A Sociology of No-Self: Applying Buddhist Social Theory to Symbolic Interaction

Matthew Immergut
Purchase College

Peter Kaufman
State University of New York at New Paltz

Although fraught with complexity, the self is a central phenomenon of discussion and analysis within sociology. This article contributes to this discourse by introducing the Buddhist ideas of anatta (no-self) and prattyasamutpāda (interdependence) as analytic frameworks to deconstruct and rethink the self within sociology. We argue that the sociological self, most clearly articulated by symbolic interactionism, is premised on a self-other dualism. This dualism leads to a conceptualization of the self as constantly threatened and anxious. Using these Buddhist concepts we propose an alternative interpretive schema, a sociology of no-self, for analyzing social interaction and understanding the roots of social angst.

Keywords: self, symbolic interaction, no-self, interdependence, Buddhism

In his review of the sociology of the self literature, Callero (2003) makes the point that the concepts of self and identity have moved to the forefront of analysis within the social sciences. With this ascendancy has come increased scrutiny from a range of disciplinary perspectives such as postmodernism and poststructuralism. Critics have highlighted the myriad ways in which the concept of the self is problematic (Foucault 1979; Gergen 1991; Hall 1996; Hood 2012). Although we are sympathetic to some of these critiques, we agree with Callero that the self is still a valuable tool of sociological analysis. Like Holstein and Gubrium (2000), who also counter the largely postmodern sentiment that the self is in disarray, fraught with peril, and rendered obsolete, we maintain the concept of the self as still valid, relevant, and ubiquitous. We depart from these defenders, however, with our claim that the self still needs rescuing from certain shortcomings and unspoken assumptions. Here, we are referring to the dualistic foundations that inevitably produce a threatened and anxious self.
This article aims to uncover this dualistic assumption and show how it leads, presumably inadvertently, to a quasi-essentialist notion of the self as constantly under threat. Because of our commitment to a social constructionist perspective we find such essentialist thinking, no matter how subtle, problematic for symbolic interactionism and sociological theory more generally. In crafting our critique we borrow concepts from Buddhist philosophy. Specifically, the Buddhist ideas of anatta (no-self) and prattyasamutpada (interdependence) provide analytic frameworks to critique the self within sociology. Using the Buddhist notions of no-self and interdependence we propose an alternative interpretive schema, a sociology of no-self, for analyzing social interaction and understanding the roots of social angst.

For the sake of this article, we adopt the sociological definition of the self as both an object and process (see Hewitt and Shulman 2010). Like learning about significant objects throughout development, humans also learn and come to experience themselves as specific types of objects in the world. This self-realization is expressed in a variety of ways such as, ‘‘this is me.’ ‘I exist.’ ‘I live, and I will die.’ ‘I think, I act, and I am the object of other people’s actions.’’ (Charon 2004:37). Only through the process of interaction with others can such a self-object come into being. But once “in place,” such an object needs constant re-creation both inter-subjectively as well as intra-psychically. The self-object is, in other words, an ongoing, reflexive process (see Callero 2003:128). Recognizing the self not as a stable object but the result of an interactional and ongoing process is one of the great strengths of sociology, and symbolic interactionism in particular. But, as we argue throughout this article, this sensibility slides away from process and toward objectification, with the result being the self becomes a particularly anxious object in opposition to others.

THE DUALISTIC AND THREATENED SELF IN SOCIOLOGY

In positing the self as a dualistic and threatened self we are referring to a self-conceptualized in opposition to others and chronically anxious about acceptance or rejection. The dualism is the primary variable in fostering this threatened self. Such a claim may not be readily embraced because for most symbolic interactionists the self-other duality fulfills a central analytic position. This is not surprising considering the self-other dichotomy is one of the major epistemologies in Western thought and a central piece of the more overarching dualistic paradigm found in Western intellectual history (e.g., Plumwood 1994; Rozemond 1998).

Nevertheless, the dualistic paradigm has come under critical investigation and deconstruction in a variety of disciplines. For example, there has been a long and vigorous debate within philosophy, and more recently within sociology, about the mind-body dualism (Bendelow and Williams 1995; Shusterman 2008). Various feminists from differing disciplines but especially eco-feminists have made efforts to undermine the male-female dualism that leads to the domination of women and nature (Adams 1993; Plumwood 1994). Ecological philosophers (Peterson 2001;
Spretnak 1999) as well as environmental sociologists (Čapek 2006; Catton and Dunlap 1978) have also challenged the human-nature construct of the Western imagination. Sociologists have also made efforts to undermine dualistic categories within different theoretical traditions (Knights and Willmott 1983) as well as challenged methodological dualism (Sprague and Zimmerman 1993). Even with these efforts, the self-other dualism within sociology is never fully dismantled. Indeed, the self-other dualism appears so foundational, a kind of “incorrigible proposition” (Mehan and Wood 1975) as to remain an unquestioned assumption within Western thought and more specifically within sociology. As a result, those who study the self continue to reflect and perpetuate this dualistic proposition in their theorizing.

