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Differentiating the *I* from the *ME*

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Introduction

It was 12:31 a.m., February 24, 2008, and I had been lying in bed half awake. My first awareness in my waking state was of a sound. The sound was punctuated by short periods of silences. As my cognitive processes started kicking in, I had a desire to make sense of the experience. I recognized the sound as coming from a low-flying airliner. What I could not explain was the short silences between the noises. I quickly came up with a possible explanation. Evidently, some type of interruption in the sound waves reaching my ears caused the silent periods. I hypothesized that the interruptions were caused by periodic blockages of the waves as they bounced off of the ground in their journey to my ears; I surmised that these blockages were probably caused by the rows of houses lined up on streets parallel to our street. All of this experiencing took place in less than ten seconds.

During this time, I realized I had never noticed an intermittent sound quite like that particular sound before this moment. During the next few seconds my attention focused on the use of this experience as a key example for this chapter. I conceived of the idea that this experience might be a vivid example of what I meant by the *I* concept, one of the two concepts being differentiated in this chapter. This was my *I* experiencing what was happening in my environment. It was my *I* construing what was happening. It was *I* doing something.

Soon after I formulated this *I* example, I started to think about a possible example from my personal life that would demonstrate the other concept, the *ME*. Several came to mind, including the descriptive statement about Jerald R. Forster at the beginning of this chapter. I wrote those words several months ago to describe myself to the readers of this chapter. Those words describe me as an object, somewhat as I might describe some other object, if it were a person. The description was written for other people, and it communicates some of what I want others to know about me. That description presents one version of my self-identity. What would the description have been like if I had only intended it for myself? My own personal description of myself would be my *ME*. As I pursue the concept of *ME* more fully below. I will introduce a metaphor based on a feedback loop to describe my *ME* as a creation or a construction by my *I*. I will also

offer a theoretical system wherein the *ME* influences the *I*'s subsequent construction of the *ME*, thereby influencing the construction of a later version of the *I*'s *ME*.

This introduction provides a glimpse of my purpose for writing this chapter. I will attempt to differentiate between my *I* and my *ME*, two perspectives on myself. I will also build a case for the way this differentiation could help you be a more adaptable person who does not get stuck in a self-identity that overuses your *ME*-based characterization of your *I*.

The experiencing I

Mead (1934) conceptualized the *I*-self to be the *self as the subject*, or the agent who is experiencing and responding to stimuli. The potential stimuli available for experiencing are highly diverse. Many of these stimuli are attended to and processed by the operations of the brain's neocortex. Some of the stimuli are construed, or interpreted in a process of making meaning. In terms of cognitive processing, it could be said that part of your infantile *I*-self processing is similar to that of lower animals, more focused on sensed external stimuli and not much mediated by symbols and language. As your *I*-self develops, its processing becomes more complex and symbolic language comes into play. Even though symbols and abstract concepts come to be used in the processing, much of this aspect of your self still operates without extensive use of language.

Personal constructs form and develop to serve as templates for recognizing patterns in the stimuli, which help to create meanings. Memories of meaningful experiences are stored, and the labels attached to personal constructs help the *I* retrieve those stored experiences. The organizing and remembering of these experiences and their sequencing are greatly enhanced when they are strung together in a narrative. This aspect of the self, which I am calling *I*, is the doer. The *I* is experiencing. It is deciding, it is behaving / acting, and it is construing. When I was hearing the airliner during the event described in the Introduction, I was experiencing, construing and deciding. I wasn't very aware of myself during this process; I was focused on what was happening.

The I is a process

The *I* can be thought of as a process, rather than an entity or a physical object. This particular process is enabled by the simple functioning brain. However, it would be overly simple to equate it with the brain. The process enables awareness to occur within the brain. This awareness permits associations, connections and the making of meaning. The brain might be thought of as a processor, the vehicle for the constantly-changing process.

The complex processing, which is the essence of the *I*, might also be conceived of as a number of sub-processes that enable pattern recognition and interpretation. It could be said that personal constructs form and are used as the *I*-processes take place.

