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Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s vs. the 1980s

Irene Taviss Thomson

If the 1950s are remembered for conformity, the 1960s for rebellious individualism, and the 1970s for narcissistic individualism, images of the 1980s contain an ambiguous mixture of individualism and conformity, with similarities to the 1950s. But if the 1980s resemble the 1950s in some respects, are portraits of individualism and conformity in the later decade nevertheless different from their earlier incarnations? A comparative analysis of best-selling self-help books in the 1950s and the 1980s reveals the following changes: from "maturity" as a desirable end to an ever-changing self; from determinism about the self to antideterminism and constructionism; from institutional constraints and joys to interpersonal ones. These changes reflect the incorporation of ideas from the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and may also stem from perceptions of a simultaneous increase in structural determinism and individual empowerment.

KEY WORDS: individualism; conformity; determinism; constructionism.

INTRODUCTION

American individualism has long been seen as containing contradictory impulses—toward independence and isolation on the one hand, conformity and community on the other. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans "imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (1848/1961:105), and each individual is in danger of being confined "entirely within the solitude of his own heart" (106). Yet the very equality of conditions that makes such independence possible also means that "all follow the same track" (146). More recent commentators have noted the

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"secondary yearnings" for community and dependence produced by American individualism (Slater, 1976), the "cultural point-counterpoint" of community cohesion and individual mobility (Keller, 1988:173), the "dual yearning for individualism and community" (Wilkinson, 1988:55), the "dilemmas" of conforming vs. rebelling, of "staying" vs. "leaving" (Hewitt, 1989).

The expression of this duality in American culture has taken various forms. In our collective memory, there has been an alternation of individualist and conformist periods. Thus, "the twenties came to emphasize the self apart from society" (Crunden, 1972:72), whereas the hero of the 1930s became "the bearer of specific group virtues" (Johns–Heine and Gerth, 1949:110). The celebrated 1930s best-seller How to Win Friends and Influence People (Carnegie, 1936) conveyed the message that to be successful one must be well-liked. This idea came to full fruition during the other-directed 1950s. The conformity of the 1950s was followed by the rebellious individualism of the counterculture in the late 1960s and the retreat into narcissism during the "me decade" of the 1970s.

The "decade labeling" (Davis, 1984) of the 1980s appears considerably more ambiguous, however. On the one hand, there is the individualistic striving of the "yuppie" in the "go-go" 1980s. On the other hand, various indicators of the popular mood suggest similarities to the 1950s. Thus, surveys of college students showed a "return of the fifties" (Hoge et al., 1987). The cover of U.S. News and World Report on January 16, 1989, announced the appearance of "The New Organization Man." On the best-seller lists, Loving Each Other (Buscaglia, 1984) replaced Looking Out for Number One (Ringer, 1977), and Be Happy You Are Loved (Schuller, 1986) replaced How to Be Your Own Best Friend (Newman and Berkowitz, 1971). As in the 1950s, social scientists characterized Americans in the 1980s as lacking in true community. What they manifested instead were "life-style enclaves" (Bellah et al., 1985) or a "loose-bounded culture" (Merelman, 1984). And in language quite reminiscent of the 1950s, we are told that community is needed as "a counterforce to the TV-Blip-other-directed-celebrity-struck-lonely crowd-mass society of the late twentieth century" (Keller, 1988:181).

If the 1980s resemble the 1950s in some respects, is conformity as perceived in the later decade nevertheless different from its earlier incarnation? Is the individualism advocated by writers in the 1980s of the same sort as that applauded in the 1950s? Some writers, notably Hewitt (1989) and Wilkinson (1983, 1988), suggest that while the individualism-conformity polarity may play itself out in new guises, each one simply reflects and gives voice to the basic American cultural debate about the self—a self that should be both autonomous and conforming (Hewitt, 1989:40-41).
Alternatively, one can see perceptions of individualism and conformity in different time periods as reflecting subtle changes in the culture. Thus, individualism as depicted in the 1920s was primarily a rebellion against a restrictive society, a drive for self-expression, and the release from self-control. By the 1970s, society is no longer seen as a constraining power and individualism becomes a matter of self-absorption and the quest for self-development. The self is now seen as a fluid entity that is freed from social determination (Thomson, 1989).

Does such perceived freedom from social determination persist through the 1980s? What new constraints are placed on the individual as the “impulsive self” is “bureaucratized” (Zurcher, 1986)? How do freedoms and constraints as seen in the 1980s differ from those of the 1950s?

