

An open slate emerges on which persons may inscribe, erase, and rewrite their identities as the ever-shifting, ever-expanding, and incoherent network of relationships invites or permits.

KENNETH J. GERGEN¹

What we call the self—one's inclusive sense [or symbolization] of one's own being—is enormously sensitive to the flow of history.

ROBERT JAY LIFTON²

Today, it is the speaking subject who declared God dead one hundred years ago whose very existence is now being called into question.

PAUL KUGLER³

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3 From Modern Self to Postmodern Selves

Despite all the factionalism in the world of psychology, most theorists and therapists have tended to accept the modern self as both a description of human consciousness and a model of mental health. Western ideas about human development have been enormously influenced by Erik Erikson's account of how a person ideally grows, gets through his identity crises, avoids the perils of "identity diffusion," and becomes a stable adult with "an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him."

Psychology is, after all, an agent of the social order, and the civilizing agenda of societies has always been to develop responsible human beings who can bring their wildly divergent urges and voices and energies under control and take up their roles in the community's economic and social and political lives. Stable societies need stable people. A limited society—which is the only kind there is—needs limited people.

So the problems of patients are often seen as failures to develop

this “inner continuity and social sameness,” and the therapeutic prescription is likely to be: Integrate your wayward drives and descriptions into a coherent whole. Even Carl Jung, who had proclaimed that “the so-called unity of consciousness is an illusion,” based his therapy on the goal of developing a mature, “individuated” personal self.⁴ Robert Assagioli, who made an extensive study of the “sub-personalities” that reside within us all, nevertheless created a therapy of “psychosynthesis,” which meant locating the “true self” and building around it a personality that would be “coherent, organized, and unified.”⁵ And so it went. Although the terminologies, the maps of the mind, the therapeutic approaches varied enormously, the general message tended to be the same: Get your act together; be consistent, integrated, authentic, whole.

But that consensus has unraveled. Many psychologists now claim that the way to health and happiness in today’s decentralized, pluralistic world is to *be* decentralized and pluralistic. Kenneth Gergen, one of the leading spokesmen for this point of view, summed it up some years ago in the title of his article: “The Healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks.”⁶ This new postmodern psychology is in part a response to the times—if stable societies need stable people, then fast-changing societies need fast-changing ones—and also a search for a new image of our possibilities, a more expansive vision of the human being than any society’s roles have yet made room for. It moves us toward an understanding of people as open systems—ever seeking new contacts, prepared to take in new information, willing to move boundaries, unafraid of change.

To get an idea of what postmodern psychology is about, let’s briefly review what some psychologists of that persuasion have been saying recently about selfhood. I’ll do this by exploring three terms that turn up frequently in such dialogues: multiphrenia, protean, and decentered. Each of these words gives a bit of the flavor of postmodern psychology, and each invites us—in fact dares us—to think fundamentally new and different thoughts about who and what we are.

The Challenge of Postmodern Psychology

There is no central doctrine, acknowledged leader, or organizational headquarters for postmodern psychology and probably never will be. One of the leading thinkers about psychology’s role in the postmodern world, Steinar Kvale of Aarhus University in Denmark, said, “The very concept of a unitary discipline is at odds with postmodern thought.”⁷ But even though the field of postmodern psychology is, to say the least, pluralistic, we can approach the essence of it easily enough with the help of two propositions that most of its spokesmen and spokeswomen subscribe to. The first, not too controversial in itself, is that identity is a social product and that people in different kinds of societies have quite different kinds of identity-forming experiences. The second, and more likely to provoke argument, is that most of us today live in “postmodern” societies in which it is difficult—if not impossible—to create and maintain a single, stable, personal identity.

So, the argument goes, in premodern traditional societies—of the sort that once existed everywhere in the world and still remain in a few remote places—people may have had many problems, but at least they usually had the security of living within a single culture. They knew what was true, because everyone in their tribe or village shared the same values and beliefs; they knew with the same certainty who and what they were, because every interaction through the day’s activities or through a lifetime recognized and reaffirmed their names, family connections, and social roles.

