not possible it is the task of the “omnibus meta-narrative” to (re)unite the self (Benson, 2001).

The concept of narrative self tries to bridge the “inner” and “outer” paradigms presented above. While the biological/individualistic account introduced the problem of autonomy, the social/narrative one talked about cultural and historical determinants. The solution to the “asocial” – “aindividual” dilemma rests in acknowledging the value of intersubjectivity and self – other dialogism (Sampson, 1993), in recognizing that self and society shape each other (Mead, 1934; Baumeister, 1997; Fiske et al., 1998), that they are “twin-born” (Cooley, 1918,
cited in Ziller, 1973). From this perspective humans appear as “inter-subjects” (Crossley, 1996) and the self as ecological and interpersonal (Neisser, 1997), arising only in the process of social interaction.

Although the literature on intersubjectivity has been flourishing in the last years (Coelho and Figueiredo; 2003; I. Marková, 2003), the intersubjective “solution” is not as new as it may seem. In fact, prominent authors in the psychology of self – Mead, Goffman and Giddens – have constructed their accounts on these premises. However, while Giddens and his reflexive self emphasise the intersubjective “me” and Goffman and his dramatic self the intersubjective “other”, Mead’s theory of the self remains unrivalled for its depth of analysis and balance between individual and society.

For A. Giddens (1991) reflexivity is the defining and distinguishing feature of the self. It allows persons to monitor and reflect upon experience and empower them to act within the social arena. Individuals are not only constrained by social practices but they constantly examine and reformulate them (Giddens, 1990, cited in Elliot, 2001) showing that the self is anything but a passive entity. For Giddens (1991), person and society are truly interdependent and the “self in context” needs to face the “high” or “late” modern world of global institutional and technological transformations, of interpersonal anxieties and risks. In approaching intersubjectivity he talks about the reflexive project of the self, of being coherent while constantly remodelled, about negotiating lifestyle choices and reflexively organising a life-plan.

E. Goffman (1971), on the other hand, used the metaphor of the theatre to analyse daily interactions. During their encounters social actors reach a common definition of the current situation (a working consensus), one that they “manipulate” through their particular “onstage” performance and that gives them a feeling of being “in control”. Violations of social norms and traditions create confusion, embarrassment or even hostility and call for preventive and corrective practices. This underlines the moral character of social interactions, in which participants have, due to their characteristics, the moral right to expect a certain type of treatment. Intersubjectivity in the case of Goffman is played between an actor and its public (observers of co-participants) and agency, though possible, is defined mainly in situational terms.

Largely recognized as one of the most comprehensive accounts of the self, the psychology of G.H. Mead (1934) is based on the self–other relationship and its importance for the development of selfhood. His standpoint, defined as symbolic interactionism, starts from inter-related acts or conversation of gestures. Through these interactions attitudes are expressed and social responses are adjusted. When conceived in its symbolic nature, the conversation of gestures explains the development of human intelligence and, ultimately, of society and knowledge. The mind and the self arise through social experience and in this process language plays a key part by facilitating co-operation, communication and the transmission of culture.
Mead not only discussed the double-dependency between self and society but also explained how this connection is vital to the genesis of the self. By interacting with others, by participating in play and games, by hearing ourselves speak, we are able to see our own selves as objects, to take the perspective of the other and gain reflexivity. The self fully develops when these internalised attitudes of others coagulate into a “generalized other”. For Mead the self is “populated” by others given that the agentic and spontaneous “I” needs a socially constructed and regulated “me” just as much as the “me” needs the “I”.

“Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only insofar as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also” (Mead, 1934, p. 164).

3. THE SELF IN CONTEXT: ATTRIBUTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS AND CULTURE

In the previous section I tried to demonstrate that the self has a social nature and emerges only within me – other relations, in an intersubjective space. This position will be now further argumented by linking the development and function of the self with broad phenomena such as attributions, representations and culture and therefore illustrating how social practices and knowledge shape our understanding of oneself and the world.

From the middle of the last century there has been a pressing need for social psychologists to uncover the ways in which persons perceive others and integrate social experience (see Ichheiser, 1949). The social representations theory is perhaps the most prominent and well-articulated account on how social knowledge is produced, transmitted and transformed (Jovchelovitch, 2007) and how it becomes functional, within a certain social milieu (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). The founder of the theory, Serge Moscovici (1984), envisioned social representations as general systems of values, ideas and practices that help us navigate and master the world (Moscovici, 1973, cited in Duveen and Lloyd, 1990).

