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# Why the Self Is Empty

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## *Toward a Historically Situated Psychology*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article presents a contextualized treatment of the current configuration of self, some of the pathologies that plague it, and the technologies that attempt to heal it. Of particular interest is the historical shift from the Victorian, sexually restricted self to the post-World War II empty self. The empty self is soothed and made cohesive by becoming "filled up" with food, consumer products, and celebrities. Its historical antecedents, economic constituents, and political consequences are the focus of this article. The two professions most responsible for healing the empty self, advertising and psychotherapy, find themselves in a bind: They must treat a psychological symptom without being able to address its historical causes. Both circumvent the bind by employing the lifestyle solution, a strategy that attempts to heal by covertly filling the empty self with the accoutrements, values, and mannerisms of idealized figures. This strategy solves an old problem but creates new ones, including an opportunity for abuse by exploitive therapists, cult leaders, and politicians. Psychology's role in constructing the empty self, and thus reproducing the current hierarchy of power and privilege, is examined.*

From its beginnings, modern psychology has had difficulty developing a historically situated perspective on its discourse and practices. Nowhere is this ahistorical tendency more obvious than in the debate on individualism. Many researchers have treated self-contained individualism as an unquestioned value and the current concept of self—the bounded, masterful self—as an unchangeable, transhistorical entity. In opposition to a decontextualized approach, I will argue that cultural conceptualizations and configurations of self are formed by the economies and politics of their respective eras. By studying the self in this way, psychologists will be better able to understand the current era and psychology's place within that era.

I have drawn from the insights of hermeneuticists such as Faulconer and Williams (1985), Gadamer (1979), Heidegger (1962/1977), Morawski (1984), Rabinow and Sullivan (1987), Stigliano (1989), and the authors in the book edited by Messer, Sass, and Woolfolk (1988) in order to develop an approach characterized by historical and ontological concerns. The argument is at times speculative and nonempirical. It depends in part on a survey of the opinions of other social scientists and on the arguments of historians whose qualitative data is far too detailed to

reproduce in an article of this size. I realize that this approach will be considered imprecise by some psychologists, but after much debate, I have decided that it is, with all its flaws, the best approach for such an elusive subject.

Even with these limits, I think the study of the self across time and cultures is an *essential* topic for psychology. If psychologists do not recognize the ethnocentric nature of psychology's discourse about the current Western self, we commit several errors. In particular, we participate in a culturally disrespectful and damaging psychological imperialism abroad and at the same time perpetuate the discourse of self-contained individualism and its attendant miseries at home.

By the *self* I mean the concept of the individual as articulated by the indigenous psychology of a particular cultural group, the shared understandings within a culture of "what it is to be human" (Heelas & Lock, 1981, p. 3). The self embodies what the culture believes is humankind's place in the cosmos: its limits, talents, expectations, and prohibitions. In this sense the self is an aspect of what Heidegger (1962/1977) called the horizon of shared understandings or "the clearing" carved out by the particular practices of a particular culture. There is no universal, transhistorical self, only local selves; no universal theory about the self, only local theories.

Studying the self of a particular era in this way allows us to operationalize a basic tenet of ontological hermeneutics: The process of studying humans is not the same as "reading" persons as "texts" (Gergen, 1988), but more like standing behind them and reading over their shoulder the cultural text from which they themselves are reading (Sass, 1988a, p. 250). In an earlier article (Cushman, 1987), I suggested that all elements of the clearing, including psychological theories about the self, are cultural artifacts and can be examined as elements of the cultural text.

That is what I am attempting to do when I describe the current configuration of self: Read over our shoulders. The self is a difficult concept on which to get a perspective, precisely because it is such a central aspect of the horizon. As Sass (1988a) explained, "The horizon's concealment is intimately or intrinsically connected with the condition of being visible. . . its presence is almost too obvious, too self-evident" (p. 242). It is therefore difficult for us to imagine the self as other than the way it is in our era or to consider it a legitimate subject for study. But as difficult as it is, the study of the self is also a crucial ele-

ment in interpreting an era. By studying the configuration of the current self, we will come to have an enlarged perspective on the forces that shape it, the discourse that justifies it, the consequences that flow from it, the illnesses that plague it, and the activities responsible for healing it. These things come in packages; unraveling one helps reveal them all.

## The Emergence of the Empty Self

Many authors have described how the bounded, masterful self has slowly and unevenly emerged in Western history. This is a self that has specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its own personal ends. I believe that in the post-World War II era in the United States, there are indications that the *present* configuration of the bounded, masterful self is the empty self. By this I mean that our terrain has shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. It experiences these social absences and their consequences "interiorly" as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger. The post-World War II self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost: It is empty.

One can see evidence of the empty self in current psychological discourse about narcissism and borderline states, the popular culture's emphasis on consuming, political advertising strategies that emphasize soothing and charisma instead of critical thought, and a nationwide difficulty in maintaining personal relationships. Broad historical forces such as industrialization, urbanization, and secularism have shaped the modern era. They have influenced the predominant psychological philosophy of our time, self-contained individualism; constructed the current configuration of the bounded self, the empty self; and developed the professions that I believe are most responsible for filling and healing the empty self, advertising and psychotherapy. Thus, the ideologies, subjects, and businesses of modern psychology have historical antecedents, economic constituents, and political consequences. They do not float suspended in time and space: They have a context.

Unfortunately, throughout the ongoing debate on the meaning and value of individualism, it has become increasingly clear that many researchers have made the fundamental mistake of decontextualizing the subject. Gergen, (1973, 1985), Giorgi (1970), Harré (1984, 1986a, 1986b), and Sampson (1977, 1981, 1983, 1988) have tried to reorient psychology's perspective. Others, such as Foucault (1980) and Levin (1987b) also have argued that each era produces a particular configuration of self and

corresponding kinds of psychopathology. Sampson's work in particular has emphasized the political antecedents and consequences of the current self.