But in modern or modernizing societies, people lived in much wider social spaces and were much more likely to hear about—or to come into direct contact with—other people with quite different values and beliefs. They also had to deal with other kinds of subdivisions within their own societies, such as the separation between the public and private spheres of life. This “pluralization of life-worlds,” as Peter Berger calls it, was always stressful, and it always provoked responses.⁸ People found it necessary to develop psychological tools for maintaining their faith in the rightness of their own ways, for

remaining in some respects closed systems even in a much wider and more complex environment. One such device was the one Reisman (and before him Freud) described—the “internalization” of a culture so strongly that the individual carried it about within himself and continued to follow its rules and affirm its values and beliefs even when far away and surrounded by strangers, who thought and behaved differently. This kind of inner-directedness might easily be taken for arrogance, ignorance, or insensitivity, but at least it did have a certain survival value. It came in particularly handy for explorers, anthropologists, missionaries, and empire builders.

The British Empire produced some of the world’s finest specimens of inner-directed people who were unwaveringly British wherever they went. This was widely admired, widely resented—and widely lampooned by humorists. I have a copy of a classic *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a safari scene, three impeccably black-tie-clad gentlemen dining at a candlelit table in front of their tent, while another, in khakis and pith helmet, sits off alone some distance away, eating from a plate balanced on his lap. “Rotten shame that cheetah making off with Sir Roger’s dinner jacket,” says one of those at the table.⁹ It was English literature that gave us, in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, an immortal portrayal of what might lay in store for the civilized man who went native: the unfortunate Mr. Kurtz who descended too far into the jungle and gave himself up to savagery—savagery so unspeakable that the author kept it outside the narrative, leaving the reader to guess at what primitive depravities Kurtz may have indulged in—and at the end could die whispering only, “the horror.”

And the modern era provided a myriad of “external” institutions—such as organized religions, political ideologies, high cultures of art and literature—to help people form and maintain certain beliefs about the world. You could always be pretty sure of who and what you were if you stayed within the life of the Catholic Church or if you were inscribed in the rolls of a political movement. Drama and stories provided not only entertainment but portrayals of how ladies and gentlemen behaved—useful models for the rest of us. The modern era

also had, according to the much-quoted analysis of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, historical “metanarratives,” such as the West’s story of progress, which framed the larger events of life in a way everybody could accept and understand. Each of those, in different ways, furnished people with ready-made answers to the ancient questions of who they were and what was true.

In the postmodern world—meaning the advanced industrial countries from roughly the late 1960s onward, and increasingly the rest of the world as well—the modern era’s strategies for reality construction and identity formation don’t seem to be working as well as they used to. Most of us, say the postmodern psychologists, are not strongly inner-directed, and few of us succeed in wrapping around ourselves a community of belief that completely shields us from strange and conflicting messages. We live in virtually endless contact with otherness. In traveling, or simply by opening our eyes and ears to the communications media, we are bombarded daily by different values, different beliefs, different realities.¹⁰

Postmodern thought, influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other twentieth-century philosophers, places great emphasis on the role of language in human life. Whereas earlier generations had tended to regard language as a “transparent” medium that *describes* the real world, postmodernists see it as an active medium that *creates* the real world. We live in language. So when postmodern social theorists talk of “the social construction of reality,” they are likely to be drawing attention to the ways we use language to give meaning and value to the objects around us. And when postmodern psychologists talk about “the construction of the self,” they are drawing attention to the ways we use language—speech, writing, internal chatter—to maintain our sense of who and what we are.

“Multiphrenia” is the term one of the leading postmodernists, Kenneth Gergen of Swarthmore College, invented to describe the “populating of the self, the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being” that is the lot of people who live in our time.¹¹ Multiphrenia is the consciousness of all of us who are, as he put it, “saturated” with messages that flow into our minds from the daily

experiences of a mobile, multicultural, media-rich civilization, and whose sense of personal identity may well be as transient as the image in a kaleidoscope. Gergen said, "Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything that we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view." In the postmodern world as Gergen described it, you just don't get to be a single and consistent somebody because you don't have a social environment in which all your interactions and relationships, all the voices that you hear and the images reflected back to you by others, unanimously support a consistent view of who and what you are.