The I is the present tense of the experiential process

This brain-enabled process is taking place as a continuous stream of consciousness focused at the present moment. Theoretically, the ideal *I* would always be focused on what is being experienced in the *now*. In real life, the *I* is often focused on past experiences and future possibilities. When the *I*'s awareness is focused on a past experience or an anticipated experience, that transported awareness has been enabled by a sub-process that allows the attention to be focused on a different time frame than the present. When thinking of a past event, the recalled experience is at the center of my attention. Similarly, a possible future event can be imagined or constructed, and my current thoughts are projected into the future. The acuteness of awareness is compromised or clouded during these transported experiences. Being in the present, the past and the future all have their purposes and advantages. But a person who was always focused on the present could not benefit from experience, and a person who could not focus on the future could not plan.

As I recall my experiences described in the introduction of this chapter, I can recall some of what I experienced the first time I heard that airliner passing over. Although fourteen hours have passed since I first heard those punctuated noises, I can remember some of what it was like. The experience is less vivid and less real, yet I do have some of the sensations and many of the thoughts I had when I tried to make sense of what had happened the first time I experienced the event.

Let me add that I think of mindfulness as meta-cognitive awareness of whatever I am experiencing in the moment, or in the present. I can be mindful when I am planning for the future or remembering the past, if I am aware that my planning and my remembering are occurring right now. When I am mindful, I am aware of both the content and the process of my thinking. Further exploration of the tense of awareness can be found in the literature on the concept of mindfulness (Kabat-zin1994).

The Objectified ME

Mead conceptualized the *ME*-self to be the *self as the object*, an object that is observed by the *I*, along with a large number of other objects also being observed by the *I*. Perhaps the use of the verb *observed* oversimplifies the process that is taking place when the *ME* has the attention of the *I*. What may be happening is that the aspect of the self called the *ME* has entered the awareness of the *I* that is experiencing what is happening in its external and internal environment. At first the *ME*-self might simply be recognized as another object, which are like those objects known as persons. The *ME* might be compared with other people interacting with the *I*-self. Eventually, that *ME* becomes a very special object, because the *I* comes to recognize a complex and symbiotic connection to that object.

To consider a series of developmental activities of a representative child who is forming and elaborating his *ME*, let us follow Tommy through his early years. After several months of being called Tommy, this child looks into a mirror and says 'that's Tommy'. Later, Tommy uses the pronoun *Me* to describe the object in the mirror. Somewhere during this period of development Tommy has learned to associate the sound of the word *Tommy* to the object he saw in the mirror. Later, he will read the word *Tommy* and know that the word represents the body he saw in the mirror so many times. Like most objects that become meaningful to the observing *I*, the *ME*-self will come to have a large number of special meanings, such as 'sweet boy' and 'bad boy'.

During the earlier stages of a person's development, there are simple, direct associations between the object, the *ME*, and evaluative words or actions expressed by another person. Eventually, the personal constructs formed and employed by the *I*-self, are used to describe *ME* and provide a budding self-identity. Tommy has come to use a pole of the construct *sweet v bad* to characterize himself and others.

Although I have written about the *ME* as a fairly simple, unitary concept or symbol, I could have described the *ME* as a cluster of *MEs*. James (1890) did this when he proposed various *MEs*, including the Social *ME*, the Spiritual *ME*, and several other *MEs*. However, in the theorizing I will next propose, it will be easier to treat the *ME* as a unitary unit or concept.

My *I* construes my body and constructs my *ME*

In an earlier section, I described the *I* as a process wherein many connections are made among stimuli, and many relationships are recognized. These processes might be called *construing*, or at least include *construing*. Kelly (1955) defined *construing* as a process of interpretation. The observed objects and other stimuli are being *construed*. I assume that my physical body was one of the early objects selected by my evolving *I* for *construing*. After all, that body is always in close proximity to the experiencing-*I*, and there are ample opportunities for the *I* to be aware of the body. So, my experiencing and *construing-I* probably used newly-developed personal constructs to construct my *ME*. This developing construction process continued to be elaborated as new personal constructs evolved during subsequent reiterations of the *construal* process. In effect, my *I* constructed my *ME*, using my physical body as its original stimulus.

