The Self We Live By

Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World

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CHAPTER TEN

The Moral Climate of the Self We Live By

The story of the social self has come a long way in a short hundred years: Building on countless narratives and reflecting myriad institutional developments, the self is now distinctively appropriated and deployed virtually everywhere. Far from being a grand narrative settled at or near the center of personal experience, the self now materializes in myriad nooks and crannies of everyday life, reflecting one sense of who we are in one site, turning a second option for personal definition in another. If the story is now complex and socially dispersed, the self still isn’t lost in a “wilderness of mirrors.” Rather, the many looking glasses we peer into themselves are built into the experiential projects of encasing going concerns with narrative auspices of their own, providing discernible circumstances for assembling identity.

In this environment, does the self lose its direction along with its grand narrative? Can we continue to consider it in terms of choice, of right and wrong, of responsibility and decision-making? A beacon of experience observes, reconnoiter weighs alternatives, and prudently directs itself along the way. It’s a moral entity because, in part, it propels itself on its own and makes choices. In a postmodern world, the self’s story forges ahead, but also follows in its own wake. Both before and after we set out on the proverbial path of life, the self is informed by divergent discourses. As Goffman (1959, p. 13) again informs us, “We must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character.” Many discourses center on familiar themes of personal responsibility surrounded by a heady philosophical sense of the good life we might realize. Simultaneously, these discourses deploy just the opposite, narratives of squandered opportunities, botched choices, and paths not taken, all adding up to tales of living a shorn of proper meaning. Of course, there’s an element of fate, too, as the unwritten forces of existence themselves are inserted into the picture and then taken sort our destinies according to their own devices. In that story, we can be false heroes and tragic figures despite ourselves. In this world, the grand no longer stands over and above the local, but instead is one more body of accounts alongside the many other narratives we use to construct ourselves.

What becomes of traditional moral matters when the grand narrative of the self devolves into multiple stories, pared down, circumscribed, and dispersed in myriad locations of everyday life? What is the moral climate that informs the restored ending? What could responsibility, choice, decision-making, and the like possibly mean in this new context?
The Expansion of the Particular

A few years ago, while doing fieldwork at Cedarview, the residential treatment center we mentioned earlier, Gubrium overheard the following conversation between a 9-year-old emotionally disturbed child named Tina and Margaret, her psychiatric social worker (see Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979). Their ostensibly chit-chat became morally telling only when viewed against a background of institutionally dispersed identities, which then highlighted the increasing importance of the role played by local understandings in defining who we are. Like other children in treatment, Tina attended daily individual counseling sessions. Tina and her social worker had been seeing each other for over a year and the child eagerly looked forward to visiting with Margaret. Tina not only “got outta class,” as the children put it, but she also thought Margaret was “lots of fun.” They played games as they talked about themselves and there was plenty of affection to go around. Tina often sat on Margaret’s lap during the sessions, their exchanges literarily wrapped in Margaret’s comforting arms.

In this particular session, with Tina seated on Margaret’s lap, facing away from her, their conversation moved along rather unremarkably. The two talked about Tina’s thoughts and feelings. “So how was your day so far, Tina?” Margaret asked. Tina, playing with her fingers, muttered something incoherent. Margaret interrupted, explaining that she couldn’t hear what Tina was saying and that she should take care to speak clearly and with lots of eye contact, as Margaret often reminded the children. (Could eye contact be a form of moral specification?) Margaret then asked Tina if she was being a good girl today. Snickering, Tina turned her head to look directly into Margaret’s eyes and answered that she was always a pretty good girl. Margaret hugged Tina and responded, “I really like good girls.” Still looking directly at Margaret, Tina ever so earnestly asked, “You think I’m a good girl, right Peggy?” using Margaret’s pet name. Margaret assured Tina that she indeed did think that Tina was a good girl, repeating that she liked all good girls. Tina continued, holding Margaret’s arms tightly around her, “And you really like me, too, don’t you Peggy?” Margaret reassured her that she did and Tina again asked, “You think I’m a really good girl, too, don’t you?” Margaret once more responded affectionately, “Yes, of course I do. I really like good girls.”

Like many conversations at Cedarview, this one centered very globally on topics of local interest: right and wrong, children’s “goodness,” their self-control, whether or not they were being “bad,” and the like. Tina and Margaret presumably were talking about Tina, but in many ways the conversation was also about “good girls” in general, who, in the moral scheme of things, were persons to like or “really like,” according to the strength of one’s convictions. Tina didn’t expect or “really like,” according to the strength of one’s convictions. Tina didn’t expect any differently.

Tina and Margaret also took it for granted that children who were “being bad,” were obviously not being good and thus were not very nice or in some other way generally discredited. Rarely did such characterizations produce disagreement. Everyone, it seemed, was for “the good” and against “the bad,” including the children, their parents, and the staff, echoing on a small scale an ethic as old as ancient philosophy. The children, their parents, and the staff regularly referred to the inappropriate, to “today’s bad kids,” to the behavior “we’re up against,” and so-called bad influences. In their own brief exchange, Tina and Margaret built an implicit consensus regarding the bad as well as the good. Tina asked about herself with great certainty of what good meant generally, as well as what it generally didn’t mean. In turn, Margaret “of course” agreed that she liked good girls implying that “of course” no one would like their opposite. Who, after all, would side with immorality?