Many forces help to make up this new world. Here I'll mention four of them:

1. **THE MOBILITY OF PEOPLE.** Once, remaining in the same place was the norm for most people, and migration was a deviation. Now, the demographers tell us, migration is the norm. People are on the move in unprecedented numbers, in all directions and for many reasons. The moves are rural to urban, urban to rural, within regions, between countries. People move because they are pulled by hopes and economic opportunities, or because they are pushed by famine, disaster, and war. They move temporarily, and they move permanently—and the movements are occurring all over the world, at all levels of economy and society. And as people move they do not simply abandon their old homes and their old social networks for new ones. More and more are becoming "multilocality people" who have links to more than one place, more than one community. These may be high-flying

international jet-setters, or they may be itinerant laborers and domestic servants who work in distant foreign countries but send money to—and sometimes return to—their original homes.

2. **THE MOBILITY OF SYMBOLS.** Words and visual images are the raw material out of which our realities are made, and they are zipping around the world as never before, transported by radio, television, telephone, and of course through the newer networks of cyberspace.

3. **CULTURAL PLURALISM.** Many parts of the world that were once ethnically and culturally homogenous are now cosmopolitan, with large—in many cases permanent—colonies of residents from other lands.

4. **CULTURAL CHANGE.** We now assume in the West that whatever we do, whether we go anywhere or not, conditions will change. Values and beliefs and lifestyles change; sometimes whole political orders collapse around us. There is much social mobility, with newcomers gaining access to wealth, status, and power. Some of the early sociologists of knowledge theorized that people who live in societies with high "vertical" social mobility are less likely to be inner-directed, and thus more likely to be changed by the "horizontal mobility" of travel. Social rigidity, according to Karl Mannheim, increases the binding force of a society's constructions of reality and makes it easier for individuals to view other cultures as merely primitive or wrong; social fluidity tends to make people more relativistic, likely to be open to other values and beliefs when they go abroad.¹²

For whatever reason, most of us, instead of carrying around a solidly internalized set of values and beliefs that we hold on to unless we get brainwashed or lose our dinner jackets, are attuned to the cultural signals around us, and we change as the messages change.

In some ways the postmodern analysis runs fairly close to the one that had been offered to the world by David Reisman in *The Lonely Crowd* a couple of decades before—and which Gergen describes in *The Saturated Self* as “a modernist evaluation of . . . the early emanations of the postmodern mentality.”¹³ But although Gergen appears to agree generally with Reisman’s description of how Western society was changing, he takes issue with the conformist bashing that had been evident in the earlier work and which became a major sport among social scientists and media pundits throughout the 1950s and early 1960s—the nostalgic elevation of the inner-directed individual, the man with “the courage of his convictions,” to the status of a model of mental health and moral probity. Multiphrenia, as Gergen described it, is part problem and part solution. It is indeed the mind of the hassled and harried, torn in all directions by conflicting commitments, yet it is also potentially the key to a more spacious and supple way of being, a richer inner and outer life. He cited research that directly contradicts Reisman’s and showed other-directed people to be more psychologically healthy in several respects—“more positive in their attitudes toward others, less shy, less upset by inconsistencies, superior in remembering information about others, more emotionally expressive, and more influential”—than their cousins with the famous inner gyroscopes.¹⁴

At this point it should be obvious how much is at stake here, how much more than a mere fine point of psychological theory. We are not only talking about a new model of mental health—no small matter in itself—but also questioning some major assumptions about human morality and social behavior. We are considering a drastically different way of evaluating your life and mine, and the lives of the people we know. We are participating in a mental revolution as the one that took place when the Greeks ceased to believe that their personal lives were directed from Mount Olympus.

