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The Self:
A Transpersonal Neuroanthropological Account

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The anthropology of the self has gained momentum recently and has produced a significant body of research relevant to interdisciplinary transpersonal studies. The notion of self has broadened from the narrow focus on cultural and linguistic labels for self-related terms, such as person, ego, identity, soul, and so forth, to a realization that the self is a vast system that mediates all the aspects of personality. This shift in emphasis has brought anthropological notions of the self into closer accord with what is known about how the brain mediates self-as-psyche. Numerous examples from the ethnography of the self are given, as are neuroscience research reports on the structure of the self. Engagement with the self is seen as an essentially transpersonal one, as self-awareness penetrates the mysteries of the transcendental self.

Keywords: ***Brain & self, no-self, transcendental, meditation, cross-cultural, transpersonal***

My brain and I are inseparable. I am who I am because my brain is what it is. Even so, I often think about my brain in terms different from those I use when thinking about myself. I think about my brain as that and about myself as me. I think about my brain as having neurons, but I think of me as having a memory. Still, I know that my memory is all about the neurons in my brain. Lately, I think about my brain in more intimate terms—as me.

—Churchland, 2013, p. 11

The *anthropology of the self* has gained momentum recently and has produced a significant body of research relevant to interdisciplinary transpersonal studies.[1] But along with this upsurge of interest has come considerable confusion over just what constitutes the self. Contemporary anthropology offers very little in the way of a paradigmatic school of thought about self. Aside from remnants of the early 20th century impact of Freud on psychological anthropology, the discipline really has not developed a theoretically coherent approach to the self. Anthropology offers nothing in the way of a depth psychology of the self, nothing like Jungian *archetypal psychology* or Kohutian *self psychology* around which to organize research, to test hypotheses, and to explain patterns. With the possible exception of medical anthropology, anthropology is largely a natural science with very little input from either experimental research or clinical practice. However, what anthropology does offer is information about how non-Western peoples experience, conceptualize, and talk about the self. This ethnographic perspective perforce broadens understanding of the ways people have come to develop psychologically and to know themselves, more often than not in transpersonal terms. It is the aim of this paper to provide transpersonal researchers with an array of conceptual tools designed to enhance their understanding of self, especially as it relates to the advanced spiritual practices of non-Western societies.

Self:
First Steps Toward a Definition

The word "self" is, of course, an English term, which has its own distinct history of use and meaning. Etymological dictionaries indicate that the word comes from the Old English *self, seolf, sylf* ("one's own person, same") and is related via Proto-Indo-European *selbaz to the Old Norse *sjalfr*, Old Frisian *self*, Dutch *zelf*, Old High German *selb*, and Gothic *silba*. The Old English form was emphatic, expressing "(I) myself," "(he) himself," and so forth, and implied reference to both a physical-spatial meaning (self and no-self) and a temporal meaning (same self through time; "I am the same person today as I was yesterday;" see Brockelman, 1985, p. 81). Today one uses the word self to refer to a person's essential being, that which distinguishes them

from others, and especially understood as the object of introspection or reflexive action. Implied in the term is the phenomenological "sense of self," self as directly experienced as distinct from *other*. Moreover, one can signal the continuity of self through time by such phrases as "back to his old self again." Conversely, one can signal that some change has occurred in a person by phrases like "he wasn't himself today." Hence, the connotation of self implies both physical and psychological boundaries, and both physical and mental continuity through time.

It is clear that from ancient times self has had an inherently ambiguous meaning—what I will call hereafter *self-as-being* and *self-as-psyche*. One may use self to label the fact that one's entire being, including one's body, one's physical existence, is present, is bounded, is distinct from the other and has remained so through some duration of time. One may also use self to refer to the psyche and its mental faculties, including intentionality, personhood, ego, persona, feelings, and unconscious processes—perhaps also soul—and so forth, which are distinct from the mental faculties of the other, and that have remained the same "mind" through some considerable duration of time. The degree of distinction between self-as-being and self-as-psyche depends upon the extent to which one is *enculturated* (the process by which a baby grows up to be inculcated with his or her society's skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge) to believe that there exists a mind-body dualism—that is, the belief that mind and body are two different substances, levels, metaphysical planes, domains, and so forth. If I say "I went there myself," I will usually mean that my entire physical being moved there, that I was there in both body and mind. However, an Australian Aborigine might say something in her language that is similar to "I went there myself," but actually mean that she traveled there in her dream state. For the Australian Aborigine, the distinction between self-as-being and self-as-psyche is not as extreme as it is for most Westerners, yet she would certainly know that she had left her body behind while she traveled as her spirit-self, her "soul." Indeed, she may well report that she had met others during her dream journey who had likewise left their physical forms behind, if they still had physical forms—were not perhaps ghosts of departed relatives (see Laughlin, 2011). The distinction between self-as-being and self-as-psyche is sometimes subtle and often muddled in anthropological writings, one reason being that although the self-concept (self-construal, self-representation) is a cultural universal (i.e., people everywhere make the distinction between self and non-self or other), how different peoples understand the self can vary enormously (Spiro, 1993). It is the task of ethnology (i.e., the scientific study of culture) to unpack differences and similarities among the ways people come to know what they know about themselves, their society, and their world. The thing to keep in mind is that anthropologists of whatever age have almost always been concerned with self-as-psyche, not self-as-being.

