

Selves, societies, and social sciences: Pluralism in a changing global world

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Matthew Adams, *Self and Social Change*. London, UK: Sage, 2007. 208 pp. ISBN 9781412907118 (pbk).

Robin Goodwin, *Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 221 pp. ISBN 9780521842044 (hbk).

Abstract

This essay reviews two books addressing the nature of the self, and relationships between self and others in the context of modernity and globalization. While each book has many merits of its own, they provide for a particularly interesting and thought-provoking joint reading. I see them as opening up a broader debate about pluralism of self and philosophy of the social sciences. Rather than a self in the singular characteristic of Adams' post-Freudian account, the contemporary self may have a psychology, for example, of superegos, identities, and reflexivities. Furthermore, in order to address the nature of selves, relationships, and societies in a way that is valid and applicable in a global world, we also need to rethink the social sciences in plural terms. The challenge and opportunity that we face today, in my view, is one of *bridging* universal theories with cultural ones.

Keywords

bridging, culture, globalization, modernity, relationships, self, social sciences

Writing a decade ago, Giddens proclaimed: “There is a global revolution going on in *how we think of ourselves* and *how we form ties and connections with others* [emphasis added]” (2000, p. 69). The nature of this “revolution”—its history, context, causes, and repercussions—constitutes the central foci of the two books reviewed and discussed here. They examine how self and social relationships are changing through modernity and globalization.

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In *Self and Social Change*, Matthew Adams is centrally concerned with how we think of ourselves. With the loosening of community roles, bonds, and traditions in modern and post-modern societies, “the personal biography becomes the blueprint for making sense of one’s life-course,” according to Adams (p. 8). The bulk of his very well-written book consists of four chapters, each reviewing how a different line of sociological theory has conceptualized the self in light of social change. Adams’ pithy chapter titles aptly capture the crux of each of the four sociological strains. There is the “diminished self”—the anomic, atomized, lonely, and uncivic self of more than a century’s worth of theories by scholars such as Durkheim, Weber, Riesman, and Putnam. There is the “reflexive self” who contemplates, challenges, and reconceptualizes social relations and norms in a global world where “traditions lose their grip,” to use the words of Giddens (2000, p. 94) who has played a key part in the emergence of the notion of reflexivity (Giddens, 1991). Whereas reflexivity primarily implies new-found empowerment and mastery to Giddens, to others this merely amounts to the delusion of a self that in fact is being mastered and subjugated. Thus there is the “regulated self” of Foucauldian theory who can never transcend social forces and who even takes part in its own subjugation through self-surveillance masquerading as reflexivity. The fourth and final line of sociological theory reviewed by Adams is Christopher Lasch’s (1979/1991) psychoanalytically derived perspective that warns against the “narcissistic self.” Unmoored from family and communal ties, this self is excessively focused on and fond of itself. For anyone looking for a concise and comprehensible review of important sociologies of the self, Adams’ book is excellent. He also begins to move toward an integration of the four sociological lines. We will return to Adams’ integration below, holding it together with the perspective offered by Robin Goodwin.

While Adams delves into how we think of ourselves, Goodwin in *Changing Relations: Achieving Intimacy in a Time of Social Transition* looks at the other side of Giddens’ claim: how we form ties and connections with others. Goodwin’s book starts with two chapters laying out central features of social change and modernity. The great majority of the book, however, is comprised of four chapters reviewing empirical and theoretical work on various types and characteristics of interpersonal relationships. The chapters touch on diverse facets of romantic relationships, sexuality, families, and friendships and voluntary civic networks. Goodwin covers a wide range of historical and cultural changes in interpersonal relations, such as the rise in premarital sex, the decrease in arranged marriages, and the increasing emphasis on emotional closeness between children and parents. Goodwin treats the reader to many a concrete tidbit on how people’s interpersonal lives have changed over time, and the nature of our current lives and relations. At times, this comes across as a bit of a smorgasbord, lacking the logic and theme of a well-conceived *prix fixe* menu. *Changing Relations*, however, offers a beneficial balance to *Self and Social Change* which provides a rich serving of theories but hardly a morsel of research on people’s everyday lives and experiences.

The books also provide for an interesting joint reading in other ways. Here I will highlight two. The first pertains to a need for a re-examination of the psychology of the self in a changing global world. The second pertains to a corollary need for reconsideration of the philosophy of the social sciences. Addressing each of these points in turn, I will describe the views of Adams and Goodwin, and aim to open up a broader debate.

As briefly mentioned above, Adams moves from a review of four lines of sociological theory of the self in the main part of his book toward a presentation of his own point of view

at the end of the book. In contrast to the notions of the self as diminished and regulated, Adams agrees with Giddens that we are capable of reflexivity. For example, we are not simply subject to commodified images but also capable of thinking in critical ways about such images. Drawing on Lasch and psychoanalytic object-relations theory, however, Adams also argues that reflexivity has a dark side. He wishes to counter what he terms “banal optimism” and the “sunny individualist tendency” of reflexivity theory (p. 135). Specifically, he argues that reflexivity implies an overly rational view of human psychology—one of humans consciously and logically thinking about the images in our world. Whereas human beings may have rationality, according to Adams, we also have many an unconscious desire, motive, and vulnerability that leave us open to the world’s images in unpredictable and uncritical ways. Furthermore, Adams especially worries that reflexivity turned inward can all too easily develop into narcissism. In fact, following Lasch, he suggests that narcissism may even cloak itself in a pretense of virtuous reflexive self-development. In a changing modern and global world, then, Adams wishes for his reader to keep in mind that the self at heart is very much a Freudian one of varied and conflicting internal thoughts and feelings, including some (or perhaps many) which are out of sight of the conscious self.

