Unity Versus Multiplicity: A Conceptual Analysis of the Term “Self” and Its Use in Personality Theories

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ABSTRACT

There is no single answer to the unity–multiplicity problem regarding the self for the simple reason that the term “self” is used by too many different theorists in too many different ways. In fact, there are several important substantive topic areas that need to be distinguished and studied scientifically. The topic areas I examine in this article are reflexivity, unit coherence, agency, and subjectivity. Each of these areas will be evaluated in terms of what it contributes to, and can be interpreted in terms of, the unity–multiplicity issue. It is proposed that we need a more differentiated technical vocabulary if we are to better understand the phenomena we are examining. Matching our technical vocabulary to this empirical detail sharpens the questions being asked and places the empirical facts in better focus. A more elaborate framework of conceptual differentiation provides a better basis for developing an integrated theory.

There is a conventional understanding of the term “self,” reflected in such statements as “the self is not some entity other than the person” (Mischel, 1977) or “the number of selves in a given room is equal to the count of bodies” (Baumeister, 1997). Such intuitions notwithstanding, there has been a line of theorizing in psychology, dating at least from James’s Principles, (1881/1890) that suggests a

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somewhat more complex state of affairs. Recent literature abounds with references to a complexity of subselves (Martindale, 1980; Rosenberg, 1997); subpersonalities (Rowan, 1990); potential selves (Schlenker, 1980); possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986); a false versus authentic self (Harter, 1997); private, public, and collective selves (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Triandis, 1989); actual, ought, and ideal selves (Higgins, 1987); imagoes (McAdams, 1993); and dialogical selves (Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This polarity of thought has recently come to be known as the unity–multiplicity debate regarding “the self” (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Baumeister, 1999).

My argument in this article is as follows: Several substantive topics underlie the unity–multiplicity debate, and all deserve serious attention. However, the substantive issues have remained poorly identified largely because of a vague and imprecise terminology. Specifically, the term “self” is used by too many different theorists in too many different ways. In the next section I will argue that a main cause of the imprecise terminology is a lack of clarity in distinguishing between two semantic functions of the term “self.” This analysis will clear the way for the identification and examination of four substantive topics, which, by virtue of the imprecise terminology, have been unnecessarily confounded in the unity–multiplicity debate. I suggest that each topic, if examined on its own, leads to a different answer to the unity–multiplicity alternatives.

On the Use and Meaning of Terms

The term “self,” as with so many terms in the psychological literature, is a trap of ambiguity that can only lead to terminological confusion. Although this confusion ought to be easily recognized (e.g., Fiske, 1973; Robins, Norem, & Cheek, 1999), we need a proper diagnosis of the reasons for this terminological confusion if it is to be remedied. A comment by Block (1995) gives a hint of one cause of the confusion:

Psychologists have tended to be sloppy with words. We need to become more intimate with their meanings, denotatively and connotatively, because summary labels . . . chosen quickly will control—often in unrecognizable ways—the way we think subsequently. (p. 209)
The key terms for elaboration are “denotation” and “connotation.” Given an article that examines a phenomenon identified as “the self,” analysis typically proceeds with statements with the structure: “the self is . . .” followed by a list of attributes. The root ambiguity of this approach is that a statement of the form “the self is . . .” conflates two distinct semantic uses—connotation and denotation—to which any term can be put. The connotative usage of a term concerns the relationship between a term and ideas or concepts, while the denotative usage of a term concerns the relationship between a term and some phenomenon.

First, consider the connotative usage, the relation between a term and a concept. In this case, when we are asking what the self is, we are asking for the dictionary definition. A definition links a set of concept attributes to that term. Thus, the phrase “the self is . . .” can more accurately be paraphrased as “the term self means . . .” Consider a few possible definitions:

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<td>the sum total of all that [a man] CAN call his (James)</td>
<td>self</td>
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<tr>
<td>a multiplicity of “I” positions (Hermans)</td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge structure (Kihlstrom &amp; Klein)</td>
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<tr>
<td>complex attitudinal schema (Greenwald &amp; Pratkanis)</td>
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This is where most controversy in psychology is found. Statements of the form “The self is [definition]” are proposed, followed by heated debate over which definition is correct. Such definitions are often presented as competing alternatives, with one correct and the others necessarily false. Yet all that is being done is establishing a correspondence between a concept and an otherwise meaningless symbol. Even if one were to run to a dictionary to find a conventional definition of the contentious term, this still leaves us with only the term’s connotation. Whatever one’s definition, someone can always legitimately reply “I don’t care how you define the term (i.e., the meaning or connotation), I’m actually interested in something else.”
We still have a problem. When confronted with several competing definitions—or connotations of a term—how do we decide which is the preferred definition? What is it that prompts a theorist to propose some definition in contrast to some other? What is it that he or she feels needs explaining/describing in the way summarized in the definition? This brings us to the denotative usage. What is being explicitly left out of the above definitions, yet implicitly assumed, is the second use of a term: to refer to or denote some phenomenon. This usage is the linguistic equivalent of the physical act of pointing at something. Some dictionaries do provide an “ostensive definition” of some terms by providing a picture of an object to which the term points. The picture is the equivalent of pointing to a real-world object (denotation), while the linguistic definition provides the term’s meaning (connotation). The value of a linguistic symbol is that this pointing (i.e., directing attention) can take place when the object of attention isn’t physically present. Thus, when a term is used in normal speech, its denotative usage is an invitation to look for a phenomenon.

So we must make an analytically essential distinction between saying, “The term ‘self’ refers to . . . (followed by a denotative act such as pointing)” and saying, “The term ‘self’ means . . . (followed by an attribute set or [definition]).” In conventional linguistic discourse both uses occur simultaneously, so that the term establishes a link between a concept definition (the connotative function) and the entity being discussed (the denotative function). “The self is [definition]” is an ellipsis for “there is some phenomenon which we refer to with the term ‘self’ and this phenomenon can be characterized as [definition].” The gap in this way of talking is that if there is no phenomenon provided, analysis may reduce to a conceptual circularity where the phenomenon is nothing other than the definition. The act of referring to the phenomenon is one way in which competing definitions can be assessed. Without the phenomenon, there is no ground for selecting from alternative definitions.