My understanding of their historical interpretations is that an increasingly bounded, masterful self was constructed after the collapse of feudalism. It emerged at the same time that the modern state was faced with the necessity of developing justifications and techniques for controlling a modern populace. During the beginnings of the modern era in the 16th century, the Western world began to shift from a religious to a scientific frame of reference, from an agricultural to an industrial means of production, from a rural to an urban setting, and from a communal to an individual subject. These vast changes were coincident with and some say responsible for the dual triumph of the concept of Montaigne's subjective individual and the method necessary to study it, Descartes's objective empiricism (Taylor, 1988). Culminating with the Victorian era, the concept of the deep, secret, instinct-driven, potentially dangerous self was used by the state to justify its role as official controller of selves. Over the course of the 20th century, it has become apparent to cultural historians such as Susman (1973) and Lears (1983) that Americans have slowly changed from a Victorian people who had a deeply felt need to save money and restrict their sexual and aggressive impulses. Americans in the post-World War II era seem to have become a people who have a deeply felt need to spend money and indulge their impulses.

The thesis of this article is that the current self is constructed as empty, and as a result the state controls its population not by restricting the impulses of its citizens, as in Victorian times, but by creating and manipulating their wish to be soothed, organized, and made cohesive by momentarily filling them up. The products of the social sciences, and of psychology in particular, have often worked to the advantage of the state by helping to construct selves that are the subjects of control and to develop techniques that are the means of control. In the early modern period, Bentham's innovative prison, the Panopticon (Foucault, 1979), and in the current era, political polling strategies (Ginsberg, 1986) are prominent illustrations of the political utility of the social sciences.

This article supports Foucault's and Sampson's line of political reasoning and follows it into the realm of the economy. I believe that the construction of the post-World War II middle-class American self is a good illustration of how the economy and the power structure impact on personality. Since the end of World War II the configuration of an empty self has emerged in the middle classes. It is empty in part because of the loss of family, community, and tradition (Levin, 1987a; Rieff, 1966; Zaretsky, 1976). It is a self that seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era. This response has been implicitly prescribed by a post-World War II economy that is dependent on the continual consumption of nonessen-

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tial and quickly obsolete items and experiences (Zinn, 1973, pp. 89–119). In order for the economy to thrive, American society requires individuals who experience a strong “need” for consumer products and in fact demand them (Henry, 1963). Such an economy requires individuals who have an uninterrupted flow of money and a continual motivation to spend it. The complex interrelatedness of social change, political forces, and cultural forms has somehow accomplished this through the dual creation of easy credit (Malabre, 1987) and a gnawing sense of emptiness in the self (Kohut, 1977).

Psychotherapy is one of the professions responsible for healing the post-World War II self. Unfortunately, many psychotherapy theories attempt to treat the modern self by reinforcing the very qualities of self that have initially caused the problem: its autonomous, bounded, masterful nature (Sampson, 1985). The patient is diagnosed as empty and fragmented, usually without addressing the sociohistorical predicament that caused the emptiness and fragmentation (Bordo, 1988; Levin, 1987c). Thus, through the activity of helping, psychology’s discourse and practices perpetuate the causes of the very problems it is trying to treat.

### ***The Self Is a Social Construct***

This article is based on the type of social constructionist argument recently developed by Geertz (1973), Gergen (1985), Harré (1986a), Morawski (1988), and Sampson (1983, 1988). Humans do not have a basic, fundamental, pure human nature that is transhistorical and transcultural. Humans are incomplete and therefore unable to function adequately unless embedded in a specific cultural matrix.

Culture “completes” humans by explaining and interpreting the world, helping them to focus their attention on or ignore certain aspects of their environment, and instructing and forbidding them to think and act in certain ways (Heiddeger, 1962/1977). Culture is not indigenous clothing that covers the universal human; it infuses individuals, fundamentally shaping and forming them and how they conceive of themselves and the world, how they see others, how they engage in structures of mutual obligation, and how they make choices in the everyday world.

The material objects we create, the ideas we hold, and the actions we take are the consequences or “products” of the social construction of each particular era. They are cultural artifacts. However, these artifacts are not only the expression of an era. They are also the immediate “stuff” of daily life, and as such they shape and mold the community’s generalized reality orientation in subtle and unseen ways. Consequently, they inevitably reinforce and reproduce the constellations of power, wealth, and influence within their respective societies.

### **The Many Shapes of the Western Self**

The self, as an artifact, has different configurations and different functions depending on the culture, the historical era, and the socioeconomic class in which it exists. For

example, the Western self has gone through many permutations over the course of the last 2,500 years. We would do well to remember Foucault’s (1970; Hutton, 1988) warning that the changes undergone by the Western self are not developmental changes brought on by an inner logic, the unfolding of a secret genetic code, or the peeling of layers of enlightenment. The self has undergone extreme, erratic, often discontinuous change because it is part of the larger sociohistorical fabric of its time. The self must function within a particular cultural pattern: matching, maintaining, and replicating it.

For instance, the communal, outward looking, nonsexually conflicted self of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (458BC/1953) looks vastly different from the tortured, confused, “inner” self of Augustine’s *Confessions* (397/1986). The self of the early Middle Ages was an immortal soul enclosed in the shell of a mortal body. It looked vastly different from the cynical, confused, increasingly nihilistic self of the 1920s. To get the sense of this contrast, imagine a conversation between Roland, the French knight in the twelfth century epic *The Song of Roland*, and Zelda Fitzgerald, the quintessential 1920s “flapper.”

During the last 2,000 years in Western society the self has become increasingly more individualistic, more subjective, and “deeper” (Logan, 1987; Meyer, 1986; Morris, 1972). Some scholars (e.g., Dreyfus & Rubin, 1987; Taylor, 1988) believe this individual depth was first expressed by Augustine’s mistrust of self. It was later influenced by Europe’s incremental steps toward capitalism and then developed by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Romantics (Baumeister, 1986, 1987; Greenblatt, 1980; Trilling, 1971) into the hypertrophied, individual self. Finally, the Western self took a major complicating turn during the ascendancy of the Victorian bourgeoisie with the overt articulation of its “hidden” sexual and aggressive content (Lowe, 1982). The individual, bounded, communally isolated self is a modern phenomenon (Rieff, 1966; Zaretsky, 1976), roughly paralleling the development of industrialization and the rise of the modern state. The belief in objective empiricism was based in part on the Enlightenment’s search for the universal laws of a “pure” human nature, accomplished by studying the decontextualized individual. Lowe (1982) has shown how the particular qualities of *bourgeois perception* objectified and quantified everything. Taylor (1988) described how the subject–object and mind–body splits led to an increasing interest in, and the eventual hegemony of, the empirical social sciences. The social sciences thus developed at the same time as the emergence of the isolated, individual self and the modern state’s need to control it through study and calculated manipulation (Foucault, 1979; Trigg, 1985).

