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THE EVOLUTION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF IN THE 20th AND 21st CENTURIES

Abstract. The article explores the evolution of the psychological concept of the self from classical psychoanalytic theory of the early 20th century to contemporary perspectives shaped by digital and social influences in the 21st century. It demonstrates how the self has transformed from an intrapsychic structure to a multidimensional, relational and context-dependent construct, linking foundational theories of Freud, Jung, Rogers and Erikson with modern understandings of digital selfhood.

Particular attention is paid to the gradual shift from internally focused models of selfhood toward approaches that emphasise relational, social and contextual dimensions of identity, illustrating how psychological well-being is closely linked to the interaction between inner experience and external social environments.

The article shows that in the 21st century the psychological self has become increasingly influenced by technological mediation. Contemporary research suggests that identity formation now extends into digital spaces, where self-presentation, social comparison and online feedback significantly affect self-esteem and psychological well-being. Social media platforms provide new arenas for the construction and negotiation of identity, intensifying the relational and performative aspects of the self. As a result, the self is no longer confined to internal psychological processes but is continuously shaped by interpersonal, cultural and technological factors.

The article concludes that although the concept of the self remains central to psychological theory, its meaning has become increasingly fluid and multidimensional. The modern self can be understood as relational, developmental and digitally extended. Integrating classical theoretical insights with contemporary empirical evidence demonstrates that selfhood cannot be adequately understood outside its broader social and technological contexts. Further research is needed to examine how ongoing processes of digitalisation, globalisation and cultural diversity continue to transform identity formation and mental health in modern societies.

Key words: psychological self; selfhood; identity; empathy; psychological well-being.

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ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОГО «Я» У ХХ–ХХІ СТОЛІТТЯХ

Анотація. У статті досліджується еволюція психологічного поняття «Я» – від класичних психоаналітичних теорій початку ХХ століття до сучасних підходів, сформованих під впливом цифрових і соціальних чинників ХХІ століття. Показано, як «Я» трансформувалося з внутрішньої психічної структури у багатовимірний, реляційний та контекстно-залежний конструкт, що поєднує фундаментальні теорії З. Фрейда, К. Юнга, К. Роджерса та Е. Еріксона з сучасними уявленнями про цифрову самість.

Особливу увагу приділено поступовому переходу від внутрішньо орієнтованих моделей самості до підходів, які акцентують реляційні, соціальні та контекстуальні виміри ідентичності, демонструючи, що психологічне благополуччя тісно пов'язане з взаємодією внутрішнього досвіду та зовнішнього соціального середовища.

У статті показано, що у ХХІ столітті психологічне «Я» дедалі більше зазнає впливу технологічної медіації. Сучасні дослідження свідчать, що формування ідентичності нині поширюється на цифро-

вий простір, де самопрезентація, соціальне порівняння та онлайн-зворотний зв'язок істотно впливають на самооцінку й психологічне благополуччя. Соціальні медіаплатформи створюють нові простори для конструювання та переосмислення ідентичності, посилюючи реляційні й перформативні аспекти самості. У результаті «Я» більше не обмежується внутрішніми психологічними процесами, а постійно формується під впливом міжособистісних, культурних і технологічних чинників.

У висновках зазначається, що, хоча поняття «Я» залишається центральним у психологічній теорії, його зміст стає дедалі більш гнучким і багатовимірним. Сучасне «Я» можна розуміти як реляційне, розвинуте та цифрово розширене. Інтеграція класичних теоретичних положень із сучасними емпіричними даними демонструє, що самість не може бути адекватно осмислена поза ширшим соціальним і технологічним контекстом. Подальші дослідження мають бути спрямовані на аналіз того, як процеси цифровізації, глобалізації та культурного різноманіття продовжують трансформувати формування ідентичності та психічне здоров'я в сучасних суспільствах.

Ключові слова: психологічне «Я»; самість; ідентичність; емпатія; психологічне благополуччя.

Problem statement. The concept of the “self” has long fascinated psychologists, philosophers, and social theorists alike. In psychological discourse, the self is not simply an isolated entity but a dynamic construct encompassing self-concept, self-esteem, and self-identity. Throughout the 20th century, psychological theories progressively explored the self – from Freud’s psychoanalytic model of the ego navigating unconscious desires, to Carl Rogers’ humanistic vision of self-actualization, and Erikson’s psychosocial stages of identity formation. While these foundational studies have provided crucial frameworks, they have not fully addressed how contemporary phenomena – such as digital culture, social media, and globalization – reshape the psychological understanding of identity.

Thus, **the aim of this article** is to examine the evolution of psychological perspectives on the self, tracing key theories of the 20th century and exploring how contemporary research and digital culture have transformed our understanding of identity and selfhood. By analyzing both classical and modern approaches, it argues that the self is increasingly seen not only as a psychological construct shaped by internal processes but also as a social and digital phenomenon, reflecting the complex interplay between individual consciousness and external influences.

