THE ELUSIVE SELF: I AM BECAUSE WE ARE

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OBJECTIVES

- To consider Indian and Western perspectives on the nature and origin of selfhood
- To discuss some of the similarities and contradictions in the two approaches
- To explain, with the help of the three sociological perspectives, why the manner in which the concepts of self and identity are conceived and propagated leads to conflicts
- To recommend a new approach to conceptualizing selfhood
THE ORIGIN OF SELFHOOD

- Methods: Intuition, observation, reflection, experiments and analyses
- In India, ancient scriptures like Upanishads, Vedas, Gita provide teachings about the nature of the self
- Western civilization: Biblical concepts like Genesis
INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

- The bodily self is transient and therefore an illusion
- True Self = ATMAN (essence of life; ontological principle underlining all reality; life force – pervades all living things; immortal)
- Self knowledge = Knowing ATMAN + PRANAS (breath, sight, hearing, speech & mind; can be known only through strict adherence to practice) + PANCH AGNI VIDYA (knowledge of 5 fires, or energies)
- SELF knowledge is the highest achievement: Samsara (worldly existence) = suffering; Self knowledge leads to MOKSHA (freedom from the cycle of birth and death). Can be achieved only under guidance from an enlightened master.
ATMAN

- ATMAN defies categorization
- TAT TVAM ASI (That Thou Are): Essence of life
- “Knowledge of the ATMAN leads to obtaining all the worlds and fulfilling all desires.” Udalaka (Black, 2007)
- The consciousness that lies hidden behind or which underlies perception & cognition
While ATMAN which is equated with PARMATMA (GOD/ESSENCE OF LIFE) is the true self, for functional purposes people are divided into castes (identities). Brahmins the highest caste; custodians of this secret knowledge.

The social self (a man’s birth into society) is considered his second birth (dvija) and is considered of greater value (more real) than his natural birth (Black, 2007) (like holy communion probably?)
ATMAN: SELF OR NO-SELF?

- When people die do their ATMANS merge into Bramhan (eternal essence) or do they remain separate entities?

1. Self as a unit of existence (endures over time): unchanging self vs. momentary self (like watching a film)
2. Self as substance (dravyas) vs. self as quality (guna)
3. Self as plural or unitary; changing or unchanging?

(Tuske, 2017)
WHAT IS THE SELF

- “The empirical self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of *me.*” (William James, 1890)

- A psychological structure embedded in a social system (Vohs & Baumeister, 2012)

- The self is an abstract object, a theorist's fiction. (Daniel Dennett, 1992)
The awareness of ‘self’ and the awareness of ‘others’ or ‘otherness’ are closely linked because both require a cognitive capacity for secondary representation.” (Asendorpf & Baudonniere, 1993)

“One simple distinction that allows for social consideration is differentiating self from others. By 24 months most children recognize themselves in mirrors…” (Neiworth, 2009)
SELF DISCOVERY
SELF & IDENTITY

- The Segmented (duplex) Self (William James 1890)
- Me vs. Mine
- The ‘self’ has three parts:
  Part 1. Constituents (of the self)
  Part 2. Feelings & emotions
  Part 3. Actions constituents trigger
THE SEGMENTED SELF

Constituents of Self:

- The material self (body, clothes, immediate family, property)
- The social self (recognition from friends, family, society; role perception/identity)
- The spiritual self (inner subjective being)
THE SEGMENTED SELF

- The Pure ego (personal identity): The consciousness of personal sameness over past, present and future. It is ‘illusory’ and more a feeling than a verifiable fact.

- Similarly ‘social identity’ arises but unlike personal identity ownership of ‘self’ is ascribed to an external ‘brand’

   Interestingly, the ‘brand’ is an abstraction (a concept) with no identifiable agent.
THE NARRATIVE OF THE ‘SELF’

“Lying somewhere between pure fantasy and slavish chronicle, life stories are psychosocial constructs that aim to spell out personal truths – narrative explanations for life-in-time that are believable, followable, even compelling.” (McAdams, 1996)
SOCIAL AGENCY

- Three types: Individual, Proxy, Collective
- Properties of self that facilitate agency: Intentionality, power, rationality (Hewson, 2010)
- Emotion and compulsion
- Autonomous agency, mechanical agency or emergent interactive agency (Bandura, 1986, 1989)
- “Movement and vocalization suffice to orchestrate beliefs in a cultural-physical world where people engage with each other, artifacts and institutions.” (Cowley, n.d)
- Memes (Dawkins, 1976)
IDENTITY DRIVES AGENCY

- Self perception (self concept, perception, esteem, efficacy, belongingness, motivation)
- Contrasting other hood (gender stereotypes, role perceptions/expectations, acting alone/in others’ presence)
- Identity has contradictions and inherent conflict (sub groups often disagree on concepts)
- Memes (Dawkins, 1976)
IDENTITY & CONFLICT

- Role conflict
- Interpersonal conflict
- Intergroup conflict
- Mutually exclusive goals
- Overt versus covert behavior
- Social instinct versus appropriation
IDENTITY & CONFLICT

National, religious, linguistic, ethnic and gender identities operate with the help of the following ‘non-negotiable’ components (appropriations) which exacerbate conflicts:

- Exclusivity and privilege [America first]
- Superiority [Exalted/eternalized divinity]
- Contrasting ‘otherhood.’ [Gender stereotypes]
IDENTITY & CONFLICT

- Identities instill incompatible biases
- Identity transfers ownership of self to an external ‘brand’ which is an abstraction (free flowing narrative) sans agency
- Re-conceptualizing selfhood could promote connectedness (commonality) of all mankind [It’s all ‘us,’ no ‘them’ 😊]
RE-CONCEPTUALIZING SELFHOOD

- The assertive self (Anant, 2018)
- I am because we are
BENEFITS OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

- Will address the enhanced conflicts triggered by globalization (Nguyen, 2015)
- Will help overcome intense hostilities that nationalism breeds (Abdul-Jafar, 2015)
- Most importantly, a citizen cannot transfer ‘ownership of self’ to an external brand, hence the individual retains agency (reduced chances of being manipulated by wild-flowing narratives & conspiracy theories)
KRISHNAMURTI

“\[\text{You see the word individual is really not a correct one because the term, as you know, sir, means undivided, indivisible in himself. But human beings are totally fragmented, therefore they are not individuals... ... They are fragmented, contradictory, torn apart by various desires.}\]” (Krishnamurti, 1991)
REINVENTING THE SELF

- Induced behavioral changes (learned through training) lead to structural and functional changes in brain neurophysiology (Ramachandran, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2010)
- “The concept of mutual link between modification of behavior and ability of the human brain for profound functional and structural reorganization throughout the whole life span is well established in modern neuroscience” (Draganski B. et. al 2014).
- Practicing new behaviors at any stage in life can lead to lasting changes and the creation of new or reorganization of existing neuronal networks in the brain (Hanggi J. et al., 2010)
- Altering behavior also leads to changes in attitudes (Self-Perception Theory: Bem, 1972) (Anant, 2018)
CONCLUSION

- The concept of self analyzed through symbolic interactionism, functionalism and conflict
- The manner in which concepts of self and identity are propagated exacerbates conflicts
- Need for re-conceptualizing selfhood
- The self is elusive, fragmented and illusory; a collective delusion?
- I AM BECAUSE WE ARE 😊
REFERENCES


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- Cowley, S. J. (www.academia.edu) accessed 15/07/2018