### ***The Sexually Conflicted Victorian Self***

More specifically, the bounded, masterful, middle-class self has emerged in Western society during the last 200 years. The bourgeois self of the Victorian era in Europe reflected the impact of the Enlightenment and the in-

dustrial and French revolutions. The economy's need for an industrial labor force caused traditional rural communities to be uprooted, populations to become urbanized, and work to become increasingly compartmentalized and alienating. The percentage of Americans living in urban settings had grown from 3.4% in 1790 to 33% in 1900 (Blum et al., 1973, p. 441). Researchers such as Flexner (1959), Schiebinger (1987), Smith-Rosenberg (1981), and Welter (1966) have shown that in the late 18th and 19th centuries in general and the Victorian era in particular, gender roles in the middle and upper classes took on a polarized and restrictive cast unique to that time regarding both social privilege and economic function.

Lowe (1982) convincingly argued that the Victorian bourgeois self was a secular, rational, subjective, divided, sexually conflicted, linear self that viewed the world as objectifiable and quantitative. The "unknown" was once thought to reside in the external world. Slowly, as the modern age dawned and developed, the self became the container for that which could be hidden from others and from oneself (Baumeister, 1986, pp. 36–50). Trilling (1971) described this as the concern for sincerity preoccupation. Foucault (1979) argued that the modern state exploited this conception of the self in order to justify its new, restrictive powers (see also Sass, 1987). By the triumph of the Victorian bourgeoisie, the unknown was understood to be unequivocally interior (see also Brandell, 1979; Taylor, 1988) and potentially dangerous. Freud (1953, 1961) postulated a self with an interiorized unconscious that contained primitive drives—sex and aggression—that had to be restricted in order for normative bourgeois society to function. Early psychoanalysis reflected these trends, describing and further constructing the modern self.

Some authors, such as Drinka (1984) and Van den Berg (1961), have suggested that as a consequence of the attempts to control "dangerous" impulses, new mental problems developed in the middle and upper classes, most notably hysteria and neurasthenia. Many other writers (e.g., Bernheimer & Kahane, 1985) have also suggested that the particular Victorian construction of gender and identity, especially the conflict between the growing ethic of modernity and the restrictiveness of women's roles, was prescriptively linked to the outbreak of hysteria. Susman (1973) and Lears (1983) also argued that in the United States the strain of acting in a proper bourgeois manner took a toll on spontaneity and expressiveness. What Lears (1983) referred to as the *therapeutic ethos* came into being in order to alleviate derealization and reintegrate selfhood in the upper classes (pp. 11–17). New business roles developed, such as the preacher-therapist, who attempted to cure these new diseases by using the ideology that Meyer (1980) called *positive thinking*. The advertising industry, which Lears thought was another manifestation of "the therapeutic," attempted to cure by implying that products would magically "transform" the customer's life. In order to do that, ads became progressively less informative and more evocative, associating

the product with happy, clean, vigorous models (Lears, 1981, pp. 4–58, 300–312; 1983, p. 19).

### *The Early 20th Century American Self*

During the last 90 years, psychological discourse and practice in relation to the middle-class self have changed from a focus on the Victorian, sexually restricted self to the post-World War II empty and fragmented self. The seeds of this change slowly began developing in the United States in the early decades of the 20th century. For instance, the tactics, products, and successes of therapeutic businesses such as the advertising and self-improvement industries changed from a preoccupation with restriction to an inclination for indulgence.

Susman (1973, pp. 271–285) has demonstrated how, especially in America, the quest for developing a secular *personality* came to take precedence over building religious *character*. Unlike character, which is centered on personal moral integrity, advice manuals of the time taught that personality was synonymous with becoming liked by others. The self was conceived of as capable of personal change; impressing others and gaining their approval became an important aim in life, far outstripping the value of doing the morally correct act, which was dictated by one's character. Riesman, Glazer, and Denny (1953) and Fromm (1955) have also described the *inner-directed*, self-reliant rugged individualist who began to give way to the *outer-directed*, socially skilled salesperson-type of individual.

After the turn of the century, popularized forms of psychology and religion began to offer advice on how to impress others, become popular, and achieve monetary success and peace of mind. Advertising began developing a highly effective strategy: By identifying the product with an "imaginary state of being" (Lears, 1983, p. 19), the ads sought to allay the customer's personal fears and feelings of inadequacy. "By the 1920s," Marchand (1985) explained, "advertisers had come to recognize a public demand for broad guidance . . . about taste, social correctness, and psychological satisfaction. . . . Advertising men had now become broader social therapists who offered . . . balms for the discontents of modernity" (pp. 347, 360).

In the 1920s and 1930s, psychology began to forge an alliance with business management that appeared to aid psychology's emergence as an independent social science discipline. As Brammell and Friend (1981) and Gillespie (1988) have suggested, the famous Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1933; Whitehead, 1938) on worker productivity led the way for an alliance that has not always been as scientifically objective as historians depicted. Asch (1983) and Scheibe (1988) have intimated that this alliance has led to laboratory psychology's quick rise to power in American academia. As big business became increasingly interested in using psychology to boost profits, maximize worker productivity, and influence consumers, new subfields of academic psychology emerged. Applied psychology was used in advertising, marketing, and personnel work.

The trend toward the waning of Victorian values, which began and increased in the first three decades of the century, appeared to have slowed somewhat during the economic depression of the 1930s and World War II. The concrete economic problems of unemployment and hunger took precedence over the cynical and reckless self-absorption of the 1920s. Then, World War II effectively ended the Depression and provided an inescapable sense of realness. For a moment the ennui of the upper classes, which the therapeutic ethos had tried to cure, receded.