Presentation of the main material. In the early 20th century, psychology’s exploration of the self concentrated on internal drives, developmental tasks, and the human capacity for self-realisation. One of the most influential perspectives was offered by Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic model situated the self as a site of conflict among the id, ego, and super-ego. He famously stated, “*Where id was, there ego shall be*” [3, p.80], suggesting that the unconscious, instinct-driven id must gradually yield to a conscious ego that mediates between instinctual desires and external reality. Freud further observed that “*The ego represents what we call reason and sanity, in contrast to the id which contains the passions*” [3, p.25], thereby emphasising that the self is not given as a uni-

fied, stable entity, but emerges through intrapsychic negotiation.

In parallel, Carl G. Jung expanded psychoanalytic theory by introducing the concepts of individuation, persona, shadow, and the collective unconscious. Jung envisioned the self as a process of becoming – an integration of conscious and unconscious elements toward a more unified identity [4]. This broadened the self-construct to include archetypal dimensions and deeper layers beyond immediate consciousness.

Meanwhile, the humanistic orientation emerged as a corrective to deterministic and drive-based models of the self. Carl Rogers declared that “*The organism has one basic tendency and striving – to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism*” [8, p. 487]. Rogers emphasised that the self-concept (how a person perceives themselves) and the ideal self (who they wish to become) are crucial for psychological health: “*If there is a large gap between [actual self and ideal self] ... negative feelings of self-worth will arise that will make it impossible for self-actualisation to take place*” [8, p. 490]. Rogers thus shifted the focus toward subjective experience, growth, and the person’s capacity for authentic self-direction.

Beyond Rogers, the development of self-psychology further expanded psychoanalytic ideas. For example, Heinz Kohut emphasised relational needs and the emergence of self-states in interaction with empathic others, arguing that the self’s sense of worth and coherence depends deeply on early supportive relationships [6]. These theoretical contributions collectively form what we might term the foundational self-theories: they demonstrate that the self is not a fixed, singular entity, but rather a dynamic, evolving construct influenced by unconscious processes, conscious striving, developmental demands, and relational contexts.

Moreover, contemporary research suggests that these foundational ideas remain highly relevant. For example, Andersen and Chen [1] introduced the concept of the relational self, arguing that our self-representations are linked with representations of sig-

nificant others and shift depending on interpersonal context: “*Mental representations of significant others are activated ... and this evokes the relational self*” [1, p. 619]. More recently, Mateusz Woźniak and colleagues explored self-concept plasticity, proposing that the self can change on very short timescales and is grounded in neural processes: “*The way we think and feel about ourselves is not fixed over time*” [12]. These insights indicate that the self remains a dynamic, context-sensitive phenomenon – not only in humanistic and psychoanalytic terms, but also in neurocognitive, relational, and cultural frameworks.

Thus, these early and foundational theoretical frameworks provide the intellectual groundwork for later expansions: cognitive-social models, lifespan development perspectives, and the digitally mediated self. By establishing the self as a process of becoming rather than a static essence, they set the stage for the more externally-oriented and technologically enriched conceptions of selfhood explored in subsequent sections.

During the mid-20th century, psychological theories of the self diversified significantly, moving beyond purely intrapsychic models to incorporate cognitive, social, and developmental dimensions. Cognitive psychology introduced the idea of the self as a system of mental representations or self-schemas, through which individuals organize information about themselves and guide behaviour. Hazel Rose Markus and Paula Nurius elaborated this idea with the concept of possible selves, explaining that: “*Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation*” [7, p. 954]. This highlights how self-concept extends beyond the present state to encompass aspirations, fears, and motivation, bridging cognition, emotion, and behaviour.

At the same time, social psychology emphasized the role of interaction, feedback, and group membership in shaping identity. For example, Social Identity Theory [10] proposed that individuals derive part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong, engaging in categorization, comparison, and identification. William B. Swann Jr.’s self-verification theory complements this perspective by demonstrating that individuals strive to maintain coherence between their self-concept and social feedback. Swann notes that: “*People will even stop working on tasks to which they have been assigned if they sense that their performance is eliciting non-verifying feedback*” [9, p. 33]. This underscores that the self is not only cognitively organized but also relational, seeking validation and coherence in the social environment.

According to Erikson, emphasized that identity formation is central to psychosocial development, observing that ego identity is continuously reshaped through experiences and social interactions [2, p.23]. This illustrates that selfhood evolves across the lifespan, shaped by social, cognitive, and developmental influences. Personality psychology added further depth with trait-based models such as the Big Five, which describe relatively stable dimensions of selfhood while acknowledging environmental and social impact.

Thus, mid-20th-century perspectives collectively demonstrate that the self evolves through a dynamic interplay of cognitive frameworks, social environments, and developmental stages. These theories serve as a bridge between early intrapsychic models (Freud, Rogers, Jung) and the externally oriented, digitally mediated conceptions of the self emerging in the 21st century.