Identifying the Phenomenon

What is the phenomenon that we wish to study and understand? This was seen as an important question in personology a few
decades ago (see, e.g., Royce, 1973, particularly Part I). Oddly enough, apart from a very few recent exceptions where this matter is raised at all (e.g., Magnussen, 1990; McAdams, 1995; Westen, 1995), the full significance of the question is not given enough attention in the literature. Psychologists, as often as not, use natural language terms, assuming that this is sufficient to identify the subject matter to be examined. However, natural language terms do not necessarily or accurately identify the phenomena that are the target for scientific analysis.

This raises an interesting question. How can we identify a topic of interest without needing to fall back on conventional meanings of existing terms? This has always appeared to be a major difficulty for psychologists, and an explanation is not difficult to find. A natural scientist might return from a field trip and dump a sample bag of pot shards, petrified bones, insects in preservative, or rock samples onto a table, point to the collection, and say “that’s what I’m interested in.” The objects of study can then be subjected to various scientific tasks, such as descriptions, definitions, classifications, and so on. Psychologists have felt constrained by an apparent inability to display the phenomena they are interested in. Indeed, the history of 20th century psychology can be characterized as a concern over what phenomena even count as its legitimate subject matter.

Whatever else we psychologists have, patterns of behavior constitute a major class of phenomena from which further analysis progresses. Consider the following statement:

As a psychological concept, personality refers to regularities and consistencies in the behavior of individuals and to structures and processes that underlie these regularities and consistencies. (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985)

This is a concise summary of what much of psychology has been about. At the same time, a distinction is made that much of personality theory—if not psychology in general—has not been implementing clearly and consistently enough. We are dealing with two phases of inquiry that must be kept analytically distinct from each other. The observable (i.e., the “regularities and consistencies”) are the actual denoted entities. We may observe that any one person tends to behave in a characteristic and consistent way that is different from other persons, while still exhibiting some within-person variation across situations (see Ozer, 1986, for a fuller treatment of types of consistencies). One aim of psychology is to
describe such consistencies, and this has been the focus of much research in personality, particularly that with a purely psychometric emphasis. There is a very good and practical reason for starting with a clear consensus regarding the denoted entities under examination. These entities serve as the reality check for an empirical determination that some [definition] is true or false. Rational discussion requires consensus on the topic or phenomenon under discussion. Once there is consensus on the phenomenon of interest, we can then get down to one of several new tasks: a full description of that entity, an attribute specification for purposes of classification, and so on.

However, describing and making inventories of the behavioral regularities is only one phase of scientific inquiry. The denoted observables (i.e., the descriptions of the regularities) comprise the scientific point of entry for which our theories about “structures and processes” are developed. Thus, we can start with observable behavior and introduce cognitive/mental processes as theories to explain that behavior. It follows that, in this context, the term “self” is most frequently used as a hypothetical term (connotative usage) but is not actually functioning denotatively.

If one believes that the term “self” is denotatively ambiguous, analysis can still start with an a priori definition. Notice that this strategy is asking a different sort of question than “What is the self?” Instead, this strategy treats the definition as an hypothesis: Is there any real entity which fits the proposed definition/description? This is a common strategy in the physical sciences. For example, I can hypothesize the existence of a quark or black hole, make a guess at where and how I can find such an entity, then search for it. Of course, such hypothetical entities are best derived from a well-defined theory (in contrast to other hypothetical entities such as Loch Ness monsters or unicorns, where search procedures may be a waste of time and resources). But even if a strong theory is absent, the working principle of the strategy still applies to psychology. My impression is that many competing definitions of the format “the self is . . . ,” when viewed as hypotheses for the existence of entities with the specified properties, are not necessarily mutually exclusive and thus can all be true in a limited sense. There may well be something that corresponds to “knowledge structures”; there may well be something that corresponds to “a multiplicity of I-positions”; there may well be something that fits the description
of an “attitudinal schema.” However, in the absence of an independently identified phenomenon, the appropriation of the term “self” to signify any of these alternatives is an irrelevant and confusing exercise.

The Concept Space of the Term “Self”

My argument up to now has been that the term “self” has been used to imply a phenomenon that is in fact rarely identified. Terms borrowed from common language are, at best, both denotatively and connotatively ambiguous. At worst, the terms have multiple meanings. The common language term “self” is thus a carrier for several different concepts. Since these are rarely made explicit at the start of articles, different readers may interpret the term in a way different from the intention of the writer. Indeed, the writer might not always be semantically unambiguous, in that the term “self” isn’t even defined. The result is that a vague nebula of concepts are evoked each time the term “self” is used. It will no longer be clear which of the evoked meanings is appropriate to the topic being discussed.

In this section I will argue that there are, nonetheless, several important substantive topics that need to be distinguished and studied scientifically, if some headway is to be made in making sense of the unity–multiplicity issue. The topics I will examine are reflexivity, unit coherence, agency, and subjectivity. However, just by using the term “self,” these topics are implicitly invoked in such a way as to imply a specific sort of phenomenon. Through the use of grammatical devices such as reflexive pronouns, nominalized verbs, and singular determiners, conventional speech converts the topics, via the shared term “self,” into a specific theory.

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<th>concept</th>
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<td>reflexivity</td>
<td>reflexive marker</td>
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<td>unit coherence</td>
<td>determiner</td>
<td>the</td>
<td>conscious agent</td>
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<td>agency</td>
<td>nominalization</td>
<td>agent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>subjectivity</td>
<td>pronominalization</td>
<td>“I” (vs. “me”?)</td>
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The conventional interpretation of “the self” actually entails a theory of how a set of attributes are necessarily combined to define
a specific sort of entity. Specifically, there is one, and only one, entity that is conscious, and that functions as an agent, and that stands in a one-to-one relationship to a denoted physical entity. It is not my aim to evaluate the truth of such a claim, but simply to argue that it is a theory in the sense that it entails a specific connotation of the term “self,” but that it is not the objectively denoted phenomenon we want to examine. In the rest of this section I will elaborate the problems that the four topics raise, for which this theory is proposed as a solution. Each of the topics will be evaluated in terms of what it contributes to, and can be interpreted in terms of, the unity–multiplicity issue to determine the extent to which the issue is or is not relevant, and if so, whether the balance is in favor of unity or multiplicity.