Anthropology of the Self

It is commonplace in anthropology to maintain that the Western (i.e., Euro-American-Aussie) cultural concept of the self is somewhat different, perhaps even aberrant, when compared with the majority of non-Western peoples (Geertz, 1984; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Westerners do tend to cognize the self as an independent, distinct, separate, and autonomous individual, while most traditional peoples conceive of themselves as interdependent, as social actors whose identities derive from their position in a social network—as cogs in the social wheel. It is also the case that most people in all societies identify themselves with their culturally defined self-concept (social-self or ego), rather than the self as it really is (see Spiro, 1993). However, the Western vs. non-Western conception of the self is not a simple black and white contrast, for there are people in each type of society that may be found to exhibit the style of self-construal of the other (Hollan, 1992; Mpofu, 1994). Thus any scientific definition of the self must be amenable to a range of sociocultural variation broader than is normally modeled in Western psychology.

To one extent or another, ethnology has been interested in the social and cultural aspects of the self since the discipline's inception as a science in the mid-19th century. The reason for this is the obvious ubiquity of ethnopsychologies (local theories of mind) among the planet's peoples. As Paul Heelas (1981a) noted: "Indigenous psychologies are in fact necessary if three interrelated functions are to be fulfilled: sustaining the 'inner' self, sustaining the self with respect to the sociocultural, and enabling sociocultural institutions to operate" (p. 13). In other words, human beings everywhere are curious about themselves and develop personal knowledge both through direct experience and through the internalization of the society's norms, self-concepts, and categories. The principal interest of the anthropology of the self is in understanding how

the developing individual constructs his or her identity within the context of physical and social environment. One fundamental impact of a cross-cultural view is that the definition of the self as used by psychology and interdisciplinary transpersonalists should conform to how it may be applied in other non-Western societies. In other words, the definition one uses should reflect the fact that all societies have words for and concepts of the self, but that how the concept is instantiated in each culture may vary, as it will among individuals making up the group.

Factors in the Cross-Cultural Understanding of the Self

There are other factors that become evident in the cross-cultural literature, and I will discuss each of them in turn, giving examples from the ethnographic literature and adding some relevant literature in case the reader wishes to follow-up. Sensitivity to these factors will allow interdisciplinary transpersonalists to better utilize the ethnographic literature in their formulations. For instance, knowing that so-called lucid dreaming is quite common in many societies should temper discussions of lucid dreaming as an unusual experience among Western subjects and how such subjects conceive of the dream-self (Laughlin, 2011).

Self-as-being versus self-as-psyche. Virtually all anthropological treatments pertain to the self-as-psyche, as opposed to the self-as-being, as described above. Perhaps as many as 95% or more of uses of the term in the anthropological literature are concerned with the psychological dimensions of personhood, identity, role, status, and so on, rather than the greater existential sense of "being in the world" (i.e., existence, Heideggerian *dasein*; Heiddeger (1953/1996). Keeping this distinction in mind may help in processing ethnographic data in the context of interdisciplinary transpersonal studies wherein writers often imply self-as-being in their research methods and analyses. Indeed, transpersonal research often requires a developmental shift from a self-awareness locked into a culturally defined social identity to a transcendent awareness of being (e.g., Barušs, 2003).

The people living on Saburl Island near New Guinea make a distinction typical of traditional peoples, and to some extent modern technocratic nations as well—that being the difference between someone who is physically human and someone who is morally human, the latter being defined as an individual who knows the "rules of sociality" (Battaglia, 1990, p. 55). The process by which one becomes a moral human is a trick of memory in which the disparate experiences one has and stories one hears suddenly coagulate into one understanding. The stories become one story, and one finds grounding for one's social self. By inculcating the lessons of experience and stories, one realizes a self that is fully Saberl—that being, one who is capable of participating in a flowing, meaningful, and unobstructed social discourse.

Self-as-experienced and self-as-reported. A close reading of the ethnographic literature makes one aware of a distinction that is often poorly operationalized. That is the distinction between self-as-experienced and self-as-reported, or to put it in other words, how I experience myself from moment to moment and how I talk about myself in public (Hallowell, 1955; Hollan, 1992). The ethnographic literature often seems to equate self with self-concept, self-knowledge, and personhood—the self as described in language (e.g., Battaglia, 1995; Goddard, 1996). Limiting research to the ways that people talk about themselves and others: (1) slants the data in favor of the typical constructivist bias, for people are influenced by rules of appropriate linguistic production and etiquette and may be reporting in terms of cultural models as opposed to personal phenomenology (Throop, 2000), and (2) leads to ethnographers ignoring or down-playing the vast depths of the transcendental self—the psyche each individual is culturally conditioned to model. Thus, ethnographic research that is limited to recording how people customarily talk about themselves is often psychodynamically shallow and of limited importance to transpersonal studies. Moreover, because different non-Western peoples talk about the self, personhood, social identity, and consciousness in myriad different ways, it is difficult to compare cognitions across cultures, or to isolate those aspects of the transcendental self that may be universal to the species (Erchak, 1992). It should be remembered that language hides as much or more than it reveals about experience (see Weiner, 2001) and may easily gloss over non-linguistic factors involved in self-awareness and self-understanding, which may be more fluid, universal, and developmental than self-reports may describe.

Another way to view this issue clearly is to make a distinction between public and private self (see Heelas, 1981b, p. 43). People often express that there is more to themselves than others know. In fact, they often say "nobody knows me." That means that they are not getting feedback about themselves that matches what they know

about themselves. Again, anthropology has most often focused upon the public self: the social identity, persona, public ego, and so forth.