To answer such questions, the best-selling self-help books of 1950–1959 and 1980–1989 were analyzed. Supplementary data were drawn from an analysis of all articles of general social commentary appearing in Harper’s and The Atlantic during those same years. There is, to be sure, an internal dynamic that accounts for some of what appears in these two genres of popular culture. Thus, the self-help literature of the 1980s explicitly denounces the “selfish freedoms” that had been advocated during the 1970s; one cannot, after all, expect to sell the same advice repeatedly. And although the allegation of conformity may have become truly less relevant after the upheavals of the 1960s, it is also the case that “from the twenties on, so much had been said about conformity in America, that it was hard to say anything new about it” (Wilkinson, 1983:176). Yet if the best-sellers are tinged with considerations of marketability and the commentaries with an intellectual vogueishness, they both appear to reflect perceptions that are widely shared — at least among the younger members of the upper middle class.

To be sure, changes in publishing practices since the 1950s may have altered the relations between authors, publishers, and the reading public in ways that are not apparent. But it still appears reasonable to assume that the best-sellers resonate with their audiences, insofar as they have sold millions of copies. And the commentaries often provide the vocabulary that colors middle-class perceptions of reality. Though the problems of inferring cultural change from such materials make all such research suggestive rather than conclusive, corroborative evidence from both survey data and other studies of popular culture lends support to the conclusions drawn here.

The relationship of the best-sellers to the actual behavior of individuals is, of course, indirect, with the advice books providing a set of legitimations or a “vocabulary of motives” (Mills, 1963). Yet it would be surprising, for example, to find an emphasis on institutional goals like that
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found in the self-help literature of the 1950s accompanied by a divorce rate like that of the 1970s and 1980s or an emphasis on self-construction like that found in the 1980s accompanied by the dominance of Freudian therapies.

Using only those self-help books that appeared on the annual best-seller lists, a total of sixteen volumes was analyzed: five in the 1950s, and eleven in the 1980s. To tap the reigning images of individualism and conformity, four questions were addressed: What is the self like? What should the self be like — i.e., what will produce the good or happy or successful self? How does the self relate to others? How should the self relate to others? An overview of the results is given in Tables I and II. A total of 33 magazine articles was also analyzed: 24 in the 1950s — when both magazines contained more pages per issue — and 9 in the 1980s.

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2The sources of the best-seller lists for 1950-1959 are Hackett and Burke’s *80 Years of Best Sellers* (1977) and for 1980–1989, the 26th–35th editions of *The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*. Though the study was confined to hardcover books, one paperback edition was added to the 1980s sample because of its exceptional sales. As of April 30, 1989, M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* had sold over three million copies and remained on the *New York Times* paperback best-seller list for a period exceeded only by *The Joy of Sex* (see *New York Times Book Review*, April 30, 1989).
THE SELF

The self portrayed in the best-sellers of the 1950s is neither a tranquil nor a free one. It is limited by heredity and environment, and ridden with both inner conflicts and the difficulties of compartmentalized roles. The key to success and happiness lies in assuming self-control, establishing goals for the self, and striving to become a socially cooperative and "mature" individual. The self in the 1980s is neither well-defined nor limited, except by its own mental constructions and those of the others with whom it interacts. To be happy and successful, this self must take responsibility for its own development and continually grow and change.

The influence of Freud is clearly apparent in the portrait of a conflict-ridden psyche that appears in the best-sellers of the 1950s. The self is seen as "a prey to . . . inner tensions" (Overstreet, 1950:140), "driven by deep impulses which we do not understand" (Peale, 1957:140). Moreover, these "buried urges . . . determine our lives even though we have no conscious knowledge of them whatsoever" (Blanton, 1956:4). By the 1980s, though one self-help writer speaks of internal conflict, he sees the unconscious as "a kind of good fairy working very hard to make us honest" rather than as "a mischievous devil trying to trip us up" (Peck, 1980:248). Two other writers enunciate a kind of post-Freudian romanticism, suggesting that the child within us is wise and sensitive to others (see Dyer, 1980, and Buscaglia, 1982).