The articulation of traditional standards wasn’t all there was to such exchanges, however, and this is how they became locally telling. Discussions always grew more specific, raising questions about the particulars involved. Usually, in time, it became apparent that the meaning of things like “the good” and “the bad” was deeply entangled with institutional discursive technology at many levels, from the local culture that specified what goodness and badness concretely were in relation to the current situation, to the conversational machinery through which such matters were communicated. It was in the local specification of cosmic issues that selves were actually fleshed out, always with an eye to moral accountability in relation to the circumstances at hand. The moral order was perennially clarified in the details of social interaction; moral ordering, in effect, was always in progress. As we showed in the last chapter, in the context of Joe Julian’s and Francine O’Brien’s baselining efforts, if the specific contours of teasing were elusive, the morality (or lack of it) of teasing was nonetheless institutionally mandated and locally sought in its biographical particulars, even if that wasn’t always figured as effectively as it could have been. In practice, the pursuit of morally accountable assessments was conducted in relation to the immediate cultural and material horizons of classroom observation.

The good child. The good parent. The good life. Aren’t these all worth being worth living for? Their stories are so grand as to be unimpeachable. But isn’t an cosmic moral order always so abstract as to be problematic when put into practice? Isn’t moral consensus empty until it is grounded in the particulars of daily living? This has always been the philosophical rub of grand narratives of moral order. They serve to organize our selves in their own terms, over and above the morally accountable assessments was conducted in relation to the immediate cultural and material horizons of classroom observation.

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narratives are regularly given voice in everyday life. They seem to have always been with us.

What was telling about Tina and Margaret’s conversation was that, unarticulated in their exchange, the grandly moral was being referenced in the context of a particular setting, one whose rules of moral specification would not necessarily be the same as they would be in another site. The morally familiar, and timeless, would eventually be cast in locally accountable terms, as we now realize that the comment about eye contact hinted it would. It is the abundance and diversity of such practical, local environments of accountability that are new, having grown at a dizzying pace, transforming the moral contours of the familiar in the process. We are now more entangled in the relation between the grand and the particular than ever before and it is this social fact that makes Tina and Margaret’s otherwise undistinguished exchange morally remarkable.

As we were writing this book, yet another narrative for the self resounded across the identity landscape. Like Tina and Margaret’s exchange, this self-implicating story was unremarkable in the abstract, but it eventually became more complex and interesting when viewed as a discourse-in-practice. In a quest for spiritual renewal, thousands of Christian men gathered one Saturday on the National Mall in Washington D.C. to pray and sing about masculine responsibility. Some estimate that close to a million men, calling themselves “Promise Keepers,” were seeking redemption and renewal in front of the nation’s Capitol. Their goal was to “reverse the moral and social deterioration caused by men abandoning their family responsibility” (New York Times, Oct 5, 1997, p. A14). This is a social movement that has bought into the masculine identity business in a big way.

Just as Tina and Margaret’s small-scale discussion of the good girl was very general, the Promise Keepers movement describes the contemporary man’s self in cosmic terms. This self needs renewal. It’s made the wrong choices, become irresponsible. It no longer functions properly. The director of that Saturday’s mass gathering, Dale Schlafer, suggested that men, as moral agents, have no one to blame but themselves. They’re responsible for not being the proper men they should have been.

We gather not to point fingers at society. We’re not here to say that the government has failed. We’re here to say that the problem is with us, with us men who are in the church. We are coming to confess our sins. (New York Times, p. A14)

Broadly speaking, the Promise Keepers are raising the issue of who men are and who they need to be, as men. Women’s identities aren’t at stake, not even children’s, although some vigorously claim that these are implicated in the wider scheme of things. The issue centers on what it means to “be a man,” to actually take familial responsibility, and to thereby redeem oneself from the sin of failed promises and negligence. Failed promises and negligence are very global issues across the identity landscape. Like Tina and Margaret’s exchange morally remarkable.

The New York Times report on the Promise Keepers rally was itself telling, appearing as it did on a page juxtaposed with a companion story featuring various observers’ attempts to “divine the politics” (or set of particulars) of the occasion. The juxtaposition begins to teach us about the very practical dimensions of sin and redemption. The observers’ opinions are not privileged truths, of course, no more truthful than Promise Keepers’ views in the grand scheme of things. But the opinions point to the going concerns that regularly tug at the moral heartstrings of identity in today’s world. As if to say that being good is no longer what it used to be, the various commentators insist on looking under and around the cosmerically moral to see what “really” is behind the rally. For some, it was symbolic that the rally was held in Washington D.C., the political, but not necessarily the moral, capital of the nation. Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization for Women, explains:

I think it’s disingenuous of the Promise Keepers’ leadership to say the group is non-political. There is a reason that Promise Keepers is having their rally in Washington with the Capitol as the backdrop. If they were looking for visibility, why didn’t they hold it in New York City, the media capital of the world? When members of Congress look out onto the Mall, they see the same thing I see—hundreds of thousands of constituents and voters. (New York Times, Oct 5, 1997, p. A14)