The embodiment of self. More modern anthropological conceptions of the self have insisted upon its *embodiment*. Following on from Hallowell's (1955) pioneering work, Thomas Csordas (1994) argued that the only perspective that fits cross-cultural findings is an experiential-phenomenological one that recognizes the self as an amalgamation of "prereflective bodily experience, culturally constituted world or milieu, and situational specificity or habitus" (p. 5). The various somatic processes orient the being to the world—processes mediating perception and action ("practice")—and exist prior to self-reflection and cultural conditioning (see Powers, 2005). The fundamental function of the self is *orientational*; that is, the essential and embodied processes of the self operate to orient the being toward objects and events in the world, toward the social other, and toward oneself as the center of an existential situation. In reflexively objectifying the self, one creates the fiction of personhood, an identity influenced by culture and projected outwards upon society.

I do not mean to imply that all non-Western societies exhibit the extreme mind-body dualism typical of technocratic societies. Far from it, for many cultures see the self as a physical entity. For instance, while the Muinane people of Columbia speak of themselves in much the egoistic terms Westerners do, their ontological assumptions about the self are as a physical substance, or, to put it in other words, they do not posit a clear distinction between thought and act, both being part of the same physical process (Londoño-Sulkin, 2000). Muinane are enculturated to pursue a way of life they consider "cool," and remaining cool requires cool thoughts—like, loving their kinsmen, avoiding improper intentions, showing respect for others, working hard, and so forth. Evil is produced by people and other beings that are "hot," meaning egotistical, self-serving, angry, and morally ignorant. A hot person is transformed into a cool one by the ritual manipulation of the substances causing such anti-social and dangerous tendencies.

Nor should I leave the reader with the misconception that just because a people conceive of the self as a substance, that the substance fits a Western category of physical "matter." Indeed, few peoples are materialistic in that way. One of the most common conceptions of self and body is that people, just like all other things in the world, are essentially made up of an *élan vital*, or vital force. The Navajo speak of that force in terms of "wind" (McNeley, 1981). The Holy Wind is a single force that pervades everything in the world. Hence, everything (including people) is implicated in everything else. This is a common view among African peoples who conceive of this force or energy in the person as interpenetrating with that of others, and with all things (Horton, 1983; Morris, 1994). The African ontology is quite similar to that among Pacific peoples who hold to various conceptions of "mana" as a living, vital force in and between persons (Keesing, 1984).

Egoistic versus social self. Personhood never develops in a social vacuum. One develops a self-concept in relation to others among whom one is raised. All people everywhere experience themselves as both individual and social actor (Mageo, 1995, 1998). But in many societies, the sense of self develops so thoroughly bound to family and community relations that people have a difficult time considering the self apart from society (as in the case of the Muinane above). Among the Cashinahua of Western Amazonia, people make a distinction between a normal person who craves interaction with his kin and a being they call a *yuxin* who has no fixed place in the world (Lagrou, 2000, p. 159).

Moreover, all normal (i.e., non-psychopathic) individuals acknowledge the personhood of the other in every encounter. As George Murdock (1945) noted, every culture on the planet demarcates encounters with the other with ritual hellos and goodbyes (see also Gregor, 1977, for a case in point among the Mehinaku of Brazil). Moreover, the vast majority of societies encourage the developing person to conceive of themselves in socially pragmatic ways (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Whom I conceive myself to be as a person, as an identity, as a self-image, persona or ego, is coterminous with my social status, my role(s) in the social fabric, and my position in the family, lineage, and clan, as well as any ritual exchange network with which I am involved. Gender is always a factor, of course. As Gerald Erchak (1992, pp. 59-61) noted, all human societies exaggerate gender differences. I might add that gender categories are often some of the most rigidly held in defining social identity. At the moment, the cultures of the technocratic world are undergoing a profound gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) revolution, which reveals just how rigid or flexible traditional gender roles can be.

The role I play in the political and economic structure of the group is entirely entangled with my conception of social context. While knowing that I am distinct as an entity, a person, I nonetheless define myself in my relation to others. In a very real sense, people are symbols to one another, and even symbols to oneself (Stromberg, 1985). When people encounter one another through the mediation of social categories (male vs. female, higher status vs. lower status, authority vs. peer group member, etc.), they are conditioned to alter how they present in the encounter. They are often *performing* who they are on a socially appropriate stage (Battaglia, 1990, 1995). This cross-culturally common situation involves self-construal: internalizing during development the historical narrative, social statuses and roles, and the system of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities in which the individual is embedded, as well as the projection of social categories and expectations upon the other. These relations and reciprocal obligations may extend into cosmological domains, including backwards into my culture's cosmogony (Mageo, 2001a, pp. 4-6) and into my present or past interactions with *other-than-human persons*, as Hallowell (1955, 2010) liked to call spiritual beings (i.e., with ancestors, totemic spirits, gods, etc.; Block & Parry, 1982).

Martin Sökefeld (1999) made the point that modern anthropology recognizes that traditional societies are made up of a plurality of selves. Culture does influence the development of self-identity, but this does not mean that identities are stamped out by some kind of cultural cookie-cutter. Indeed, as he illustrated among the people living in the town of Gilgit in Northern Pakistan, identities quite often come into conflict. Individuals under the stress of social involvement may be forced to embrace a number of identities, and some of these identities may even conflict with each other.