Slowly, the fortunes of war began to change as the managers of big business and government learned how to develop and focus America's industrial power for the war effort. There began to emerge in the national consciousness a sense of the power and affluence that the United States would generate in the unknown postwar future (Goldman, 1960). A new era was about to dawn.

### *The Post-World War II Era and Its Economy*

In the decades immediately following World War II, the United States developed an economy that depended on the continual production and consumption of nonessential and quickly obsolete products, celebrities, and experiences (Lowe, 1988). A new era with a new self was beginning to emerge. Although the roots of this new world reach back into the earlier decades of the 20th century, its distinctive character became fully formed in the decades following the war (Goldman, 1960; Zinn, 1973). Authors such as Blum et al. (1973) have described an America that became highly urbanized and industrialized. In 1940 the urban population comprised 77% of the whole; by 1970 it comprised 95% (Blum et al., 1973, pp. 441, 808). In the post-War era writers such as Fromm (1955) and Lasch (1984, 1978) have described a world in which flash is valued over substance, opportunism over loyalty, selling ability over integrity, and mobility over stability. The car transformed urban living, and postwar industrialization brought with it new business capacities and new technologies. The movie and music businesses became dominant, producing a new kind of star; not a hero, but a celebrity (Susman, 1973, pp. 282-284).

More and more the focus has come to rest on the individual (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Levin, 1987b; Zaretsky, 1976). People are living ever more secluded and secular lives, forsaking even the shrinking nuclear family. The percentage of American households of seven or more persons declined from 35.9% in 1790, to 20.4% in 1900, to 5.8% in 1950. At the same time, households with only one person rose from 3.7% in 1790 to 9.3% in 1950—and to 18.5% in 1973. Households with two persons rose from 7.8% in 1790 to 28.1% in 1950 (Kobrin, 1978, p. 71). Coincident with the decline of the large, extended family unit, the individual self came to be seen as the ultimate locus of salvation: the evolving, constantly changing self, on a never-ending search for self-actualization and "growth" (Lifton, 1968). Personal fulfillment is seen to reside within the purview of the individual, who is supposed to be self-sufficient and self-

satisfied (Sampson, 1977, 1985). For this self there are supposed to be no limits to achievement and enjoyment. Middle-class Caucasians born in the baby boom era directly following World War II were told that they were the privileged generation of the most privileged and powerful country in the world (Marin, 1979).

For the United States, one of the tasks of the 1950s was to convert its powerful, international war machine into a viable, international peacetime economy. This was not an easy task, and at times the country floundered in recessions (Goldman, 1960). Eventually it found a way into postwar prosperity through the creation and use of universal, easy credit (see Friedman, 1988; Malabre, 1987). Credit made the new economy go: personal credit, business credit, and government credit. But credit for what?

The increasingly powerful print and electronic media unleashed a flood of opinions about how post-World War II families should spend their money. Countless ads, radio shows, and TV situation comedies portrayed a nation of postwar families that needed new homes. Indeed, large suburban housing developments began transforming the countryside. Advertisements portrayed a nation of new families that needed modern, electronic "conveniences" in order to stay scientific and modern (see the popular comic strip *Gasoline Alley* in 1949 for a good example of these themes; e.g., the *Los Angeles Times*, particularly February 27, 1949; also January 2, 1949, and January 6, 1949). New appliances appeared on the market and transformed household chores. Because the homes and products were so expensive, young middle-class families could not save enough cash to purchase them. Thus, credit became indispensable. The percentage of after-tax income that Americans have saved has decreased from a high of 25.5% in 1944 to less than 2% by 1986 (Malabre, 1987, pp. 4, 21). In contrast, the Japanese rate is currently at 30% of after-tax income. During that same span of time, the volume of consumer installment loans rose from 5% of personal income in 1949, to 15% in 1979, to a record 20% by 1987 (Malabre, 1987, p. 27).

### *The Post-World War II Era and the Empty Self*

I believe that after the war the configuration of the empty self coalesced and finally became predominant as a consequence of the loss of community and in order to match the needs of the new economy. Without this particular self, America's consumer-based economy (and its charismatically oriented political process) would be inconceivable. New discourses and practices such as the advertising industry and the field of psychology were modified in order to respond to and further develop the new configuration of self (Ewen, 1989; Fox & Lears, 1983). Practitioners in both fields are placed in the position of being responsible for curing the empty self without being allowed to address the historical causes of the emptiness through structural societal changes.

Authors such as Gendlin (1987), Lasch (1978), Lears (1983), Lifton (1968), Rieff (1966), Susman (1973), and Taylor (1988) have observed that Americans in the post-

World War II era came to need self-improvement in a form and to a degree unknown before. As the individual's growth, enjoyment, and fulfillment became the single most valued aspect of life (Baumeister, 1987), several industries grew up to minister to this newly created need. The cosmetics industry, the diet business, the electronic entertainment industry, preventive medical care, and the self-improvement industry (containing mainstream psychology, pop psychology, and pop religion) all came into prominence. The technological advances in these fields have been astronomical, as has their increasing power to influence and control the mainstream of American life (Lasch, 1978; Lears, 1983).

But how does this new self-improvement industry work? What makes this network possible? Why do Americans "need" these items and experiences now when they never did before? Again, I am speculating that it is the formation of the empty self that has made this situation possible; a sense of meaninglessness and *absence* feeds these businesses. The Western world and America in particular constructed a new type of bounded self that was the perfect complement to the postwar economy built on a system of universal, worldwide credit. Credit is only necessary when the individual's wish to buy outstrips his or her capital. Individuals do not wish to buy if they do not perceive a need for a product. But with an empty self people *always* need.