Whether it’s as nondescript as an ordinary discussion of the good girl or as visible as a national rally, moral discourse repeatedly centers on who and what we are as moral agents, increasingly implicating the narrative horizons of specific going concerns. Local rights and wrongs, local goods and bads, and locally credited and discredited identities diversely constitute the contemporary moral climate of the self. The morally abstract is thoroughly embedded in the mundane details of daily life. From selves who love too much, are not task oriented enough, or need spiritual renewal, to selves who have grown too fat, too thin, too irresponsible, or too indulgent, we find answers to who we are in the extraordinary minutiae of our everyday going concerns—in their available hand mirrors and teddy bears, in tissue boxes, eye contact, and voice modulation, in the machinery of institutional narratives, in the mere openness or reserve we show to others. The grand narrative of the self is now replete with the small tales of myriad dis-
tinct storytelling occasions, which leap out of diverse and variegated discourses and texts. From the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association—which rationalizes virtually every conceivable action into too much of this trait or too little of that—to the multiplicity of support groups that stand ready to “talk out” every imaginable trouble, we’ve become a self-articulating society, collectively authorizing particular selves.

Indeed, these selves that are authorized are no longer even embedded within traditional experiential borders, as Arlie Hochschild maintains in her book *The Time Bind* (1997). In the family-friendly company in which she did her fieldwork, called Amerco, a Total Quality (TQ) management system has displaced a top-down calculus of scientific management, purportedly “empowering” workers to make decisions on their own. But with its resulting cognitive and emotional intrusions into workers’ personal lives, TQ inadvertently turns the work place into another home, encouraging a different kind of work place surveillance: an institutional gaze that places a premium on the expression of feelings, the sharing of emotional labor, and the cooperative spirit of family-like corporate responsibility.

Originally formulated by W. Edwards Deming (see Walton 1986), TQ principles have turned many corporate work places into experiential grounds that compete with the home for storying the self. The “time bind” that results from the cognitive and emotional engagements of such work places blurs the work-family balance. A “third shift,” according to Hochschild, has emerged for these workers that entails keeping the increasingly time-pressured and culturally reversed from paternalistic to maternal accounts, not only nurturing but also healing sites of corporate domesticity. The company’s work narrative has effectively privatized family (haven) that are increasingly besieged by the (heartless) public sphere.

As Hochschild shows, what Amerco has put in place wends its way through a variety of constitutive adjustments, as different individual employees and working couples convey their lives in relation to what the company expects them to be. We don’t mean to suggest that these developments and discoveries in the identity landscape are all bad, by any means, even though they do complicate and further localize the moral order. Rather, conceiving of identity in terms of the local and the particular provides us analytic purchase on the multiplicity of selves and the question of individualized agency, not to mention offering a moral position or diversity. In an important article on the storying of experience, anthropologist Lilli Abu-Lughod (1991, 1993) writes that we must give special attention to small stories in studying culture, because culture doesn’t designate our identities automatically, from the top down. In practice, culture works through the little, local stories we tell about who and what we are. Abu-Lughod (1993) contends that the analysis of stories of the self helps to work against a totalized cultural mold, presenting members of society as active agents of culture. Her material underscores the particular in the representation of culture, along with the related moral diversity of engaging the cosmic in the ordinary. She goes on to urge us to “write against culture” not as a way of abandoning culture, but as a means of making visible how culture lives in and through the ways we communicate identity as culture’s agents. She argues, as we do, that, in this way, subjectivity is not homogenized into the moral generalizations of “the” culture in question, but is permitted to come through in its particular and engaging color, so to speak, in the ways its identities are used in everyday life.

In this book, we have adopted a version of Abu-Lughod’s concern for the particular to call attention to a sociology of the mundane as it applies to selves in our society. To this, we’ve added a strong institutional dimension, reflecting the growing number of going concerns that populate the contemporary identity landscape. This landscape specifies the moral climate we live in.

Revisiting Multiphrenia

Does this necessarily produce the multiphrenia that Kenneth Gergen describes it. *The Saturated Self?* Recall that Gergen’s understandably busy professional life lec
to a feeling of decenteredness, the sense of being pulled in so many different and equally compelling directions at once that his “moral career,” to borrow Erving Goffman’s (1961) phrase, became directionless. In multiphrenia, an internal, grandly decisive beacon devolves into a thousand possible I’s and me’s, whose local articulations scatter us every which way. Buffeted about the self-construction terrain by diverse narratives, the self’s compass spins wildly out of control, ostensibly losing its ability to pick and choose its own moral course.

Gergen experiences multiphrenia in even the most commonplace settings. The moral spectrum of contemporary life he portrays is so diverse that the competition of its elements for his attention leaves him with little choice but to virtually fold up and wither away. Gergen (1991) presents this “vaguely familiar” anec-
dote to make his point:

It is a sunny Saturday morning and he finishes breakfast in high spirits. It is a rare day in which he is free to do as he pleases. With relish he contemplates his options. The back door needs fixing, which calls for a trip to the hardware store. This would allow a much-needed haircut; and while in town he could get a birth-
day card for his brother, leave off his shoes for repair, and pick up shirts at the cleaners. But, he ponders, he really should get some exercise; is there time for jog-
gging in the afternoon? That reminds him of a championship game he wanted to see at the same time. To be taken more seriously was his ex-wife’s repeated re-
quest for a luncheon talk. And shouldn’t he also settle his vacation plans before all the best locations are taken? Slowly his optimism gives way to a sense of de-
f. The free day has become a chaos of competing opportunities and necessi-
ties. (P. 73)