**Reflexivity**

One frequently sees hyphenations documented in the literature as evidence for both the popularity and importance of the topic “self” in psychology. For example:

Analyses of self pervade contemporary social-psychological research, and self-referent terms run rampant in the literature. In a recent edition of my social psychology text... for example, 11 “self”-hyphenated terms... are defined in the glossary and 49 lines of the subject index refer directly to the self. Social scientists’ fascination can also be documented by the 36,445 entries to “self” in the psychological literature between 1981 and 1990. (Deaux, 1992, p. 9)

Or:

... in everyday discourse ... we should be “self-confident” and “self-respecting,” but also “self-critical” enough not to be “self-satisfied” or “self-congratulatory”; “self-contained” and “self-reliant” without being “self-defeating”... and so the list goes on ... (one dictionary gives over 200 “self” hyphenations—Collins Dictionary of the English Language, 1979). (Kitzinger, 1992, p. 228)

Other reviews, otherwise quite useful (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Baumeister, 1999; Kihlstrom & Klein, 1995), also illustrate this habit of extensively documenting such self-hyphenations as part of an inventory of the topic domain, sometimes without even defining the term “self.” This discussion confounds two distinct uses of the term “self,” which Toulmin (1977) described as:

1. “self” and “-self” treated as reflexive, auxiliary prefixes or postfixes in everyday colloquial language, and
2. “self,” treated as a name for a hypothetical entity.
Phrases such as “the lion bit itself” or “the baboon groomed itself” do not leave the reader confused about the existence of the “self” the lion bit and the baboon groomed. Grammatically, any transitive verb can be used in a sentence where the object of the verb is the same as the subject of the verb. If one were to say “the lion bit the lion,” the object of the action is denotatively ambiguous. The term “self,” used in such constructions, is nothing more or less than a grammatical device for indicating a reflexive action, where the object of some action is the same as the executor of that action. A particle such as “auto-” (e.g., automatic, autobiography, autoregulation) serves the same function.

Of course, the interests of psychologists concern more than overt physical acts. Our interest is in the notion of reflexivity as applied to cognitive/mental activity. One way of understanding the meaning of the term “reflexivity” is as (some) processes, structures, and behavioral outputs of an entity that can operate on that entity or can produce outputs which can be taken as stimulus input for that entity. This idea has profound implications for human psychological functioning. Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960) made an early effort to replace a linear chain (the reflex arc) as a basic unit of operation in psychology with the notion of a feedback loop. What is meant here by “unit of operation” is a functional and organizational principle, and not some specific concrete “entity” as such. Concepts of recursiveness and feedback have since become more commonplace in cognitive psychology.

Reflexivity, then, is a general principle governing the dynamics of the cognitive system. This principle, when combined with other psychological processes or capacities, results in a very large number of specific phenomena—or specific exemplifications of the reflexivity principle. The terminological ambiguity of “self-” constructions only distracts from this point, and lends an unnecessary aura of disorganization and lack of thematic focus to the literature. We are in fact dealing with multiple exemplifications of a general operating principle of mental functioning. For example, if an operation of a cognitive system is to value something, such as apple over cherry pie, then why not differentially value some auto-perceived attribute? The term “self-esteem” is one way in which autoevaluative processes can be discussed.

Another cognitive operation, which has been central to discussions and uses of the term “self,” has to do with concept-formation.
This concerns interpreting “self” as “self-concept.” If the mind can create concepts at all, it follows that it can create a reflexive concept (i.e., a “self-concept”). This is what motivated Toulmin (1977) to link self to knowledge, what perhaps lies behind James’s (1981/1890) ambiguous “me,” and what Robins et al. (1999) summarize as stable self-representations. Indeed, even many of the Behaviorist writers were content to restrict the use of the term “self” to this idea of a “self-concept” as such; for example, “It would be appropriate to use self only as a descriptive term, to stand for the verbal behavior the individual emits concerning himself, not as an explanatory term standing for some inner psychic agent” (Staats & Staats, 1964, p. 261). Nonetheless, we must distinguish the reflexive process from the content of the self-concept, if we are to properly identify the phenomena that “self-concept” is about.

Now, take the principle of reflexivity and the conceptual system and add the cognitive system’s capacity to reconfigure the content of a conceptual system; in other words, humans have an imagination. If it is possible to generate modified concepts like pink elephants or Klingons, it is also possible to modify a self-concept. In effect, this capacity to manipulate and reconfigure stored information takes us closer to understanding the character of the numerous possible, ideal, imagined, ought, and other sorts of selves discussed in the literature. The conceptual ambiguity with these adjective-qualified usages of “self” concerns what a possible, ought, ideal, or any other variant of “self” is intended to denote. What is more often intended is reference to some imagined and otherwise qualified facet or component of that real totality. I might wish to be a better person by trying to control an explosive temper. But this activity is less a “self” being wished for than an attribute or a specific altered behavioral pattern. This matter will again be raised in the next section.

Finally, take the principle of reflexivity and the capacity to reconfigure the contents of the conceptual system, and pose the question about their causal or mediating status regarding the regularities and consistencies of behavior. This brings us to one frontier of theorizing about personality: the autoregulatory characteristics of cognition. It is not only that attributes of an entity can be perceived, represented, and even modified by that entity, but that the attributes (modified or not) play a role in the production of behavior. This concerns more than the truism that people behave as much as a function of what they believe as of some objective reality. The

To summarize: in all such instances of recursiveness we are dealing with a general property of the cognitive system, following Toulmin’s (1977) first distinction, and not “the self” following his second distinction. The implied multiplicity of self is, in this context, a spurious issue. Stripped of irrelevant entity implications of a self-hyphenation construction, we are still left with a theoretically important issue and one that already has a long precedent of research in several areas of psychology. Reflexivity is a fundamental operational principle of cognitive processing which, in combination with other cognitive processes and structures, generates the observed variation. Central to a more dynamic conception of personality is the role that reflexivity, combined with autogenerated mental representations, has in processes of personality innovation and change.

Unit Coherence

Any noun phrase, composed of a determiner and a singular noun (e.g., “the self”) implicitly conveys the distinction between singular and plural, one thing and many things. The mere linguistic act of using a term in this way implies a character of numerical oneness, that the entity so denoted is sufficiently coherent, and thus distinct, that it can be denoted at all. By virtue of this linguistic convention, the term “the self” can be read as implying one single referent, as does “the person” or “the table” or “the leg” or “the banana.” This grammatical intuition of oneness is at odds with the theoretical claims about multiplicities of these singular entities.