Individuals in the 1950s not only face internal conflicts, they must also deal with the difficulties of the "compartmentalized self." In our culture "the domestic self, the business self, the religious self, the political self . . . are housed in one body but remain strangers to one another" (Overstreet, 1950:140). Yet "life cannot be so compartmentalized" that men "can be inhuman exploiters in their business life, and loving husbands and fathers at home" (Blanton, 1956:146). This theme of role differentiation is completely absent from the best-sellers of the 1980s. In these volumes, the self is no longer defined primarily in role terms. Indeed, two authors suggest that to be good at what you are doing requires that you go beyond the requirements of your role (see Buscaglia, 1982, and Peck, 1980).

In sharp contrast to the later self-help literature, writers in the 1950s suggest that people are substantially limited not only by unconscious urges, but also by heredity and environment. "Within limits . . . the human being can become almost anything that is conceived as desirable by those who set up the stimuli to which he responds" (Overstreet, 1950:29). "Each human being is born to become what his original potentialities decree" (Blanton, 1956:21). In the 1980s, an antideterminist argument prevailed. Individuals themselves were in charge of their thoughts and feelings, "not
some mystical force of heredity, astrological sun-sign or personal psychology” (Dyer, 1980:38). Readers were told not to succumb to the “negative ‘fates’ that social structures or the ‘stars’ might try to impose upon you” (Schuller, 1983:103). Though you take on the definitions of your culture, your parents, your teachers, “you can change your inside programming” (Buscaglia, 1982:99).

To the extent that people are limited in the 1980s, it is by their own mental constructions and those of the people with whom they interact. The best-sellers take what might be termed a “constructionist” view of human behavior. That is, they argue that the meanings and realities of social life are constructed by people in and through their interactions. Thus, “all power is based on perception. If you think you’ve got it, then you’ve got it” (Cohen, 1980:20). “Once you and enough other individuals begin to be more open to differing points of view . . . our social structures (which are all comprised of individuals) will cease to victimize anybody” (Dyer, 1980:111). Though the constructionist viewpoint gives individuals power to change their social environment, it also points to some limitations on the self. For in this perspective, “we’re made, mostly, by the people who surround us. We make each other every day” (Buscaglia, 1982:250). Our past experiences and learning can also limit us. “You and I do not see things as they are. We see things as we are” (Cohen, 1980:159).

In prescribing for the happy and successful self, self-help writers in both decades talk about the need for individual responsibility. But the concept of responsibility is treated differently in the two decades. In the 1950s, responsibility is discussed as a function of maturation. The baby is born irresponsible; maturity entails acquiring a sense of responsibility, accepting the consequences of one’s actions. In the 1980s, a failure to take responsibility is a failure to develop the self, to make the most of one’s self. Thus, “you have to take the responsibility for choosing and defining your own life” (Buscaglia, 1982:167); you cannot “blame anyone else” for what you are (Dyer, 1980:347). Nor can you take refuge in unconscious motivation, for “the unconscious as an entity simply does not exist! . . . [There are] leftover reactions from your childhood . . . [and dreams] in which your mind operates quite differently from the way it does while you are awake. But to assign responsibility for your behavior to something which, by definition, you cannot be aware of or control is to give yourself an instant cop-out” (129).

The ultimate goal for adults in the 1950s is to attain “maturity.” To be mature, the individual must assume adult roles and responsibilities and “feel one’s self as part of the community” (Schindler, 1954:114). Maturity entails “the development of a sense of function. No one is mature except to the extent that there is work he accepts as his own . . . . The person
who cannot settle down—who remains a vocational drifter . . . [is] immature” (Overstreet, 1950:52). Assuming “the role of the good parent . . . is the capstone of maturity” (Blanton, 1956:201). No allowances are made for individual idiosyncracies: “maturity in one person is the same thing as maturity in another person” (Schindler, 1954:208).

By the 1980s no such end point of development is seen. Rather, the individual is expected to be ever-changing: “Healthy human beings . . . are alive to the possibility of becoming someone new each moment” (Buscaglia, 1986:107). It is a “painful” but “necessary ordeal” that we must “outgrow the person we used to be . . . and take on the risk of a new identity” (Kushner, 1986:93).

References to personal growth or change in the 1950s are quite different. One best-seller talks of growth as an unfolding of the inherent potentialities that lie within the individual (see Blanton, 1956:21). Two others see personal change as an adaptation to environmental change (see Overstreet, 1950:38, and Schindler, 1954:81). The risky, self-generated change of the 1980s is absent here.