The constructed *ME* may come to serve as a representative of the *I*, since the *I* is aware of the close connection between the body and its processing operation. Unfortunately, the *I* can attribute too much realness to its *ME* construction. This attribution process has been called *reification* and the process could restrict the further development or elaboration of the *I*. If the *I* considers its current version of *ME* to be sufficiently representative of the *I*, it may not seek further elaborations of its current construction. As the *I* seeks an identity, it may adopt the current *ME* as its primary identity, and that *ME* is likely to be a very limited version of the *I*.

Consider the example of one version of my *ME*, that I identified in the introduction to this chapter. A good deal of that identity is now out of date. I have moved on in my career and I do not often educate counselors. My affiliation with the University of Washington has changed, and I do not represent that university as much as I now represent some other institutions of higher learning. Yet, I might still be stuck in that former identity, and it might confuse people who want to implement some joint ventures. Maybe it is time to give up that part of my identity. Maybe I could gain new awareness and be freed of some of my restrictive views of reality. Am I stuck in old roles and old perspectives because I attribute too much realness or validity to the constructed *ME* that has not been revised very much during the passing years?

The relationship between the *I* and the *ME*

I have elaborated two concepts that are useful for explaining the development and functioning of the self. When doing that, I did not mean to imply that these two concepts are two separate components of the self. I am proposing that these two concepts are so intertwined and related that they cannot be considered separately. Since the *I* has been depicted as the creator of the *ME*, the *I* is obviously the more important concept to consider. However, the *ME* can be objectified and described to others, so it provides the most open window to self-characterization. After all, the *ME* does play an important role in the whole processing system of the self. As I will propose in the next section, the *ME* provides feedback in the self-system that facilitates the elaboration and development of the *I*.

The feedback loop between the *I* and the *ME*

In my initial attempt to describe the relationship between the *I* and the *ME*, I used the simple metaphor of a person looking at a mirror and seeing his or her physical image. The person who is looking is the *I* and the image in the mirror is the *ME*, a representation of the *I*, as experienced by the *I*. The actual relationship between the *I* as subject and the *ME* as object is a much more complicated than what is suggested by the mirror metaphor.

Hofstadter (2007) proposes the feedback loop used in mechanical systems such as flush toilets and thermostats, as a useful metaphor for explaining how the *I* and *ME* affect each other. In the case of flush toilets and thermostats, the larger system is kept in balance by at least two subsystem components that provide feedback to each other so that pre-established boundaries are not violated. When using this metaphor for theorizing about the human self-system, Hofstadter develops a more complicated feedback loop, called a *strange loop*. He uses this metaphor to show how perceptions of the *ME* by the *I* change the *I*, which then changes the way the *I* comes to perceive the *ME* during the next loop. So, the interaction between the *I* and the *ME* keeps changing each other, causing each changed *I* to observe new aspects of the previously observed *ME*, thereby creating a new *ME* to be observed differently during the next round of the loop. Using this metaphor, one can get a sense of the complexity of self-identity and how it constantly develops during a process of elaboration and change.

When this feedback process is framed in the language of Personal Construct Theory (PCT), the experiencing *I* starts with a simple construct which is used to differentiate the constructed, and yet observed, *ME* from other people. But the newly constructed *ME* becomes elaborated and changed from the previous *ME*, which might well change the personal construct previously used to make the differentiation. When this new version of the construct is used to differentiate the new *ME* from others, a different *ME* is constructed, which, in turn, might influence the *I*'s next construction of the newly-different *ME*.