The Shape Changers

Robert Jay Lifton, whose thinking is closely akin to Gergen’s but who comes at the subject from a slightly different direction and with a slightly different emphasis, presented a somewhat different perspective on this revolution. Lifton reported some years before that he had, in his psychiatric work, identified a new type of person he called “the protean self.” The protean person is unafraid to change, goes willingly through many metamorphoses in the course of a life. These may be stressful to the person who is going through them, and bewildering to others, but they are not simply signs of pathology or weakness. Furthermore, said Lifton, this pattern extends to all areas of the person’s experience. It may include changing political opinions and sexual behavior, changing ideas and ways of expressing them, changing ways of organizing one’s life.

Lifton’s first contribution to the literature of psychology—and his first exploration of the protean self, although not yet under that label—had come much earlier. That was his groundbreaking study of brainwashing as it was practiced on political prisoners during the time of the Cultural Revolution in China.¹⁵ One of the most common arguments against postmodern psychology is the charge that it describes only the problems of postmodern intellectuals and others like them in the contemporary Western world and has little or nothing to say about humanity in general. But what Lifton documented was a profound *changeability* in human consciousness—something universal, to be found in all people: When people are manipulated with sufficient skill and ruthlessness, they can literally “change their minds” not only about what’s true—what is right and wrong politically—but also about who they are. This was exploited by the brainwashers—as it had been by various inquisitors and propagandists before them—but it was not invented by them. It was inherent in the nature of human consciousness. It was also, I suspect, what most human cultural institutions—from the rituals of traditional societies to the ideologies of the modern world—had been designed to keep under control so that people stayed on track, secure in their identities and their beliefs.

When I first encountered Lifton's ideas about the protean self, in a work published in 1970, I got the impression that he was talking mainly about conversions over time.¹⁶ But in a more comprehensive work on the subject published in the '90s, he said that although the protean person might indeed change sequentially—trading in one personal style, personality, role, or belief system for another—proteanism could also be simultaneous, “in the multiplicity of varied, even antithetical images and ideas held at any one time by the self, each of which it may be more or less ready to act upon. . . .”¹⁷

Although Lifton's ideas are radically different from those of mainstream modern psychology, we should note where he draws the line, because it points up another difference—this one within the rather unregimented ranks of postmodern psychologists:

I must separate myself . . . from those observers, postmodern or otherwise, who equate multiplicity and fluidity with disappearance of the self, with a complete absence of coherence among its various elements. I would claim the opposite: proteanism involves a quest for authenticity and meaning, a form-seeking assertion of self. . . . The protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination.¹⁸

The Death of the Self

Other postmodern psychologists—the ones Lifton doesn't agree with—are calling into question the idea of *any* self as a stable, continuing entity apart from its own fleeting descriptions of itself. This “decentered” view is particularly popular among poststructuralist French intellectuals, and it usually takes the form of denying that the speaking subject—the “I” of our personal consciousness—really exists at all. For the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the subject is not the

speaker of language but its creation. “I am not a poet, but a poem,” he has written. This view of the subject as the product of its own discourse is expressed in a different way by Jacques Derrida and the deconstructionists. For more politically oriented intellectuals such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, the subject is still a fiction, but a fiction imposed upon us by external power agendas: A solid, centered, identifiable self can be more easily controlled or punished, is more capable of feeling guilt. It is hardly surprising that Foucault, who has rivaled Franz Kafka in his descriptions of society's fiendish cleverness at finding ways to deprive individuals of their privacy and freedom, is the most determined to reject anybody's effort to know who he is or expect him to remain the same.

So for these latter-day Heraclitans, the self—at least that part of it that you experience as the subjective “I”—is its own description of itself in the present tense. Who you are is neither more nor less than who you are in the process of *telling yourself*—or others—that you are.

Paul Kugler, a contemporary Jungian, said:

Today, it is the speaking subject who declared God dead one hundred years ago whose very existence is now being called into question. No longer is the speaking subject unquestionably assumed to be the source of language and speech, existence and truth, autonomy and freedom, unity and wholeness, identity and individuality. The transcendence of Descartes' “cogito” is no longer so certain. The speaking subject appears to be not a referent beyond the first person pronoun, but, rather, a fragmented entity produced by the act of speaking. Each time the first person pronoun is uttered it projects a different entity, a different perspective and identity. It is positioned in a different location.¹⁹

This is about as far as you can get from the concept of the integrated self that dominated Western society until only a couple of decades ago—and that still dominates commonsense assumptions

about personal identity. It goes so far, in fact, that it comes very close to the no-self of Oriental mysticism.