Living in a human society every one of us is integrated, from early childhood, into a dynamic representational environment that forms our “reality” (Moscovici, 1984; Jovchelovitch, 2007). Representations are both social and symbolic in expressing subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds since:

“They involve a symbolic labour that springs out of the interrelations between self, other and the object-world, and as such have the power to signify, to construct meaning, to create reality” (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 11).

Individuals are never passive receivers of social representations but actively construct them, are aware of them, share and comprehend, accept or reject them (Breakwell, 2001). As follows I will argue that, understood in the terms above, social representations are bricks in the fabric of the self, catalysts of its genesis and modulators of its social and cultural expression.
In discussing the relation between self and social representations we must acknowledge the fact that the self per se is a complex representation, build within social interaction and endowed with deep cognitive, motivational and emotional components. Cognitivists speak in this regard about self-concepts as ways in which we see ourselves (Neisser, 1997) but there is much more to the perspective of *self as representation* that goes beyond simple imagery. First of all there is no single and complete representation of the self and probably a good way of grasping this connection is by analysing social identities in terms of representations of the self that stand as reference points for both person and other in each social contact.

“It is as social identities that social representations become psychologically active for individuals. Thus we can say that in expressing or asserting a social identity individuals draw on the resources made available through social representations” (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990, p. 7).

“Social representations are a network of mediating social meaning which lends texture and material to the construction of identities” (Jovchelovitch, 1996, p. 5).

Self and identities are not simply representational products but a permanent factor in each representational process. The “who” of representations (Jovchelovitch, 2007) is a constant dimension allowing every representation to re-construct and transmit not only the “object” but also the “author” (individual, group or community).

Gerard Duveen (2001) offers an elaborate account of the relationship between representation and identity/self from *a developmental perspective*. He argues that every child is born into a world of already structured social representations belonging to the family, community and broader society. Parents, and adults in general, have already built a set of expectations, hopes and fears concerning the infant and these representations of identity are internalized by the child from an early age. In this sense, *parents create a construction that will model the actual reality of the child*. The process of “being identified” and “situated” in a world of meanings/representations is therefore essential to development of the self. This phenomenon, called *prolepsis* (Cole, 1996), shows how culture and representations actively shape the way in which neonates are received and treated by adults. Education in itself is guided by what adults “know” from the past and how they consequently envision the future of the child.

*It is by understanding the nature of the representational work during the ontogenesis that the sterile agency versus social compliance debate can be transcended.* In effect, although there are some types of representations (like gender; Duveen, 2001) that are imposed to the child and adopted (almost) unconditionally, the vast majority of social representations engage the self as an agent, capable of resistance, of negotiating and transforming specific representations/identities (Howarth, 2002). This is the reason why self-development is, essentially, a fascinating process of simultaneously *becoming adjusted to* as well as *adjusting the* representational
world. This state of affairs has been recognized almost a century ago by G.H. Mead (1934) and, later on, all theorists having intersubjectivity as a focal point, through their emphasis on the role of the other and of meaning in the production of self.

As mentioned before, social representations play an important part not only in the genesis of the self but also in the social functioning of the person. In classical social psychology this area is largely covered by theories of social perception and attribution. Both representations and attributions are related to knowledge, the fundamental human need to understand and explain causality (Augustininos & Walker, 1995). Nevertheless, attributions have not always been associated with social representations. On the contrary, denying the legacy of Heider (Farr and Anderson, 1983), there is a strong tradition of research in attribution theory that purposely ignores the social/representational contexts or turns them into experimentally controlled variables.

A good example is offered by Jones and Nisbett (1971) who argue that differences in attribution between actors and observers are due to the different types of information they possess and the way they process this information. This is how the Fundamental Attribution Error of interpreting one’s own behaviour in situational terms and other’s behaviour in dispositional ones is justified. Conceived as an information processing device, the individual can only learn about himself/herself through self-observation and validation of inferred beliefs (Nisbett and Valins, 1971). But, because the actor and the observer are conceptualized as separate there is no possibility of taking the perspective of the other upon oneself and individuals are limited to watching over one’s own behaviour and matching actions with attributes.

Consequently, attribution theories have been commonly criticized for focusing solely on the individual as a “scientist”/“statistician” (Moscovici, 1984) and being too cognitive and universalistic in their accounts (Augustininos and Walker, 1995). Metaphorically speaking, attributions and attitudes represent just the visible top of the iceberg (Duven and Lloyd, 1990). The large and significant structures beneath are the systems of social representations, collective experiences and ideologies.