According to Gergen, this is social saturation, what he also calls “the popu-
lating of the self.” As we noted earlier, the result is not a disease; it’s the syn-
drome or dis-ease of multiphrenia. The end product is a new sensibility, a dis-
heartening self-consciousness about the self itself. One would surmise that in unsaturated circumstances, the moral horizons of one’s world would be clear, allowing one to make prudent decisions about manageable alternatives. In such a world, one’s attention would be less on the self than on the choices at hand. But when the options begin to overpopulate, indeed, saturate the self, the self, rather than the options, comes into focus as the heart of the matter. This spirals into the arena of multiphrenia when “technologies of self-expression” expand exponentially, in effect overwhelming the moral agent with too many choices and confronting it with endless possibilities for identity. The self, according to Ger-
gen, experiences a “vertigo of the valued,” an “expansion of inadequacy,” and a sense that “rationality is in recession.”

But, hold on! What’s wrong with this picture? Are the possible options of a sunny Saturday morning all that unusual or demanding? Haven’t people been confronted by such daily options ever since “weekends” sprang onto the moral horizon? Does the anecdote present anything new, anything especially “post-
modern,” as Gergen suggests it does? In our view, the picture is skewed because it gives little or no credit to the lived circumstantiality and variable topicality of the self, let alone to the self-constructing agent. We have no way of knowing whether that sunny Saturday morning’s self is the self it will be on Sunday or perhaps more decisively, on Monday morning when the self promptly gets back to business, so to speak. While the self one addresses from the breakfast tabl on a Saturday may be overpopulated by the day’s possible chores, it may very well seem underpopulated on Monday morning at the office when an expects invitation to lecture in Rome fails to come through. The point is that the so-

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In this regard, compare the moral horizons of Fairview Hospital’s therapistic regimen with the moral order informing therapeutic intervention at Westside House, two agencies offering individual and family counseling for personal troubles and addictions (Gubrium 1992). “Dis-eases” resembling multiphrenia were frequently topicalized at Fairview Hospital, where they were entertained and considered in relation to the emotional stresses of life in today’s world. While multiphrenia wasn’t named as such, it wasn’t unusual to hear patients speak of, an therapists respond to, a syndrome with the characteristics Gergen describes. Th syndrome came in the vernacular of emotional helplessness and indecisiveness in response to the “pressure cooker” of contemporary living that made oppressive demands on people. Pressure cookers, as we all know, sometimes “blow the tops” and this was said to happen to people when they simply couldn’t “keep up” or “meet expectations.” The solution in this setting was for people to learn how to manage their feelings in response to the rapid pace of life. The operat
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rule was to learn to be satisfied and happy with what one can accomplish under the circumstances by containing the emotional damage.

In contrast, consider Westside House’s therapeutic agenda, which advocated authoritative strategies for families with similar problems. At Westside, patients were told not to emotionally despair or adjust their feelings to the problems and pressures of contemporary life. To the extent emotional dis-ease came up, it was to be overcome by taking the bull by the horns, so to speak, and asserting personal power over it. One didn’t resign oneself to an overwhelming, complex, and irrational world but, instead, one coped by firmly establishing one’s place in it. No postmodern-like quandary here. No endless indecisiveness. If contemporary life populated the self, saturating it with endless expectations, it was because it was perhaps faster paced than ever, but otherwise, it was much as it has always been—a system of rights and obligations that needed to be confronted and dealt with on its own terms, not inundated with affective blather. Westside House’s moral horizons were distinctly modern and rational, not romantic. A moral discourse of power and decisiveness circumspectly articulated its selves in anything but postmodern terms.

The comparison of these settings suggests that the dis-ease of a saturated self can lead to quite distinct interpretations and moral sensibilities, depending on the particular discourse within which its characteristics are brought to light. Indeed, in the unlikely event that someone would organize a Twelve Step group for “philosophical addiction to postmodernism,” one might be discursively called to hit multiphrenic “bottom,” surrender to a higher signifying power, and move ahead one hyperreal step at a time. Like postmodernism, the personal dis-eases of post-modernity themselves come in diverse discursive formulations, articulated in the contexts of their own going concerns and competing ideological vintages (see Best and Kellner 1991, Denzin 1991, Kumar 1995, Miller 1997a). Varied moral orders can be brought to bear on the diverse angsts of contemporary life—personal decisiveness, the power of love, even the redemption of Christian Promise Keepers. Each provides its own narrative for telling troubles, formulating related selves, and asserting moral imperatives.

One thing is evident. In revisiting multiphrenia or other quasi-philosophical malaises of contemporary life, we cannot simply consider that “the” self is under siege, that “it” is plagued, experiences overpopulation, or is variably saturated. While such symptoms or syndromes may indeed be considered by some to be the experiential signs of the times, what those signs convey cannot be understood separate from the varied circumstances in which they are narratively addressed. It is only within particular discourses that the condition of the self is discerned and its consequences evoked. We don’t present ourselves or risk being-a system of rights and obligations that needed to be confronted and dealt with on its own terms, not inundated with affective blather. Westside House’s moral horizons were distinctly modern and rational, not romantic. A moral discourse of power and decisiveness circumspectly articulated its selves in anything but postmodern terms.