The Case of the Invisible Elephant

The multiphrenic self, the protean self, the decentered self—each of these terms is an attempt to describe the quality of life in our times, the kinds of people we have become. Each analysis is persuasive in its way, but yet each points to somewhat different features, like the famous blind men feeling the elephant. The first stresses our multiplicity, the second our changeability, the third the elusiveness of our own subjective consciousness.

Of all the concepts of postmodern psychology, the declaration that there is nothing more to the self than its description *of itself* in the moment seems to be the hardest for us to grasp. People with whom I have discussed this matter find it especially troublesome for many reasons—not the least of which being that it pushes them toward not only thinking differently about life, but also *feeling* differently about it. Most don't have much trouble accepting multiphrenia and protean selves as descriptions of how people live today—and I find a surprising number who regard that as a good thing despite the obvious difficulties involved. But if you go far enough into testing—in your own consciousness—the proposition that your subjective sense of yourself is your present description of it, you are likely to experience something akin to what psychologists call an altered state of consciousness. Some people find the experience pleasant, bringing a certain sense of relief. Others report feelings of vertigo, confusion, even panic. Some say it feels like dying.

Ernest Becker wrote about the denial of death, about the fear of not-being, which, he said, we do everything possible to avoid, but which “haunts the human animal like nothing else.”²⁰ It is hard enough to admit that we will die sometime in the future: Who is prepared to realize that we are, in a very real sense, dying every second as we let go of the consciousness of the second before? Of course we

can console ourselves with the fact that we are being born every second as well, but that seems a touch Pollyannaish and not nearly as comforting as the delusion that what we are now has a certain permanence, is what we have been and will be—the delusion of the modern self.

There are positive ways of dealing with this ever-present death, overcoming the denial of it, making it a source of wisdom and even of joy. In fact there are many such ways, including psychotherapy and various pursuits called spiritual practice. They come in different forms, but all require that you take the denial seriously, respect it. And this is something that, it seems to me, many of the postmodern theorists fail to do. Enthusiastically proclaiming the death of the self, they reveal a singular lack of compassion for real people who feel that their selves *are* dying and who don't like it a damn bit.

In Search of Limits

Often in discussions of postmodern psychology, when words like “multiphrenic” and “protean” begin to fill the air, somebody asks about limits. Are there not limits—imposed upon us by such old favorites as heredity and environment—on how many personalities we are able to entertain within one individual consciousness? Aren't there limits on how frequently we can change our roles, opinions, beliefs, lifestyles, or personal characteristics? Aren't there limits on how radically we can ever depart from our customary identities?

The answer to those questions is yes and no:

Yes, there are limits. Genes give us the shapes of our bodies, as well as brains, which come with certain built-in predispositions—things we are driven to do and things we just can't do. And our life experiences do leave their marks on us internally and externally. To some extent the Freudians are right in their insistence that we spend much of our adult lives reprocessing our childhoods. The

slate is not completely clean. Lifton's research on brainwashing showed not just that people can be forced to make astonishing changes in what they believe to be true about the world and even whom they believe themselves to be, but also that people are capable of resisting such pressures—although not all with equal success.

But no, we really don't know what the limits are. The question is far from being settled in any scientific sense, and even farther from being settled in most people's opinions. The contemporary postmodern world is a colossal circus of people pushing the limits in all directions—changing identities, appearances, genders, social roles, even consciousness in ways that most people in the past would never have believed possible. We will examine specific instances of this kind of limit-pushing in this book, because it is only in the experiences of real people, not in any body of abstract theory, that we can see what the limits are, or at least what they are now.

Historically the strongest limits—and the most visible and numerous—have been the social ones: the Thou Shalt Nots, the norms, the recognized roles, the traditions, the rituals, the authority systems, the demands of others that we be consistent selves. These are the limits that are losing much of their power now and are being tested and questioned everywhere.