Inner emptiness may be expressed in many ways, such as low self-esteem (the absence of a sense of personal worth), values confusion (the absence of a sense of personal convictions), eating disorders (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with food, or to embody the emptiness by refusing food), drug abuse (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with chemically induced emotional experiences), and chronic consumerism (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with consumer items and the experience of "receiving" something from the world). It may also take the form of an absence of personal meaning. This can manifest as a hunger for spiritual guidance, which sometimes takes the form of a wish to be filled up by the spirit of God, by religious "truth," or the power and personality of a leader or guru (Cushman, 1984). For instance, one of the most *au courant* of New Age therapies is *channeling*, an experience in which an individual is said to be entered by the soul or spirit of another "entity," usually thought to be a god, who then speaks "important truths." The wish to be spiritually filled up and guided can make the individual vulnerable to the deceptive practices of restrictive religious cults (Cushman, 1986), charismatic political leaders (Kohut, 1976; Strozier, 1978), unethical psychotherapists (West & Singer, 1980), or even highly authoritarian and controlling romantic partners (Boulette & Anderson, 1986).

### *Psychoanalytic Theory and the Empty Self*

The empty self has become such a prevalent aspect of our culture that much contemporary psychotherapeutic theory is devoted to its treatment. Levin (1987c) and Lasch (1978) among others have suggested that disorders

of the self (i.e., narcissistic and borderline personality disorders) are one of the more popular diagnoses of our time. Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) developed an entire theory of psychotherapy based on the empty, fragmented self. His theory was an attempt to explain how the self is developed in the individual and how to treat it in order to alleviate or lessen the effects of emptiness and fragmentation. In a crucial aspect of psychological development in Kohut's self psychology, the parent is psychologically "taken in" by the child and used to develop a self. He used the term *selfobject* to describe the undifferentiated nature of the parent-child relationship. In analysis it is the therapist, functioning as a selfobject, who initially fills the emptiness. Later in the treatment, the process Kohut (1977) called *transmuting internalizations* is said to fill the emptiness by building the self of the patient.

The other major psychodynamic theory that has recently come to prominence is object relations theory (Kernberg, 1975; Masterson, 1981). In general, object relations theory posits the prominent self of our era, the bounded, masterful, individuated self, as has Kohut. But for object relations theorists what fills the emptiness of the self is not the selfobject experience but rather a whole cast of psychological introjects: representations of others (their thoughts, feelings, and needs) and representations of the thoughts, feelings, and needs of one's self at various stages of development (Ogden, 1986). The representations interact with one another and with the external world, creating various dramas. What is important to note for the purposes of this article is that for object relations theorists the interior of the self is also an emptiness. It is a space partially filled by the stable self-representation (the "true self") and by external "part-objects" brought into the empty self through the psychological mechanism of introjection.

Kohut's method of treatment in particular can be interpreted as an attempt to undo the historical circumstances of our current isolation, to create a different context in which the growing self in the adult patient has a more nurturing environment. Kohut's work implies that our era needs this kind of therapy because children do not get enough empathic attention in the postwar world. Why is it that we currently need this particular kind of parenting, one that has previously been rare or perhaps nonexistent in Western history (Kessen, 1979, p. 815)? In this less communal and certain world, perhaps significantly more empathy and accurate reflecting is needed from parents because more traditional sources of guidance have been lost.

The construction of the empty self is, in fact, a product of a central cultural paradox (Sampson, 1985). The self of our time is expected to function in a highly autonomous, isolated way. To accomplish this it is thought that the individual must develop an ability to be self-soothing, self-loving, and self-sufficient (Fromm, 1956; Sampson, 1985). And yet in order to develop this type of self, many psychologists argue that one must have a nurturing early environment that provides a great deal of

empathy, attention, and mirroring (Horner, 1984; Masterson, 1981; Stern, 1985). Who is to provide this environment? If adults are self-serving, highly ambitious, heavily bounded individuals, why would they choose to undergo the self-sacrifice and suffering necessary to be nurturing parents? Even with the best of intentions, empathic parenting is difficult to accomplish because many of the requisite traits have been constructed out of the self. According to Miller (1981), one possible result of this historical situation could be a group of parents inadequate to such a demanding role and, thus, a generation of offspring who have been narcissistically wounded.

Furthermore, this situation creates a significant gap between society's expectations of high self-sufficiency and the lessened ability of narcissistically wounded individuals to achieve it. The awareness that they are falling short of society's central expectation is a further wound to the self-esteem of young adults, increasing the dichotomy between their outward presentation of self and their internal sense of self. This dichotomy exacerbates a characteristic symptom of narcissism, a sense of personal fraudulence described as a "false self" that masks the frightened, hidden "true self" (Masterson, 1981; Miller, 1981; Winnicott, 1965). Thus, even the current dichotomy between expectation and experience appears to be used in service of constructing the empty self.

Although some of these observations are informed by Kohut's theory, I do not want to leave the impression that self psychology is somehow immune from the critique developed in this article. I use Kohut's theory to interpret the current era because, like any popular psychological theory, it is an artifact that both illuminates and distorts the social world it purports to describe (Cushman, 1987). The criticisms that follow, especially the notion that psychological discourse not only describes but also actively prescribes the empty self, apply to Kohut as well as other contemporary theorists (Ehrlich, 1985; Sass, 1988b).

More specifically, Kohut has seemed particularly vulnerable to charges that his belief in the natural, unfolding program of each unique self valorizes the individual's inner world at the expense of the external, material world. Sass (1988b) has explained how Kohut's thought is part of the Counter-Enlightenment and Romantic traditions of the expressivist form of modern humanism (p. 579). This branch of humanist thought has perpetuated what Taylor (1988) called a *radical reflexivity*. The danger, according to Sass (1988b, p. 589), is that such an extreme preoccupation with the inner self causes the social world to be devalued or ignored except to the degree that it mirrors and thus becomes appropriated by the self. The social thus loses its impact as a material force, and social problems lose their relation to political action. Hence one sees the bumper sticker "Visualize World Peace."

### Advertising and the Life-Style Solution

In the second half of the century the empty self has made it much easier for advertising to exert influence and control. Marchand (1985) demonstrated how advertising ac-

cepted a therapeutic role by stepping into "a vacuum of advice. . . . created by new social and technological complexities" (p. xxi). Writers such as Lears (1983) and Modleski (1986) have argued that ads sell by convincing the public that a certain product is indispensable to their well-being or by implicitly addressing or exacerbating a personal fear in the customer that could be reassured or soothed by purchasing the product.