However, any entity, if it can be identified at all, must display some measure of continuity and distinctness. That is, any unit of analysis has some principle of internal coherence that gives it the character of numerical oneness or unity. But such coherence does not tell us anything about what it is that makes that entity coherent. It follows that the character of the coherence of one entity may or may not be different from the character of another distinct entity. This means that there can be several different sorts of units, each with different distinguishing attributes.
The problem of unit coherence cannot be separated from the problem of structure. The question that surfaces here is: are we indeed dealing with a substantive problem regarding structure when we are discussing personality or “the self”? There is a growing realization in the literature that we are. A 1995 issue of the *Journal of Personality* was devoted to a number of fundamental problems in the field that remain unsolved after decades of research. Emmons (1995) summarized the various concerns under two general headings: the unit of analysis problem (e.g., traits, values, motives, scripts) and the level or domain of analysis problem (e.g., lower-level molecular traits vs. higher level life narratives, types, or positions). This substantive concern also drives theoretical efforts aimed at system analyses of the domain of personality (e.g., Mayer, 1998; Royce and Powell, 1983; Schwartz, 1987; see also Mischel & Shoda, 1998) and calls for levels of analysis of the person (McAdams, 1995, 1996).

When we deal with some phenomenon with any amount of discernable structure and we want to discuss that structure, we need a technical vocabulary that captures and maintains all the required distinctions. There is a legitimate and strong objection to the way in which multiplicity is discussed in the literature, as reflected in phrases such as “multiple selves” or “sub-selves.” A term cannot be used unambiguously and simultaneously to denote both some unit-entity and its components. Every conceptual distinction requires a terminological distinction. At minimum, we require terminological consistency in identifying different levels of some hypothetical structure. The phrase “an atom is made of sub-atoms” makes no semantic sense, because the capacity to discuss structure is lost when this is done. You must either say “a molecule is made of atoms” and/or “an atom is made of electrons, nuclear particles...” depending on which word is used to specify which level of organization. To maintain clear distinctions, one ought not to use one term to refer to different units at different levels of analysis.

At the same time, the alternate strategy to equate the term “self” with terms such as “person” or “individual,” or establish a one-to-one correspondence with the physical body, does equally little justice to the problem of structure. A statement such as “the number of selves in a given room is equal to the count of bodies” is not logically false. After all, the number of hearts, stomachs, spleens, and numerous other things also equals the number of bodies. However,
the number of bones, eyes, kidneys, or lungs do not. The difficulty
with such an assertion is that even with a specification of the
attributes that define the term “self,” there must also be an
indication of why one and only one denoted entity can have such
attributes, and why there is a one-to-one relationship between the
entity termed “self” and the entity termed “body.” To assume
numerical equivalence bars the matter of internal coherence and
structural relationships from discussion on purely definitional
grounds. Both sides of the debate have to be clear about the
substantive claim being made about units of analysis in an overall
structural context.

The same difficulty arises in grammatical constructions where
qualifying particles are attached to the term “self” (e.g., ideal or
possible self). The use of this grammatical operation also implies
structure, which raises the issue regarding (1) the defining attributes
of any component or level of that structure, as well as (2) the
relationship among those components or levels. Using a single term,
modified or not, almost invariably doesn’t address issues of
structure. As Rosenberg (1997, p. 24) summarizes:

The multiple-selves framework ... is that of a structure consisting of a
multiplicity of ego and alter elements and their interrelationships. Associated
with each element in this structure is an amalgam of features—perceived
physical and psychological characteristics, feelings, values, images, and
intentions—experienced by the individual ... ego elements refer to the
multiple aspects of self, readily identifiable by an individual as his or her
family and work roles, interests, religious and ethnic affiliations, particular
interpersonal relationships, and any of these elements as the person
remembers it or anticipates it. Such ego elements and the amalgam of
features associated with them correspond to the “multiplicity of selves” as
this phrase is typically used in the social psychological literature. Also, in
spite of the diverse inventory of referents for “multiplicity of selves,” its most
common use in contemporary writings (both within and outside of social
psychology) is to refer to a person’s views of his or her multiple aspects of
self.

In other words, resolving the problem of units and levels of
analysis rests squarely on being able to distinguish clearly between
the phrase “multiplicity of selves” and the phrase “multiple aspects
of self.” Each phrase implies a different structural relationship
among units and levels. The phrase “multiplicity of selves”
minimally implies an aggregate of several independent entities, all
of which are members of a single class. Whether this aggregate is or
can be organized into a superordinate structure remains an open question. The phrase “multiple aspects of self” implies a system or componential description of a single entity (e.g., a physical body consists of several organs).

It follows that two distinct substantive issues of structure are applicable and relevant to the unity–multiplicity debate as it applies to the matter of unit coherence. One issue concerns unity as the internal coherence of any identifiable entity. It also follows that the notion of internal coherence of some entity is distinct from the problem of identifying the components that make up the internal structure (if any) of that entity. Any component, viewed as a distinct unit in its own right, will also have its own internal coherence. Finally, what makes one entity internally coherent need not be the same as what makes another entity internally coherent. This is the reason why it can be so misleading to use one term to refer to different levels of a unit hierarchy.

The second structural issue concerns the numerosity of any entity relative to its place in a multilevel structure. In this case, the unity of a “self” does not necessarily argue against the possibility that there is a numerosity or multiplicity of such “self” entities. The multiplicity issue addresses the problem of multilevel structure directly. But any claims concerning the numerosity (multiplicity) of an internally coherent unit is totally a function of some to-be-specified level for which the units are either (1) aggregate elements (this house is made of \( n \) bricks) or (2) system components (this body consists of \( n \) types of organs). The residual terminological problem concerns which unit at which level is to be reserved for the term “self.”

Agency

It is crucial that discussion of this topic begins with the phenomena for which the concept plays a relevant theoretical role. Suppose the phenomena of interest are again the “regularities and consistencies in the behavior of individuals.” We can now ask the question: In what sense can any organism be said to cause these regularities in behavior? This question addresses the intraindividual “structures and processes” of the observed “behavioral regularities” we wish to understand. Terms such as “agency,” “volition,” or “control” are sometimes invoked to discuss this matter, particularly when humans are under scrutiny.
The idea of agency implies at least two types of control relationships. Take a fairly concrete interpretation of “regularities and consistencies in the behavior of individuals,” and examine the problem of how motor actions, such as picking up a cup or printing the letter A, are executed. Neither action is as straightforward as one might think. One never picks up exactly the same cup in exactly the same spatial relation to a grasping hand. In the area of motor behavior, two important ideas emerged in efforts to deal with this problem, illustrating a theoretical development strikingly similar to what is now emerging in personality theory. First, it was quickly realized that what controls the execution of patterned responses must in some way be abstract, in the sense that the control procedures are independent of specific muscular motions as such (Keele, 1968; Pew, 1966; Schmidt, 1975; see also Abernethy & Sparrow, 1992, for a recent critical review). The behavioral sequence is abstract in the sense that one can grasp many sorts of cups in varying spatial orientations without needing to relearn motor movements for each new situation. One can learn how to print with the right hand, yet still, with varying degrees of proficiency, also print with one’s left hand, or with the writing instrument between one’s teeth or toes. This implies some sort of execution control representation that functions independently of specific muscle groups. Such a representation has come to be called a motor schema. The notion of control in this context has to do specifically with the relation between a given motor schema and the observed behavior: the “schema,” being abstract, can control the more concrete executions with various muscle groups.