Sameness and duration of self. A person's self-identity is almost always seen as an enduring process (Sökefeld, 1999). Even though the self may change through time—may grow, develop, evolve, mature, transcend the limits of social categories, and eventually die—there is the sense that I remain the same enduring object or process over time. For instance, anthropologists will speak of "life-history" durations of selfhood (e.g., Cole & Knowles, 2001; Thomas, 2005), and again, the duration of the self may continue on after death into ancestorhood (Royce, 2011). Those societies that believe the person is reincarnated may consider aspects of the self to pre-date conception and to continue lifetime after lifetime, if only as a bundle of karma (Block & Parry, 1982).

In addition, the self not only has agency, it is the product of agency (Bourdieu, 1977; Brockelman, 1985; Sökefeld, 1999). In either case, the human self is marked by the capacity to bind time in both its development and in its intentions (Piaget, 1980). The self takes time to develop because it is the product of the interaction between the individual and the social and physical world, and the self may project its intentions into the distant future by way of planned actions that may take time to come to fruition. Hence, it is obvious that the role of memory in construing a social self or self-identity is fundamental to the process (Ben-Āmôs & Weissberg, 1999; Mageo, 2001b, p. 15). A clear example of this factor may be found in Marianne George's (1988) description of the importance of mounting and participation in rituals that transform the status of people of power among the Barok living on the island of New Ireland in Papua New Guinea. For Barok "big men," certain major rituals not only mark the transformation of personal power, the years-long effort in mounting the ritual actually produces the transformation. This is apparently typical of Melanesian rituals of exchange in that they operate to change egoistic motivations into social regard (Gow, 2000, p. 48).

The lifetime process of self-development may be socially punctuated by phases of transformation demarked by ritual, so-called *rites of passage* (Turner, 1967, 1969; van Gennep, 1909/1960). For example, transformation in a person's social status and power is often accomplished during such rituals (Burns & Laughlin, 1979). Ritual transformations typically result in both public and self-referential changes in one's personhood. Male members of the Sambia tribe of the New Guinea highlands are forced through a series of brutal initiations, which, according to Gilbert Herdt (1982), transform each male's identity from a dependent, female dominated sense of self in early childhood to that of a fierce warrior who represses his feminine side and defines himself in opposition to women so that he may effectively fight wars and copulate with captured and presumably hostile women.

Self and emotion. The self includes emotional as well as perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral attributes (Laughlin & Throop, 1999; Markus & Kitayama 2003; Overing & Passes, 2002b; Throop 2000). Indeed,

the control of emotion may be fundamental to how individuals are conditioned to present themselves in social situations. All too often anthropologists treat the building of self-construal as though it is strictly a cognitive-linguistic process. However, the self-as-psyche includes not only what I think and imagine about myself and the other, but also what I *feel* about myself and the other. C. G. Jung (1955, p. 138 [CW 18 para. 318]; 1978, pp. 329-330 (CW 5 para. 507]) taught that one comes to know oneself by watching the emotionally-laden attributes one shares with, and that one projects upon, other people. Emotions are contagious, as is inevitable in a social species; people tend to be drawn into the emotional tone of the group. Moreover, people tend to confound their own unconscious attributes with the perceived attributes of the other. This quite natural process of projection plays a significant role in the construction of a social self.

The role of emotion is fundamental to one's sense of self in many societies. Brian P. Farley (1998) has shown the role of anxiety in constructing a sense of self among the Nahuatl-speaking people living in the village of San Bartolomé Guahuixmatlac in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico:

> I argue that the sociocentric-oriented self as developed in San Bartolomé experiences deep emotional conflicts and strong resentment toward others. Individuals subordinate their own interests to collective purposes because they experience anxiety in association with their own drives and desires and fear retaliation from either social contemporaries or supernatural beings. (p. 272)

Indeed, for a person to exhibit willfulness in pursuit of their own desires may invite systematic and negative sanctions. Among Malayan peoples, there is pressure to deport oneself so as to not appear foolish or contrary, and thus avoid feeling shame (Goddard, 1996). In virtually all societies, the socially appropriate sense of self involves controlling the expression of negative feelings, especially anger (Overing & Passes, 2002a, p. 22). See: Gaffin (1995) for the Faeroe Islanders of the North Atlantic who recognize a type of person called a *rukkur*, "an easily angered fool;" Briggs (1970) for the Utku Inuit of the arctic for whom reason is valued above all emotions, and those who show anger are ostracized; and Harris (1978) for the Taita people of Kenya who, recognizing the destructive effects of anger, have rituals for purifying negative emotions. Indeed, so prevalent is this stricture on showing negative emotions that it has led Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) to suggest there is a universal bias in cultural conditioning toward positive self-regard.

Self-system. There has been a gradual realization in anthropology that the self is less an entity than it is a complex psycho-physical system, which may trend towards unity or fragmentation (e.g., Csordas, 1994, p. 276), depending on personal, developmental, social, and environmental pressures, especially during a person's formative years (Mageo, 1995, 1998, 2002b). The *self-system* (as Jeannette Mageo aptly called it) is organic and therefore it develops, grows, and changes over time. When speaking of the self in this way—from the phenomenological point of view the only sensible perspective—one is talking about arguably the most complex system in the known universe. As with any organic system, there are developmental factors that are all-important in understanding how the system comes to be structured and operate in its adult form (Bourguignon, 1989; Mageo, 1995).