Because emptiness is, in part, an absence of communal forms and beliefs, individuals in the postwar era are thus particularly vulnerable to influence from cultural forms such as advertising that emanate authority and certainty. A good case could be made that many current advertisements (e.g., regarding body odor, hair color, or life insurance) are less a type of benign guidance and more a kind of coercive attack. Ads seem to criticize and condemn the average consumer while glorifying the model, extolling a standard of beauty and mastery impossible to achieve. Advertising certainly does not address itself to the political causes of the customer's problems (e.g., alienation and the loss of community); therefore, it must turn to the refuge of what I will refer to as the *life-style solution*. Unable to effect lasting change by developing political solutions to the problems of modern life, advertising must offer an illusory cure. One prominent type of ad offers the fantasy that the consumer's life can be transformed into a glorious, problem-free life—the "life" of the model who is featured in the ad. This can be accomplished by purchasing and "ingesting" the product, which will magically transfer the life-style of the model to the consumer. By surrounding themselves with the accoutrements of the model, by ingesting the proper liquid while wearing the proper clothing, all the while exhibiting the proper shape, customers seek to "become" the model. The customer's problems will simply disappear when the magical transfer takes place.

The paraphernalia of a commercial model are, of course, a poor substitute for the tools traditional cultures use for curing the sick. Geertz (1973) has described these tools as the *web of meaning*, the array of stories, songs, beliefs, rituals, ceremonial objects, costumes, and potions that heal by teaching and readjusting the society's cultural frame of reference. Because advertising cannot cure by invoking a workable web of meaning, I believe ads substitute the concept of life-style: the experiences and material possessions that are identified with the celebrity or model. It is a kind of mimicry of traditional culture for a society that has lost its own. In this way life-style is used as a pseudoculture—a pseudoculture that promises an instant, illusory cure, a "transformation."

This hope of substituting one identity, one life, for another is used as the sales strategy for many products today. Ewen (1989) has referred to this as "the consumable life, the buyable fantasy" (p. 85). Examples are numerous: the yuppie Lowenbrau models who lift their bottles and say "Here's to good friends"; the working-class Old Milwaukee drinkers who maintain "It doesn't get any better than this"; the upper-class version that portrays a yachting/equestrian "Cadillac style," or the ad that asks "What

kind of a man reads *Playboy*?"; cigarette ads that feature the Marlboro Man, Camel's man-beast who is a "smooth character," or the Virginia Slims's model who has "come a long way, baby"; and of course toothpaste and deodorant ads that transform models with instant sex appeal and popularity. These customers buy life-style in a vain attempt to transform their lives because their lives are unsatisfying and (without massive societal change) ultimately unfixable. But without the option of providing a viable solution through the vehicle of structural change, advertising can only offer the illusory exchange of one life for another.

This is a powerful illusion. And what fuels the illusion, what impels the individual into this illusion, is the desperation to fill up the empty self. Currently, the self is not only suffering from feeling unreal, and thereby somewhat passively hoping for a cure, as it did at the turn of the century. It is also aggressively, sometimes desperately, acquisitive. It must consume in order to be soothed and integrated; it must "take in" and merge with a self-object celebrity, an ideology, or a drug, or it will be in danger of fragmenting into feelings of worthlessness and confusion.

This is why the life-style solution has become such an efficient form of advertising, particularly in political campaigns. Kohutian social critics would argue that the life-styles portrayed in advertising have become larger-than-life, glamorous selfobjects. For those despairing and hopeless about their real lives, the wish to consume and take in a new identity, a new life, can be very compelling. By using the right toothpaste or identifying with the most reassuring or powerful politician, consumers are thus covertly promised a magically different, transformed self.

The late 20th century has thus become an advertising executive's dream come true: Life-style has become a product that sells itself, and the individual has become a consumer who seeks, desperately, to buy.

### Psychotherapy and the Life-Style Solution

Researchers such as Lears (1983), Wilson (1983), and Susman (1973) have demonstrated that the same historical context that gave rise to the advertising industry in the United States has also shaped the field of psychology. By using a mode of analysis similar to that which was applied to advertising, psychotherapy appears to be less a "scientific" cure and more a covert vehicle for cultural guidance and transmission. Individuals in the postmodern era, without a cohesive community, are struggling to find sense and meaning in a confusing world. There is little to guide them, and they stumble and feel despair. Failure is manifested in the particular mental problems of modern life, catalogued by the current psychiatric nosology (i.e., the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Revised [DSM-III-R]*; American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

Psychology is the social science most responsible for treating these illnesses. But the argument presented earlier has shown that psychology is also a product of the larger historical context that causes these illnesses. Psychology

cannot fully alleviate the symptoms unless it can treat the cause (i.e., the political and historical constellations that shape the era), and yet that cause is the exact subject psychology is not allowed to address. Psychological ideology ignores it, and job descriptions exclude it.

Psychology, therefore, is caught in a historical bind from which it cannot escape, a bind similar to that in which advertising is caught. I believe the field's current solution to this bind is a creative adaptation of the same life-style solution advertising uses. Psychotherapy practices have subtly attuned to the empty self of our era by unconsciously allowing or encouraging patients to incorporate the personal characteristics of the therapist, including his or her mannerisms, behavioral style, and personal values. Advertising uses the life-style solution in order to sell products; psychotherapy uses it in order to initiate patients into alternative cultural practices.

Because psychotherapy grew out of the late 19th-century scientific tradition, its ideology is built on the foundation of a mechanistic, rationalistic biological model (Taylor, 1988) and the bounded, masterful Victorian self (Dreyfus & Wakefield, 1988; Rieff, 1966). Current psychoanalytic practice maintains this tradition through ideas such as the abstinence principle, the concept of the economy of the libido, the self-object split, and the overriding importance of tracing the "genetic" (i.e., original internal) causes of a symptom. Other psychotherapeutic modalities, even those far removed from psychoanalytic theory such as Primal Therapy, Transactional Analysis, and Bioenergetics, also share some of these tenets.