The second idea emerged from the fact that there are countless such schemas and, more importantly, such schemas appear to be organized hierarchically. This introduced a second control question. Given a large set of coexisting and autonomous units (habits, motor schemas), how do we account for one unit having control over behavior rather than another? As there can be an indefinitely large number of such motor schemas, the notion of agency/control needs to be reintroduced, this time concerning schema selection. Given a set of motor schemas, second order control has to do with whatever is involved in how any one schema is selected over another.

Here is where we must guard against the linguistic tendency of nominalizing verbs, which identify actions, as nouns, which identify objects. This reifies a process as an object, and then assigns to the
object precisely that property which corresponds to the original
process of interest. Such is often the case with the terms “agency”
and “agent.” The linguistic habit is difficult to avoid, and numerous
examples can be found in the literature. For example: “If we do not
postulate some agent who selects and uses the stored information,
we must think of every thought and every response as just the
momentary resultant of an interacting system, governed by laissez-
faire economics. Indeed, the notions of ‘habit strength’ and
‘response competition’ used by the behaviorists are based on exactly
this model” (Neisser, 1967, p. 293). Other writers, even in spite of the
arguments in their own articles, also make this grammatical slip. In
an article with the title “What Is Human Agency?” the shift is made
in the first sentence: “I’d like to explore ... the notion of a self,
of a responsible human agent” (Taylor, 1977, p. 103). And Bandura’s
(1989) analysis of self-efficacy as a general process, when turned to the
“self as agent” versus “self as object” distinction, reduces to a
suggestion that “one is just as much an agent reflecting on one’s
experiences as in generating and executing the original courses of
action. The same self performing multiple functions does not require
creating multiple selves endowed with different roles” (1989, p. 1181,
emphasis added). But what precisely is this “one,” this “agent,” other
than a grammatical convention that inadvertently slips in the
theoretical idea of the numerical oneness of an entity with an agentic
or volitional attribute? The grammatical convention takes a legitimate
problem regarding process control and reifies it into a distinct and
separate entity, and the original problem remains unsolved.

This selecting agent, in the computerese terminology common in
cognitive psychology, is the “executive control” and does have
something of the character of a “self” as the central causal agent of
cognition (cf. Baumeister, 1999; Hilgard, 1980), although not usually
discussed in the cognitive literature in this fashion. However, we
must keep in mind that an executive control is only one design
solution to the problem of selection control and is a solution that
explicitly links a process quality to one single functional unit—the
executive or CPU. This concept has its place within a specific sort of
cognitive architecture. Some of the first applications of the computer
analogy in the early 1970s maintained a strong distinction between
stored information (declarative knowledge structures, semantic
memory) and the uses to which this information can be put. Specifically, a so-called database—the contents of memory, or
mental representations—was a static structure accessed by other processes (e.g., Anderson & Bower, 1973; Collins & Quillian, 1969; Minsky, 1968; Norman & Rumelhart, 1975; Schank, 1972).

There have been alternative proposals to the problem of selection control which even predate the mainstream adoption of the computer metaphor during the 1970s. One long-standing alternative is to conceptualize control in terms of hierarchical organization or programming. Again, Miller et al. (1960) introduced the idea of a TOTE unit, the basic operating principle being a hierarchically structured “plan,” a sequence of actions related to some goal. Control in this case entailed matching actual behavior to a representation of a desired outcome. Meeting the outcome was the criterion for control shift (i.e., transition to a new “plan” or motor program). Such a principle was intended to be independent of specific plans. That is, the model included a processing sequence (the unit of analysis) plus the notion of structure in terms of hierarchical nesting. Control was intrinsic to whatever unit and level was operative at any moment in time.

The value of this alternative was quickly enough applied in the theoretical work on knowledge representations mentioned above. Within the general framework of memory structure, which initially focused on visual perception and then on linguistic representations, emphasis shifted to more global knowledge structures. The problem concerned how these knowledge structures are related to the production of actual behavior. By programming action control directly into the knowledge structures, control could be more economical. Structures have been described as action sequences or procedural programs (e.g., Winograd, 1972). The script metaphor in the AI framework also combined relatively complex sequences of actions such as an “eating at a restaurant” script with declarative knowledge about restaurants (Abelson, 1981).

This brief survey illustrates how research and theory have been testing the scope of applicability of the idea of a schema, in what amounts to a bottom-up progression from concrete motor behaviors to complex integrated configurations of actions in a variety of situations. Control or agency as an operating principle intrinsic to the unit means that the unit operates independent of the content of a given schema—be it orchestrating muscles in a complex movement or orchestrating an extended sequence of actions. This line of reasoning also converges with a top-down approach taken in
sociology (Biddle, 1986), which generally emphasizes a concept of situation-specific roles to account for the more global regularities of behavior.

This brings us to recent developments in personality theory. The concern of the personality theorist has been to account for within- and between-individual differences and similarities in behavior. The observed varieties of behavioral regularities in the dynamic complexity of person-situation interactions (Magnussen & Endler, 1977; Thorne, 1995) require a more elaborate theoretical language to describe them. It is precisely this empirical demand that prompts so many researchers to postulate higher-order units of analysis, such as Baldwin’s (1992) relational schemas and Ogilvie and Ashmore’s (1991) discussion of self-other relations, Demorest’s (1995) personal scripts, Roberts and Donahue’s (1994) linking of personality to multiple roles, and Little’s (1983, 1993) personal projects or personal action constructs (Little, 1989). These sorts of relatively molar units still remain context-specific conceptualizations of behavioral sequences. If not dealing literally with highly specific motor actions, they concern social roles as such or sequences of actions in environmental contexts.