To illustrate these mid-century perspectives, consider studies showing how adolescents and adults shape self-concept through social interaction, cognitive reflection, and developmental transitions. For example, adolescents may adopt certain peer behaviours or internalize societal expectations, while adults negotiate multiple social roles and maintain self-verification in relationships [7; 9]. This case highlights that selfhood is both internally organized and externally validated, bridging classical theories with modern understandings of identity as multi-dimensional and socially constructed.

In the 21st century, the psychological self is increasingly socially and digitally mediated. The rise of social media has created new platforms for identity expression, self-presentation, and social evaluation. Adolescents and young adults often curate their online personas on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, aligning their “ideal self” with peer feedback and algorithmic validation. Khan and Ahmed found that “*social media platforms act as arenas where adolescents negotiate and perform their identities*” [5, p. 138], demonstrating that Rogers’ principle of congruence between real and ideal self now applies to digital contexts.

To illustrate this phenomenon, consider the Digital Selfhood case study. Adolescents and young adults co-construct their identities online, with social and technological factors shaping self-concept and self-esteem. This example shows that contemporary selfhood extends beyond internal cognition to social and digital environments, supporting the argument that identity is co-constructed in modern contexts.

Another important aspect of the modern self is developmental variation, illustrated by the Age-Related Selfhood case study. Research indicates that

self-perception and identity formation vary across age groups: adolescents actively construct their identities, while adults integrate multiple life roles and social expectations. Wang notes that “*digital interactions, including social media engagement, can significantly influence self-esteem and psychological well-being in both adolescents and adults*” [11, p. 25]. This example highlights how social, cognitive, and digital influences intersect across the lifespan, demonstrating that the self is dynamic and shaped by multiple interacting factors.

Finally, the applied relevance of contemporary self theories is evident in clinical practice. The Applied

Self in Therapy case study emphasizes how psychologists help clients manage discrepancies between online and offline identities, using humanistic principles to foster congruence and self-acceptance. This example illustrates the practical importance of understanding the modern self in therapy and other applied settings, showing that classical theory remains relevant when adapted to contemporary challenges.

The following table summarizes key 21st-century case studies linking theory, phenomena, and relevance to the essay’s argument (see Table 1).

As it can be seen, the table above illustrates how contemporary selfhood is shaped by social, cognitive,

Table 1

Integration of 21st-Century Case Studies

Case Study	Main Focus	Theory Applied	Implications for Understanding the Self
Digital Selfhood	Adolescents and young adults curating online personas (Instagram, TikTok)	Rogers’ humanistic congruence between real and ideal self	Demonstrates that selfhood is socially and digitally mediated; supports the argument that the self extends beyond internal processes
Age-Related Selfhood	How self-perception and identity evolve across adolescence and adulthood	Erikson’s psychosocial development stages	Highlights that the self is developmental, dynamic, and influenced by social and technological factors across the lifespan
Applied Self in Therapy	Clinical interventions addressing discrepancies between online and offline identities	Rogers’ humanistic principles & contemporary therapy approaches	Shows real-world applications; integrates classical theory with 21st-century challenges to support practical relevance of modern self theories

developmental, and digital factors, reinforcing the essay’s main argument that the self is not purely internal but co-constructed in multiple contexts.

Conclusion. The study of the self in psychology has evolved substantially from the early 20th century to the present. Foundational Self-Theories by Freud, Jung, Rogers, and Erikson positioned the self as a dynamic psychological construct shaped by internal drives and developmental processes. Mid- to late-20th-century perspectives, exemplified in the Social & Cognitive Self in Context case, showed that identity emerges from the interplay of cognition, social feedback, and developmental stages.

In the 21st century, the self has become multi-dimensional and digitally mediated, as illustrated by the Digital Selfhood, Age-Related Selfhood, and Applied Self in Therapy cases. These examples show that the self now emerges from the interaction of internal cognition, social context, and technological mediation. Social media, online feedback and digital culture influence self-concept, self-esteem and identity development, demonstrating that the self is not solely an internal construct but a socially and technologically co-constructed phenomenon.

Thus, the psychological understanding of the self has undergone substantial evolution – from early

20th-century psychoanalytic and humanistic models, through mid- to late 20th-century cognitive, social and developmental frameworks, to 21st-century perspectives shaped by digital culture and global interconnectivity. The self today is understood not purely as an internal psychological structure but as a dynamic, socially and digitally mediated construct. This evolution has important implications: for how we study identity, how we conduct therapy, and how individuals navigate selfhood in a connected world. Looking ahead, future research might focus on how emerging technologies such as virtual reality, augmented identity spaces, and artificial intelligence further reconfigure the self – and how psychological theory can keep pace with these transformations.

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