Not surprisingly, a mature self is seen as needing goals, while an ever-changing self is more concerned with process. Thus, goals are regarded as necessary in the 1950s: “Lots of people get nowhere simply because they do not know where they want to go. They have no clear-cut, precisely defined purpose” (Peale, 1952:116). In the 1980s, goals are seen as important by only two of the best-sellers, and one of these cautions that we must not be too wedded to our goals, since caring too much weakens our negotiating abilities (Cohen, 1980). Moreover, goal-directed behavior is specifically rejected by some writers in the 1980s in favor of an emphasis on the process of living. “You know, we are a culture of goal seekers. I have news for you—it’s not the goal, it’s the trip that’s life. Life is the process . . .” (Buscaglia, 1982:130). “Learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory, in the joys that fade. Learn to savor the moment . . . because it is only a moment” (Kushner, 1986:141). We would benefit from a Zen approach to life; as things are, “we have no terms to describe total concentration or intense living-in-the-present moment behavior” (Dyer, 1980:320).

Social critics in both the 1950s and the 1980s also address the topic of individual goals, bemoaning what they see as the decline of ambition. While the decline of the Protestant ethic has been a consistent refrain in 20th-century social commentary, the precise nature of the argument changes over time. In the 1950s, a substantial proportion of the commentary—37.5% of the articles in the sample—was devoted to the theme that people were now too devoted to security, that their “little dreams were not of wealth or fame or monumental accomplishments, but of bureaucrats’
offices in government or the corporations” (Handlin, 1951:26). This lowering of ambitions is variously explained as resulting from status anxieties (Lynes, 1956), a softening of our character (Richter, 1950:30), or the tendency of large corporations to encourage imitative and cautious rather than risk-taking behavior (Harrington, 1959a).

By the 1980s, both ambition and work itself had become suspect, according to one-third of the essays in the sample. One critic suggests that work has lost its connection to both play and craftsmanship, so that people must find creative release elsewhere (Lasch, 1984). A second writer sees a “changing folklore of success” in which our “private concepts of ambition” favor the tenured professional above the risk-taking entrepreneur (Fallows, 1985:50). The third writer argues that while the accoutrements of success are still valued, ambition itself is in bad repute among the educated (Epstein, 1980). Whereas in the past ambition was a way of overcoming degrading work, now “one can attack the character of work itself.” There is “a vague groaning about something called ‘the system’ . . . . It is almost as if we subscribed to a form of social determinism that has no name . . . .” (Epstein, 1980:52, 54-55).

While critics in the 1980s do not adopt a constructionist view of social life, critics in the 1950s nevertheless see a greater economic determinism over the lives of individuals, a more direct connection between the corporate system and the self. Thus, we are told that corporations “control” the “destinies” of people (Lynes, 1956:39); that they are “determining our movements, manipulating the dominions over self” (Gold, 1957:61); and that because of corporate testing and evaluation of employees, “after years of being tabulated and boxed in, a man tends to give up his own idea of himself and accept the evaluation from outside” (Harrington, 1959b:54). Critics in the 1950s either pity or take to task those individuals whose allegiance to the corporation makes them so vulnerable. By the 1980s, critics appear to suggest that individuals no longer identify themselves with their work.

The critical literature of the 1950s supports the images of the self-help writers insofar as one writer sees maturity as necessary for a good society (see Binger, 1951) and two others see the compartmentalized self as a problem (see Allen, 1954; Gold, 1957). Support for the images of self found in the self-help literature of the 1980s is at best indirect. Though critics do not affirm the ability of the self to make and remake itself, a third of the essays in the 1980s do posit a self that is self-conscious in its pursuits and not given to merely accepting authority: “The age of the anti-hero sees no warrant for the submission of the self” (Barzun, 1984:102, 104). And new religious and psychological movements suggest a society that has passed
through a period “in which all hierarchical structures had been called into question” (Roszak, 1981:61, 62).

THE SELF IN RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

As seen by self-help writers in the 1950s, the successful handling of both internal and institutional constraints was a key to happiness. Happiness was achieved by the mature individual who settled into work and family roles and learned to be socially cooperative, despite his compartmentalized and conflict-ridden self. In the 1980s, self-help writers portray individuals whose constraints are no longer internal or institutional, but interpersonal. On the one hand, we are shaped by others’ ideas of who we are and what it is desirable for us to do. On the other hand, our needs for intimacy and love bring complex interpersonal constraints. And just as the source of constraint was simultaneously the source of joy in the earlier period, so too in the 1980s: It is other people who both constrain us and bring us joy.