Self-body dualism. Cross-cultural research has shown that virtually all societies on the planet conceive of the self and the body to be separable to some extent. In a research project some of my students and I carried out some years ago, we asked some questions about mind-body relations of a standard holographic sample of societies from around the world (see full report at Laughlin, n.d.). We found that although many societies evidence a more unitary view of mind-body relations than Westerners do, virtually all societies have some notion of mind being distinct from body, if nothing more than they experience leaving their body and traveling around in their dreams. In other words, mind-body dualism ranges from minimal to extreme, but is nonetheless a cultural universal. The importance of this finding for explanations of notions of immortality cannot be overemphasized. The phenomenological gap suggests to a person's mind that their consciousness is somehow separate from their corporeal nature, and that the mind, or some part of the mind, may continue to exist, in some sense, "long after the frail corporeal envelope which lodged it for a time has moldered in the dust" (Frazer, 1933/1966, p. 3).

Multi-state self. One of the most important findings in ethnology for transpersonal studies is that for most traditional societies, people develop their

identity in part from information they derive while in *alternative states of consciousness* (ASCs), that is, experiences had while dreaming, having visions and mystical states, on drug trips, and participating in rituals (Bourguignon, 1973; Bourguignon & Evascu, 1977; Laughlin, 2011; Laughlin, McManus, & d'Aquili 1990; Winkelman, 2010). The distinction between these kinds of societies and those of the Western world (usually modern technocratic societies), where ASCs are either not encountered or ignored in identity formation, is critical. For this reason, two types of culture are defined: *monophasic cultures* in which knowledge of self and world tends to be derived from what Westerners think of as "normal waking" experiences, and *polyphasic cultures* in which knowledge of self and world is derived from multiple states of consciousness (see Laughlin et al., 1990). The latter type characterizes the vast majority of the planet's societies.

Certain states of consciousness are more easily influenced by normally unconscious processes than others. This is particularly true of dream life and is why dream work is vitally important in many types of psychotherapy and in advanced Jungian individuation (Hillman, 1987). Hence it follows that the construal of self among polyphasic peoples may be quite different—and some have argued potentially more productive of advanced, holistic self-development—than that among, say, modern Westerners whose protean ego development may thwart advanced self-realization. This factor is evident in the extent of control the dream ego may exercise in the dream life. For most Westerners and monophasic peoples, generally, dreams just kind of happen, usually without any exercise of will on the part of the ego. Among many polyphasic societies, however, people routinely travel at will in their dreams. This is a particularly important skill learned by certain shamans who may seek socially vital information and healing power in the dream world (Laughlin, 2011).

Transcendental versus cognized self. Peoples vary as to the extent to which they distinguish between culturally influenced self-construal and the recognition of the self as a transcendental object, system, or field (Jung, 1968b, p. 181 [CW 12 para. 247]). Some cultures hold that the culturally inculcated empirical ego is merely a reflection of the true, mysterious and mystical self that is either ultimately unknowable, or knowable by only a few advanced individuals (shamans, seers, mystics, etc.; see Winkelman, 2010). Ethnographies will sometimes confound the term self with other terms such as identity, personhood, personality, ego, being, subjectivity, ethnicity, and self-construal (Erchak, 1992, p. 8). As I have said, what most anthropologists are referring to is the way a people talk about themselves relative to the other (either to other persons or other groups), to their social position and status, or to their role with respect to their cosmology. There are some societies in which the development of the self is thought to pass through multiple stages, usually involving a person's comprehension of and participation in the society's spiritual life (e.g., see Jorgensen, 1980, for the Telefolmin, and Barth, 1975, for the Baktaman, both of New Guinea).

Transpersonal self-construal. Mara, DeCicco, & Stroink (2010) have suggested the term *metapersonal self-construal* for societies recognizing transpersonal development. Metapersonal self-construal "is defined as a sense of one's identity that extends beyond the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche, or the cosmos" (DeCicco & Stroink, 2007, p. 84). Again:

> The focus of an individual with this self-construal moves beyond personal and relational views of the self to a more universal view. In other words, the metapersonal self-construal is not simply defined by personal attributes or social relations, but instead defines the self as connected to all things. The metapersonal has a universal focus that includes all life and nature into the concept of the self. (Mara et al., pp. 1-2).

The ethnographic literature is rife with cultures that not only recognize a metapersonal dimension to the self, but actively encourage self-realization and peak experiences of self in relation to the world (LaHood, 2007; Laughlin, 1989, 1994a, 1994b, 2001; Laughlin, McManus, & Shearer, 1993). In many of these cases, the distinction between self-as-being and self-as-psyche not only becomes blurred, it may well be culturally irrelevant (Bateson, 1980).

Broadening the Definition of the Self

In summary, modern ethnology tends to encounter local conceptions of the self as embodied, as a system: (1) that perceptually orients the individual toward both the social and physical world and the inner being, and (2) that guides intentional action. The self is not an entity—not the product of a constructivist

cookie-cutter mechanism—but does develop a model of itself through adaptive development and self-reflection. The product is a self-concept or identity that may be pluralistic and even protean, that is inextricably linked to emotion, and that is strongly influenced by cultural categories (such as age, sex, status, role, spirit, soul, morality, etc.). Cultures generally recognize that the self is plastic and that it develops with age, sometimes passing through culturally recognized maturational phases that may be demarked or facilitated by rituals. Some societies also recognize higher, transpersonal dimensions of self-development, which perhaps only a few individuals in the group ever attain.

Self from a Neuroanthropological Standpoint

Anthropological and neuropsychological approaches are not only compatible, it is clear that they are mutually supportive and paint similar pictures of the self (see Kitayama & Park, 2010). This is especially true when more introspective or experiential methods are used in ethnology. This is not surprising, for the structure(s) of the self *are* the neurophysiological networks that mediate awareness, personality, emotion, cognition, imagery, point of view, temporal perspective, planning, social identity, and all the other attributes of the self as described by ethnographers. Thus, a neuroanthropological perspective on the self is possibly the most powerful window one has on human nature. So let me finally define self in a way that is amenable to both neuroscience and anthropology.