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Panopticism Revisited

The relation between moral and institutional orders and identity invites us to revisit the panopticon that Michel Foucault (1977) discussed in conjunction with the construction of subjectivity. The panopticon, we recall, was an actual building designed by Jeremy Bentham to keep prisoners under surveillance efficiently. With the guard tower always in view, but not the tower’s occupants, prisoners had little choice but to keep themselves under control because they had no way of knowing when, or whether, they were being watched. Foucault argued that this sort of surveillance represents a regimen of power and knowledge increasingly pervading contemporary life. Panopticism is part of the varied discourses we share, which, in use, articulate and regulate our subjectivity. Designating the sum of an experience of our inner worlds and social relationships, these discourses also constitute the moral horizons of the self.

Foucault is careful to describe the institutional groundings of discourses. From the prison to the hospital and clinic, panopticism operates not only in word but in deed. Grounding is practical, suffused in the myriad acts, interactions, and material markers of the language games we apply in communicating to ourselves and to each other who and what we are, not to mention what we do and how we feel. As we noted earlier, because Foucault’s project was to document historic constructions as they coalesced in different institutional domains, he did not provide us with much evidence of discursive technology. This, of course, has been part of our own project in this book, to forge an analytics of both discourse in-practice and discursive practice and thus introducing Foucault and et al. nomethodology to one another.

What is the moral flavor of panopticism as it applies to the self in discursive practice? Is the self morally implicated or marginalized? What degree of choice does panopticism leave for self construction? The grand view of panopticism, which discourse is seen as a totalized deployment of subjectivity, leaves actors with little or no separate moral will. In a totalized panopticism, in which we are only unwittingly imagine others as discerning us in a particular way but discursively ourselves likewise, what we do, say, or feel isn’t a matter of choice. In a grand scheme of things, such as the broad sweep of new subjectivities that came with the Enlightenment to rationalize and individualize experience, who and what we are is an impersonal matter. The self is massively indebted to a prevailing discourse and has no recourse to alternative vocabularies of subjectivity. In this framework, discourse fully speaks the moral subject, in which case the self morally immersed in its discourse.

Our view is less grand and confining; we see panopticism operating in relation to the particular. Recall, for example, that Foucault described how prisoners effectively became particular kinds of subjects by virtue of their articulation of disciplinary regimes, which in turn produced its own moral order and respectivity. While Foucault doesn’t describe this in lived detail, we might envision prisoners’ identities emerging from the way their conduct was understood in relation to the local scheme of things. If we had ethnographic access to the scene to which Foucault alerts us, we might see the prisoners, their guards, and other
participants in prison life gazing upon each other in the very terms that the daily regimen specifies. These "gazes" not only provide a way of orienting to a schedule but also impose self definition and self discipline. The gazes virtually confer individual identities, according to the language games the regimen provides (Foucault, in effect, giving shape to Wittgenstein). The reflexive power of panopticism has the prisoners themselves discursively joining the ranks of the guards as they figure themselves in terms of the local rhythms and discourse of surveillance, speaking of each other in its vocabulary and deploying their identities in the same terms that a figurative tower guard might.

The institutionalization of the regimen involves everyone in the production of subjectivity. The gaze is universal. Even the savvy prisoner who refuses to adhere to the regimen on principle—not just because he or she is a backslider—is nonetheless looked upon in disciplinary terms. But matters of principle are not merely cosmic issues. They are raised at a specific time and place; in this case it is the confines of a prison or some related setting and the discourse in place is one of regimented confinement, not some other gaze. Both what is known and what is construed reflexively realize each other in terms of the prevailing discourse.

The situation is complicated because a sited panopticism, such as this prison's regimental system, deploys local, not universal, knowledge and power. The moral climate surrounding subjects such as who is a model prisoner, a trustee, or other prison identities is articulated in prison talk and interaction. Of course, what one prison puts into place is likely to be part of what all prisons deploy, a broad discourse of rationalized regimentation constituting related subjectivities. In turn, this may itself be part of a grand narrative of institutional rationalization, which Max Weber (see Bendix 1960), well before Foucault, made the centerpiece of his view of modernity. In that case, we're right back to square one, to the grand scheme of things and totalized discourse.

But there are features of everyday talk and action that limit the experiential penetration of totalized discourses and their pervasive moral orders. Thus, we can ask, how does everyday life provide a kind of moral leverage against totalized discourse? Ethnographic analyses of everyday institutional life have shown repeatedly that participants express different levels of awareness about the moral fragility of gazes (e.g., Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979; Edgaranton 1987; Gianniombaro 1966; Haas and Shaffir 1987; Holstein 1993; Loseke 1992; Miller 1991, 1997a; Perrucci 1974; Pollner and Stein 1969; Sykes 1958). The everyday talk of institutional participants indicates that some are keenly aware that local discourses are not etched in stone but provide useful moral options for defining, judging, and cataloging conduct and identity (Wittgenstein, in effect, giving shape to Foucault). As Goffman has indicated in his poignant analyses of the moral order of institutional environments, one can manage to "go through the motions" without thoroughly succumbing to the operating gaze of a going concern. Discourse-in-practice is seldom perfect.