The need for interpersonal connection — to belong, to be needed, to be loved — is seen as a given in both decades. In the 1980s, however, relationships are seen as fraught with difficulties and never entirely free of problems. “There is no such thing as a perfect relationship which is utterly secure, happy, and binding” (Buscaglia, 1984:188). And the fear of rejection or loss has become so great that some people no longer risk loving or
committing themselves to others. The result is either the loneliness that comes from "temporary interpersonal relationships" (Schuller, 1986:242) or "a life of emotional flatness" (Kushner, 1986:98).

The difficulties of love relationships are not discussed in the 1950s, except insofar as "the childhood arrests" of "ego-centricity and selfishness" are seen as harming marriages (Schindler, 1954:158), or marital failure is seen as resulting from the use of love "as a disguised vehicle to carry hate" (Blanton, 1956:70). Such difficulties lie within the individual rather than in relationships per se. By the 1980s, readers are told of the difficulties of simply listening to another person. We usually listen "selectively with a preset agenda in mind," whereas "true listening involves bracketing, a setting aside of the self" (Peck, 1980:128).

Since substantial increases in the divorce rate did not occur until the late 1960s, it is not surprising that the difficulties of love relationships were of more concern in the 1980s. But prescriptions for the good self and the good love relationship in the 1980s may have imposed additional difficulties. Thus, while the best-sellers tell us that we must never cease growing, they also advise that true love encourages growth in the loved one: "Real love liberates! For it wants the object of its healthy love to blossom to its full potential" (Schuller, 1986:149). Consider the complexity of this demand: "Genuine love not only respects the individuality of the other but actually seeks to cultivate it, even at the risk of separation or loss" (Peck, 1980:168).

Is a focus on growth of the self incompatible with loving and giving? Two authors argue that these are quite compatible. One suggests that "real love is a permanently self-enlarging experience . . . . It is impossible to truly understand another without making room for that person within yourself. This making room . . . requires an extension of and therefore a changing of the self" (Peck, 1980:89, 149). The other offers a different perspective: "If you are truly a lover, you want to give the best you there is. And that means developing all the wonder of you — as a unique human being" (Buscaglia, 1982:68).

Our ability to relate to each other is seen as being impeded by societal factors in both the 1950s and the 1980s. In the 1950s, writers blame our competitive economic system and take pains to distinguish individualism or maturity from competitiveness. Maturity, we are told, means "graduating from egoism and competitiveness to cooperativeness" (Schindler, 1954:75). By the 1980s, the social impediments to interpersonal relationships are related principally to cultural definitions rather than the economic system. "We think to be a grownup we must be independent and not need anyone. And that's why we're all dying of loneliness" (Buscaglia, 1982:16).
Individualism and Conformity

Despite the general agreement on the need for belonging, conformity as such is never valued. Anticonformity messages are present in both decades, though there are fewer of them in the 1950s. In that decade, individuals are cautioned against being forced into a uniform mold for the sake of social convenience or obedience to society’s dictates. Of special concern is the need for the individual to develop his own unique aptitudes, rather than being pushed into the cultural mode of success (Overstreet, 1950:33–34). We often fail to “use our native capacities to their fullest extent” because of “conflict with prevailing social standards and ideals” (Blanton, 1956:110).

By the 1980s, the target of attack becomes the conscious falsifying of emotions. Readers are now warned not to be “phony” (Buscaglia, 1982:58), not to “play games, put on a front” (Schuller, 1985:33), not to “wear masks” (Schuller, 1986:52), not to allow “contrived emotion” to substitute for “genuine emotion” (Kushner, 1986:25). While one author concedes that “organizational effectiveness” sometimes requires one to be “circumspect in the expression of individual opinions,” he argues that if organizational effectiveness becomes one’s only goal, then one loses one’s “personal integrity and identity.” And indeed the line “between the preservation and the loss” of identity and integrity is extremely narrow and “very very few really make the trip successfully. It is an enormous challenge” (Peck, 1980:62).

Such advice stands in stark contrast to that of the most famous book in the sample: Norman Vincent Peale’s The Power of Positive Thinking (1952). Though Peale did not actually advise readers to be “phony,” he could certainly be accused of advocating “contrived emotions” when he advises, “Practice liking people until you learn to do so genuinely” (1952:245). To gain friends or to get people to like you: “Practice building up the ego of other persons” (Peale, 1952:242). How different this is from the advice of a self-help writer in the 1980s who proclaims: “Contrived emotion (What am I supposed to feel now?) replaces genuine emotion (How do I really feel about this person?) until the ability to know what you are really feeling disappears. Perhaps this is why there is so much phony conviviality and so little genuine friendship in the lives of American men today” (Kushner, 1986:25).

