The self
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What is This?


The self

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Abstract

This article advocates an extensive definition of self as the totality of what an organism is physically, biologically, psychologically, socially, and culturally. This definition departs from the narrower definition of self as self-representation – as culturally shaped constructs of the self that one applies to oneself – that is current in cultural anthropology today. The article goes on to elucidate recent neurobiological thinking – specifically, the model of the interpreter developed by Michael Gazzinaga and his colleagues, and Joseph LeDoux’s idea of the synaptic self – in support of the extensive definition favored here. Finally, the article compares two divergent analyses by Katherine Ewing of the same case material, showing that the second analysis, that implicitly assumes an extensive definition of the self, provides a more satisfying explanation of the case than the earlier analysis, that is explicitly framed by a definition of the self as self-representation.

Key Words

cultural task solutions • interpreter • intrapsychic autonomy • neurobiology • the Pakistani woman • self • self-representation • synaptic self

Not too long ago, I heard a young cultural anthropologist give a colloquium in which he employed a variant of performance theory to capture the array of ‘selves’ that individuals availed themselves of and enacted, on different occasions, in the community where he had conducted research. Afterwards, I asked him what he thought was going on in people’s minds when they managed and performed these various roles. He thought hard for a moment, giving me the impression that this was an altogether new question for him. Then he responded that they must be performing each of these different selves to themselves in their heads.

The colloquium speaker’s answer brought home to me the impoverishment of cultural anthropological theory with regard to the self. Specifically, his idea of performing homunculi reflects the recent cultural anthropological tendency to treat the self in overly simplistic terms. By his rendition, the self is just a matter of self-presentation; later in this article, I will give an example in which the self is reduced to self-representation. In what follows I want to urge an extension in the way cultural anthropologists typically define the self nowadays. I think that this proposed extension
will correct a theoretical over-commitment to a contemporary anthropological view of the self as fragmentary, shifting, and inconsistent, thereby increasing the explanatory options open to us.

I will make my argument in three steps. First, I will present alternative definitions of self and indicate how I would like to see it redefined in contemporary cultural anthropology. Then, I will review two recent approaches in neurobiology to show that my preferred definition of self actually accords better with, and captures more fully, what neurobiologists are finding out about the neural processes that constitute the self. Finally, I will re-analyze a published case to illustrate the explanatory advantage of adopting my preferred definition of self. I can only hope that those cultural anthropologists who espouse a generalized antipathy to biological explanation of any kind will set aside that bias and read to the end of my argument.

**AN EXTENSIVE DEFINITION OF SELF**

Several different definitions of self recur in the recent anthropological literature and, while I have no intention of swelling this number here, I must, in order to make my argument, first make clear my own definitional preference. In doing so, I lean heavily on Katherine Ewing’s discussion of the alternatives, in her influential article, ‘The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency’ (1990). In what follows I draw on Ewing’s presentation of the existing definitions of self not only because it is clear and exhaustive, but also because, in the final third of my own article, I will be examining a case study she presents in the very same 1990 article and returns to in a subsequent one. I will be arguing for my preferred definition of self against the one she employs in ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’.

The first definition of self that Ewing considers is one she characterizes as the most general, and ordinary, everyday, sense of the word. In this sense, she (1990: 254) says, “self” encompasses the physical organism, all aspects of psychological functioning, and social attributes. It is an all-inclusive (if not loose) definition of self that stresses the intra-psychic – including psychological, biological, and cultural, and both explicit and implicit – processes that comprise it. Ewing finds this definition unsuitable to anthropological studies of the self. However, it is the definition of self that I intend to recommend; a first indication of our divergent positions. It is a usage, we will see, that corresponds not only to lay understanding as Ewing remarks, but also, and importantly, to recent neurobiological characterizations of the self with which I hope to connect. For, as neurobiologists learn more and more about what neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux has dubbed *the synaptic self*, these new findings about the way the brain organizes selfhood enlarge our understanding of it and our capacity to explain how it influences human feeling, motivation, and action. In his book, *Synaptic Self*, LeDoux defines the self thus: ‘In my view, the self is the totality of what an organism is physically, biologically, psychologically, socially, and culturally. Though it is a unit, it is not unitary’ (2002: 31). This extensive definition captures the multiple aspects of self, results of multiple independent processes, some explicit and some implicit, that neuroscientists are identifying.

It is worth noting that the definition I favor can also trace its pedigree to culture and personality theory, recouping the notion of personality as it has been and continues to be understood by many practitioners of that school. Perhaps it is time for a fresh

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new term to label an analytic concept for which there is an enduring theoretical need – by whatever name it is called. I myself am happy to use ‘self’ and ‘personality’ interchangeably.

Common to culture and personality theorists’ definitions of personality (see note 1) – though missing from Ewing’s (1990) discussion of this definition of self – is the assumption that the physical organism and its psychological functioning of which Ewing speaks comprise a complex or system or organization of some sort – as Ingham puts it, ‘the intrapsychic organization of the person’ (1996: 88). The idea of such organization, which I hereby import into my definition of self, nicely captures the self’s ‘impulse’ (actually, we will see, a number of disparate impulses) toward at least partial integration, but does so without any assumption that this integration is total or that the self is perfectly cohesive. Like LeDoux when he says that the self, though a unit, is not unitary, I make no a priori assumption as to the overall cohesiveness of the self. There are processes, highlighted by Ewing, that work against such cohesiveness. There are other processes, however, that push toward integration. As Claudia Strauss puts it in the title to her 1997 article, the self is ‘partly fragmented, partly integrated’ (1997a).

**SELF AS SELF-REPRESENTATION**

In ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’, Ewing goes on to distinguish two further usages, both of which she attributes to psychoanalytic thinking on the topic of the self. One of these is self as self-representation (1990: 254). By self-representations, Ewing means culturally shaped concepts of self that one applies to oneself – or, as Melford Spiro elsewhere puts it, ‘the individual’s mental representation of his own person’ (1993: 109). These appear to be composed minimally of labels (such as ‘dutiful daughter’ or ‘clever politician’ in her case study to be discussed later) and images, but doubtless also of other knowledge, accumulated memories of self-relevant experiences of all kinds – particularly early experiences of identification with others (Ewing, 1990). Importantly, self-representations in Ewing’s terms are multiple and constantly shifting. Since the self is composed of these multiple, shifting representations, any sense or experience that individuals have of a cohesive, continuous self is illusory.

For Ewing (1990: 255), it is this second definition, the self as self-representation, that is the anthropologically relevant one: ‘Since anthropologists are talking about symbols, otherwise known as “collective representations”’, she says, ‘the culturally shaped “self” that is the object of anthropological study can, in my opinion, most clearly be understood in this sense, that of self-representation’. This stance – that the anthropological study of the self is rightly confined to the study of symbols – is instructive in the context of this special issue and its aims, because it illustrates the very anti-psychological bias that we oppose in these articles. Here this bias is cast in Geertzian terms, as a territorial, and decidedly anti-interdisciplinary, claim for the distinctiveness of what anthropologists study: symbols. I will be arguing that this definition of self as self-representation is markedly incomplete, and unnecessarily limiting for anthropological theory, and I will try to illustrate the value of interdisciplinary drawing on neurobiology to support a more extensive definition.