At both Fairview Hospital and Westside House, for example, there were patients who had been ordered by the courts to receive treatment, as well as others whose employers had required, in effect, that they undergo therapy or lose their jobs. According to some of these patients, they were in treatment because they "had to be." To the chagrin of staff members, this could sometimes be glibly elaborated in administratively annoying terms during therapy sessions. It wasn't uncommon for Westside's counseling staff to complain about the lack of convicti of some of these clients. At Fairview Hospital, the inpatient facility, "going through the motions" was sometimes discussed by patients in afternoon recreational periods and during free time in the evening before retiring for bed. These discussions, what "had to be" was often followed by discussions of "what you have to do," underscoring the dramaturgical character of the local moral order, and its discourse.

One evening at Fairview Hospital, during a discussion of "doing" what gotta do," a 28-year-old male patient animatedly explained why he decided undergo treatment for an allegedly "bad crack [cocaine] habit." In the followi reconstruction of his comments from ethnographic fieldnotes, notice how he di maturely distances himself from the locally applicable discourse of addictive juxtaposing it to his "own" sense of the "problem" as merely recreational. I eventually reproduces the institutional gaze itself and the related subjectivities the therapeutic regimen, in which everyone, including the therapists, are simp doing their job." Initially, the speaker responds to an older patient's complaint about the "shit" the older patient received for smoking "a couple joints" at two which, the complainer adds, "ain't nowhere as bad as those fuckin' pillheads w pop all day long and no one knows it because they ain't smellan' it." The young man responds:

That's cool. What they don't know, they don't know, right? You gotta pop off, pop. Better for your lungs.

Hey, we all get shit, man. I got real shit. You do some crack and ya get high. Who ain't gettin' high? They said I got a bad crack habit. Shit! That's a joke. Hey, man, I'm doin' my job! No one's kickin' about that, right? I'm doin' my fuckin' job. They like what I do. Yeah, they like it! Can ya beat that? Then they comes up with this counseling shit. [Snidely imitating his boss] "I gotta go to the shrink." Some fucker decides that my head ain't on straight. From a few hits!! So here I am. In the fucking nuthouse.

[Responding to a comment about "being set up"] Naw, I ain't been set up, man. Fucking boss just came over and right out in my face he says that it's either dry out or get axed. Simple as shit, man. Says I'm addicted. Can't afford to lose this job, either, you know what I mean?

But hey, dudes, you do what ya gotta do, right? [Several listeners nod] That disclosure shit [referring to his disclosure group], I just tell 'em what they wanna hear. Whatever ya wanna hear, boys and girls. Listen up, boys and girls, I got lots of head troubles. Real troubles. I'm down on my luck. Real bad luck story. Real bad. Been into drugs real bad. Bad ass, bad. Ruinin' my life. Fucking up my head. Got a bad attitude. I ain't got control over shit, not me, not my life, not the stuff, nothin'. I'm addicted. Face it, man. I know that song and dance. [Launches into plantation lingo] I'z a druggie. Yesa, I admit it. I'z alearnin'. Okay, massa. You the man, I'z alearnin'. Just like The Man say, you gotta do what ya gotta do. You do their thang, couple or four weeks in the nutcake, pickin' at yo' head. So what's new? Nice vacation, job's safe, no big time hard time [prison].
Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) assessment, locates the self at “crossroads” or “nodal points” of discourses-in-practice. This means that self construction takes place in relation to diverse moral vectors; its moral environment is layered with options, sometimes compatible, sometimes countervailing. While this complicates the self-construction process, to be sure, it also provides conditions that are ripe for interpretive slippage and artful, situationally accountable practical reason which, while complicated, can be morally empowering at the same time. Following Lyotard, we find that such conditions make it essentially impossible for social actors to be “powerless” in the face of discursive or moral imperatives, since such forces must always be played out in and through their local and particular applications—through discursive practice. They virtually require the assertion of individual agency—if only for the present—to deal with the competing demands of that moment and its social circumstances.

We can see alternatives at work as local narratives of identity are assembled from the moral hardware of their respective going concerns—in sites such as Metropolitan Court, Westside House, or Fairview Hospital that provide multiple possibilities for accounts of who and what we are. Two important real-life plots that often compete with each other for designating the moral horizons of troubling identities are respectively contained in narratives of crime and sickness. Arthi Kleinman’s book The Illness Narratives (1988), for example, presents the experience of illness and recovery in stories of suffering and healing, while Jack Katz book Seductions of Crime (1988), published the same year, describes criminal through stories of the “moral and sensual attractions of doing evil.” Their narrative horizons compete to specify the etiological and moral bases for human problems in countless everyday situations, including places such as the two fami therapy agencies we’ve discussed (see Conrad and Schneider 1980).

Patients’ and family members’ troubles would occasionally be discussed Westside House and Fairview in relation to such alternative narrative paths, som times in these very terms. Alternative moral careers were interjected into trea ment to exemplify the course that patients’ lives would have taken had they n come to the therapeutic attention of the institution. For instance, a counselor Fairview once ended an especially emotional disclosure session by saying, “I kno it’s real hard to disclose your feelings like we’ve done this afternoon but, ju think, you could have been spilling your guts behind bars and there all you hear is shut up and stop bellyaching.” Family members, too, cited the omin alternatives their children might have faced as they railed against the children f not taking their treatment regimen seriously, pointing to how much worse c they would have been if they had gone to juvenile detention, say. On the oth hand, it wasn’t unusual to hear a parent complain about all the “mind game” they play in therapy, adding that he or she might have been better off just “d ing time.”