While “phoniness” and “game-playing” in interpersonal relations are condemned, writers in the 1980s nevertheless advise readers to “try to regard all encounters and situations, including your job, as a game” (Cohen, 1980:88). “When you adopt the attitude that it’s only a game, emotionally you are free” (Schuller, 1983:140). The role-distancing proposed here is suggested as a way of easing tension, of reducing the fear of failure. It is of interest that such distancing of the self is acceptable only with respect
to roles or goals; remaining detached from one’s relationships is seen as a defense against failure that makes failure more likely (see Kushner, 1986:96; Schuller, 1986:107).

Readers in the 1980s are also warned about the more subtle pressures that arise in response to others’ opinions or images of oneself. Thus, “you owe it to yourself not to live by what someone else thinks you ought to do” (Cohen, 1980:52). “If our sense of who we are depends on popularity and other people’s opinions of us, we will always be dependent on those people. On any day they have the power to pull the rug out from under us” (Kushner, 1986:17).

While yielding to the pressures of others is frowned upon, the giving of the self is in some ways more valued than earlier. The need to identify with something larger than the self is a theme in the self-help literature of both decades, but the underlying rationale changes. In the 1950s the purpose of such devotion is primarily a psychological one: the principal aim is to forget one’s own problems. “The more you lose yourself in something bigger than yourself, the more energy you will have. You won’t have time to think about yourself and get bogged down in your emotional difficulties” (Peale, 1952:42). In the 1980s devotion to something larger than the self is viewed as good or satisfying in itself. “To give of oneself without expecting anything in return is one of the finest things one human being can do for another” (Buscaglia, 1986:130). People “receive their inner feelings of satisfaction from doing something for others” (Dyer, 1980:335).

The therapeutic tenor of the 1950s is noted in the literature of social criticism as well. One observer suggests that we live in an “age of happy problems.” If one feels some discomfort for leaving the city as the Negroes move in, one takes the matter up with one’s psychiatrist. “What moral problem? They are all psychological” (Gold, 1957:61). This criticism is part of an attack on the perceived “privatism” of contemporary Americans, their lack of involvement in community or world affairs (see Wilder, 1952; Lynes, 1956; Gold, 1957). The problem is seen either as endemic to American culture—the characteristic American is “thrown back upon himself” (Wilder, 1952:65) —or as a consequence of the prosperity and consumerism that have rendered Americans unconcerned with anything but their own immediate needs and desires.

While some lament the retreat into private concerns, a much larger number of critics in the 1950s discern a growing conformity in America. In all, 37.5% of the commentaries deal with conformity — in suburban life (Allen, 1954; Henderson, 1953), in corporations (Harrington, 1959a, 1959b), in consumer culture (Gold, 1957), among the young (Handlin,
1951), and as expressed in the value attached to "adjustment" (Binger, 1951; Meserve, 1955).

In the 1980s, the allegation of conformity disappears. One critic even takes note of the fact that no one in the suburbs, or nationally, is concerned about conformity anymore (see Lemann, 1989). But the privatism critique now appears in a new guise— as a concern about social fragmentation. The roots of this fragmentation are seen to lie primarily in cultural changes. Thus, cultural changes have encouraged people to "place a greater emphasis on personal, face-to-face relationships than on wider social associations" (Fairlie, 1980:32). The counterculture of the 1960s, having "challenged the 'givens'— the largely nonrational assumptions, values, habits, rituals, symbols, and myths that hold the diverse elements of society together" has "destroy[ed] their efficacy" (McDonald, 1984:47). Yet another critic sees fragmentation as resulting from a progression of intellectual movements, starting with the "sneering at conventional morality" during the 1920s, and continuing with the "new religions" of Marx and Freud and the spread of the "adversary mentality" with its interest in various suffering groups rather than the country as a whole (Nisbet, 1984:53). At issue in the 1980s, then, was not so much the retreat of individuals into private concerns as the absence or decline of a widely shared culture. The critics seem to suggest that the unifying cultural values have been displaced as different population groups construct their own meanings.