Synthesizing all the above I propose a schematic model for the relation between self, social interaction, attributions and representations (see Figure 1) in which self and other are recognized as having a unified actor/observer perspective and perceiving both themselves and the situation through the “lenses” of informed and contextualized attributions and representations. The self and the other are never abstract or theoretical entities but real persons, in real social situations, acting from within a social context: group, community, society/culture. All these three major levels foster certain systems of representation that both define and support them (representations, categories and social positions are all interconnected; see Wagner and Hayes, 2005).
The series of attributions (symbolized in Figure 1 by black intermittent lines) are never simple causality judgements but genuine efforts of understanding both self and other. They are not mechanical inferences in terms of situational/dispositional interpretations but complex evaluations guided by available social representations of self, other and relation/situation. In agreement with Farr and Anderson (1983) this model conceives attributions as a dynamic exchange of perceiver-other representations.

At the broadest level, the value of the social and cultural contexts is best reflected in cross-cultural studies about the self. Since the self-systems/"selfways" are the basis of our culture-specific existence (Markus et al., 1997) and representations are constitutive of culture (Moscovici, 2001), an analysis of how the self is represented across cultures confirms the social and contextual nature of selfhood.

One of the earliest conclusions in this type of research suggested that the Western representational system is dominated by the image of the independent self while the East embraces the vision of an interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1997). These studies usually focused on language (see Wetherell and Mybin, 1996), self-description tasks, surveys or observation (for a review see Smith and Bond, 1998; Fiske et al., 1998). Most of them showed that the autonomous and self-determined person is not a universal model and may even look peculiar in Asian cultures (such as Japan) where a relational or interdependent self is literally
considered “a bigger self” (Markus and Kitayama, 2003). In many African countries the community is so important that there is no definition of a person apart from it (Paris, 1995).

Different cultures show not only different patterns of self-representation but also of self and other attributions. Reviewing the literature, Bond and Smith (1990) support the conclusion that people with idiocentric values focus more on actions while those with allocentric values pay more attention to the context and how actors relate to one another. Under these circumstances the Fundamental Attribution Error as envisioned by Jones and Nisbett (1971) proves to be hardly fundamental.

4. CONTRADICTIONS AS A RESOURCE – THE SYNERGETIC SELF

Although the experience of the self is intrinsically human it seems that no theory has achieved to fully appreciate this complex reality. The idea of individual/biological determinants is incorrect in assuming an asocial, independent self. On the other hand, the narrative and saturated images of the self, while emphasizing the social, risk to “overpopulate” the self (Jopling, 1997). Not even the intersubjective accounts escaped criticism. Giddens is generally accused of playing down the role of culture in conceptualizing the self, of disembedding and individualising the person (Adams, 2003). Goffman is much too centred on maintaining expressive control over one’s performances while Mead is too cognitive and “conscious” (Elliot, 2001).

A careful analysis shows that most of these accounts fail in conceptualizing a self that is both personal/agentic and social/re-presented, both unified and multiple, both rational and affective. The antinomies of the self seem insurmountable unless adopting the “cosy” solution of compromise. What this last section will argue is that the self is never a lifeless mixture but a fully functional synergetic system.

The Greek etymology of the world synergy, “working together”, argues that the whole is always more than its parts. A synergetic vision is equally structural and dynamic, based on a systemic approach but improving it. Applied to the concept of self, it explains selfhood both as a product and as a process, as a sum of intrapersonal and micro/macro-social relations, as a self-organizing and open system. The synergetic self is an emergent one, never completed, always transforming and reconciling its contradictions (see Figure 2).

A synergetic approach is not to be confused with a cybernetic one. The system of the synergetic self has nothing in common with mechanical visions of highly ordered and predictable cybernetic structures. On the contrary, synergetics as a science and metascience originating in the ’70s is most adequate to study complex living systems consisting of nonlinear interacting parts, being “far from equilibrium” and constantly generating order from a state of entropy. Synergism invites us to rethink the dialectic between part and whole, order and chaos, equilibrium and disequilibrium.
The principles of the synergetic approach (see Zlate, 2007) can be easily and effectively applied to the psychology of the self as follows:

1. **The interaction principle.** Different “parts” or aspects of the self (either seen as identities, roles, components, narratives, representations etc.) interact generating effects of co-operation and competition. The unified self is a process and not the final product of this interaction. Such a vision has been largely supported by most theorists when discussing the tension between inner personality and social roles (Ichheiser, 1949) or the cynic disbelief in personal performances (Goffman, 1971). Perhaps the synergetic interaction principle is best reflected in Mead”s distinction (1934) between a spontaneous “I” and a “me” incorporating the attitudes of others where the two are distinguishable yet interdependent phases in the production of self.