We here enter another frontier of theorizing about personality and the most interesting extension of the schema idea as applied to personality structure. The general theoretical question is: How abstract can such schemas get and, more importantly, what are the properties that theoretically define these higher order units? Are there other sorts of schema-like configurations that have operating parameters more closely related to traditional qualities of a singular personality or “self”? Some theorists have proposed exploring exactly this possibility. For example, Greenwald and Pratkanis (1984) suggest a “self as a complex, person-specific, central, attitudinal schema” (p. 167). Perhaps parameters such as “attitudes” were originally conceived as belonging to the so-called singular central “self.” Given that there can easily be a multiplicity of schemas, the theoretical extension of “attitudes” as being potentially schema-specific is logical. For example, Tomkins (1979, 1987) has suggested that the defining attribute of such schemas is a sort of affective style suited to specific contexts or individuals.

Most recently, the proposals of Hermans and associates (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 1996) are also developed in this vein. For example, “the
different positions in the dialogical self may each have their own views, wishes, motives, feelings, and memories” (Hermans, 1996, p. 42). Here, the hypothesis is that elements such as wishes, motives, or feelings are not simply organized into a single undifferentiated array, but that subsets of them adhere with each other in specific structures, termed “positions.” One can easily adopt Hermans’s and Hermans-Jansen’s (1995) analysis of narrative structure in terms of clusters of “valuations” and then utilize such clusters of valuations as the definition of a “position” (Raggatt, 2000). In this way, distinct higher-order units termed “positions” are both semi-autonomous and, what is most significant theoretically, value-laden. This is what imbues each position with a character traditionally reserved for a single monolithic “self.”

This still leaves us with the question whether, at any point of organization, a higher level of organization will by definition eliminate any functional autonomy at a lower level by imposing new control/selection criteria into the system. The one implicit assumption of the unity argument, either through the use of common language (“the self”) or otherwise, is that, however many such scripts, schemas, modules, roles, or positions exist at however many levels of organization, they converge at an apex with one and only one control element. A control apex would render any talk about autonomous control at lower levels of organization an irrelevant issue. But this is but one theoretical possibility, and it is possible to formulate alternative questions. For example, does the array of autonomous control units necessarily converge to a single apex? Might there be specific advantages to a control apex? What are the conditions in which it might not be an advantage? Might it be more interesting to examine the social order of an aggregate of control elements other than the authoritarianism (dictatorship?) implied in a single control apex? These sorts of questions address explicitly the architectural issues regarding the organization of the components. I suggest that this is a theoretically more neutral way of examining the problem, for which the notion of a control apex is but one possible solution.

Subjectivity

If the phenomena which captured psychologists’ scientific interest were restricted to “regularities and consistencies in the behavior of
individuals,” then there is very little in psychological theory and research during the past several decades that would not allow us to conclude that there is a multiplicity of relatively autonomous “processes and structures” involved in the production of behavior, with control being a distributed function of that system. And yet, there is something else that the foregoing discussion has not addressed. There is a deeper issue that underlies objections to the claims regarding multiple selves, and this issue concerns the matter of subjectivity. However, I suggest that any objections to multiplicity grounded on a “subjectivity” argument is introducing what seems to be a different phenomenon into the discussion. This phenomenon is the ghost that has haunted the centuries-old, mind-body problem in philosophy. It has also haunted psychology since its inception as a science, with the discipline unable or unwilling to deal with an entire class of phenomena arguably central to the discipline.

Contemporary psychology remains a victim of a bias in the previous century that aspired to a scientific stance of objective analysis. However, this goal of objectivity confounded (1) a methodological ideal of dispassionate study on the one hand with (2) a belief that the phenomena to be studied are to be open to public scrutiny. Thus, acceptable phenomena include only the “regularities of behaviors” observable to the third-person perspective. This has resulted in a significant error of omission. Consider the following point of view, expressed by Combs and Snygg (1959, p. 44):

To the individual himself the phenomenal self is real. It is himself. To the outsider observing the individual, the phenomenal self is pure abstraction inferred from the observed behavior and representing only an approximation of the self experienced by the behavior.

Compare this quotation with contemporary statements, such as the passage from Staats and Staats (1964) cited above, or with “a concept of self is not essential in an analysis of behavior... it appears that a self is simply a device for representing a functionally unified system of responses” (Skinner, 1953 p. 285). The latter quotations reflect legitimate specific connotations of the term “self,” from the objective perspective of an outside observer. In selecting this focus, much of psychology has dismissed other connotations of the term. The consequence has been an historical bias where any subject matter not open to third-person scrutiny was deemed to be
outside of the domain of psychology’s legitimate scientific purposes. (See Nelson, 1996, for a concise summary of this development.)

Psychologists ought to maintain a distinction between objectivity as a mode of inquiry from subjectivity as a phenomenon for study. In fact, much of the so-called objective procedures in personality research depend on assuming the existence of this subjective phenomenon: the presupposition of such subjectivity saturates our methodologies. There is no obvious reason why having our research subjects report on sense impressions of the world, make summary judgements of their average behavioral regularities in social contexts, make inferences about the motivational causes of an observed person’s behavior, or report on childhood experiences, is any less introspective—and thereby scientifically more objective and acceptable—simply because the subjects are untrained and their responses are aggregated into group averages (cf. Block, 1995, who makes a similar argument regarding trait research). This leaves us with our data that are dependent on subjectivity. But no provision in theory or in methodology is made for such a phenomenon. This alone warrants more attention to the problem of subjectivity. But more central to my immediate purposes is the point that the raw intuitions of a private subjective perspective are used to argue against a notion of multiplicity.

What is the substance and status of such an objection? A commonsense interpretation of the term “self” implicates the notion of consciousness as a property of this single entity. Any argument for multiple selves would thus imply that there are a multiplicity of consciousnesses. The objection to such a claim is made primarily on intuitive and introspective grounds, and is based on a direct and literal analogy to several distinct and experientially simultaneous persons in a room. This is what underlies the “number of selves is equal to the number of bodies” counterclaim to multiplicity. But the intuition implicitly concerns something other than simple simultaneity. The intuition invokes the notion of privacy as a defining attribute of an individual conscious mind. Whatever it is that a person may experience at a given moment (his or her past or current mental activity), such experiences are hidden from others, as are such attributes of others hidden from him or her. If we are to take this privacy criterion seriously, then a multiplicity of consciousnesses would necessarily mean that each is just as private from each other
within a single body as any one is from a different and distinct physical body.