The concern for intimacy that looms so large in the self-help literature of the 1980s finds expression in one critic's concern about the "pseudoculture" of the mass media that threatens true intimacy through its use of "public intimacy." He argues that "those without intimacy have their identities assigned to them— by biology, by the state, finally by pseudoculture" (Elliott, 1980:56).

Because individuals in American society are seen to be both unique and in need of belonging, the relationship of the self to others is always problematic. Yet the precise nature of the dilemmas involved appears to have changed. For the self defined primarily in institutional terms, as in the 1950s, the principal danger of conformity is that one will not use one's own unique talents appropriately, and the major pitfall of individualism is that one will succumb to excessive competitiveness. When the self comes to be defined in interpersonal terms, as in the 1980s, the principal danger of conformity is that one will yield to others' opinions of what the self should be, and the dominant risk of individualism is that one will allow selfish freedoms to interfere with interpersonal commitments.
INTERPRETING AND EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES

Three interrelated changes appear in the best-sellers: From institutional constraints and joys to interpersonal ones; from maturity as a desirable end to an ever-changing self; from determinism about the self to anti-determinism and constructionism. The changes are interrelated since an ever-changing self must abandon earlier ideas and habits, and culture then can no longer be seen in terms of fixed values and absolute meanings. Hence a constructionist perspective emerges. The constructionist perspective in turn supports a sense of constraints as interpersonal rather than institutional. If we are free to make ourselves and our world, then the construction of reality becomes a joint project. And if our values emerge from this joint construction of social reality rather than being internalized early in life, then our moral obligations come from the pressures we impose upon each other.

In assuming a constructionist perspective, self-help writers intensify the habitual antistructural bias of this genre—the bias that allows its practitioners to preach that problems will disappear in the face of "positive" (Peale) or "possibility" (Schuller) thinking. While the literature of social criticism does not share this antistructural bias, there is a change in the way it portrays social structures too. In the 1950s, the universe of suburbia, corporate bureaucracy, and the consumer economy are seen as having a determining influence on the lives of individuals, even if some critics chastise people for acquiescing in these patterns by complaining about the widespread "conformity." By the 1980s, individuals are portrayed as having at least partially disengaged themselves from these structures. No critic in this decade expresses concern lest individuals give up on their own ideas of themselves in favor of corporate evaluations. Rather, individuals are seen as being highly self-conscious and not readily submitting themselves to anything. Conformity is no longer the problem, just an unwillingness to challenge the system or to attempt to alter it.

The changes found in these indicators of popular culture are consistent with Turner's (1976) thesis of the decline of the "institutional" self and Yankelovich's (1981) argument that there has been a rejection of the old "giving-getting compact" in which one was rewarded with respect and status for playing one's roles well. But unlike the "narcissistic" self often noted during the 1970s, the ideal self of the 1980s self-help literature shows an "ethic of commitment" (Yankelovich, 1981) or the presence of a social (or intimacy) anchorage for the "impulsive self" (Turner, 1976).
Other changes in social scientific thinking also seem to parallel those found in the self-help literature. Thus, just as the best-sellers of the 1950s spoke of the need to integrate "compartmentalized" selves, so it was common for social scientists of this period to argue that "because of structural differentiation in the society, the individual must integrate the larger number of roles he plays in order to maintain his identity" (White, 1961:127–128). If this view emphasized the difficulties of having multiple roles, by the 1970s the benefits of "role accumulation" were being argued (see Sieber, 1974). And by the 1980s, it was suggested that the greater the number of identities an individual has, the less psychological distress will be experienced (see Thoits, 1983). Similarly, the discussion of maturity in the best-sellers coincides with the assumption made by many social scientists that adulthood entailed some degree of closure after the adolescent's "search for identity." By the 1970s, however, a "firm and stable identity" came to be seen as expressing little more than "rigidity," since "a rapidly changing society" made "a flexible unstable identity . . . a very useful thing to command" (Berger, 1971:96; see also Zurcher, 1972, 1977). The "plasticity" of self repeatedly found in empirical studies was now seen as adaptive (Gergen, 1977).

Both survey data and analyses of other forms of popular culture provide evidence of changes in self-society relationships akin to those found in the self-help literature. Beginning in the late 1960s or early 1970s, popular magazines discuss human relations in terms of negotiated meanings rather than preset standards (Kidd, 1974); traditional morality and unchanging standards give way to individual definitions of moral standards (Zube, 1972). Best-selling novels chart both "the failure of success" and the disappearance of moral standards; they focus instead on internal beliefs and experiences (Long, 1985). Success manuals now include "displacement books" that direct the pursuit of success to nonwork areas (Biggart, 1983). College students define themselves in "reflective" or "impulsive" rather than "institutional" terms (Zurcher, 1972; Snow and Phillips, 1982) and assign greater validity to open-ended than to fixed-response tests of self-concept (Spitzer and Parker, 1976).