2. **The dynamic instability principle.** The image of a perfectly balanced and motionless self is one of stagnancy and non-evolution. The lived self is a self that grows, changes, flows, although this dynamics is often marked by insecurities, anxieties and risks (see the experience of separation/divorce in Giddens, 1991). Our interiority would be unimaginable without the capacity for contradiction, for constant rhetoric and debate (Billig, 2001). Our multiplicities inevitably lead to a clash of identities within the person (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996), to a multi-phrenic condition (Gergen, 1991). Metaphorically speaking, the role of the synergetic self is not to “melt” down the orchestra of inner “voices”, but to be a flexible and supple conductor, to dynamically engage them in the process of self construction.
3. *The creative disequilibrium principle*. Closely related to the previous principle, it envisions the self as a constructive and creative functional “disorder”. The outer world is a world of flux (Reicher, 2004), constantly challenging our efforts to reach a state of equilibrium while demanding a “bureaucratization” of the self (Goffman, 1971). Being in (quasi)disequilibrium allows us to experiment and therefore to improve and develop the self (see the importance of play and games in Mead, 1934, and the concept of role-distance in Goffman, 1971). It makes us innovative in dealing with our conflicts and maladjustments and gives us a sense of a “situated” existential freedom (Stevens and Wetherell, 1996). In this context dissonance and contradictions are the fuel alimenting a creative process of qualitative self-change.

4. *The transformative relations principle*. The synergetic conception is at the apogee of the relational/intersubjective understandings of the self. It acknowledges the social and cultural context of the self and highlights the interconnections between self, others and objects. The synergetic self is embedded in a network of social representations where, due to a plurality of others and objects (or a state of cognitive polyphasia, see Jovchelovitch, 2007), it mobilizes symbolic resources in making sense of the world (Figure 3). The synergetic dynamics of the self reflects the concept of microgenesis (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990) in which social representations and identities are permanently elaborated and changed through social interaction. All relations have a transformative potential and represent a realm of negotiation, interpretation, construction and re-construction of self (Elliot, 2001; Howarth, 2002).

Figure 3 – The Synergetic Self in a representational network.
All the arguments presented above and generally throughout this article are intended to support the idea that the self can’t be conceived outside of the social and relational context. As demonstrated earlier, neither the biologic/individualistic nor the discursive/saturated perspectives manage to locate the essence of the self which lays in the space of intersubjectivity, of me–other relations. Representations, attributions and culture constitute both the environment and the fabric of self. The synergetic approach helps us emphasize the value of creative syntheses, of exploring potential selves and incorporating various postmodern cultural possibilities (Gergen, 1991).

As Gerard Duveen (2001) argued, many social psychologists answered the “Who am I?” question of identity with the general “I am who the other says I am”. It took several decades to introduce the more existentialist viewpoint of “I am what I make of what others say I am”. In light of the current developments in social representations theory and in synergetics, we may frame the self in the new and inviting terms of “I am what I creatively make of how others represent me”.

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Interrogațiile despre self sunt la fel de vechi ca omenirea și întrebarea „Cine sunt eu?” pare să fi apărut din timpuri istorice pentru a fi pusă mai acut decât ori când în epoca postmodernă. Acest eseu va începe prin trecerea în revistă a definițiilor self-ului, precum și a problemelor principale cu care psihologii s-au confruntat în teoretizarea self-ului. Voi argumenta pentru a oferi suport pentru conceptualizarea self-ului drept o structură socială, că ambele tendințe, „individualizare” și „discursificare” nu reușesc să surprindă natura intersubiectivă a self-ului și geneza sa în relațiile eu–alții. Această abordare deosebită va fi dezvoltată în continuare, prin conectarea self-ului la contextual social al reprezentărilor, atribuirilor și culturii. În ultima parte va fi introdusă și dezvoltată noțiunea de self sinergetic prin accentuarea dinamicii acestuia, dimensiunilor transformative, emergente și creative. Voi explica modul în care acest nou punct de vedere reușește să depășească vechele dihotomii din psihologia self-ului și să ofere o concepție cu adevărat socială și contextuală a acestuia.