Our argument, then, is that the extensive literature on the sociology of the self adheres to the single, underlying premise of a self-other duality. Whether one is talking about self-concept (Gekas 1982), self-esteem (Hewitt 1998), self-presentations (Goffman 1959), or self-appraisals (Rosenberg 1986), each conceptualization posits a self in relation to and in contrast with others. Consider some contemporary examples like Gurevitch (1990, 1998) who argues that duality is part of being human and that seeing oneself as separate from others is a central component of the self. The self-other duality is especially evident in Coles’s (2008) discussion of the role of others in constructing self-narratives. Coles identifies six others that are all necessary for the self to exist. Zhao (2005) identifies a duality between our online selves and our offline selves. As Zhao’s work suggests, the duality of the self is not always expressed as a self-other dichotomy but may also be theorized as an intra-self or self-self duality. In their study of college students who take medication to control ADHD, Loe and Cuttino (2008) focus on the duality of the natural self and the medicated self. Not surprisingly, in all of these accounts of the dualistic self there is also a threatened self—a self in chronic low-level anxiety or high-level stress because the individual is trying to gain acceptance, manage impressions, avoid shame, gain status, or establish prestige in relation to an other.

In many respects, it should come as no surprise that the self-other duality creates this threatened existence. As Gergen (2009) points out, when our lives are structured around this me-versus-you attitude such angst is ubiquitous: “I must always be on guard, lest others see the faults in my thinking, the cesspools of my emotions, and the embarrassing motives behind my actions. It is also a world in which I must worry about how I compare to others, and whether I will be judged inferior” (Gergen 2009:xiv). This dualistic, threatened self is most overtly manifest in symbolic interactionist works dealing with stigmatized and marginalized groups. For instance, research on the homeless (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004), minority groups (Han 2009), the disabled (Sousa 2011), fat women (Gruys 2012), mobile home residents (Kusenbach 2009), and a variety of other populations provides overt evidence that individuals must chronically worry about defending, repairing, or simply minimizing the damage their selves create in opposition to others.
Admittedly, stigmatized groups are an obvious example but this dualistic, threatened self construct can also be found more implicitly in seemingly less threatening social interactions. Consider, for example, the work of Scheff (1988, 1990, 2000, 2003). In *Shame in Self and Society* (2003), Scheff argues that shame is the master emotion of social life, arising whenever there is the slightest threat to the bond between self and other. Scheff portrays the self as searching for approval from others and chronically threatened by the possibility of shame; in Scheff’s words, “every social situation is rife with shame, either actual or anticipated” (2003:256, italics in original). This idea of a self constantly worried about being shamed by others can also be found in Scheff’s earlier works (1990, 1988). For example, in discussing the nature of genius, Scheff provides a picture of the worrisome social interactions that even the most common child faces:

> [E]ven a child who has no wish to express a unique vision, who wishes merely to be conventional in every possible way, must run the gauntlet of potentially shaming situations (1990:168).

Scheff’s work paints a picture in which the social self—stigmatized or not—must navigate a minefield of potentially explosive shaming encounters.

**The Foundations for the Dualistic and Threatened Self**

This self-other duality, and the threatened self that follows, is central to the discipline because it was central in the works of Mead ([1934] 1967), Cooley (1902), and Goffman. For Mead, the self is undoubtedly a socially constructed and even interdependent entity. The self cannot exist on its own; to have a self requires that one has an attachment to others and that one’s sense of self arises out of that attachment. The reflexive impulse, the ability to see oneself as part of others, is a necessary component of the Median self. If we do not fully internalize the attitudes of others then we are not complete selves. Implicit in Mead’s explication is a clear, albeit symbiotic, distinction between self and other. By referencing the self one is, by the same token, referencing the other.

Not surprisingly, from this dualistic self, we can also find the foundation and perpetuation of the threatened self in Mead’s work. For example, in his framework we see not only an in-group-out-group dualism but also an I-Me intra-psychic dualism. These dualisms lead to a self that monitors its actions to ensure they are in line with the generalized other. Both external and internal dynamics produce an anxious self continually preoccupied with approval from others. In effect, either implicitly or explicitly the self constantly feels threatened and vulnerable to disapproval. As Mead writes:

> “Thus he becomes not only self-conscious but self-critical; and thus through self-criticism social control over individual behavior or conduct operates by virtue of the social origin and basis of such criticism. That is to say, self-criticism is
essentially social criticism and behavior controlled by self-criticism is essentially behavior controlled socially’’ (Mead 1967:255).

