

The Anti-alienation Move of the Modern Self and Its Newest Care-of-the-Self Strategies

ABSTRACT

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This paper argues that a unified sociological discourse on the self does not exist, and that all relevant theory is in the form of unrelated fragments within a number of different disciplines that do not communicate well with each other. This situation explains the theoretical invisibility of the growing problems in modern society regarding socialization in all age groups, not only in childhood. In sociology, problems of the self draw attention indirectly only through the problems they generate in respect to social order and control, which means that the focus falls upon the consequences of the problems that modern selves face rather than on the reasons why modern selves have problems with both self and other in the first place. This leads to the conclusion that the problems facing social selves are also problems within sociology itself. The latter are here identified in terms of the alienation of social psychology, viewed as a general and non-specialized micro-macro sociology, from the rest of sociology, which is comprised of specialized research fields that possess either a micro or macro bias (gerontology, sociology of youth, family sociology, sociology of deviance, criminology, sociology of education, organizational sociology, etc.).

The paper discusses the problems of the theory of the self as problems of the theory of socialization as well. The evidence for this relationship is the fact that these two theories assume that young children and old people have no selves that can be of theoretical interest, with doubts persisting concerning whether such selves, with their own patterns and problems, even exist. Although there are a number of discrepant theories and empirical studies, there are very few relevant discussions involving the theory of the self. The lack of a clear difference between self and identity is also brought forward in connection with the interchangeable use of these two terms and the difference between a child's self/identity and that of an elderly person. The self of the elderly has in fact seldom been discussed on the theoretical level – Lars Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence is here regarded as an exception to this rule and an inspiration for further theorizing. The problems of socialization in modern society will thus be discussed with a focus on the transition from direct, unmediated interaction and

socialization to mediated communication and socialization. The consequences will be theorized here in terms of the emergence of new forms of alienation of the self from the self, the other, and society.

I further argue that – in the age of individualization – problems of the self are regarded solely as the concern of individuals themselves. The ways in which they are dealt with on the individual level take visible forms and exhibit particular patterns of new practices and behavior, with some issues in this regard being of particular interest. Two examples will be presented as an expression of new forms of “care of the self” (Foucault). The first is tattooing, which is regarded today as a new phenomenon and an element of youth culture; the second concerns the care of domestic animals, which is now often viewed as a form of behavior typical of old age.

The approach outlined in this paper supports the view that body modification is a form of “care of the self.” In particular, the paper is focused on the example of tattooing as a solution that provides immediate gratification in respect to problems concerning the primary self, issues of authenticity, behavior, identity, role-playing, and visibility in public places. Although tattooing attracts attention today as reemerging phenomenon involving young people, typically in the period of transition between childhood and adulthood, I argue that there are both theoretical grounds and empirical evidence for claiming that it is no longer restricted to any particular age group. One possibility that emerges from the discussion, which is grounded upon recent theoretical developments in neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, is that tattooing will become popular among elderly citizens in connection with problems associated with the primary self that arise during that period in life.

The sociological theory of the self has been criticized for its insufficient level of concern with the model of the self of senior citizens. The identity of the members of this steadily growing group of the population of the world, after their exit from social roles, has already been theorized in sociology as problematic (Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh). In addition, those social practices among the elderly that may be qualified in socio-psychological terms as “care of the self” after the transition period known as “role exit,” such as the care of domestic animals, have been completely neglected except for their medical significance in respect to physical health. Also neglected in this regard is how the relationship “care-taker-of-domestic-animal/the-animal-receiving-care” may itself be an interesting object of study for sociological social psychology. I will argue in this discussion that the care-of-domestic-animals has become a new social role in modern societies that generates the opportunity for, and gives legitimacy to, continuous performance on both back stage and front stage. This has particular importance as an anti-alienation strategy of the self that maintains its sociality and sociability.

The specific importance of the theory of the self within sociological theorizing is a sociological issue of great importance that must be addressed. A multitude of questions concerning the identity of human nature need to be answered before any possibility for a post-modern society can emerge.