Although much psychotherapy discourse advocates the objective, scientific uncovering and "working through" of genetic roots and traumatic causation within the self-contained individual, I believe a strong case can be made that psychotherapy practices necessarily deviate from that theoretical stance (Dreyfus & Wakefield, 1988, p. 274; Kohut, 1977, pp. 251-261; 1984, pp. 106-110; Singer, 1981). Let me suggest that, without the therapist being aware of it, practice deviates from normative discourse by allowing the therapist to function as a model for the patient, by providing corrective emotional experiences of care, respect, and understanding, and by allowing the patient to "take in" the therapist's ideas, values, and personal style. Some theories do explicitly refer to this as the patients modeling themselves after, temporarily merging with, or introjecting the therapist. The objective uncovering of genetic causation and the goal of individuation are still the basic, consciously enacted activities of much current psychotherapy. But an alternative interpretation of what happens behind the behavioral surface is that not only does the uncovering or understanding of trauma and distortion occur, but that functions such as modeling, guiding, and relatedness also occur and are indeed primary factors in the healing aspects of the modern therapeutic hour.

In 1966 Rieff suggested that historically there are *commitment* therapies that cure by returning individuals to their community's sacred forms, and *analytic* therapies that cure by a detached, intellectual analysis of individuals

who are bereft of a viable communal tradition. I believe that during the last 25 years the two therapeutic strategies somehow have been combined. It is a particular combination of analytic and commitment therapy to which I am referring as the life-style solution. Most psychotherapies claim they are healing by applying a detached, scientific analysis that has little to do with the transmission of cultural guidance. But, by unconsciously offering the personal values and behavior of the therapist as a model to be imitated by and incorporated into the empty self of the patient, psychotherapy actually functions as a substitute for more explicit, institutional forms of cultural transmission that have been lost or devalued.

Consequently, the most important function of current psychotherapy is that it offers an alternative attitude toward life (one of confidence and hope), alternative cultural values (respect for an individual's feelings and for the importance of understanding, empathy, and psychological insight), and alternative social practices (listening to others, assertiveness, and honesty). Sometimes this emphasis on guiding and modeling is overt (e.g., health psychology emphasizes proper exercise and nutrition, and many cognitive and family therapists make straightforward behavioral assignments). Sometimes the emphasis is covert (e.g., when and with what level of emotion a Rogerian therapist ventures a reflective formulation or a psychoanalyst delivers a carefully thought-out interpretation).

The central point of my argument is that in a world sorely lacking in community and tradition, the most effective healing response would be to address those absences through structural societal change by reshaping political relationships and cultural forms and reestablishing the importance of their transmission. Because that avenue is closed for normative psychology, psychologists can only provide guidance and caring within the therapist-patient dyad. I think that this is done by employing the life-style solution. Disorders of the self are thought by theorists such as Atwood and Stolorow (1984), Horner (1984), Kohut (1977), and Miller (1981) to be caused by an interpersonal environment that is disrespectful, psychologically avoidant, unempathic, and punitive. The modeling of respect, psychological courage, and empathy therefore helps patients imitate, practice, and finally internalize the qualities they most need. Kohut has written extensively that disorders of the self produce a powerful wish to psychologically merge with admired figures, to take them into the empty self; if this is accurate, then this narcissistic wish greatly enhances the teaching-incorporating aspects characteristic of the life-style solution. So the fit is a good one.

### *Abuse in Psychotherapy*

However, there are some serious, perhaps dangerous, problems inherent in this situation. As discussed earlier, most psychotherapy discourse uses the dominant ideology of its era (the value of individualism and the transhistorical nature of the bounded, masterful, fully individuated self) even though the patient's suffering is caused in large

part by that particular formulation and by the political and economic arrangements that construct it.

If this analysis is correct, therapy is helpful when it deviates from the dominant discourse of the past and adheres to the life-style solution—not because of the normative, scientific psychotherapy discourse but in spite of it. The life-style solution carries out a small but nevertheless subversive activity (i.e., compensating for cultural deficiencies through teaching and modeling); however, psychology undermines its helpful practices when it wraps itself in the ideology of the status quo. Not only is this actually less than honest, but it undermines the most therapeutic aspects of its practice because it does not acknowledge that they exist. Although therapy succeeds because it compensates for cultural absences in our society, it usually does not admit to doing so. In fact, by outwardly adhering to the practices of an objective technology and the ideology of self-contained individualism and the bounded self, writers such as Prilleltensky (1989), Sampson (1988), Sass (1988a), and Taylor (1988) have argued that it perpetuates the social problems that caused the patient's wounds in the first place. This paradoxical situation undermines the helpful work of the therapy because it is unempathic (the therapist is choosing adherence to an ideology over the needs of the patient), harmful (it inflicts on patients the discourse by which they have previously been harmed), and ultimately counterproductive for our society as a whole (it reproduces the present power hierarchy and economic structure that have caused our present suffering).

Second, the difference between discourse and practice in the life-style solution is dangerous to the patient because it increases the possibility of psychological, sexual, and political abuse within the therapeutic setting and ultimately in society as a whole. The wish to overidealize and psychologically merge with an admired figure or the experience of grandiosity and the pull to exhibit before and please the admired figure are exceedingly powerful psychological motives (Bollas, 1987; Kohut, 1977). These impulses are regressive and destructive of critical thought. Under the best of circumstances in the therapy setting these urges can be discussed, understood, and ultimately used during transference analysis in service of the healing process. However, in the hands of poorly trained or power hungry therapists, these urges can be encouraged, and the power they give the therapist can be misused.

In the post-World War II era, the potential for the misuse and abuse of the selfobject-patient merger is high. Patients with disorders of the self are empty and hungry for idealizing and merging and thus are in a highly suggestible and vulnerable state. Their wish to be guided and taken care of is one that can easily be exploited. This is particularly true when therapists have not been trained to recognize and understand narcissistic transference reactions, when their own needs for understanding and appreciation are so great that they try to elicit them from their patients, or when they themselves have been so wounded that they want to dominate and abuse their patients (Kohut, 1976).