For Mead, the fully socialized self is constantly under scrutiny from without and within and is persistently worried about aligning itself with the in-group.

In much the same fashion, Cooley’s looking-glass self is dualistic and threatened. Cooley’s notion of the looking-glass self posits an “other” from which our self idea arises. As Cooley suggests:

In imagination we perceive in an other’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (1902:184)

Whether this is an imaginary or accurate perception, the constitution of a self-hinges upon their being an other that gazes at us in positive or negative ways. Similar to Mead’s conception, Cooley’s self is only manifest in the presence of others from whom we glean our sense of personhood. There is no nonlooking glass self in Cooley’s analysis because without the perceived perceptions of others the self does not exist.

Like Mead, Cooley’s looking glass self provides another example of a dualistic assumption leading to an anxious self. Cooley postulates that people are constantly imagining themselves from another’s perspective. From this reflected image of the other comes our sense of self-worth or lack thereof. Cooley’s self is thus primarily a self anxiously looking in the eyes of others for a positive reflection, mortified by negative reflections, and avoiding or simply ignoring reflections that serve no self purpose. This claim is supported by Scheff’s (2003) work in which he argues that for Cooley, pride and shame are the central affective dimensions of our lives.

Finally, in all of Goffman’s works the self does not exist without the other conferring upon us some degree of legitimacy. Stemming in part from his dramaturgical framework, Goffman’s conception of self is largely beholden to others. Although we may engage in back-stage actions, our undertakings are all in preparation for our front-stage activities in which we offer ourselves to others for their social approval. Goffman posits a self that is always engaging in action with the reaction of the other in one’s mind. In this sense, we may say that the self-other dualism is a cornerstone of Goffman’s analysis and we see it manifested in the interactional strategies in which actors engage.

Throughout Goffman’s work we see a chronically anxious self, motivated to manage impressions and avoid intersubjective embarrassment. Most of the interactional strategies that Goffman describes indicate a self in a type of perpetual effort to protect or bolster one’s sense of self from threatening or supporting others. Impression management, Goffman’s master interactional strategy, epitomizes the anxious self to the extent that the individual is constantly trying to make presentations for others’ approval. Consider Preedy as a case and point. Preedy is used as Goffman’s (1959) every man trying to ensure a favorable reception in front of a beachside audience.
Like all of us, Preedy is worried about losing face and so he works to ensure a favorable impression, using the appropriate props and scripts to give a convincing performance to the audience.

In the works of Mead, Cooley, and Goffman we see an inter-subjective and intra-psychic self that is always on edge; a self chronically threatened because of a bad performance, a negative reflection or not playing the game well. To boil it down, the self-other dualism organizes a reality in which the self is in competition with others in order to secure rewards and avoid costs. The dualistic self that sociologists have constructed sets up an anxiety-ridden self that tries to secure social status, belonging, pride, prestige, and power while it simultaneously defends against (and fears) embarrassment, shame, and losing face. As a point of clarification, we are not saying that Mead, Cooley, and Goffman intentionally postulated a chronically anxious self. Instead, we are looking at the implicit dualistic assumptions of their models of the self. Mead, Cooley, and Goffman, and their contemporary counterparts, leave us with a social self that exists in relationship to others based on a spectrum of anxiety—from low to high.

At first blush, these theoretical positions might not seem to be a problem but simply a description of what is. After all, these theories have endured precisely because of the way in which they illuminate so much of social behavior. For this reason it seems nearly impossible, maybe even foolish, to question this dualism and propose that an alternative framework of the self might be possible. The irony, however, is that by clinging to this dualistic notion, the threatened self implicitly gets reified thereby limiting social analysis and undermining the sociological commitment to an anti-essentialist and constructionist position. As long as the self-other dualism remains, then a threatened, anxious self, and motivational structure remains static, even everlasting. Sahni (2012) captures the essence of this point in his analysis of the perduring self in Goffman’s work:

Goffman often derides as naïve common sense and psychological fallacy the idea that there are real perduring selves, but cannot help repeatedly falling back on just this supposition. (pp. 163–64)

On the basis of our review above we would add that the self “fallen back to” is chronically worried, anxious, and threatened.