This creates something of an explanatory paradox for both sides of the debate. Let’s take the multiplicity side first. If the multiple consciousnesses are not private from each other, the strong claim of multiplicity reduces to a metaphor without any substance, at least as far as consciousness is concerned. If the consciousnesses are private from each other, then we still have to account for the apparent unity of subjective experience of any one of them, which simply brings us back to the question we started with—still needing to account for the unit coherence of any one such entity. Until this is done, a simple claim for subjective multiplicity is theoretically empty.

The main problem with the argument for subjective unity is that the ground for the objection lies in presupposing precisely what it is that requires explanation—subjective experience. Scientifically, there is also no obvious reason for accepting the face-value trustworthiness of such introspective reports. Claims regarding a unity of subjective experience must come under scientific scrutiny: it concerns what we want to understand, not what we accept as given. The subjectivity argument can only have power when a theory of subjectivity is provided, and this again is what is lacking. Thus, both camps have some explaining to do. The unity advocates still need to account for this private subjectivity as a fact. The multiplicity advocates must account for why, even given a multiplicity, people nonetheless report that a subjective unity exists.

In summary, the bulk of the multiplicity claims are, justifiably, within the domain of objective accounts of a phenomenon. The core of the subjectivity objection is making an appeal to the existence of a different sort of phenomenon. Because of this implicit shift of topic, we have to reject subjectivity as a face-value argument against the types of multiplicity we have been discussing up to now. However, the subjectivity objection must be accepted as an appeal to examine a different class of phenomena. Psychology has historically focused on an attempt to provide an objective theory of the data of experience. What psychology lacks is a theory of experience as such.

The subjectivity claim, in pointing to a different phenomenon, implies the need to define a different unit of analysis. This raises two questions. Exactly how are we to conceptualize this new unit of
analysis? More generally, what is the place of subjectivity in a broader, more integrated theoretical framework for personality? The problem, for which a theoretical integration is required, is nothing less than the need to reconcile the objective stance that psychology has traditionally taken with the subjective stance implied in the fact of experience itself. Our data depend on the subjectivity; we cannot ignore it. What we need to reconcile theoretically is the objective facts that point to a complex mental structure, with the subjectively reported experience, which appears to be much more simple and unitary. If this distinction is adequately developed, then we will have the solution to reconciling objective complexity with the apparent subjective simplicity.

The issue enters discussion of self and personality whenever James’s (1981/1890) “I-me” distinction is cited. By and large, however, the distinction is only alluded to, rather than examined in detail. Whereas the habitual citing of James at least notes the place in inquiry where these issues arise, I strongly urge caution in uncritically citing the “I-me” distinction. It’s not my purpose here to provide a detailed critique of the Principles. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that the Principles is saturated with the sorts of terminological inconsistencies I have been describing in this article. Not only is the term “self” used almost indiscriminately in connection with a bewildering array of units and levels of analysis, terms like “thought,” “consciousness,” the “I,” or even “self” are at times used almost interchangeably.

The immediate challenge, as I have been arguing throughout this article, is to gain some insight into the phenomena without being misled by connotations of everyday terms used to discuss the phenomena. James (1981/1890) was not consistent in distinguishing the phenomena to be explained from the terms he appealed to in an attempt to identify those phenomena. He was not making a distinction between “I” and “me” but between two theoretical entities. He wanted to cash in on our intuitive understanding of common language terms to communicate some sense of what that distinction was. The allusion to commonsense linguistic terms counts on the reader knowing both the denotation and connotation of the terms “I” and “me” for the conceptual distinction to have even the least force. This was a mistake. His way of talking implicitly reintroduces into his thinking exactly what it was that he explicitly wanted to avoid discussing—the metaphysics of a transcendental...
soul, a Cartesian-like ego. James himself equivocates on this matter. For example:

We must take care not to be duped by words. The words I and me signify nothing mysterious and unexampled—they are at bottom only names of emphasis; and Thought is always emphasizing something ... Of a pair of things it calls one this, the other that ... I and thou, I and it, are distinctions exactly on par with these—distinctions possible in an exclusively objective field of knowledge. (James, 1981/1890, chapter 10, footnote 18)

Thus, the terminology is less a sharp theoretical analysis than one more example of acknowledging that an important problem exists. His use of language is misleading in a way I have been discussing throughout this article, in that he interprets processes and actions as objects which possess those processes. In fact, James equivocated on this matter as well. His program in the *Principles* was to develop a naturalistic psychology that was necessarily dualistic. He continuously skirted the matter of a hypothetical transcendent ego or soul as being too metaphysical for psychology (e.g., James, 1981/1890, p. 292; chapter 10; footnote 39), a stance which he abandoned in his later writings. If one digs deeper into what the implication of such terms are, one finds the subjective-objective distinction. The “I” and the “me” are not parts of a higher-order unit termed the “self.” This created an ambiguity, with the “I” reified into a distinct entity standing against the objective data of experience (the “me”). The I-me distinction in James implicitly confounds the subjective with the objective on a single level of objective analysis, not acknowledging that the subjective requires a different unit of analysis. This is the type of analysis developed by the German phenomenologists, and also in the writings of the British metaphysician A.N. Whitehead (e.g., 1978/1929). Combs and Snygg (1959), cited above, were also focusing on this phenomenal or perceptual field as the object of analysis.

I cannot develop a full alternative here, but can simply suggest a few key points which characterize an alternative. The notion of subjectivity, as with the term “self,” is actually a covering term for several distinct attributes discussed in the literature. What we want to avoid is reifying these attributes into an “entity,” and this is what conventionally happens whenever the term “I” is introduced. First, in taking an experience as a unit of analysis, one of these attributes is a notion of perspective, or point-of-view. This can be understood literally in the case of a perceptual experience. The so-called privacy
of a perceptual perspective in experience is that it is always uniquely defined. The uniqueness of the experience is in its structural composition of perspective. Only “I” can perceive my room from the vantage in which I now perceive it. In other words, if one wants to consistently avoid postulating a “subject” as a soul or mind substance, then there is not an “I” that has the experience. Rather, the phenomenon signaled by the conventional use of “I” is constituted within the experience.