Getting Through the Identity Crisis

There is a lot of debate in the psychology world about the postmodernists and their ideas. This argument isn't about whether or not contemporary life tends to cause a fragmentation of the self. It does, and everybody knows it. The debate is about how bad this situation is, whether it is inherently pathological, and about how people ought to cope with it. In the spring of 1994 and again in the spring of 1995, *American Psychologist* ran a series of articles on these issues, with Kenneth Gergen speaking for the postmodernists, and Brewster Smith of the University of California at Santa Cruz as the leading critic.

Smith was inclined to stress the downers of postmodern life: “the prevalent cynicism about politics, indeed, about most social institutions; the shallowness of the mass media and the chaos of contemporary attempts at high art and literature; the inescapable climate of sensationalism focused on sex and violence; the unnegotiable clash between fundamentalism and absolutism on the one hand and nihilistic relativism on the other; the uncertainty about all standards, whether they concern knowledge, art, or morals—or the utter rejection of standards; and the fin de siècle sense of drift and doom.”²¹

Gergen, on a more optimistic note, insisted that the postmodern world is perilous but also promising, that it “does not militate against practices of research or moral deliberation. Rather it invites us to place them in broader cultural and historical context. By striking our banners of truth and morality, we might live less aggressively, more tolerantly, and even more creatively with others in the world.”²²

As for coping, it really comes down to two basic alternatives. The first is to make your own life—and perhaps society as a whole—less multiphrenic. The second is to get good at multiphrenia.

Brewster Smith spoke for the first alternative, and his prescription was one that is now extremely popular: Become a member of a community, less individualistic, and more committed to society. He cited with approval the popularity of *Habits of the Heart*, by Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah et al., which describes Western society as a place of “individualism grown cancerous” and makes a strong case for a “morally coherent life” based on a sense of citizenship and social responsibility.²³ He mentioned, also favorably, the manifesto on “communitarianism” that had been the work of another sociologist, Amitai Etzioni, and has since attained the status of an organized social movement advocating the need for deeper roots in civic life.²⁴

It's amazing how strongly the fashion has shifted—about 180 degrees from the celebration of inner-directed individualism, the condemnation of conformity, that was mainstream thinking among liberal intellectuals only a few decades ago. Today the same kind of people condemn individualism and celebrate life in the bosom of a commu-

nity, a kind of life that can be lived only by conforming to the community's norms and values.

Gergen is much less inclined to view the postmodern situation with alarm or to characterize the multiphrenic state of mind as a form of mental illness. Although he devoted a lot of space in *The Saturated Self* to descriptions of the perils, discontents, confusions, and stresses of life in the postmodern world, his personal position appears to be that it offers great opportunities:

If one's identity is properly managed, the rewards can be substantial—the devotion of one's intimates, happy children, professional success, the achievement of community goals, personal popularity, and so on. All are possible if one avoids looking back to locate a true and enduring self, and simply acts to full potential in the moment at hand. Simultaneously, the somber hues of multiphrenia—the sense of superficiality, the guilt at not measuring up to multiple criteria—give way to an optimistic sense of enormous possibility.²⁵

There's a lot to be said in favor of the communitarian case as an exhortation to better citizenship, but it offers no real solution to the personal problem—the lack of a single social setting that can help us to define a single and consistent identity. Life has changed in fundamental ways for most people, and no amount of moralizing can recreate the idyll of intimate and familiar connection to a single town or neighborhood. We all are becoming multicomunity people, inhabiting multiple and ever-changing life-worlds. We need a different understanding of self and society, and that presents us with new problems. Sometimes conflicts between the demands of different communities—such as professional community and that of the family and neighborhood—wreak havoc with marriages. Sometimes people can't decide which community they most want to be a part of, and spend their time and energy shopping among churches, self-help groups, and other societies in search of that true and completely

satisfying home. Often communities become possessive and make strident demands upon their members for more time, loyalty, energy, or money. People need to learn new skills, become adept at prioritizing the claims made on them by different communities—which also compete to define who and what we are.