**BUDDHISM AND SOCIOLOGY**

In our effort to rethink notions of the self not wholly based on a dualistic conception, and not in a constant state of threat and anxiety, we turned our attention outside of the Western academic tradition and considered Buddhism. For over 2500 years, Buddhist scholars, monks, and practitioners have written and theorized about the self. Yet, in sociology there is very little mention of the deep and rich tradition of Buddhist theories of the self. Most sociological theorists and symbolic interactionists ignore contributions by Buddhist philosophers. Classical and contemporary scholars
alike base their conception of the self on an entirely Eurocentric understanding of what it means to be human.

We might expect Western sociologists to ignore Eastern thought. Yet, since its introduction and growing popularity into mainstream Western society, Buddhism has been coupled with numerous academic disciplines such as psychology (Kwee, Gergen, and Koshikawa 2006; Segall 2003), neuroscience (Austin 1998; Wallace 2009), physics (Mansfield 2008; Wallace 2003), environmental studies (Sahni 2011; Tucker and Williams 1998), and economics (Sivaraksa 2009). Glaringly absent from this list is the one discipline arguably most aligned theoretically with Buddhism: Sociology. There have been some preliminary efforts among Buddhist scholars to synthesize Buddhism with sociology in an attempt to articulate a Buddhist social theory (Jones 2003; Loy 2003). Similarly, there is work among sociologists who have attempted to explicate the beginnings of a Buddhist sociology (Bell 2004; McGrane 1993a, 1993b; Preston 1988; Schipper 2012). Despite these forays, the incorporation of Buddhism into sociological theorizing about the self is generally nonexistent (Perinbanayagam 2000). We believe the synthesis of sociology and Buddhism is a fruitful exercise in interdisciplinary and intercultural theory building and we situate our work in this growing literature.

As noted above, sociology is arguably the most closely aligned theoretically with Buddhism. In fact, many of the major themes of Buddhism are also major themes of sociology: impermanence and social change; dependent arising and the social construction of reality; and suffering and inequality. Recently, Buddhist social thought and socially engaged Buddhism came about as a means to work toward a more just, equitable, and peaceful world (Jones 2003; Moon 2004; Queen 2000). This theme similarly parallels recent calls among sociologists for a public sociology (Agger 2007; Blau and Smith 2006; Clawson et al. 2007). Further theoretical intersections between the two are elucidated by Schipper (2012).

For the purposes of this article, we focus exclusively on the implicit connections between Buddhism, symbolic interaction, and conceptions of the self. We suggest that both bodies of knowledge are largely traveling along the same theoretical path pertaining to the self and drawing similar conclusions. The key difference is at the juncture of the self-other duality and the resulting anxious or threatened self. Sociology stops at this dualism, makes it an implicit theoretical foundation, and thereby leaves us with a threatened self. Buddhism, however, deconstructs the self-other dualism and conceives of a nonthreatened, no-self.

Buddhism, Sociology and the Self: Converging Then Diverging

Even with limited contact, sociology and Buddhism have some noteworthy parallels. Both maintain the centrality of interdependence, they both consider the self as a construct, and both postulate that people are driven to protect and defend this sense of self. Let us briefly consider these points of convergence.
Although we have critiqued sociology for its dualistic orientation we have also acknowledged that sociology contains a vision of interdependence—even if this term is not always invoked. The sociological enterprise begins with relationships and interactions rather than focusing on isolated things or self-contained individuals. Social life, as described by Berger and Luckmann (1967), is an ongoing production created and sustained collectively rather than some essentially stable thing. As sociologists we are interested in finding out what causes what and how things are connected within this dynamic, interrelated and constructed reality. This theme of interconnection has been articulated most cogently by those working in actor network theory (Latour 2007), social network analysis (Prell 2011), and figurational sociology (Mennel 1992). As Mennel states about these links of interconnection:

Like the effect of a stone dropped into a pool, the consequences of people’s actions ripple outwards through society until they are lost from sight. Their effects are felt, not at random but according to the structure of the figuration in which they are enmeshed, by people who may be quite unknown to each other and unaware of their mutual interdependence (1992:258).

An interdependent self is also evident in the works of symbolic interactionists. The self, as Goffman articulated so astutely, is a performance that can only be realized within a social setting. Change the social context or remove normal social supports and the result is another self. Similarly, Berger and Luckmann write:

The same social processes that determine the completion of the organism produce the self in its particular, culturally relative form. ... It goes without saying, then, that the organism and, even more, the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped (1967:50).

Not just inter-socially, but arguably intra-psychically as well, the self arises from an internalization of a multitude of external others.