When these conditions are present, I believe the life-style solution becomes a tool of abuse. Therapists who are hungry for adulation and power can easily create overidealization and submission (whether it be psychological, sexual, or political) within the therapeutic setting. There are certain aspects of theory and practice that increase the likelihood of an abusive dynamic: extreme forms of the decontextualization of the individual (Sampson, 1981), the devaluation of and disrespect for the patient (Kohut, 1984; Wile, 1984), a belief in a universally "true" theory and a "perfect" technology (Riebel, 1979), and the encouragement of overidealization and compliance by misusing the transference (Cushman, 1984). These techniques can be used to create or exacerbate a patient's narcissistic crisis in order to use it in service of dominance and exploitation. The occurrence of sexual exploitation of the patient within the therapy setting (Bouhoutsos, Holroyd, Lerman, Forer, & Greenberg, 1983; Holroyd & Brodsky, 1977) could be explained through this dynamic. The occurrence of emotional and financial exploitation and psychiatric damage within religious cults (Clark, 1983; Cushman, 1986; Singer, 1979) and mass marathon psychology trainings (Cushman, 1989; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Hochman, 1984; Ofshe & Singer, 1986; Temerlin & Temerlin, 1982) could be similarly understood.

Patients who experience an *exploitive* life-style therapy or cult training feel as though they have been "transformed." Rather than seeing themselves as historical beings, embedded within the larger communal matrix and their own personal history, they usually devalue their communal ties and believe themselves to be "emancipated" from their earlier lives and former beliefs. This reproduces the isolation and moral confusion that are among the greatest problems of our time. These ills must then, somehow, be treated. By substituting an artificially loving community and an authoritarian, self-sealing doctrine, restrictive groups and exploitive therapists soothe the problems they have created or exacerbated. Thus, exploitive forms of the life-style solution that promise personal transformation should be recognized for what they are: iatrogenic illnesses.

Fortunately, the vast majority of therapists do not misuse the therapeutic setting in this way. But any amount of abuse is too much abuse. The point is that because the life-style solution is a covert and culturally syntonetic solution, the problems inherent in it, especially the opportunity for exploiting the patient, remain too often hidden, unacknowledged, and thus unaddressed. Because we cannot straightforwardly talk about the life-style solution, we cannot completely guard against its misuse.

The emphasis placed on drawing out and analyzing the transference in psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy can be interpreted as a way of addressing some of the hidden aspects of the life-style solution, thus making them less dangerous and more easily guarded against. The patient's secret wishes for the therapist as parent, romantic partner, or mentor can be analyzed and deconstructed in order to more easily uncover idealizing

tendencies and the wish to be taken care of, loved, and guided. In this way well-conducted psychodynamic therapies do in part guard against exploitive forms of the life-style solution.

I am not arguing that an *ethical* use of the life-style solution is wrong. I am arguing that it exists and that it exists precisely because, given our historical moment, it provides some aid and comfort to a beleaguered people in one of the few ways the present power structure tolerates. However, even in its more helpful forms, the life-style solution does not solve the larger historical bind in which psychology is caught. In fact, by ignoring the bind and outwardly accepting society's expectations and psychology's normative discourse, the life-style solution cooperates in further constructing the empty self, which ultimately exacerbates the current broken historical moment and reproduces the current political and economic arrangements of power and privilege.

Where does this leave us? The task of this article was not to devise *the* "correct" therapeutic technology but to do what Furumoto (1988) has suggested, to interpret the collective mentality of our era. Perhaps other studies will be able to devise more historically situated and explicit therapeutic solutions to the problems of our time. Heidegger's concept of the clearing offers intriguing possibilities. Boss (1963/1982), and more recently Chesick (1986), Dreyfus and Wakefield (1988), and Sass (1988a) have made promising steps in that direction.

## Conclusion

We are witnessing an important shift in the content of the bounded, masterful self of the 20th century, a shift from a sexually restricted to an empty self. At the same time there has been a shift from a savings to a debtor economy. The dual shift has not been a coincidence. It is a consequence of how the modern nation state must currently regulate its economy and control its populace: not through direct physical coercion, but rather through the construction of the empty self and the manipulation of its needs to consume and ingest. Three beneficiaries of this narcissistic dynamic are the modern state, the advertising industry, and the self-improvement industries (including psychotherapy). All three perpetuate the ideology of the empty self, and all three profit from it.

One of the disquieting results of this constructionist perspective is the realization that our current era has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself (Sampson, 1983). We could also say that about our nation as a whole. The dynamic of our society revolves around a fundamental paradox. We are a nation whose ethical idealism has often informed its actions, and yet we are a nation that struggles with conflicting and mutually exclusive ideals. From slavery to manifest destiny to Vietnam to the struggle over reproductive rights, we are often a nation at odds with itself. Now a new paradox has arisen: One of the wealthiest nation on earth is also one of the emptiest.

Let us hope, as Sampson (1988) has, that in the years ahead we can construct a society that is less in need of

suffering and a self that is less a sacrifice to the nihilistic economics and politics of our time. But such changes would require developing a distance from the current normative intellectual discourse regarding individualism, the self, and the good life. Psychology has been one of the foremost contributors to that discourse. The field's historical insistence on a scientific epistemology has obscured the political nature of its discourse. Psychology has continued to decontextualize the individual, examining the patient as an isolated entity without considering the larger sociohistorical causes of personal distress. As a result, cultural absences and political wounds are "interiorized" (i.e., located in the self) and thus "blamed" on the victim (Ryan, 1971). While psychologists have been treating the empty self, they have, of necessity, also been constructing it, profiting from it, and not challenging the social arrangements that created it.

Could psychology now become a helpful force, assisting in the development of a perspective on the masterful, bounded self in opposition to the current system? Given the history of the Western self, and the role of psychology within that history, it is doubtful. In order to accomplish this shift, psychology would have to acknowledge the historically and culturally situated nature of its discourse and the political and economic consequences of its practices. We psychologists would have to rethink the entire way in which, to use Hales's (1986) phrase, we conduct "the business of psychology." Rethinking would necessitate a profound critique of our field and our society, and most of us do not have the training to attempt such a task. But the integrity of our profession, and possibly the viability of our society, may depend on our success or failure.

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