However real such alternatives were in practice, there was no mistaking the competing rhetorical, and moral, value. Time and again, staff members, patient and significant others looked back and either portrayed or recalled what might have been, had a therapeutic alternative not been selected. Therapists attempt to convince patients that seeking treatment or being “forced to” go through the apy was “the best option,” the “only choice you had,” or “the right path to fi recovery,” among other ways of retrospectively justifying therapeutic identities. Patients and family members used similar rhetorical strategies to raise each other
morale. They looked ahead and portrayed the future in similar terms, as personal narratives that would likely have been told otherwise in stories of “hard time” or of becoming further “jail bait” had they not entered treatment. For better or worse, there also was the rhetorical value of being able to convince oneself or others of the excitement the future could still hold if one didn’t let all “this shit go to [one’s] head,” as a 19-year-old drug abuser advised his friends.

Alternative discourses for the self are present throughout contemporary society, as integral parts of, and surrounding, the moral horizons of select institutions. While one discourse may be regularly pitted against another, the possibilities for competition are seemingly endless. For example, in his studies of interpretive practice and involuntary mental commitment, Holstein (1993) showed how the moral discourse operating in the court environment oscillated between binary narratives of sickness and ordinary living, of care and management versus custody and control, depending on the practical interests of judges, lawyers, psychiatrists, candidate patients, and witnesses to the “craziness” in question. Similarly, Gubrium and Buckholdt’s (1982) research at Wiltshire Hospital, a physical rehabilitation facility, illustrated how educational narratives were used to describe patients’ progress in treatment. Therapists addressed patients in educational terms, describing them as “pupils” and “learners” who would go as far as their “motivation” would take them. They were told, time and again, that physical rehabilitation was not a matter of being cured, but of achieving one’s maximum potential. In sharp contrast, progress in rehabilitation—called “learning” when speaking to patients—was reported to third-party payers and to families in medical terms, communicating the details of “cure” and “recovery.” Success was a medical accomplishment in this discourse. Failure to make progress, on the other hand, was descriptively retrenched to the vocabulary of motivation and learning, the lack of progress being the result of poor motivation, for example, reasserting an educational discourse.

To revisit panopticism in these terms is not to question the usefulness of Foucault’s formulation for understanding the moral climate of the self. Rather, it is to put it in its everyday working places, as Foucault’s broad institutional analyses started to do. In today’s world, the morality of discourse-in-practice must necessarily be tied to an increasing expansion of the particular. This, of course, implies discursive practice, as individuals work locally to construct and deploy accountable subjectivities. Despite the recent resurgence of romanticist impulses that suggest there are more authentic selves beneath or beyond the many language games through which we now communicate who and what we are, identity remains what local interpretive practice makes us out to be (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, Chapter 4).

The self survives because we continue to refer to it, speak of it, and act toward the entity that we take to be at our moral core. At the same time, we do so in and through its complex and disciplined narrative technology. The selves we produce are the very same selves to which we turn in moral considerations of the selves we are. As we story ourselves, those stories provide the moral horizons for evaluating who and what we’ve become. There are plenty of options for self construction and self assessment. For some, this is frightening, as it conjures up moral recklessness and an associated proliferation of diversity that they can’t abide. This hints at the fear of responsibility for self production that comes with the opening of new moral territory. Others, of course, find this morally refreshing because it presents us with worlds and identities of our own making, the narrative particulars of which are as limitless as our imaginations.

The Moral Significance of the Local

The theoretical tension between grand narratives and particular renditions of self is an old one. Over the years, we have seen repeated forays into totalizing social theory, systems of social thought so abstractly and broadly conceived that they leave virtually nothing to the agency and nuanced conduct of everyday action (see Parsons 1951, for example). But, from the pragmatists’ rejection of a philosophically transcendent self, to Garfinkel’s repudiation of the cultural dope and to Foucault’s specification of discourses-in-practice, we also can trace a complete stream of thought that has insinuated the particular into social theory. The groundings of interpretive practice—from the I’s and me’s of ordinary social interaction to the machinery of conversation, and into the various going concerns we enter as we go about our lives—highlight the foundations of a less totalizing and determinate approach.

Its strength lies in its refusal to theorize away the lived morality of the self. Practice remains open to view; the moral climate of the self remains simultaneously and continually under construction. The self is not completely predefined: it’s not the byproduct of a totalized and totalizing cultural or social system; it isn’t what some grand narrative—some monolithic panopticon—might designate. Totalized, perfectly articulated conceptual systems leave little space for local modification. Yet, this is precisely what we see when we look at the practical production of the self, as we did when we observed Joe Julian and Francine O’Brien in Chapter 9 actually work at discerning the moral order applicable to Maurice Clay’s teasing behavior. What Julian and O’Brien assumed to be universally and automatically applicable was bound to its practical realization.

We have chosen to locate self construction at the doorstep of the particular, in the varied self stories that populate the identity landscape. None of these is simply there for the telling. We’ve conceptualized these stories as narratives-in-the-making. Selves, we have argued, are constituted and received in relation to the complex machinery of telling, local ways of knowing and hearing, and the scenic presence of their performances. We accent the moral significance of the local, which is as varied and diverse as the circumstances of contemporary life.