This sociological perspective of interdependence also challenges the dearly held notion that the self has some autonomous, stable essence we carry within. Instead, sociology clearly envisions the self as created within a specific cultural and historical context and sustained and performed from situation to situation. Even the founders of sociology—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—had an awareness and interest in the particular type of self construct emerging with the onset of industrial capitalism (Burkitt 2008). Thus, interdependence and the constructed self runs throughout sociology and provides a refreshing and a radical perspective in an individualistic and psychologically-oriented culture in which the self is the primary unit of analysis and dependence carries negative connotations.

Interdependence is at the heart of Buddhism as well. One of the classic Buddhist images that express this interdependent and inter-causal cosmic order is the Jeweled Net of Indra. This is a net that reaches out infinitely in every direction with a reflective jewel at every joint.
If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection, writes scholar of Hua-Yen Buddhism Francis Cook,

we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected back all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. (1977:2)

In Buddhist philosophy, this general principle of universal interdependence has a specific application for human life, traditionally referred to as “dependent co-arising.” This refers to a specific series of psycho-physical causes that lead to the formation of human perception of self and reality. By understanding this sequence of causality, the practitioner could see how the common-sense assumption of an innate or essential self is, in actuality, constructed from various causes and conditions. In contrast to sociology, the self in Buddhism is understood as an illusion or, in more traditional terms, “no-self” (anatta in Pali). The self is merely a label projected onto the bundles of constantly changing psycho-physical elements called the khandas in Pali. Thoughts, feelings, moods, attitudes, physical parts, or movements of the body are all simply changing, impersonal interactions that arise and pass away. To identify with them, to hold on to them, or cling to them as “my self” only invites suffering according to Buddhism because we are trying to stabilize what is inherently not stable. As described in the Assutavā Sutta, one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha describes how the commoner perceives the self and then exhorts his followers to deconstruct such assumptions.

For a long time this [consciousness] has been relished, appropriated, and grasped by the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person as, “This is me, this is my self, this is what I am.” The instructed disciple of the noble ones, [however,] attends carefully & appropriately right there at the dependent co-arising: When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that (Bhikku 2011).

This idea of no-self—or self-as-dependent-construct—is also captured in a series of Socratic style debates between the Buddhist sage Nagasena and King Milinda around 100 BCE (see Müller 2000). The flow of the debate is a question and answer session, in which the sage Nagasena challenges the King to demarcate the “thing” that makes up his chariot. Systematically and piece by piece, Nagasena asks Milinda where the “chariot” is—is it in the pole, the wheel, the frame, and so on. To each question, the King answers “no.” This questioning eventually leads the King to an epiphany and to a type of early labeling theory, as he comes to the conclusion that the chariot not only comes into existence dependent on all these parts but is also dependent on the observer labeling it a “chariot.” Nagasena then takes this same logic and applies it to himself, pointing to all the dependent pieces that make up the self, including the name of “Nagasena.” This story reveals a central tenet of Buddhism—the self is a construct, created and sustained by making a symbolic
demarcation out of an interdependent “state of flux” (Wallace 2009:109). In a sense, the very practice of Buddhism is about deconstructing this isolated self-construct in order to realize the actuality of no-self.

Buddhism does not claim that we live our lives out of this sense of interdependence. Just as we described above with sociology, Buddhism sees individuals as driven to protect and defend their selves—to secure rewards and avoid costs, to ensure status and praise and avoid infamy and blame. This protective desire comes from living with a sense of being an isolated self in opposition to others. Much like sociology, the self-other dualism is a basic organizational foundation of human experience according to Buddhism. But this endpoint is exactly where the two perspectives diverge. Essentially, sociology accepts dualism and formalizes it both explicitly and implicitly as a part of its theoretical foundation. More specifically, the self-other construct becomes “reality” rather than a construct and thus sociology produces dualistic theories that “accurately” describe the actions of an anxious self in opposition to others. Sociology, in other words, naturalizes the self-other dualism and essentializes the threatened self. It is wholly ironic that a discipline that eschews essentialism ends up implicitly promoting such an argument. This may not be an intended consequence but it is certainly the conclusion that one may draw.

Alternatively, Buddhism does not formalize this dualism or reify the threatened self; instead, it aims to deconstruct both. If interdependence is the reality then the self-other dualism is a misperception, a construct of the human imagination. If the threatened self arises as a result of this misperception then it too is an artificial construct. To state the matter differently, from a Buddhist perspective this self-other dualism and the resulting threatened self might be a deeply wired psychosocial construct; nevertheless, it is a construct and should be dealt with through deconstruction. This is what the Buddha is telling his followers in the Assutavā Sutta quoted above—do not accept common sense categories but deconstruct “your” experience directly.