The third and final definition Ewing considers deserves briefer comment. This definition, inspired by the self psychology of Heinz Kohut, posits a self as ‘a supraordinate, primary psychic constellation, the center of experience and initiative and the main
motivating agency’ (Ewing, 1990: 255). Ewing critiques Kohut’s assumption that the
self thus defined is unitary and cohesive, with continuity through time. When she next
returns to this Kohutian definition, she might seem, at first blush, to be seeking a way
to reconcile it with a conception of self as self-representation. She says (1990: 261): ‘Even
when a person has made efforts to achieve integration, the result falls short of Kohut’s
cohesive self; the components maintain a semiautonomous existence, and new events
can rupture previously established integrations (which in any case may not incorporate
all of a person’s self-representations)’. This allowance for efforts to achieve integration,
however partial, might be the route to recognition of a (non-illusory) process of psychic
integration of the self, along Kohutian lines. But, when Ewing takes up Kohut’s theory
of the self for a final time at the end of the article, her move is not to attempt a reconcili-
ation of this theory with her own, but, instead, to reinterpret it in her terms (1990:
272–4). She calls his label, the ‘cohesive self’, a misnomer for the capacity for flexibility
that she takes to be the essence of what he intended by this concept, and she redefines
this flexibility as the (illusory) sense or experience of wholeness that ‘derives from a
symbolic constitution of the self and the phenomenon of rapid shifts in the content of
that experience’ (1990: 274).

The treatment of the self exclusively in terms of self-representation, for which Ewing
opts, is widely accepted, even normative, in cultural anthropology today. A clear
example would be Wimal Dissanayake’s definition of the self, in the introduction to his
edited volume on Narratives of Agency: Self-Making in China, India, and Japan, as ‘the
imaginary register consisting of identifications, narratives, formulations and images that
serve the notion of the individual’, an ‘imaginary singularity’ that, he says, ‘is largely a
product of self-representation’ (1996: x). This stance toward the self has been taken to
what is perhaps its extreme in Debbora Battaglia’s introduction to an edited 1995
volume titled Rhetorics of Self-Making. Asserts Battaglia, the self is ‘a representational
economy’, and ‘[f]rom this position there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative

Battaglia’s is, of course, ‘a project that challenges essentialist notions’ (1995: 11) – a
de-essentializing move that has been made by contemporary cultural anthropologists
against a whole range of analytic concepts, in the name of opposition to an ethnocen-
tric bias inherent in western science. To accept any analytic construct recognized in
western science or philosophy as more than a cultural construction is to commit such
bias, seems to be the general point. For Battaglia (1995: 2–3), the western self – ‘the
“transcendent self” of ego psychology and some psychological anthropology, a self
perduing, continuous, impermeable, unitary, and universally sought after’ – is such a
suspect analytic construct. Yet, as D.W. Murray (1993) has effectively argued, a concept
of the self as fragmentary and self-integration as illusory has just as long and venerable
a tradition in western thought. (For a similar point, see Marcus, 1991: 16.) Thus, the
vanishing act that Battaglia performs on the self is no less ‘ethnocentric’ than the treat-
ment of the self as ‘transcendent’, that she opposes.

I will next introduce two theoretical approaches from neurobiology: the proposal of
Michael Gazzaniga for a neural interpreter, and LeDoux’s characterization of the synaptic
self, already alluded to. While on the surface these approaches may seem to represent the
two different and opposing definitions of self set out by Ewing (1990; the self as
restricted to self-representation and the self as encompassing the entire organism), within
a neurobiological framework the approaches can be seen to be wholly compatible. In conjunction, they offer a more complete proposal for a theory of the self and dissolve any apparent conflict between the two anthropological definitions.

THE INTERPRETER MODULE

Neuroscientists recognize that the human capacity for language and the cognitive capacities enabling language amounted to a revolution in the way the brain works and what it can do. Language supplements nonverbal with verbal knowledge in working memory. Working memory is a mental workspace in which information (a limited amount at one time) that may be of different types and come from different systems, including from long-term memory, can be grasped, attended to, and integrated. Language enhances this capacity immensely, radically altering ‘the brain’s ability to compare, contrast, discriminate, and associate on-line, in real time, and to use such information to guide thinking and problem-solving’ (LeDoux, 2002: 197). As Merlin Donald puts it,

Language differentiates experience for us. It refines the thought process and embeds it in increasingly precise culturally imposed algorithms. We know intuitively what words and sentences do for us. They define reality. They focus our attention. They elevate our awareness of whatever they specify . . . In a word, languages clarify the experienced world. (Donald, 2001: 294)

This uniquely human, language-based capacity for more discriminatory, precise thought is the foundation for what neurobiologist Michael Gazzaniga has called the interpreter and has located in the human brain’s left hemisphere – to be more exact, in the left pre-frontal cortex. The interpreter is a neural system dedicated, as its name suggests, to the interpretation of our life experiences as these occur. As we will see, the interpreter is not unrelated to the anthropological notion of the self as self-representation, as Ewing (1990) defines it.

Evidence for an interpreter module comes from decades of research and hundreds of experiments with split-brain patients by Gazzaniga and others. Splitting the brain is a radical surgical solution to severe epileptic seizures that are not helped by medication alone. When these seizures have multiple sites, it is impossible to excise the epileptic tissue. Instead, the nerves between the two sides of the brain are severed, so that seizures are localized to the hemisphere where they originate. Then, during seizures, the other half of the brain remains in control of the body.

Individuals thereafter appear to have two minds, each of which operates somewhat independently. For a stark example, LeDoux (2002: 305) reports watching a boy, several days after his split-brain surgery, trying to pull his pants down with his right hand and up with his left. This unfortunate side effect of the surgical procedure opens a remarkable window into brain function. The experimental approach is to present the right side of the brain with images, written instructions, or other visual stimuli to which the left side is not privy and then to ask the patient to make sense of what has been presented. What Gazzaniga and colleagues discovered was that the left brain would make up ‘elaborate confabulations’ (Turk et al., 2003: 70) to explain seeming gaps and
inconsistencies, attempting ‘to assign a coherent explanation to events or behavior’ even when none is present. For example, the right hemisphere is instructed, ‘Take a walk.’ The patient gets up and walks away. Asked, ‘Why are you doing that?’ she replies, ‘Oh, I need to get a drink.’ As Gazzaniga elsewhere concludes, ‘The left brain really doesn’t know why it finds the body leaving the room. When asked, it cooks up an explanation’ (Gazzaniga, 1998: 133). These cooked-up explanations are analogous to the illusion of wholeness described by Ewing.

One further experiment described by Gazzaniga and his colleagues will suffice to bring home these experimental findings. In this experimental manipulation, the split-brain patient is presented with two pictures, one to each hemisphere, and then asked to select an associated picture from an array placed in front of him. (Keep in mind that the movement of each hand is controlled by the opposite hemisphere of the brain.)