The self that emerges from Goodwin’s account is one that lives in a world of relationships that often blend old and new features. For example, the last sentence of Goodwin’s book includes the statement that “modernisation and traditionalisation motifs continue to coexist” (p. 185). It is also a self who seems to have increasing choice in how to put together the old and the new. Like Adams (and Giddens), Goodwin writes of individual agency and choice. For example, he discusses the role of individual preferences in “mate choice” (p. 62) and speaks of friendship as a “relationship of choice” (p. 64). Goodwin’s focus, then, is not on the inner layers of the self as in Adams, but rather on the layers of modern and traditional values among which the self makes choices.

While Adams and Goodwin present thoughtful and thought-provoking accounts of the self, I would suggest that their accounts leave room for further reconsideration of the psychology of the self in a world that is changing and increasingly global. People in today’s world increasingly come into contact with diverse social and cultural traditions, something that both Adams and Goodwin make clear. This contact takes place first-hand (e.g., migration, business travel, tourism), and indirectly through various media (e.g., television, movies, internet). Consequently, people increasingly are aware of more than one way to think, feel, and relate to others. It is this awareness, in fact, that powerfully pushes for reflexivity. When we are conscious of plural worldviews and ways of life, we also have plural positions from which to make judgments. A fundamental psychological question follows from this state of affairs: what is the nature of the self who lives in this global world of plural positions?

The Freudian self of about a century ago remains compelling with its conscious and unconscious sides (although I am far less convinced than Adams of the Freudian and object-relations developmental account of this self). At the same time, to me at least, the Freudian self also seems a bit quaint in light of today’s world. The strict divisions between id, ego, and superego—each psychological structure in its place with its distinctive characteristics—seems to be of a time when it was perfectly clear what should be repressed and what should not. By now, however, many a person draws from multiple social and cultural backgrounds that not infrequently vary on what is considered acceptable and repressible. For example, the ideals of one cultural part of the self such as sexual liberation,

individual entrepreneurship, and self-esteem may be of little relevance or even highly suspect to another cultural part of one's self. In *Changing Relations* and *Self and Social Change*, the self is discussed in the singular. My suggestion is that the self in today's global world often may be better conceptualized in the plural. The contemporary self may have a psychology, for example, of superegos, identities, and reflexivities (Jensen, 2003; Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Furthermore, these plural psychological dimensions of the self may come to the fore in different ways in different interpersonal relationships.

There is also a need to reconceptualize the philosophy of the social sciences. Adams concludes his book by noting a common theoretical failure to consider "the *differential* impact of social changes upon social groups and individuals depending on their positioning relative to social structure. . . The challenge is to account for the inter-relationship of self-identity and social structure . . . without completely losing sight of a general model" (p. 139). Adams' final call for a "pliable form of theorizing" (p. 139)—to use his nimble words—is a call reiterated throughout by Goodwin. For example, early Goodwin states that "grand theories are rarely testable or appropriate everywhere" (p. 13), and he continues to point out how both material factors and values "moderate" social outcomes (to use the social science term favored by Goodwin).

I agree with Adams' and Goodwin's analysis that we need a new philosophy of the social sciences. Apart from rethinking the self in plural terms, we also need to rethink the social sciences in plural terms (Jensen, 2011, in press). The standard social science approach for more than a century has been to generate grand, one-size-fits-all theories (Freud's theory is a good example). More often than not, these theories have been formulated on the basis of a very thin sliver of the world's population. In psychology, for example, a recent analysis of articles in top journals found that journal editors and board members, authors of articles, and research samples were overwhelmingly American (with a smattering of Europeans and Canadians next in line; Arnett, 2008). This is problematic (to say the least) in a world of 7 billion persons where anthropologists and cultural psychologists have definitively documented the diverse nature of peoples' lives and psychologies. The challenge and opportunity that we face today, in my view, is one of *bridging* universal theories with cultural ones. One-size-fits-all approaches are often too broad (and biased) to adequately capture the complexities of human selves and relations. Cultural approaches provide detailed and useful conceptions of diverse cultural groups. However, one issue with cultural approaches is that they potentially suggest a need for a-theory-for-every-culture, raising the specter of theoretical pandemonium.

It would seem that time has come to forge new social science syntheses that offer creative and appealing alternatives to one-size-fits-all and one-for-every-culture. There is a need to do this because theories matter. Their impact ranges all the way from individual psychological therapy to large-scale public policy, and at a time when the world is becoming ever more interconnected we need theories, therapies, research, and policies that bridge what is universal and what is culturally distinct about how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others (Jensen, 2011).

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