That deconstruction of self, the close investigation into the myriad causes and conditions that constitute the self, led to the doctrine of anatta mentioned above. Unlike many Western traditions that posit an everlasting soul, the Buddhist notion of no-self presents a radical anti-essentialist perspective. Simply stated, there is no abiding, autonomous or unchanging self within nor is there some stable motivational structure. Interdependence and no-self are therefore two ways to speak about the nature of the self—a self that arises in dependence means the self is empty of independent existence. This point is expressed succinctly and cogently by Gergen:

> here is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship. (2009:xv)

But let us be clear: the Buddhist notion of no-self does not mean that the individual is simply an undifferentiated blob, lacking unique traits and characteristics. As Buddhist scholar Mu Soeng writes:
A great many misunderstandings have taken place in interpreting the Buddha’s teaching of *anatta* or “non-self” but it is important to keep in mind that while the Buddha pointed to a lack of an abiding core, he did not deny an existential personality. In other words, things exist but they are not real. [... ] The challenge of Buddhist thought and practice is to recognize and separate the sense of self from all assumptions and notions about a permanent, autonomous self. A sense of self is vastly different from a belief in a solid, unchanging self. (2010:54–55)

A simple way to capture this idea of an interdependent, no-self is to compare it to the hydrodynamics of an eddy behind a rock in a river. An eddy is a persistent vortex that maintains a particular shape and stability even though it is constantly changing. Any alteration in the current—a rock shifts, increase or decrease of water flow or turbulence—results in a shift of the eddy. The eddy is not an abiding and autonomous form fundamentally distinct from the river; nor, from a Buddhist perspective, is the self in anyway autonomous, enduring, or distinct from everything else. The eddy and self are actually analogous from the standpoint of Buddhist ontology; all phenomena—rivers, rocks, self, and everything else—are seen as dependently arising without any unchanging or enduring substance behind or within. These concepts may not be easily digested by Western audiences. We are socialized—both sociologist and nonsociologist—to believe that we exist, that we have not just a sense of self but a self-existing self. As scholar of Eastern religions Patrick Bresnan writes:

One of the first words a child learns to say, usually loudly, is ‘mine.’ The language is full of such subtle conditionings: ‘Let yourself go.’ ‘Be yourself!’ ‘Collect yourself!’ And then there’s always ‘self-esteem,’ ‘self-pity,’ and even ‘self-loathing.’ Everywhere we turn, the culture supports our unquestioned conviction that the sense of self—a substantive, enduring self—is real and beyond question; it is self-evident. (Bresnan 2006:217)

It is therefore often difficult to embrace the idea that we have no solid self, that each of us is empty. Yet Buddhism has made this knot of the self a point of investigation for thousands of years. The conclusion of this examination has been summed up succinctly in the words of the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen:

To study Buddhism is to study yourself; to study yourself is to forget yourself; to forget yourself is to be awakened and realize your intimacy with all things. (quoted in Loy 2003:118)

In commenting on this Dogen quote, Buddhist scholar and social theorist David Loy explains how such a concept of no-self contrasts with a dualistic, threatened self:

The fruit of the Buddhist path, the end of a life organized around fear, is to lose and empty yourself by forgetting yourself, which is also to find your true self: not an alienated self threatened by the world and seeking security from anxiety, but a nondual self that knows itself to be an expression or a manifestation of the world. (Loy 2003:118)
In this commentary, Loy expresses a major point of our argument—that the anxious and threatened self is dependent upon the reification of a self-other duality. Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE), who is widely recognized across various Buddhist schools as one of the most important philosophers of the tradition, captures the psychic (and we might add social) relief that comes to individuals when they cease acting toward things in dualistic terms of self-other. In his verse aptly titled, Self, which is part of his masterpiece, Mūlamadhyamakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), Nāgārjuna (cited in Batchelor 2000a:114) writes:

What is mine
When there is no me?
Were self-centeredness eased,
I would not think of me and mine—
There would be no one there
To think them.
What is inside is me,
What is outside is mine—
When these thoughts end,
Compulsion stops,
Repetition ceases,
Freedom dawns.

As we have said throughout this section, sociology and Buddhism travel down similar analytic paths about the self. Sociology leaves us with a threatened self; Buddhism, on the other hand, takes the next step by questioning the dualistic assumption and deconstructing the threatened conception of self that arises out of this assumption. But how might this Buddhist perspective not only challenge certain theoretical assumptions but possibly move sociology beyond its implicit stopping point?

**TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF NO-SELF**

Theories are based on presuppositions about the ontological status of reality. Theorists need to have an understanding of those assumptions for the sake of evaluation and, if necessary, reformulation. In this article, we have used Buddhist theory as a way to expose certain taken-for-granted assumptions in sociology. Specifically, sociological conceptions of self are based on a dualism that leads to a threatened social self. Highlighting this assumption was our main task. This highlighting might be enough as it allows us to evaluate the veracity of these assumptions. Theoretically speaking, once evaluated we may go no further and agree that the dualistic, threatened self will continue as the foundation of the discipline.

However, we want to push a bit further and provide a sense of what the idea of no-self means in the context of symbolic interactionism. How might this concept be useful to sociological thinking? Our first claim is that the idea of no-self provides protection against accidental essentialism. Although sociologists may view the self as a construct, more often than not it is seen as a positive social asset, even a
social necessity for psychological and social health. Consequently, this may lead to a sort of “self existent” bias within the discipline in which the self is understood as a normative, unquestioned, ontological reality. This is part of the argument made by Sahni (2012) in his article about the “perduring self” found in Goffman. As sociologists, we may intellectually commit to a constructionist position of the self but such a bias practically and experientially veers toward an essential, inherent sense of self, even if very subtle. As Bresnan (2006) argued above, to talk about a “self” or to utter the words “me,” “mine” or “I” is to evoke a cultural and experiential reality of an ego-center. Symbolic interactionists are caught in the same cultural trap as other Westerners, even as symbolic interactionists object to others’ essentialist views. The Buddhist idea of no-self provides a type of intellectual warning toward such an essentializing slide. It provides a way to conceptualize the self without accidental reification. In a sense, evoking no-self is like a linguistic breach, halting the ossification process that the term “self” sets in motion. This may seem like a small benefit, but if we take seriously the interactionist claim that language constructs the reality we encounter, then using the term no-self is not simply a linguistic bandage but encourages a re-evaluation of dualism.

Our second claim is that the Buddhist notion of no-self elucidates the source of origin for this threatened self. Instead of positing that such threat arises solely from external factors, a sociology of no-self points out that the threatened self comes from our desire to cling to a core sense of self. To explain what we mean, consider the research by Loe and Cuttino (2008) on college students’ use of ADHD medication and the management of what the authors call a “medicated self.” A particular student, Mary, is highlighted because she struggles to manage her sense of self, the ADHD medication, and the demands of academic performance:

[Mary’s] new ADHD identity seems to emerge from a sense of inadequacy, a realization that she was unable to handle the challenges that college presented. In the campus context, she is ADHD, and she self-medicates to meet academic expectations. But outside the classroom and the library, Mary retains her “authentic” self, a self that is not considered disordered. (2008:311)

Mary’s new medicated self was born from feelings of “inadequacy”—ostensibly stemming from her inability to manage the college workload. This is in part true. But if we interpret this situation in light of the concept of no-self, then an analytical shift occurs. Specifically, Mary’s inadequacy does not simply come from the academic pressures of college. Instead, her worry originates from the burden of living up to a self that does not exist. By compelling us to acknowledge the radically constructed nature of the self, a sociology of no-self helps us recognize that the source of anxiety comes not from external pressures such as school work. Rather, Mary’s angst derives from trying to hold onto any sort of self, authentic or medicated, and being unable to do so because both of these selves are not essential things.

This point is also evident in the literatures on micro-interactional processes that identify specific social indicators as the source of inter- and intra-personal
Specifically, we are alluding to stigma. Variables such as physical appearance, medical or mental condition, and economic or social status are often identified as the cause of the threatened and stigmatized sense of self. Although such explanations have validity, by problematizing the self-other dualism we gain an alternative lens for understanding social interactions and the associated problems such as stress, anxiety, and threat. But from this standpoint it is not the actual object of the stigma but the deeper dualism between self and other that creates angst by causing the stigmatized threatened self to feel essentially “real.” To use a medical analogy, the threat from stigma or a botched performance, and the subsequent need for face-saving maneuvers, are all symptoms of a deeper self-other condition. As researchers we are quite good at analyzing the symptoms; a sociology of no-self, however, wants to also consider the etiology of these symptoms. Two examples from the stigma literature illustrate our point.

If we understand stigma as Goffman (1963) did, as an undesirable difference, then we may say that stigma is premised on a self-other duality. Individuals with an undesirable difference strive to be “normal”; they want to be aligned with the generalized others from whom they feel excluded. They engage in various forms of stigma management as a means to secure membership of the group. From a Buddhist perspective of no-self, the great irony of stigma management is that individuals are trying to shed this duality only to align themselves with another duality. For example, in the growing literature of obesity as a stigma, individuals who navigate “stigma exits” after weight loss are, implicitly, trading one dualistic self-other relationship (fat versus thin) for another (thin versus fat) (Granberg 2011). Even those individuals who reject the stigma of obesity and “come out as fat” by flaunting and celebrating their difference are promoting and upholding a self-other duality (Saguy and Ward 2011) that maintains the foundation of the anxiety and threat to self.