When a picture of a chicken claw was presented to the left hemisphere and a snow scene presented to the right hemisphere, subject P.S. responded by selecting a picture of a shovel with the left hand and a picture of a chicken with the right hand. These choices would seem to be logical since a shovel might be used to clear snow, and the chicken claw obviously goes with the chicken. However, when asked to explain why he selected these items, P.S. responded, ‘Oh, that’s simple. The chicken claw goes with the chicken, and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed.’ Thus the left hemisphere explains the response of the disconnected right hemisphere (left hand) in terms of its own experience, which does not include information about the snow scene (perceived only by the right hemisphere). (Turk et al., 2003: 70–1)

As these researchers summarize this and other experimental results, ‘The right hemisphere appears to process what it receives and no more, while the left hemisphere appears to make elaborations, associations, and searches for logical patterns in the material, even when none are present’ (Turk et al., 2003: 70. V.S. Ramachandran has made a similar argument based on other lines of research.12 See Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998: 134–6).

So it seems there is a system or module, located in the left pre-frontal cortex, that interprets information after it has undergone its initial processing in the right hemisphere. It is perhaps not immediately obvious why, in evolutionary terms, there should be a system that ‘cooks up’ plausible but sometimes bizarre and downright erroneous explanations for events. But Gazzaniga and his colleagues (Turk et al., 2003: 71–2) argue that this hemispheric asymmetry in processing the world provides an adaptive advantage. In the normal brain, the cognitive styles of the two hemispheres complement each other. The right hemisphere maintains a veridical representation of experience, tracking what is happening, while the left hemisphere strives to provide an understanding of events and their underlying causes, solving problems in comprehension and preparing for future occurrences of the same events.13

That the interpreter ‘provides the string that ties events together’ (Gazzaniga, 1998: 133) is suggestive indeed.14 But what does this ability to construct and parse sequences of causally or otherwise related events have to do with the self? Gazzaniga and his colleagues (Turk et al., 2003: 72) suggest that one aspect of the coherent explanation of the world that the interpreter produces by integrating available information is a unified
experience of the self. The information relevant to this interpretive task includes autobiographical knowledge, personal beliefs, currently active goal states, and conceptions of the self (Turk et al., 2003: 75). In short, the left hemisphere interpreter might be said to be responsible for self-representation, in Ewing’s sense. In parallel with these neuroscientists, Ewing suggests, ‘it could be argued that we constitute the self as a string of memories’, arguing ‘that these memories are analogous to a curriculum vitae for a particular self-representation, a highly selective personal history’ (1990: 267).

Autobiographical memory, then, is one of the chief building materials for self-representation. It is worth adding that Donald (2001: 297) grants a central role to language, and specifically the human narrative skill that is itself built on language, in enabling the construction, retention and mental grasp of autobiographical memory. LeDoux also recognizes this ‘narrative self’, which he describes as ‘a coherent self-consciousness that extends with past and future stories that we tell about ourselves’, and which, he notes, ‘bears some relation to the postmodern notion that the self is socially constructed’ (2002: 20).

However, there is an important difference between the interpreter, said to draw on an autobiographical knowledge base together with current beliefs and goals, and Ewing’s idea of the self as self-representations that each draw on strings of relevant memories. This difference becomes clear when Gazzinaga and his colleagues equate their concept of an interpreter module to the idea of a ‘working self’ delineated by psychologists Martin Conway and Christopher Pleydell-Pearce (2000). A large and diverse array of experimental findings, which I cannot enumerate here, are cited by these latter authors in support of their claims regarding the properties of this working self.

The working self is ‘a constantly changing dynamic on-line conception of the self and what it may become’ (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000: 265–6). This definition might make the working self seem compatible with self-representation as Ewing depicts it. However, Ewing (1990: 251) stresses the rapidly shifting nature of self-representations, depending on context, and their inconsistency, enabling her to dismiss any sense of the self as stable and cohesive as illusory. In Conway and Pleydell-Pearce’s rendition of it, by contrast, this self-conception, while dynamic, is not unconstrained. Rather, it is grounded in, and limited by, the stable base of autobiographical knowledge. The self thus constructed out of autobiographical memory has the potential for considerable stability and cohesiveness. Indeed, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000: 267, 279–80) tie their theory of an autobiographically-constructed self to other research showing that individuals develop recurrent themes about their lives and construct integrated life narratives around these themes.

Moreover, a primary function of the working self, in conjunction with autobiographical knowledge (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000: 271), is to structure currently active goals, for example retrieving memories relevant to these goals, assessing goals for plausibility and consistency with one another, and keeping a record of goal attainment successes and failures in the form of vivid autobiographical memories of these events (2000: 267–71). Some of these goals are what Conway and Pleydell-Pearce speak of as ‘superordinate life goals’ (2000: 267), and are long-term – as must be the record of autobiographical successes and failures out of which such goals emerge and against which they are assessed, and hence the self that crystallizes out of these autobiographical experiences. The durability of all of these long-term goals and enduring autobiographical
memories, as well as the stable themes that run through these goals and memories, are underwritten by processes to be described in the next section.

THE SYNAPTIC SELF

The interpreter is only a small part of a larger neurobiological whole. Indeed, the awareness, will, identity, and autobiography on which it depends are a late-breaking evolutionary development (Damasio, 1999; Donald, 2001). The larger story, a highly complex one, has begun to be detailed by recent neurobiological research. In his book, *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, Joseph LeDoux (2002: 308–23) argues for at least six distinct neural processes that contribute to the assembly and maintenance of the self. It is worth considering what these are. First, he notes, different neural systems experience the same world, so that ‘a kind of shared culture develops between the various systems, because they are exposed to similar environmental circumstances’ (2002: 308).

Second, Hebbian plasticity extends across networks in the brain. This second process requires some explanation. Briefly, and over-simply, activity across synapses from one neuron to another leads to a strengthening of the connections from the presynaptic to the postsynaptic neuron. This was discovered by the psychologist Donald Hebb in 1949 and is called Hebb’s rule (LeDoux, 2002: 80). LeDoux, in Chapter Six of his book (2002: 134–73), provides a clear, detailed summary of what is now known about how the process works. This ability of connections among neurons to be altered through new learning – new experience and consequently new neuronal activity – is known as synaptic plasticity. Recent studies suggest that changes of this type actually take place, not just within individual networks, but between networks in the brain as well. This is another way in which different parts of the brain are integrated. In this sense, the self is a large, interconnected network of synapses that fire in concert.

Third, parallel processing is further coordinated by modulators, which are chemicals such as dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin released in response to stimuli that signal emotional arousal. As LeDoux, whose own work has been in this area of emotion, explains:

> The cells that produce modulators are located primarily in the brain stem, but their axons are distributed throughout the brain. Consequently, when these cells are activated, many brain areas are affected. The widespread action of modulators makes them especially useful in broadcasting that something significant has happened, but they are less suited to identifying exactly what has happened. (LeDoux, 2002: 312–3)

Modulators not only signal emotional or otherwise significant experiences, and do so throughout the brain. They also promote synaptic plasticity and enhance memory, so that such experiences are the ones we tend to learn and remember. Thus, the experiences that trigger modulators have a large role in forming whom we think we are.