This isn’t a radical localism, however. The dividing practices that Foucault pointed to as increasingly constructive of contemporary subjectivity are not bereft of their discourses nor insensitive to their institutional horizons. The conversational machinery that Harvey Sacks introduced to us serves to articulate methodically the storying of the self, but it doesn’t work in a cultural vacuum. In inventing conversation analysis, Sacks repeatedly came around to both the
immediate and broader conditions of communication that bear on narrativity, as narrative practice invariably does.

For us, the moral significance of the local derives from "where people are," as Dorothy Smith reminds us. This is not meant to resurrect a positivistic naturalism, nor to romanticize a deeply hidden, genuine self. Instead, it points us in the direction of the working horizons of identity. As such, the moral significance of the local rests on the methods people themselves apply to construe who and what they are. It entails a concerted alertness to the many and diverse ways that self can be assembled and articulated in the midst of its always compelling operating locales.

The moral climate of the self we live by is located at the working crossroads of institutional discourses and everyday life, in the interplay of discursive practice and discourses-in-practice. It’s a space where the self has multiple signposts, directed in various ways by what is both locally shared and broadly consequential. If there is anything grandly narrative about this, it lies in that which “everyone knows” as it is uniquely and specifically brought to bear on issues of immediate concern. We see this in the “sick” selves detected by Joe Julian and Francine O’Brien at Cedarview as opposed to the “traumatized” selves that Alan Young’s Vietnam veterans reconstruct in group therapy. It may be the “spiritually lost” souls who seek to regain their manhood in Promise Keepers as opposed to those who search for redemption taking AA’s Twelve Steps. Curiously enough, we even see this in the “haven” that work, not home, now provides for selves bound in time to both worlds.

The linkages between who and what we are and the various big and little stories of what we could be are enormously complex. This isn’t a grand language game, which we might theorize as a mosaic of conceptual associations and disassociations. Nor is it reducible to the ethno-methods of folk fabrication. The age-old issues of responsibility, choice, and decision-making still apply, but they are anything but totalized or purely discursive. These are moral engagements we share with others—engagements that are informed by the circumstances in which we all find ourselves.

Our aim in this book has been to make these engagements visible, a goal realized through our own form of panopticism—a surveillance of surveillance, the discursive scrutiny of deployed subjectivities. Just as selves reflexively grow out of the diverse stories we can tell, our own restorying brings us to the junction of everyday accounts and the going concerns that mediate reflection on those accounts. If there is an inventiveness at this location and a related hope for the potential selves we might be, it is the natural creativity of any crossroads, where there is direction, yet the paths are unclear, where the signposts are a bit confusing and the crossing itself precarious and in need of continuous definition. As all panopticons do, the panopticon we have ourselves brought to bear on the self establishes its own moral climate. It opens individuals to view as subjects who are reflexively working out who and what they are as they articulate and ramify the myriad self narratives of contemporary life. It points out that, however much this figure in storying the self we live by, there are always new stories to spin, tell, and become. The going concerns of modernity assure us of it.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. As we will argue, these stories are grounded in a multiplicity of sites and settings, implicating the increasingly varied circumstances of institutional life and electronic communication. Our argument also has implications for the daily materialization of race class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and a gamut of other categories of membership and identity (see Andersen and Collins 1998, Anzalda 1997, Buchbinder 1994, Butler 1990, Chow 1993, Connell 1995, Marcus 1992, Seidman 1997).

2. Richard de Mille (1980) has raised questions about the veracity of Schneebaum’s account, especially regarding the reports of cannibalism and homosexuality. This skepticism, however, doesn’t extend to the descriptions of Akarama subjectivity and the penchant for absorbing individuals into the collectivity.

Chapter 2

1. Two additional and important early pragmatists were John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, who variously influenced, and were influenced by, the others both personally and intellectually. We focus on James, Cooley, and Mead because these thinkers’ ideas about the social self shaped subsequent social psychological formulations, even while this influence has been claimed by some commentators to have been assimilated into social psychology, especially into symbolic interaction, in mythic proportions (see note 6 below).

2. In our view, one can best understand the significance of the early pragmatists’ contribution by considering their efforts in relation to what came before them, not what came afterward. A half century later, symbolic interactionists, for example, regularly make connections with early pragmatist thought and, certainly, there were many parallel concerns. But these were already in the pragmatist cards, so to speak; these were important, albeit not revolutionary, extensions, especially of Mead’s contributions. The contrast with transcendent philosophy, however, was a sea change in perspective launching the self as the empirical project it came to be for the behavioral and social sciences, as well as for its subjects.

3. As commentators Larry Reynolds (1990), David Miller (1973), and Gary Cook (1993) note, Hegelian idealism, with its absolutely transcendent self, was an important part of the Cartesian philosophical background for James’s, Cooley’s, and Mead’s pragmatist reaction. What Descartes launched centuries earlier continued to lurk in the pragmatists’ philosophical background as they turned away from a Hegelian and transcendent self to an empirical one.

4. Self is part of the “variable” human nature that Cooley is attempting to link with sociocultural order, as the title of his book indicates. In contrast to “metaphysicians and moralists’” universalized approach to human nature, Cooley’s sense of human nature, like that of the other pragmatists, works against a singular view. For him, it’s the nature of man to have as many natures as the social order reflects who or what he is.