From the neuroanthropological standpoint, the self is comprised of those neurophysiological structures that mediate the psyche, including those specialized networks that produce self-reflection. Self is a distributed system of neural networks, some of which are more common to experience than others. Because it is made up of living cells, the self-system is organic and dynamic, and changes its organization from moment to moment depending upon the focus of consciousness. The biological function of the self is to orient mental functions to those aspects of the world that are of adaptive significance, including the physical environment, the social milieu, and internal somatic and psychological states. All animals with brains have a self-system, however rudimentary. Primates, being social animals, are focused on social relations that play a major role in neuropsychological development. Most of the neural activities comprising the self at any given moment are unconscious, and some operations are either rarely or never conscious. Self-system states normally include elements of emotion and perhaps praxis, appropriate to the adaptational problem being faced.

One of the most important functions of the self is in observing and modeling itself. As the great perceptual psychologist, James J. Gibson (1979; Neisser, 1993) showed, self-perception is a special case of perception in general in that one's being, one's body, is part of the extramental world to which the brain must adapt. The cognition of the self is no different in this respect than the cognition of any other object. Just how the self presents to self-awareness and how one makes sense of those presentations are heavily mediated by culture. As psychological anthropologist Larry Peters (1994) has shown, the "symptoms" of mental illness as interpreted by clinicians in a Western technocratic culture may be seen as indications of the need for a rite of passage and self-transformation in a non-Western context.

Self-reflection, mediated primarily by cortical structures in the prefrontal lobes, is probably a more advanced facility among humans than any other animal on the planet. It is small wonder that anthropologists encounter the range of customary self-construal represented in the ethnographic literature. Anthropologists have traditionally emphasized the sociocultural factors influencing the development of personality, social identity, maturation of social role, alterations in consciousness, autobiographical narratives, behavior, how people talk about themselves, and so forth. More recent studies (e.g., Hollan, 1992; Mageo, 1995; Throop, 2000) have more fully recognized the systemic and reflexive nature of the self, but none so far have grounded the self-system in neurobiology. If one includes neurophysiological grounding—if one acknowledges that the self is a distinct organization of the brain—it becomes obvious that there is always far more to the self-system than any cognitive model or self-concept, a factor rarely acknowledged in most anthropological studies. There is also a growing understanding that the self-system is not necessarily unitary, that sub-systems may be in conflict with each other. There may exist recurrent contingencies that require a fragmented adaptation during the development of the self.

For phenomenological reasons (see Laughlin & Throop, 2009), it is easy for people to ignore the embodied nature of mind, consciousness, and even the self, and to conclude that there exists (to one extent or another) an ontological distinction between mind

(psyche, self, soul, etc.) and the physical body. In other words, local cultural epistemologies are hampered by the very structure and operations of the nervous system in reaching a complete *identity theory* of mind-body relations, or in understanding the full complexity of the self-system. Being cognizant that the self-system is vastly complex, most of its operations remaining unconscious to actors, allows one to realize that the self is transcendental relative to any possible knowledge one may accrue about it. It is also clear that there exists no cultural tradition that fully models the self-system in anything like the complexity of modern neuroscience. Simply put, the human nervous system is the most complex system in the known universe, and there is no end to what one may come to know about its operations, most of which are amenable only to scientific scrutiny.

Unfortunately, there so far exists no widely accepted anthropological theory that can accommodate a transpersonal, transcultural, or archetypal view of the self (cf. Daniels, 2002, for a summary of theories in transpersonal psychology). For various reasons too arcane to go into here, psychological anthropology has historically been heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis while virtually ignoring Jungian psychology (Laughlin & Tiberia, 2012). Were anthropologists more aware of Jungian *complex,* or *analytical psychology* (Jung, 1968a, p. 40 [CW 9 pt. 1 para. 84]), they would know that over a century ago Jung taught that the psyche is a vast system of subsystems and sub-subsystems, termed complexes, most of which remain unconscious to the person (Jung, 1973b, p. 599 [CW 2 para. 1351]), and which are redolent with emotional associations (Jung, 1973a, p. 321 [CW 2 para. 733]).

> The self is merely a term that designates the whole personality. The whole personality of man is indescribable. His consciousness *can* be described, his unconscious *cannot* be described because the unconscious—and here I must repeat myself—is always unconscious. It is really unconscious, we really don't know it, so we don't know our unconscious personality. We have hints, we have certain ideas, but we don't know it really. . . . The unconscious of man can go God knows where. There we are going to make discoveries. (Jung, as cited in McGuire & Hull, 1977, p. 301)

Jung's view was that the empirical ego is but one complex out of a multitude, and it is entirely possible for the self to develop more than one ego-complex. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1971, 1999) came close to the Jungian view when he described what he called *protean man*, a self-system with more than one ego-complex, each complex being adaptive in a specific set of circumstances. This type of fragmentation is characteristic of selves that develop under stressful conditions such as poverty, social conflict, domestic and social violence, and so forth. Protean development is a significant hindrance to the natural tendency of the self toward totality or wholeness.