Brain systems learn in parallel in these three very different ways. But, as LeDoux concludes, ‘parallel learning, on its own (even when buttressed by synchrony and modulatory chemicals), is not sufficient to account for the coherent personality of a human being’ (2002: 315). The fourth mechanism in what he calls neural ‘self-assembly’ is ‘the existence of convergence zones, regions where information from diverse systems can be integrated’ (2002: 315). Convergence takes place across ensembles, or small sets of...
synaptically connected cells – for example, in the perceptual representation of faces or complex scenes. It also takes place, more broadly, across systems. Specialized regions of the brain receive and integrate diverse kinds of information – in particular, the prefrontal cortex, the posterior parietal area, rhinal cortical areas, and the hippocampus; the latter actually receives and integrates information from other convergence zones. LeDoux comments that ‘[t]he cognitive sophistication of a mammalian species, in fact, is nicely predicted by the extent of convergence that occurs in its cortex – more is present in humans than in monkeys, for example, and more in monkeys than in rats’. He adds that synaptic plasticity, synchrony, and modulation also influence convergence zones, ‘further increasing their potential to integrate information across systems’ (2002: 316–17).

Thoughts and memories assembled in convergence zones, LeDoux points out, reflect the whole experience of the organism, composed out of the different ‘bits and pieces of an experience recorded by other systems’. Hence there is a unity of experience between the convergence zone and the lower connections from which this information was drawn; thoughts and memories are coordinated. Further, when these thoughts and memories enter consciousness – that is, whenever they are explicit – they can have their own coordinating effect, influencing what we attend to, the way we see things, what we intend, and the way we act. Thus, ‘working memory can direct traffic in the areas with which it is connected, enhancing the processing of stimuli that are relevant to the task on which it is engaged and suppressing the processing of other stimuli’ (2002: 319). This is the fifth neural process that contributes to a self, one that has been labeled ‘downward causation’. While the ways in which thoughts influence activity in other brain systems is not yet well understood, it stands to reason that if a thought is a pattern of neural activity in a network, then it can activate, and through synaptic plasticity change, another network. It should occur to the reader that the interpreter module posited by Gazzaniga is just such a convergence zone and is augmented by downward causation. That is to say, the interpreter receives input from diverse sources, integrates this information by assembling a coherent story about it in working memory, and sends this story out to other neural systems that then respond to it.21 LeDoux adds that downward causation, the influence of thoughts on perception, motivation, and action, has a specific effect on our sense of self: ‘With thoughts empowered this way, we can begin to see how the way we think about ourselves can have powerful influences on the way we are, and who we become. One’s self-image is self-perpetuating’ (2002: 320).

Sixthly and lastly, LeDoux (2002: 320–2) points out, emotional states play a special role in construction and maintenance of the self, because under some conditions they can monopolize brain resources, focusing all the brain’s processing on the emotionally arousing experience, enhancing these synaptic connections and facilitating their plasticity, and feeding back into the felt experience of the emotion in the form of bodily sensations and of hormones. The effects of modulators are long lasting, but the effects of hormones are even longer-lasting. ‘The net result’, concludes LeDoux, ‘is that emotional arousal penetrates the brain widely, and perpetuates itself’ (2002: 320). As well, when one emotion system is active, others are inhibited, so that the learning that takes place is relevant to just the current emotional situation. ‘And’, finally,

because more brain systems are typically active during emotional than during nonemotional states and the intensity of arousal is greater, the opportunity for
coordinated learning across brain systems is greater during emotional states. By coordinating parallel plasticity throughout the brain, emotional states promote the development and unification of the self. (2002: 322)22

The various processing systems that LeDoux describes, with their various integrating effects, have obvious adaptive functions for the organism – for example, coordinating information from diverse sensory systems to achieve an integrated representation of a state of affairs, or inhibiting systems that would otherwise compete with emotional arousal in order to ensure undivided attention to an urgent situation. In performing their various functions, these processes of parallel neural input, synaptic plasticity, coordination by modulators, neural self-assembly in convergence zones, downward causation, and emotional arousal, each press in their different ways toward integration of the self. This integration is far from perfect in its neural realization.23 Following his comment about the self that ‘[i]though it is a unit, it is not unitary’, LeDoux goes on to explain,

The fact that all aspects of the self are not usually manifest simultaneously, and that different aspects can even be contradictory, may seem to present a hopelessly complex problem. However, this simply means that different components of the self reflect the operation of different brain systems, which can be but are not always in sync. While explicit memory is mediated by a single system, there are a variety of different brain systems that store information implicitly, allowing for many aspects of the self to coexist. (LeDoux, 2002: 31)

Wholeness, then, is not merely an illusion, although it sometimes can be. A sense of being a whole self also arises as a consequence of neural systems acting in concert to achieve integration.24

Before going on to consider the implications of these neurobiological approaches for the anthropological study of the self, I want to acknowledge the place of culture in this theoretical scheme. LeDoux recognizes the centrality of culture in his formulations of the neurobiology of the self, even if he does not fill in the cultural side of the story very fully. As he says, ‘My assertion that synapses are the basis of your personality does not assume that your personality is determined by synapses; rather, it’s the other way around. Synapses are simply the brain’s way of receiving, storing, and retrieving our personalities, as determined by all the psychological, cultural, and other factors, including genetic ones’ (2002: 302).

The interpreter, it should be understood, is not any more inherently cultural than the other systems that comprise the self. Certainly the experience that becomes the stuff of our autobiographical knowledge, personal beliefs, active goals, and conceptions of ourselves is cultural experience. But it is equally true, if easier to overlook, that other components of the self – the similar world that separate neural systems experience; the learning that alters connections among neurons according to the principle of synaptic plasticity; the significant experiences to which modulators respond, arousing certain emotions and inhibiting others; the thoughts and memories assembled in convergence zones and entering consciousness to exercise downward causation – all are significantly culturally shaped. All these aspects of the self, implicit as well as explicit, ought to be of concern to cultural anthropologists. It would be wrong
to assume that only our self-representations are ‘culturally shaped’, as Ewing (1990: 255) implies. Following the next section, in which I consider the case of a Pakistani woman interviewed by Ewing, I will use this same Pakistani case to illustrate the cultural shaping that attends experience of the world, synaptic plasticity, and emotional arousal.

THE CASE OF THE PAKISTANI WOMAN

The crucial point to take away from the last two sections is that the self is integrated to a significant degree. Integration of information, interpretation, and response, after all, is the function of the neural systems that have been described. Gazzaniga's interpreter is but one specialized neural system among a number that go about their various neural functions. It is by and large more explicit (but of course not wholly so) than many other neural systems, in that its processing takes place in working memory and depends heavily on the linguistic interpretation of life experience (see LeDoux, 2002: 198–9). However, while the interpreter structures goals in terms of remembered experience of past successes and failures, it does not have a corner on motivation. Motivation instigates particular goals, and itself arises from emotional arousal in various of the systems that comprise the self (LeDoux, 2002: 236–59).

I want to be clear that I am not claiming that the neurobiological findings I have described translate into a new theoretical model, or even concrete new empirical suggestions, for the anthropological study of the self. At least they do not at the present stage of neurobiological investigation. My point is simpler and more basic: that there is now a neurobiological case for the more extensive definition of the self as ‘the totality of what an organism is physically, biologically, psychologically, socially, and culturally’ (LeDoux, 2002: 31). Neurobiology grants a theoretical place for the interpreter, and hence for something like Ewing's account of the self as self-representation, but does not neglect the rest of the self as anthropologists have recently done.