Construing the self as the integration of the *I* and the *ME*

I have proposed a model wherein the *I* creates the *ME* and is influenced by that creation. While the experiencing and the construing of the *I* are influenced by the *ME*, the *I* is certainly more than the *ME*. When I write about the self, I am really writing about the *I* and the *ME* combined, because once the *ME* is created, it changes the *I* in such a way that the initial, simple *I* is a different process than was previously the case. Even though the *I* and *ME* can never be clearly differentiated after they have been developed together, I am hypothesizing that we still benefit from theorizing as if they were two different processes.

However, I think it is useful to think of the *ME* as less of a process than the *I*. This is because images or symbols of the *ME* have been constructed so that they can be experienced as specific events. Specific events can be concretized or seen as being more real or permanent than are processes. This is why the *ME* seems to be more real than the *I*, even though it is not. The *I* is difficult to summarize or slow down, because it is a process that involves continual changing. We like to be able to convert processes to static units so that they are more like phenomena that can be sensed by our sensors. Sensing is the way we become aware of most stimuli. That is why we often use the phrase, *I want to make sense of what is going on*, when we are faced with processes and with abstractions of phenomena that seem ambiguous and often confusing.

Can my *I* intentionally change my *ME* ?

I certainly hope that the answer to this question is yes. I think it is reasonable to assume that you can change the *ME*, if you accept the hypothesis that your *ME* is a construction. If something is constructed, you would think it could be re-constructed. However, it is generally assumed that the system known as the limbic system influences the motivations and the actions of humans and other animals. Although the *ME* is probably developed with processing enabled by the neocortex (of the neopallium), the limbic system of the paleopallium (midbrain) may have a significant impact on the development of the *ME*, operating beneath the level of consciousness. If that is the case, self-identity might be influenced by a brain system that is not affected by interventions designed to change cognitive processing. I hope that research studies will be devised and implemented to provide answers to the question raised in the title of this section.

Can a person construct a more positive *ME* ?

I believe that the answer to this question is crucial to the cultural evolution of the human species. I base this belief on my review of the theoretical and research literature, most of which has been stimulated by the positive psychology movement (Forster 2005). Seligman (2002), known as the father of the movement, articulated a solid rationale for encouraging authentic happiness, which is characterized by positive *MEs*.

During the past fifteen years I collaborated with Bernard Haldane to create and implement methods that help people articulate their strengths (Forster 2003). These methods facilitate a process by which people recall positive experiences and then articulate strengths they used during those experiences. I conducted research studies

indicating that participation in this process resulted in significant increases in their positive self-descriptions. These positive descriptions were indications of a more positive *ME* (Forster 1991). This research finding is similar to results of many other studies wherein attempts are made to increase measures of self-esteem, feelings of subjective well-being, and optimism.

Using the model of elaboration suggested by the I/ME feedback loop, I suggest that the creation of more positive *MEs* will eventually change the *I*. Wright (2000) makes a case that such changes are likely to further the cultural evolution of the human species.

Can I transcend beyond my awareness of my *ME*?

Many people, often identified with the Buddhist traditions, have written about a *no-self* state of awareness. Anderson (1997) is particularly insightful and articulate about this state of awareness which he calls *liberation*. I have been intrigued by this possibility and I engaged in Vipassana meditation practices with the hope that I might achieve liberation. However, I seemed to lack the motivation to persist in my quest for this very desirable state of being. Yet, I remain intrigued by the possibility. I think of that state of awareness as a time when my *I* has transcended beyond awareness of my *ME*. I doubt that I, or any human being, can achieve this liberating state of awareness for very long, but even short periods would be heavenly.

Another way of transcending beyond the awareness of my *ME* is to become very focused upon some engaging activity that requires my total attention. I have recognized some times in my life when I was so engaged in what I was doing that I paid little attention to my self. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has written a good deal about this process, which he calls *flow*. Incidentally, this type of engagement has been identified as one of the three forms happiness (Seligman 2002).