The perspective of no-self offers symbolic interactionists a different lens through which we may understand the micro-interactional processes in which stigmatized individuals engage. Despite their intentions, stigma management strategies do not necessarily assuage feelings of anxiety because they are still premised on the self-other duality. This process is further illustrated in Storrs (1999) account of mixed-race women who renounce their European ancestry and attribute positive meanings to their non-White lineage. By stigmatizing their Whiteness and constructing a sense of self as non-White, these women align themselves with a social group that is often debased within the dominant racial ideology. For Storrs, such essentializing of this new identity is a powerful political move, allowing these women to reclaim a sense of self. From the perspective of a sociology of no-self, however, we gain insight into how these women cling to and even exacerbate the self-other duality. In effect, they have attacked dualism with dualism and as a result, we see these women recounting their ongoing
social angst—continually frustrated and annoyed by others assuming they are White.

Incorporating the perspective of no-self further highlights the social-psychological dilemmas that arise from a self that is continually defined in contrast to others. As Gergen points out,

our linguistic distinctions [of self-other; fat-thin; white-mixed race] are responsible for both our desires and disappointments. […] We come to see that the division between self and [other] is not only misleading but contributes to the character of our suffering. (2009:386)

Moreover, a Buddhist sociology of no-self challenges essentialist notions of the self and points to the underlying source of threat—a point that is captured by Loy:

[T]he sense of self needs to be deconstructed, to realize its true “empty,” nondwelling nature. Awakening to our constructedness is the only real solution to our most fundamental anxiety. Ironically, the problem and its solution both depend upon the same fact: a constructed sense of self is not a real self. (2008:17)

Let us be clear: we are not saying discard the analysis of the symptoms of threat nor are we saying that social variables are not contributing causes; we are not positing a theoretical revolution. Instead, we want to add another layer of theorizing by looking at the sub-structure on which such symptoms emerge. This new perspective broadens our understanding to consider a corresponding source of our suffering; namely, our disconnect or duality with others. If as a discipline we want to address the feelings of anxiety and stress that people experience in their social interactions then recognizing the self-other duality is crucial. Buddhism’s notion of no-self, as an analytic lens, gives us a way to begin reconstructing our approach to the self.

Although it may be difficult to fathom a reconstruction of the self-other duality into a sociology of no-self, recall that no-self is a way of discussing a fully interdependent self. In this sense, filtering sociological theory through a Buddhist lens brings us full circle. Early sociological theorists of the self posited an interdependent self that was constructed by and dependent upon others. This orientation parallels the Buddhist notion of no-self which is similarly premised on the concept of interdependence. A fully interdependent self means there is no abiding, static, independent self free from the endless matrix of contingencies. The point of divergence is that sociological thinkers base their interdependent self on an essential dualism, maybe even an unintentional dualism, that focuses largely on the suffix of the word, dependent, and less on the prefix, inter. The argument we have put forth in this article is to shift the paradigm of the self back toward its interdependent foundations and recognize, like Buddhism, that: “Every moment of experience is contingent on a vast complex of myriad conditions. Nothing exists in and of itself as ‘this’ or ‘that,’ ‘self’ or ‘other’” (Batchelor 2000b).
NOTES

1. To talk about Buddhist philosophy and Buddhism more generally evokes an image of a monolithic entity. In reality, Buddhism is incredibly diverse and complex tradition—this should not be surprising considering its 2500 years of development in dramatically different cultures. In a sense, there is no such thing as Buddhism-only Buddhisms. Thus, when we discuss central tenants such as no-self and interdependence we must recognize that these are complicated concepts debated rigorously for thousands of years. At the same time, they have a commonality of being shared central tenants among the various Buddhist traditions.

2. Recent research in cognitive neuroscience confirms the illusory nature of the self (Hood 2012).

3. Sutta (Pali) or Sutra (Sanskrit) refers to Buddhist scriptures.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Matthew Immergut, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Purchase College, State University of New York. His research interests include charismatic authority and new religious movements as well as the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and social theory.

Peter Kaufman is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at New Paltz. His teaching and research interests revolve around critical pedagogy, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and Buddhist sociology. He is a regular contributor to W.W. Norton’s Everyday Sociology blog.