Why does this point matter, theoretically? I will argue next that the more extensive definition of the self as the organism in its totality opens up explanatory possibilities precluded by the narrower definition of the self as self-representation. I will illustrate this claim with the case study, based on interviews with a Pakistani woman, that Ewing first introduces in the 1990 article, ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’, with which I began my discussion. In a later (1991) article, entitled ‘Can Psychoanalytic Theories Explain the Pakistani Woman? Intrapsychic Autonomy and Interpersonal Engagement in the Extended Family’, Ewing very briefly reconsiders the same case, in the context of, I think, a deeper analysis of the Pakistani dilemma it represents. Comparison of the two analyses is especially instructive in the way the second departs from the first.

In ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’, Ewing's limited definition of the self as self-representation alone leads her to assume a fragmented and inconsistent self, its seeming wholeness reducible to an ‘illusion’. Let us examine the case. Shamim, a young Pakistani woman, is undergoing inner turmoil over the impending choice of a husband she herself does not favor. On the one hand she is an obedient daughter, who ‘hoped that I would be able to sacrifice my feelings so that my parents can be happy’. Yet, in her very next utterance, she is a clever politician who will do what she can to get her way: ‘I will try to convince them but will try not to pressure them’. Shortly, Shamim veers back to a representation of herself as an obedient child: ‘Those who disobey their parents are not
successful in life.’ Shamim appears unaware of these and other rapid shifts between self-concepts. The example, concludes Ewing,

illustrates a universal semiotic process by which people manage inconsistency . . . People construct a series of self-representations that are based on selected cultural concepts of person and selected ‘chains’ of personal memories. Each self-concept is experienced as whole and continuous, with its own history and memories that emerge in a specific context, to be replaced by another self-representation when the context changes. (Ewing, 1990: 253)

The particular inconsistency that Ewing describes between two of Shamim’s self-concepts creates in the young interviewee a typically Pakistani tension – although one of which she may not be aware, says Ewing. The cultural model of dutiful daughter is the ideal, while the equally established cultural model of the subtle politician – who maneuvers and negotiates, influence-mongers and bribes at the expense of others – is viewed critically by Pakistanis. That Shamim herself feels guilty about trying to convince her parents is evidenced in the voice in which she intones, ‘Those who disobey their parents are not successful in life’; it is the voice of her parents.

The illusion is that Shamim herself does not realize that her concept of herself is shifting and inconsistent, but experiences each self-representation as coherent in the context within which she invokes it. By a cognitive device that Claudia Strauss has labeled ‘containment’ (1990) or ‘compartmentalization’ (1997b),25 Shamim is able to keep these potentially conflicting representations of herself as a good daughter and a scheming politician apart in her mind.26

This analysis, which might be viewed as a good illustration of how the interpreter module works to make sense of ongoing experience, may be correct as far as it goes. However, it is not just incomplete but misleading, obscuring what else is going on, and leaving a false impression that all is shift and inconsistency, context and illusion. There is a quite different, and, I think, fuller and more penetrating way of looking at the Pakistani contradiction Ewing describes. In this other view, resort to subtle politics is not merely a conflicting alternative to, but a cultural solution to the otherwise unbearable demands of formal deference in a severely hierarchical system of family relations. Indeed, returning to Shamim’s case in the subsequent article, Ewing puts this very construction on it:

This ability to separate one’s own needs from those of others is essential within the context of the conjugal family, but it is also fostered in the natal family. South Asians are extremely preoccupied with what they regard as the ‘politics’ of everyday life. Given their careful adherence to formal deference patterns, it is not surprising that jockeying for status and power, both within and outside of the extended family is often very subtle, at least to the American eye. This may account for the South Asian concern with subtle aspects of eye contact and nonverbal communication. As one unmarried woman said of the process of trying to get her own way in the face of parental disapproval: ‘I will try to convince them but not to pressure them. Those who disobey their parents are not successful in life.’ I suggest that the occurrence of such processes demonstrates an ability to detach oneself from a specific interaction
(rather like the observing ego that is fostered in the psychoanalytic process), associated with a capacity to separate one’s own needs and desires from those of others, which can be interpreted as a sign of intrapsychic autonomy. (Ewing 1991: 141)

Now the very same excerpt from an interview with Shamim, quoted in the previous article as evidence of her two selves in unresolved tension, is presented as evidence of an intrapsychic resolution of this tension. By this construction, Shamim and other Pakistanis, while they may pay lip service to the ideal of filial obedience, and may tend to regard subtle politicking with distaste, routinely use the latter to resolve tension created by the former. Again, they may not be fully aware of what they are doing or why.

Ewing goes on in this second article to relate this capacity to separate one’s own needs from those of others to ‘the propensity among South Asians to contextualize one’s behavior and reactions to others . . . Accompanying this tendency to contextualize is the ability to maintain a conscious awareness of one’s inner thoughts and feelings when these differ from one’s overt actions and may be socially unacceptable’ (1991: 141). This is not to be interpreted as disavowal of one’s own inner thoughts and feelings, Ewing (1991: 157, fn. 6) is careful to note. Rather, South Asians simply learn to keep these thoughts and feelings to themselves. By contrast with her emphasis in the 1990 article on the extent to which self-representations shift with context, here Ewing stresses that, in keeping these thoughts and feelings private, the Pakistani ‘individual is able to maintain stable internal self-representations that are not totally dependent on context’ (1991: 141).

Here Ewing turns not to Kohutian self psychology but to the work of ego psychologists (1991: 136). In this framework, the ability to separate one’s own needs and desires from those of others is interpreted by Ewing (1991: 141) as a positive, indeed, essential, response to circumstances of South Asian family life, evidence of intrapsychic autonomy, which is achieved with resolution of early issues of separation and individuation. More than an illusion, it is a psychodynamic reality. Ewing’s point in this article is that this underlying psychodynamic process occurs cross-culturally. As she explains, summarizing the work of ego psychologists, crucial to the resolution of separation-individuation issues and the attainment of intrapsychic autonomy everywhere is the establishment of object constancy. This means, she goes on to say, that ‘self and object representations are no longer vulnerable to splitting into “good” and “bad” objects’ (1991: 136). However partial and unresolved these processes may be in some individual cases, however prone to perturbation when particular family dynamics are less than ideal, Ewing adopts the position that ‘[t]he development of intrapsychic autonomy by means of the establishment of object constancy and the separation of self and object representations is, as ego psychologists have argued, an essential step in the development of emotional maturity and a stable self-esteem’ (Ewing, 1991: 156–7).

**LEARNED COMPONENTS OF THE PAKISTANI SELF**

Ewing’s analysis of Pakistani psychic autonomy, in the second article, posits the integration of self-representations in a larger cultural system that may be thought of as a cultural task solution (Quinn, 1997), adopted and shared in response to the recurrent psychological pressure of living in hierarchy and performing the deference it requires. This analysis opens a further, developmental, question: How is a cultural task solution such
as this distinctively Pakistani complex of formal deference and subtle politicking learned? Specifically, how does it become such a durable, life-long feature of the Pakistani self? Using the Pakistani case as an illustration, and building on Ewing’s analysis, I will sketch a provisional answer to this question. It is a speculative answer because I myself lack both the first-hand research and the regional expertise to say anything definitive about this Pakistani case.