Benefits of differentiating the *I* from the *ME*

The benefits of considering the concepts of *I* and *ME* include the possibility that you will gain insights into ways you make sense of yourself. You might increase your awareness of the ways you process your experiences. Actually, I can't speak to the benefits you get from considering these two templates for looking at yourself. I can, however, articulate some of the benefits I realized from thinking and writing about these aspects of the self. I feel I benefited from becoming more aware of my own constructions of my self-identity. I now seem to recognize these constructions as partial depictions of my self, generated by my complex processing. I interpret these self-constructions as less than real and less valid than the way I interpreted myself before I started using the concepts of *I* and *ME*. This does not mean that I am more confused about who I am, it means that I am less deluded about my ways of trying to make sense of myself.

By conceiving of my self-identity as a tentative and hypothetical possibility, rather than as the real thing, I feel less need to defend its validity to others and myself. You may have noticed that I just spoke of defending myself to myself, as if I have two selves.

Yes, I can experience myself as two selves. You can tell that other people have this dual perspective when you analyze what they say. I have heard many assertions like: 'I couldn't live with myself if I did that', and 'I feel sorry for myself'. I hypothesize that this sense of having two selves occurs because some of us do experience two aspects of our processing. I am aware at a deeper level that I am processing what is going on, while at the same time I am also the product or construction of that processing. After articulating this model of an *I* and a *ME*, I began to understand why I might be feeling like two selves.

Let me give a more specific situation when I benefited from this deeper awareness of my processing. In April 2007, after months of weight loss, I received the results of a biopsy informing me that cancer was found in my pancreas. My knowledge of mortality probabilities for people with pancreatic cancer helped to activate a personal construct of *dying v living*, so that I started interpreting the processes of my body as dying, rather than living. I started to think of my future existence in terms of months, rather than years. But, somewhat to my surprise, I did not experience feelings of dread or catastrophe.

Upon further reflection, I became aware of the way I had started to construe my *I-self* as a current process that would cease to exist when my body and my brain stopped its processing operation, an inevitable future event. This interpretation of my self as a process gave me a sense of impermanence, freeing me from an earlier sense of being a real object or a long-standing entity. This interpretation also enabled me to detach from the sense of realness I had attributed to my *MEs*, which were becoming past images or snapshots of various past experiences, never again to be experienced as they once were experienced. In a way, I had moved to an expectation of a temporary self, which is on the way to awareness of a *no-self* future. Instead of focusing on the precious time I had available to me, I became aware of the gratitude I felt because of the wonderful experiences and the unusual opportunities available to me in the past.

As it happened, my interpretation of myself as a dying person was reversed or at least postponed, after extensive surgery. Analysis of the tissue removed indicated that I had a less lethal cancer, called bile duct cancer. The whole experience enabled me to re-construe my self-identity. As a result of these experiences, I came to interpret my self-consciousness as less permanent and this realization was accompanied by feelings of peacefulness and gratitude.

Concerns about what was left out

I have addressed only a few of the specific components comprising the complex and multilayered topic of self-identity. I have focused on the aspect of the self that is experiencing, construing, and taking action. This description of what is happening when the processes called the *I* are occurring, only identifies a few of the activities encompassed by this mysterious process. I have also focused on one object of the *I*'s construing, a construed product called the *ME*. This 'product', which is some kind of virtual creation, is constructed from abstract templates used to see patterns in phenomena and processes. I tried to show how these two concepts relate to each other and how the construal of the two, interacting as a system, elaborates the self.

My exploration of how the *I* constructs the *ME* does not include the influence of other people on the development of the self. It could easily be said that a person's identity comes from relationships and interactions with other people. The topics of cultural and societal influences are also very important. The impact of expectations, goals and thinking about the future should be included in any comprehensive explanations of the self-identification. Anticipations of events that might happen are the guides for much of behavior and self-identity.

Although I have concerns about what I have left out, I also realize that I have run out of time and space for saying more in this particular publication. I appreciate this opportunity to articulate some of my reflections on my own processing about myself. The experience of doing so has stretched my thinking so far that I felt, at times, almost overwhelmed. But it leaves with me a strong desire to continue towards better understanding of something that I feel is ultimately unknowable.

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