The empirical (i.e., the phenomenologically accessible) "hints" about the nature of the unconscious are derived from intuitive ideas, images, unintended actions, and so forth that may be the objects of self-reflection. One may learn something of one's unconscious self via dreams, visions, free associations, mythopoeic creativity, and other alternative states of consciousness. The unconscious is composed of endless archetypal structures which, although never observed directly, may be known to some extent from watching their operations (Laughlin & Tiberia, 2012; Stevens, 1982). For neuroanthropological purposes, the terms neural network and archetype may be treated as synonymous when and if the neural network mediates part of the personality. Everyone is born with a self-system, with an archetypal self.

The Transcendental Self

> *Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas* ("Fortunate is he, who is able to know the causes of things.") Virgil (29 BC, The Georgics, Book II, verse 490)
>
> You cannot step into the same river twice, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you. Heraclitus (lines 41-42, as cited in Burnet (1930), Early Greek Philosophy)

One of the most important attributes of self-reflection is that its operations may, under the requisite conditions, change one's self-construal, and thus potentially change the organization of the self. This process is what Harris L. Friedman (2013; Pappas & Friedman, 2012) has called *self-expansiveness*, the transformation of the self-concept as a direct consequence of transpersonal experiences and explorations. This is a very useful concept for anthropology, as well as psychology, for it points to an attribute of spiritual development common in polyphasic cultures in which

transpersonal experiences are evoked using ritual and psychoactive drugs. Again, the concept underscores the phenomenological fact that there is no little "me" floating around above the self, objectively watching what is happening. Self-reflection is a thoroughly subjective process by which the self-system monitors its own operations.

It is crucial to understand that, just as the self and world are transcendental relative to one's knowledge, so too is the physical body. One never experiences one's body as it really is. The extramental body is vastly complex. Yet one can be aware of the body only through exteroceptive (vision hearing, touch, etc.) and interoceptive sensations (pain, bliss, proprioception, etc.) and the self-model and self-image one informs from those sensations. The cognized body is a model of the real thing, and is constructed by neural networks that are "wired-in"—modeled by what Kinsbourne (1998) has called a "body-scheme-acquisition device" (p. 215) and a "body-image-acquisition device" (p. 216). Obviously, culture can impact this modeling process by varying the experiences one has of the body. For instance, an advanced practitioner of hatha yoga may develop a different model of their body than non-practitioners.

Anthropologist Paul Radin (1927) suggested decades ago that in any given society, one would find a handful of critical thinkers, or philosophers, while everyone else simply accepted their cultural worldview as received—Radin called these *men of action*. It may well be, then, that most people in any culture will tend to project their self-concept and self-image onto their transcendental self, thereby mistaking, as Jung (1969, pp. 269-270 [CW 8 para. 516]) noted, the concept or image for the object. Belief in a permanent me is a matter of self-deceptive attitude, which is instilled in childhood (Hood, 2012) and altered by culture, and potentially by experience. It seems likely that societies range along a continuum from those that discourage too much self-reflection to those that positively sanction, or even mandate more advanced self-reflection. The point is, from an empirical view, all that is required to realize the impermanence and illusion of the self-concept, or any mental function with which the self is identified, is a sufficient level of self-reflection (often during the course of meditation). In a sense, the human brain is wired to potentially realize itself as it really is—that virtually all psychological functions of the brain are impermanent (Austin, 1999; Flanagan, 2011).

The Self

The Relevance of No-Self

There is no better example of the transformational capacity of self-reflection than the realization of *no-self*, that is, the realization that there is no such thing as a permanent ego. The belief in a permanent ego is an artifact of cultural conditioning and is easily dispelled by self-reflection as long as the individual does not overly identify with his or her self-model. It is safe to say that any cultural tradition that encourages self-reflection as a path to self-knowledge and wisdom will lead inevitably to "seeing" that the self is dynamic and that nothing that arises in consciousness is permanent. This is not a matter of taste, but of seeing the self as it really is—indeed, as a transcendental self-system as described above.

The most famous tradition of self-reflection leading to this realization, and the elevation of that realization to a cornerstone of philosophy, is the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (no-self, selflessness; see Austin, 1999; Carlisle, 2006; Collins, 1982; Federman, 2011; Flanagan, 2011, pp. 93-98; Harvey, 1995; Metzinger, 2009; Morris, 1994; Smith, 2010). In Theravada Buddhism, the realization of anatta is automatic on the path to awakening. In a famous treatise on insight meditation, the great Burmese meditation master, Mahāsi Sayādaw (1994), noted that the belief in a permanent ego falls away during stage four of a 19 stage maturation process leading to the realization of Nibbāna and the fruits of that realization. What the discourse obviously implies is that personal identification with a fixed and permanent self-model is common to all people everywhere, even in Buddhist societies. This is a point that ethnographer Melford Spiro (1993) made about his Burmese Buddhist informants. When he went into the field among Burmese Buddhists, and aware of the central teaching of anatta, he wished to see how that teaching of no-self (no-soul) influenced peoples' self-understanding:

> After a few months into my field work, however, it became apparent that I would have to change my research plans because I discovered that the Burmese villagers with whom I lived and worked do not internalize the doctrine of *anatta*. Instead, they strongly believe in the very ego or soul that this doctrine denies. They do so on two accounts, experiential and pragmatic. First, because they themselves experience a subjective sense of a self, the culturally normative concept of an ego-less person does not correspond to their personal experience.

> Second, and perhaps more important, they find the doctrine of selfless person not congenial to their soteriological aspirations. (p. 119)

Spiro's findings among the Burmese mirror my own among Tibetan Buddhist monks. The realization of no-self is exceptional in any society, even those whose local epistemology or ethnopsychology describe the emptiness of the transcendental self. Tibetan Buddhist monks may learn texts by heart that extol the virtues of realizing no-self (the *anatman*), few actually practice the advanced meditations leading to this realization.