A synaptic approach to the self can be helpful here. LeDoux, of course, is concerned to show how, in synaptic terms, the self is partially integrated. Therefore he focuses on the degree of synchrony, coordination, convergence, parallelism, distribution and so forth that pertain within and across neural systems. Here, instead, my emphasis will be on the durability of learning. In particular, I will try to demonstrate how at least two processes, synaptic plasticity and emotional arousal, figure in the learned durability of the complex of deference and politicking that Ewing describes in her 1991 article, and that is such a key aspect of the Pakistani self. Since this Pakistani self, like all selves everywhere, develops in a cultural context, my demonstration will also illustrate my earlier point that it is not only self-representation, but other aspects of the self, as well, that are culturally shaped.

Asking how something like this Pakistani complex is learned, too, underscores the insufficiency of an analysis of the self-representations that people display in different contexts. For people do not just learn to think of themselves and represent themselves as dutiful daughters or subtle politicians; they learn to be dutiful daughters and subtle politicians (and people who can juggle and integrate the demands of the two). Asking how they learn these aspects of selfhood leads to an analysis of this learning into its components, and takes us back to infancy and childhood to trace the development of each component. I am guessing that there are three major learned components to the Pakistani complex we have been considering.

One component revolves around the infant’s earliest attachment to (and subsequent separation from) its caretaker. ‘Intrapsychic autonomy’, Ewing explains in terms of ego psychology, ‘is the ability to maintain enduring mental representations of sources of self-esteem and comfort, permitting a more flexible adaptation to the vicissitudes of the immediate environment’ (1991: 132). I will gloss over, for my present purposes, the inner complexities of the universal developmental path that, in terms of the ego psychology on which Ewing draws, culminates in this ability – that is, the attainment of object constancy and the resolution of attachment and separation issues, leading to the ultimate achievement of intrapsychic autonomy. An ego psychologist might be in a position to fill in this part of the developmental story. Suffice it to say, here, that the infant learns ‘enduring representations of sources of self-esteem and comfort’ through the experience of being cared for in an accepting, responsive way within a healthy family. In terms of synaptic plasticity, the repeated, consistent nature of this experience ensures the durability of these representations. And, I would add, they are distinctively Pakistani mental representations, resulting from a distinctively Pakistani style of care. Additionally, as attachment theorists argue, the infant’s security and very survival is felt at risk by virtue of her extreme vulnerability, making this experience especially emotionally arousing. Hence, due to the neural processes that LeDoux cites, the resulting ‘mental representations’ are even more durable than they would otherwise be.
The second learned component of the Pakistani complex under consideration is the Pakistani child's practice, as she grows older, in suppressing her own wishes in deference to those of elders, while at the same time experiencing the inner turmoil that this sacrifice must engender, and having to control and disguise these wishes and these negative inner feelings. Repeated occasions for enactment of this (again, distinctively Pakistani) scenario are augmented by plentiful opportunities to observe others similarly enacting deference to their elders. Thus, again, the pattern of deferring while keeping one's true wishes and feelings to oneself is highly learned, in terms of synaptic plasticity. Moreover, once again, the emotional arousal that is part of such enactments enhances their learning and their durability.

The third and final component of the complex would emerge, I speculate, from the child's observation and eventual enactment of minor political maneuvers, likely seen and practiced first in the context of small everyday episodes – such as, for one possibility, the art of wheedling choice tidbits of food out of mother and other older female relatives. Every small political success of this sort would arouse positive emotion in the child, heightening the durability of this learned strategy. Again, too, this brand of politicking would be practiced over and over, and would gain additional familiarity and validation from the example and the talk of others around. Gradually naturalized as an acceptable (Pakistani) way of getting what one wants, this technique will be perfected over time and only later applied to more consequential ends.

If cultural task solutions like this one are assembled out of already existing components, it is undoubtedly because cultural evolution, like biological evolution, exploits existing mechanisms and co-opts them for new purposes. The three components I have described, once learned separately, are modules available for ultimate assembly into a larger cultural task solution, one that Ewing's young interviewee brings to bear on the prospect of her marriage to a husband she herself does not favor. This ready-made solution to her dilemma incorporates the intrapsychic autonomy to separate her own desires from her parent's wishes in the matter; the practiced ability to suppress her desires rather than expressing them in a way that would violate powerful cultural expectations of deference; and an equally practiced strategy for pursuing these desires within the strictures of deference. This larger, culturally-provided, task solution itself becomes well learned with repeated practice and the positive emotional arousal that attends each new successful deployment of it.

FINAL COMMENTS

In her later article, Ewing does not discuss self-representation or use the concept of the self at all. Instead, here she casts her argument about Pakistani intrapsychic autonomy in terms of ‘the organization of the personality’ (1991: 132). As I have said, the organization of the personality corresponds to my own preferred definition of self, and so I am happy to use the two terms ‘self’ and ‘personality’ interchangeably. Not so Ewing (at least the 1990 Ewing), who says she wants to reserve ‘self’ for ‘the object of anthropological study’, the study of symbols (1990: 255). But this move unnaturally segregates one aspect of the self from its neurobiological entirety, as I have tried to show with my excursion into neuroscience, and then artificially isolates even that aspect of the self from its psychological foundations, as Ewing’s second, psychodynamic, analysis demonstrates.
The issue is not a merely semantic one, as to whether the two terms, ‘self’ and ‘personality’, should be used interchangeably or assigned complementary meanings. It is an indication of a deeper contradiction between Ewing’s two analyses. The only way she can proceed with her fuller, deeper analysis of Shamim’s dilemma, without disavowing her earlier analysis, is to steer clear of the term ‘self’. Had Ewing insisted on continuing to see Shamim’s case in terms solely of self-representation, allowing herself to be boxed in by her previously published stance toward the anthropological study of self, she could hardly have moved beyond her earlier and misleading analysis of Shamim’s self as fragmented, composed of conflicting and rapidly changing concepts of herself as dutiful daughter and clever politician, to describe how, instead, these two self-concepts (or aspects of her personality) fit together as related pieces in a larger, highly stable South Asian resolution of a universal psychodynamic problem. This second analysis, drawing on ego psychology and involving the attainment of intrapsychic autonomy, is one that I very much admire. In this analysis, Ewing herself has supplied us with a powerful demonstration of the insufficiency of anthropological treatments of the self as nothing more than self-representation.

