



The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World

James A. Holstein, Jaber F. Gubrium

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The self is a big story. In the early part of the century, pragmatists like William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead turned away from the transcendental self of philosophical reflection to formulate the new concept of an empirical self—the notion that who and what we are is established in everyday interaction. The self was now a social structure, as Mead put it, even if it was located within the individual. The story has changed dramatically since then. Today, according to some postmodern critics, the self has been cast adrift on a sea of disparate images. It's just one swirling representation among others, bandied about the frenzy of a media-driven society. At the turn of the 21st century, the self has lost its traditional groundings and fizzled empirically. The self's very existence is seriously being questioned.

The Self We Live By resurrects the big story by taking issue with this account. Holstein and Gubrium have crafted a comprehensive discussion that traces a different course of development, from the early pragmatists to contemporary constructionist considerations, rescuing the self from the scrap-heap of postmodern imagery. Glimpses of renewal are located in a new kind of ending, centered in an institutional landscape of diverse narratives, articulated in relation to an expanding horizon of identities. Not only is there a new story of the self, but we're told that the self, itself, is narratively constructed. Yet as varied and plentiful as narrative identity has become, it's disciplined by its social practices, which the authors discuss and illustrate in terms of the everyday technology of self construction. The empirical self, it turns out, has become more complex and varied than its formulators could have imagined.

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