Practitioners of Western philosophical and spiritual traditions have reached the same conclusion based upon meditations focusing upon the empirical contents of the "empirical" ego. The great phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl (1989, pp. 103-104), concluded from his introspection that the ego is essentially empty of content and is really no more than an enduring point of view upon ever-changing content. The ego is an ineluctable focus of intentionality toward the world of experience (Husserl, 1969, p. 23). A meditator inevitably comes to this conclusion because he or she finds that every content she focuses upon as me—as self—is impermanent; that is, all contents arise and pass away within the sphere of consciousness, hence, the "you can't step in the same river twice" metaphor above. All that remains of my self is an enduring point of view always present within the stream of consciousness, a point of view that is devoid of content, and yet is identical to the unity of each moment of consciousness (Husserl, 1970, p. 545).

Meditation and the Transcendental Self

Meditation is essentially the disciplined turning of the spotlight of consciousness upon the internal processes of the transcendental self. It is clear now from research on the neuropsychology of meditation that the process is one of reorganization of the self (Damasio, 2003, 2010; Deshmukh, 2006; Varela & Shear, 1999; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). A self-aware self is different both experientially and structurally than a non-aware self. Indeed, awareness of self is mediated differently than awareness of the other (Decety & Sommerville, 2003). The introspective mind-state is mediated by a discrete organization in the brain (Heatherton et al., 2006), and as that system of networks develops through disciplined application of self-awareness, it grows and reorganizes (Goldberg, Harel, & Malach, 2006; Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman, & Raichle, 2001; Murphy & Donovan, 1999). As more is learned about how the brain mediates its own self-reflection, there is a concomitant and growing realization among researchers of the value of introspective, phenomenological, and meditative research in science (Tart, 2001; Wallace, 2007, 2009).

Conclusion

Approaching the nature and experience of the self from a transpersonal neuroanthropological perspective will help both transpersonal and ethnological researchers avoid some of the pitfalls of more constructivist views of social identity. More specifically, combining ethnographic fieldwork with neuropsychological research underscores the systematic nature of the self. Traditional cultures exhibit myriad ways of conceiving, conceptualizing, imaging, and talking about the self (Wexler, 2006). These ways of knowing are usually focused upon the socially active person and emphasize the ways that societies have of encouraging self-identity (or culturally conditioned model of the self). From an ecological point of view (Gibson, 1979; Neisser, 1993), one can best understand that self-construal is an adaptational process no different than adaptation to other aspects of extramental reality. Enduring social relations require that there be a consensus, habitual and customary understanding of the social person, and each individual must more or less conform to social expectations in order to, so to speak, "go along to get along."

But many cultures also recognize that such self-models are incomplete and transitory, at least implicitly reflecting the mysterious and transcendental reality of the true self. By realizing that most of what the brain does occurs unconsciously, including processes integral to the psyche and self, the researcher cannot fall into the error of mistaking the self-concept for the true self. Moreover, understanding that neurophysiological systems mediating the self both develop over the course of the life span and are to some extent plastic in their organization, forces the researcher's perspective into a broader and more dynamic standpoint.

It is reasonable to posit that the more pressure there is in a society for people to conform to a fixed and shared concept of the social (economic, political) self, the less the culture will recognize and encourage transpersonal explorations. On the other hand, one of the tipoffs that a society does encourage such explorations is that they will apply rituals to that end: for example, the Sun Dance among Native Americans,

ritualized meditations among Buddhist practitioners, the ritualized ingestion of psychoactive substances (or *entheogens*) among shamanic cultures, the Sema dance among Sufis, and so forth. The point of all such ritual practices is to set the stage for mind-states requisite to transcending ego-consciousness and self-identity and to accessing the depths of the true self (Csordas, 1994; Turner, 1969). The ethnographic literature is rich with examples of transpersonal spiritual traditions that, as with modern anthropology and neuropsychology, acknowledge the transcendental nature of the self.

Finally, in terms of the evolution of the self, it is interesting that most of the higher processes of self and self-construal involve the most recent part of the cerebral cortex, namely the prefrontal lobes. This crucial neurophysiological factor should be more important to anthropology than it heretofore has been (Goldberg, 2009; Laughlin, 2011; Laughlin et al., 1990). For instance, it is the frontal executive functions that have made the social distribution of intelligence and complexity typical of our species possible (Huberman, 1995). What is intriguing here is that it is this same advanced cortical system of cognitive imagining and emotion-modulating processes that produces the kind of complex self-construal typical of most people in all societies, and that also facilitates advanced self-awareness and dynamic self-models informing transpersonal phenomenological disciplines. The prefrontal lobes make the distinctly human cultural-self possible, as well as the self-actualizing mind-states of the few, if any, who transcend cultural models of the self in any society.

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Note

1. Ethnological and ethnographic interest in the self has burgeoned over the last three decades (e.g., Battaglia, 1995; Ben-Āmôs & Weissberg, 1999; Cohen, 1994; Erchak, 1992; Heelas & Lock, 1981; Hollan, 1992; Lindholm, 2007; Mageo, 1995, 2002a, 2003; Morris, 1994; Sökefeld, 1999; Stromberg, 1985; Throop, 2000; Van Wolputte, 2004; Whittaker, 1992). The focus of this literature has been on the many ways that cultures construe the self, including identity, ego, the "I" and the "me," personhood, and the like.

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