Obviously, I chose this particular case as an illustration of my point because it offered these two alternative, and discrepant, analyses by the same anthropologist. My purpose was not to single out the author of these analyses for critique, and, indeed, she is not its chief target. A psychoanalytic anthropologist, Ewing was inclined to press on to the second analysis – even though she could not reconcile it with the first. Unfortunately, though, most contemporary cultural anthropologists have no close acquaintance with, only a schooled antipathy for, psychoanalysis, neurobiology, or any other psychological or biological approaches that might serve them as analytic tools. Many of them will be content to stop with an analysis like Ewing’s first, that inaccurately treats self-coherence as merely illusory, and the self as nothing more than an assemblage of often inconsistent self-representations that shift rapidly from context to context. That Ewing’s 1990 argument for the illusory self has been well received in anthropology is reflected in one small piece of data. If we can extrapolate from available citation frequency counts, the second, 1991 analysis has been considerably less widely influential. Since 1992 when ‘Can Psychoanalytic Theories Explain the Pakistani Woman?’ first began to be cited, ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’ has been cited over four times as often. Surely this is because of the greater appeal of its message to so many of the anthropologists who read these articles.

I have argued, instead, for anthropologists to reconsider their commitment to a narrow definition of self as self-representation. Cultural task solutions such as the one Ewing has described, internalized and habitually implemented by individuals in a given group, contribute profoundly to the characteristic selves or personalities that allow Ewing to use such phrases as ‘the Pakistani woman’ and ‘intrapsychic autonomy in South Asians’. I have tried to show that an explanation of the Pakistani woman is best framed by the extensive definition of the self that I advocate.

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Notes

1 It is not that this idea of people performing themselves to themselves is entirely wrong. Psychologist Michael Tomasello (1993) argues, for instance, that a critical moment in children's formation of a self-concept occurs when they learn to take the perspective of other people on themselves. He goes on to speculate that, having attained this perspective, people ‘may in some cases observe, without any other persons present, my own just performed intentional behavior, that is, I may act as if I were another person looking at my behavior’ (1993: 181–2). It is just that performing oneself to oneself is hardly all there need be, as the colloquium speaker seemed to imagine, to a theory of the self.

2 In this article I follow Joseph LeDoux's (2002: 28) practice of speaking of explicit and implicit aspects of the self rather than using Freud's terms conscious and unconscious. The terms explicit and implicit come from memory research and refer to what is (currently) in or out of awareness. In my understanding, what is unconscious is actively repressed and cannot come to awareness (see Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 259, fn. 13).

3 Thus, recent definitions of personality sound remarkably like Ewing's first definition of self. John Ingham, for instance, defines personality as follows:

   In this book, 'personality' comprises the emotional and mental characteristics of the individual. It includes basic drives and needs, emotional capacities and dispositions, and ongoing wishes, desires, and purposes. It also involves representations of emotionally significant others, self-representations, cognitive style, attitudes and values, and patterns of moral reasoning. (Ingham, 1996: 8)

Ingham wants ‘to revive the notion of personality because it embraces the whole range of emotional and mental elements that make up the intrapsychic organization of a person’ (1996: 88). Roy D'Andrade has similarly described personality as a system of cognitive, affective, and motivational processes through which individuals regulate and maintain themselves’ (1990: 152–3). Robert LeVine quotes Irvin Child (1968: 82) to the effect that, in its broadest meaning, ‘personality refers to the complex psychological processes occurring in a human being as he functions in his daily life, motivated and directed by a host of internal and external forces’ (Child, 1968: 82, cited in LeVine, 1973: 4). LeVine, rephrasing Child, puts it as broadly as anyone: ‘Personality is the organization in the individual of those processes that intervene between environmental conditions and behavioral response’, processes that he says ‘encompass perception, cognition, memory, learning, and the activation of emotional reactions – as they are organized and regulated in the individual organism’ (1973: 5). Ewing herself uses personality interchangeably with her first definition of self in this way, referring to “self”, in my first sense of the organism and the total personality (1990: 264).

4 Spiro makes the same definitional distinction as does Ewing between self as ‘self-representation’ and the self as ‘the psychobiological organism – that which is bounded by the skin’ (1993: 109). He distinguishes, in addition, another definition of self (that is slightly different than Ewing's third definition, to be described), one that he traces through A. Irving Hallowell to William James, rather than to Kohut.
In this way of thinking, the self is ‘some psychological entity (an ego, a soul, an “I”) within the person’ (1993: 109). Spiro argues that this is the implicit definition relied upon by Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama (1991), in their famous argument that the western ‘construal of the self’ is a distinctively independent one, while the construal of the self in many if not most parts of the non-western world is inter-dependent. Spiro opens his critique of Markus and Kitayama by assailing the most extreme implication of their position, that ‘among non-western peoples, for whom “others” are allegedly included within the boundaries of the self’, pointing out that such a construal ‘would be characterized by little, if any, self-other differentiation, and like William James and A.I. Hallowell, I find such a notion very difficult to comprehend’ (Spiro, 1993: 109–10). This interesting debate, with its many critiques, counter-examples, rebuttals, clarifications, modifications and suggested resolutions, has been amply aired in the literature, and I will not address it here.

On the other hand, Ewing in this same article explicitly rejects symbolic anthropologists’ ‘assumption of a single culturally constituted concept of self’ and the method, exemplified for her by Geertz’s study of concepts of personhood, of deriving this single, culturally constituted concept from basic organizing cultural principles rather than directly from individuals’ experience (1990: 258–9). This critique of Geertz parallels that by Unni Wikan, mentioned in the Introduction to this issue, and squarely aligns Ewing with our own arguments throughout the issue.

In anthropology, this third definition of self (without any necessary Kohutian assumption of self-cohesiveness) has some currency. It is, for example, Grace Harris’ (1989: 599) preference – as she expresses it, ‘human beings as centers of being or experience’. And it would seem to be the definition favored by Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996: 20–1) when they say that the self is ‘an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world’. I will have little more to say about this third definition here. I readily agree that, like self-representation, beingness and agency are important aspects of the self. However, I regard a definition of self as purely (awareness of) beingness and agency, like the definition of self as self-representation alone, as markedly incomplete and theoretically limiting.

Claudia Strauss (personal communication) has remarked that the contrast between these two ways of thinking about the self mirrors more general debates today about the culture concept. Is a group’s culture just group identity – representations of itself that shift contextually and historically? Or is it more? Strauss and I (Strauss and Quinn, 1997) have argued for more.

Contributors to this volume, in addition to Battaglia herself, are Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, George Marcus, Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern, and Faye Ginsburg. All consider how selfhood is imagined or notions of selfhood are evoked or negotiated in one context or another. None address a psychological basis for the self.

Battaglia’s rationale for defining self as conceptual self-representation appears to differ from Ewing’s. Battaglia’s is rooted in post-modernist dismissal of western science, while Ewing’s, as I have mentioned, seems to be rooted in an acceptance of symbolic anthropology’s dictum that anthropology is exclusively about symbols. Thus anti-psychologism in contemporary cultural anthropology appears to draw its impetus from both of these two alternative, but mutually reinforcing, sources.
10 As LeDoux observes, working memory ‘is one of the brain’s most sophisticated capacities and is involved in all aspects of thinking and problem-solving’; and it ‘is especially well-developed in humans, and is likely to contribute to the uniqueness of human cognition’ (2001: 175–6).

11 This is done by having the subject fix his or her gaze between two screens, and then using a tachistoscope to flash images or words on the left screen. This briefly presented visual information is apprehended by the left visual field (and hence the right hemisphere of the brain) but not by the right visual field (and hence the left hemisphere). I found a description of this classic experimental design, and a helpful drawing of the experimental apparatus in use, in Kandel, Schwartz and Jessell (2000: 364–5).