The second proposal is that continuity and distinctness are not properties that define an “I.” This actually inverts the problem we must solve. It is this apparent continuity that is brought forth as an argument for a singular in contrast to a multiple “self.” It is precisely this apparent continuity of subjective experience that is the phenomenon we need to understand. To simply postulate the “I” as continuous explains nothing, and repeats the Cartesian error. Moreover, mere continuity and distinctness cannot distinguish an “I” from the cup on my desk, both of which are continuous and distinct. Within experience, continuity is more often postulated as being found in the content of experience. In this sense, there can be several sources of continuity: in the physical body, in the timeline of the entity in question, and in the representation of life events found in and retrieved from memory. And, however complex this representation might be, another form of continuity can be found in how discrete life events may undergo some degree of reflexive reordering in the creation of narrative-like story lines (e.g., Barresi & Juckes, 1997; McAdams, 1993, 1999).

Finally, the problem of subjectivity concerns the problem of how to deal with consciousness. Here again, we must exercise caution in how to interpret this term. James habitually translated process into object: knowing becomes the knower, judging becomes the judger, thinking becomes the thinker, being conscious becomes consciousness. The phenomenological alternative is to maintain the distinction between process and object in the same way as with “agency” and “agent.” With this approach, the phrase “being conscious of” describes a distributed property just as “agency” can describe a distributed property. In other words, it is not a property restricted to one and only one “unit” of some type. We can already accept the idea of multiple autonomous processing units. All that is required is to view conscious awareness as a content-independent process, not an object.
We can now reinterpret the significance of the “I-me” distinction for the problem of multiplicity, for example, as related to Hermans’ multiple positions framework. The multiplicity of positions constitute a latent structure. “Conscious of” entails a mode of activation of these latent control units called “positions.” In this sense, the so-called privacy of a given activated unit is that any one position, if activated, necessarily means that other potential positions are suppressed. They are inherently and intrinsically incompatible, in the sense that they involve patterns of activation and inhibition. In this way, successive conscious activations preserve the idea of a control multiplicity, do not necessarily imply simultaneous consciousness entities in the Cartesian sense, but still leave open for inquiry whatever sense of unity that people might report.

In summary, the topic area of subjectivity can be broken down into several important problems, each related to experience as a unit of analysis. These include: (a) the source(s) of apparent continuity in the content of subjective experience; (b) whether the subjective/objective contrast implicit in the “I-me” distinction can be usefully explored in terms of latent vs. activated units of analysis; (c) that privacy can best be viewed as a structural perspective of the momentarily activated mental content in experience; and (d) that “conscious of” is only an occasional mode of activation and not a continuous Cartesian substance.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no single answer to the unity–multiplicity debate for the simple reason that the term “self” is semantically ambiguous. Confounding the term’s denotations with its’ multiple connotations only muddies the distinction between the phenomena of study and the theory used to understand those phenomena. It is essential that the various connotations of the term be made explicit. It might appear inelegant and nonparsimonious, if not foolhardy, to suggest replacing one vaguely specified topic—“the self”—with four topics, each of which is at least as complex as the topic being discarded. However, this is the minimum required. And, there are two important advantages in doing this. First, the purpose of research is to examine phenomena in greater detail. Matching our technical vocabulary to this empirical detail sharpens the questions being asked, and places the empirical issues in better focus. In this way, the
conceptual elaboration justifies and gives meaning to the detail of empirical specialization. Second, I suggest that a more elaborate framework of conceptual differentiation provides a better basis for developing an integrated theory. Integration is not served by an indiscriminate application of a single term “self,” but by differentiating our terminology. With this goal in mind, I have examined four connotations of the term “self,” each with different theoretical implications.

First, the topic area of reflexivity is important, if not central, to an understanding of all facets of human behavior. And, even granting that this topic domain could be analyzed into several distinct processes, we are still left with one key conclusion regarding the term “self” used in its hyphenated forms. The term is irrelevant at best and misleading at worst. Rather than dealing with a multiplicity of selves, this topic domain is concerned with multiple exemplifications of a general operating principle. This conclusion does not in any way detract from the need to examine any and all such exemplifications in human behavior.

Second, the problem of unit coherence illustrates that one facet of the unity–multiplicity debate concerns the substantive issue of (hierarchical) structure. Any theorist on any side of this debate must still provide an account of unit relations within a more articulated structural context. The unity or multiplicity of any unit can only gain theoretical meaning if such a structural framework is specified.

Third, the issue of agency can also be better viewed as a problem of process, and of process exemplification in numerous contexts. On the dynamic-control side, the idea of distributed control processes is at least as viable an alternative as the more conventional executive control concept so easily linked to the notion of a “self” as agent. Given that there can be a multiplicity of semi-autonomous control units, two issues stand out as being particularly worthy of further research. First, does it make sense to discuss the organization of such units as a social order? Second, what sorts of properties might such units have and at what level of organization? The most contentious interpretation of this hypothesis, and the one most at odds with the lay sense of a single “self,” is where certain properties traditionally identified with a single “self,” such as values, beliefs, or motives—or even “traits”—are viewed as functionally specific to higher-order organizational units. This is the direction in which personology theory is moving.
Fourth, the problems related to *subjectivity* are nothing more or less than the problems of the concept of mind, of treating experience as a phenomenon for study. One would think that this ought to be a legitimate domain of study for psychology, yet historically, it has been systematically avoided in the mainstream. Further work on this problem ought to incorporate the notion of a “subjective” perspective directly into a theory of experience as a different unit of analysis. It is also necessary to (a) recognize continuity as a distinct problem, and to (b) distinguish between latent vs. activated structures of experience, with (c) being conscious as an occasional way in which such latent structures can be activated.

These substantive conclusions leave us with the problem what is to be done with the term “self.” I read the scientific literature to learn from what others are doing. Obviously, when I see the term “self” in a journal article, there is a comfortable sense of meaningfulness a symbol string such as “lsfe” does not have. But the familiarity is a fake, and the denotative and connotative precision needed for scientific research is absent. More often than not I find myself ignoring any occurrence of the term “self” and substituting whatever connotation the writer is explicitly or (more often) implicitly making. The strongest conclusion I could make is that the term “self” has no place in psychological theory. We need a more differentiated technical vocabulary if we are to better understand the phenomena we are examining.

Unfortunately, it is not practical to suggest that the term not be used at all. Linguistic usage, even in technical environments, is a matter of consensus and not of arbitrary decree. Nonetheless, I would repeat my caution that the term “self” is a trap of ambiguity. It is in any writer’s own best interest to be as clear as possible about the specific meanings being proposed, if the writer’s aim is the successful communication of the research work being done. If we focus our attention on the phenomena that interest us, and on the concepts and ideas we use to make sense of such phenomena, perhaps the terminological problem will solve itself.

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