A large body of survey data attests to the continuing support for the core values of American individualism: private property, free enterprise, freedom of speech, the work ethic, and individual responsibility for one's own fate (see Inkeles, 1990/1991). Surveys more directly pertinent to definitions of the self reveal changes akin to those found here. These surveys reveal the following: the diminished importance of "role and status anchors

\footnote{It is interesting to note in this connection that Hewitt sees "all social theory" as being "in part, discourse that both reflects and reproduces the culture from which it springs." (1989:16).}
for the definitions of self” in 1976 as compared to 1957, and an increased emphasis on the “interpersonal aspects” of work and family roles (Veroff et al., 1981:534, 20), a heightened sense of freedom of choice in living one’s life (Yankelovich, 1981:54), and a much weaker relationship between income level and perceived happiness in 1978 than in 1957 (Campbell, 1981:233–234). More generally, survey data analyzed by Campbell (1981) and by Inglehart (1977, 1990) suggest a movement away from purely economic concerns to a “postmaterialist” set of values, and Glenn’s (1987) analysis of survey data between 1952 and 1986 shows an increase in individualistic concerns and a decline in ties to both political and religious institutions.

How then can one account for the changes? Various commentators have pointed out the seeming anomaly that our cultural images of the self have become increasingly free while the social structure is ever more constraining (see Bell, 1976; Merelman, 1984; Meyer, 1986; Bellah et al., 1985). A cultural emphasis on openness, fluidity, authenticity, and the search for self-fulfillment seems to operate alongside a social structure that is stratified, hierarchical, specialized, and seemingly beyond individual influence. Perhaps this disparity can provide some clue to the changes detailed here.

It can be argued that in the decades between the 1950s and the 1980s, middle-class Americans came to see themselves as simultaneously more constrained by large and powerful organizations, and more empowered due to higher education, a rising standard of living, and the relativizing influences of the mass media. Such individuals might seek at least the illusion of control. Hence, images of the self as an autonomous inner sphere would become more appealing. Thus, while self-help writers in the 1950s maintained the importance of institutional achievements, those in the 1980s suggest that what really matters is the ability to fashion one’s own psyche. The portraits drawn by the social critics support this shift insofar as the dominant imagery in the 1950s suggested a population of conformists enjoying their new affluence while accepting the economic determinism that it entailed, whereas in the 1980s an increasingly self-conscious population is seen to be wary of all authority, disengaging itself from work roles, and vaguely grumbling about “the system.”

In the most dramatic version of the quest for individual freedom, the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an attempt was made to overthrow all existing structures in the name of the individual self. This movement of a minority of educated young people was premised on the notion that changes in the behavior and values of individuals could alter a society’s structure (see Reich, 1970). Despite the relatively rapid demise of the counterculture, many of its values have been absorbed into the
American mainstream (see Yankelovich, 1974, 1981). And perhaps ironically, cultural explanations have since been given more credence in both popular and social scientific thinking.

Family and work role changes during this period may also have been conducive to the shift toward a constructionist perspective and the tendency to see constraints as interpersonal. In the work sphere, some analysts have seen a “shift from management through command to management through negotiation” (de Swaan, 1981:374). Command makes roles and structures salient; negotiation puts the emphasis on other people and the vagaries of “corporate culture” instead. Though hierarchical structures continue to exist, the world of “impression management” becomes more visible. (Impression management, it has been pointed out, is a strategy used by individualistic people who are dependent on large-scale organizations “to maintain a sense of their own reality and potency under these conditions” [Gouldner, 1970:382].)

Subjective interpretations and constructions have also become more important in family life as this hinges less on institutional norms than on the vicissitudes of interpersonal experience. As a result, “the ‘objective’ aspects of many people’s lives are becoming less important to them than their own subjective interpretations . . . what one feels in one’s guts, the ‘vibes’ that one picks up—these are taken as the true measures of ‘reality.’ This is, of course, a complete reversal of traditional attitudes where ‘reality’ existed relatively independently of anyone’s wishes or desires” (Restak, 1982:353).

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