12 Ramachandran notes the similarity between his own rendition of the division of labor between the left and right hemisphere, and the idea of the interpreter (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998: 280, fn. 5). He puts a slightly different spin on this division of labor, however, stressing the left hemisphere’s task as preserving the existing belief system and folding new experiences into it, and the right hemisphere’s role in questioning the status quo and looking for global inconsistencies. ‘When the anomalous information reaches a certain threshold, the right hemisphere decides that it is time to force a complete revision of the entire model and start from scratch. The right hemisphere thus forces a “Kuhnian paradigm shift” in response to anomalies, whereas the left hemisphere always tries to cling tenaciously to the way things were’ (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998: 136). In this more expansive view of the right hemisphere’s task, it does not merely ‘process what it receives and no more’, it actively tests existing beliefs and models against new information.

13 Ramachandran similarly stresses that the left hemisphere’s ‘confabulation’ confers needed stability, internal consistency and coherence on our behavior. He speculates that confabulation may also enable self-presentation to others for the purposes of making ourselves understandable to them, achieving social goals, casting ourselves as part of society, and more effectively concealing the truth from others through self-deception (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998: 147, 254).

14 It is interesting that the American cultural model of marriage that I have delineated in other work (see Quinn, 1997) seems to be organized around this very structure, a sequence of temporally and causally linked events. If such event sequencing is a fundamental human capacity, then we should not be surprised to find that cultural models commonly reflect this capacity in their structures.

15 See also Katherine Nelson (1996: 183–219), who traces the gradual development of skill in autobiographical narrative over the preschool and early school years.

16 This postmodern notion of the self is to be distinguished from Ewing’s. While both treat the self as lacking cohesiveness, post-modernists see this lack of cohesiveness as traceable to the fragmentation inherent in contemporary public culture, while Ewing sees it as a universal feature of self-representation.

17 Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000: 26–8) cite experimental work that implicates the left hemisphere in autobiographical memory retrieval, work that Gazzinaga and colleagues (Türk et al., 2003: 69) find supportive of their argument for a left-hemisphere interpreter.
18 These authors trace the concept of a working self back to Markus and Ruvolo’s (1989) notion of a ‘working self-concept’.

19 Closely related conclusions come from the anthropological research of Claudia Strauss (1992, 1997a), who finds that her interviewees’ emotionally salient early experiences (such as the ordeal of a severe childhood illness or the stigma of illiteracy or the misfortune of having a distant, uninvolved parent) infiltrate and inform their adult orientations to life (1992), and in some cases supply partial thematic integration to otherwise disparate life stories (1997a). Strauss uses her finding of partial thematic integration to dispute the post-modern view of the contemporary self as wholly fragmented.

20 This process, of synaptic plasticity, is central to the theory of cultural meaning developed by Claudia Strauss and myself (Strauss and Quinn, 1997).


22 This fact about emotional arousal enhancing the coordination of learning should be of especial interest to anthropologists who study male initiation rites, which typically occur around early adolescence, and serve to reverse boys’ early feminine identification and establish their masculinity. These rites are notable for their fear-inducing practices, such as circumcision, isolation, and tests of bravery. Presumably, the arousal of fear reinforces the reversal of gender identity that is being learned. More generally, I have elsewhere argued (Quinn, 2005), child rearing techniques universally employ one or another emotion-arousing technique such as teasing, shaming, praising, frightening and physical punishment – presumably, again, because emotional arousal enhances children’s learning of the lessons adults are intent on teaching them.

23 LeDoux (2002: 322–3) notes that, in particular, the cognitive capacities of the human brain, relatively newly evolved and extensively rewired with the acquisition of language, are especially prone to disconnection from the emotional and motivational systems.

24 One could reasonably argue, as does V.S. Ramachandran, that the sense of all these different systems that work toward unification of experience and action as ‘a single “I” or “self” inhabiting your brain may be simply an illusion’. ‘[A]lbeit one’, he adds, ‘that allows you to organize your life more efficiently, gives you a sense of purpose and helps you interact with others’ (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998: 83–4). This is a different illusion than the one to which Ewing calls attention. Ramachandran goes on to clarify: ‘when I say that the self is an “illusion”, I simply mean that there is probably no single entity corresponding to it in the brain’. He amends: ‘But in truth we know so little about the brain that it is best to keep an open mind’ (1998: 272, fn. 11). Ewing means the illusion that one’s present self-representation is the whole of one’s self. Both these illusions may occur. I am only arguing that the self is not merely illusion in Ewing’s sense.

25 Strauss (1997b: 214) is careful to note that she is not the first to have pointed out this phenomenon, and cites other sources in which it is identified.

26 Martin Sökefeld, in a critique of Ewing’s 1990 analysis, objects that, in life’s practical moments rather than the purely discursive context of the interview, Shamim
cannot avoid recognizing or being reminded of the conflict between her two self-concepts. That individuals choose strategies for negotiating such moments is evidence that they do recognize such conflicts between self-concepts, and that they incorporate different self-concepts ‘into a more or less integrated whole’ (1999: 426). I agree. I want to better understand how this more or less integrated self works.

27 Ewing (1991) argues cogently that intrapsychic autonomy is to be distinguished from interpersonal autonomy, which is so highly valued by middle-class Americans, but which, as many writers have observed, is disvalued by South Asians. The achievement of intrapsychic autonomy is, for Ewing, a universal psychodynamic challenge.

28 Not all such task solutions recruit psychodynamic processes, of course.

29 Durability in the individual is certainly not the only property of culture that calls for explanation. See Chapters Four and Five in Strauss and Quinn (1997: 89–134) for a general discussion of the motivational force, sharedness, historical durability, and thematicity of culture in addition to its durability in the individual. See also Quinn (2005) for an approach to sharedness from the perspective of culture and personality. In the present context, however, in which I am trying to link anthropological to neurobiological approaches to the self, durability in the individual is most germane.

30 I am not sure whether the ego psychologist would attribute all the elements of that story to universal constraints on human children’s experience of rearing, or would want to argue that some of these elements, attainment of object constancy, for example, are wholly or partially innate.

31 Though other analysts’ uses of the term ‘self’, in reference to phenomena similar or related to what she is talking about, creep into her discussion. For example, she cites Alan Roland for characterizing the ability to maintain awareness of inner thoughts and feelings that differ from potentially unacceptable actions as ‘a distinctively South Asian “private self”’. She alludes to Roland’s idea of a ‘we-self’ and, in footnotes, to Donald Winnicott’s concept of a ‘false self’, and the psychiatric notion of depersonalization, said to be manifested in a sense of ‘self-estrangement’. Finally, in the article’s conclusion, Ewing mentions the conceptual confusion that arises from the variant usages, in psychoanalysis and cultural studies, of terms like ‘autonomy’ and ‘self’, and she adds the following footnote: ‘For a discussion of uses of the word “self”, see Ewing (1990)’. She does not appear to see that 1990 discussion of self as either relevant to or discrepant with her analysis in this 1991 article.

32 For an equally admirable analysis of Gurung selves in terms of Winnicott’s theoretical ideas about holding, see McHugh (2002).

References


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