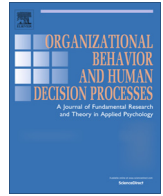




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Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdpSelf-as-object and self-as-subject in the workplace[☆]Joel Brockner^{a,*}, Batia M. Wiesenfeld^b^a Columbia University, 715 Uris Hall, New York, NY 10027, United States^b New York University, Stern School of Business, 7-52 KMC, New York, NY 10012, United States

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on James's (1890) age-old distinction between the "Me-self" and the "I-self," we discuss the implications of two self-processes (self-as-object and self-as-subject, respectively) for organizational behavior. The self-as-object is primarily concerned with thinking about oneself in valued ways, whereas the self-as-subject is primarily concerned with behavioral self-regulation. Using two prominent self-theories (self-affirmation, a self-as-object framework) and ego depletion theory (a self-as-subject perspective), we first show how results across disparate literatures in organizational behavior may be accounted for by common underlying mechanisms, and the advances that emerge from recognizing this convergence. We then consider a variety of ways in which insights into organizational behavior may be gleaned from examining the self-as-object and self-as-subject conjointly. Processes associated with the self-as-object and self-as-subject combine interactively to influence employees' attitudes and behavior, and they also influence one another. Furthermore, considering the two self-processes in tandem shows how: (1) effects that appear to be similar differ meaningfully in the mechanisms accounting for them, and (2) seemingly discrepant results may be reconciled. Our analysis demonstrates that the two self-processes have implications for many literatures in organizational behavior including motivation, organizational change, ethics, justice, escalation of commitment, social identity, control, and power. Suggestions for future research and managerial implications also are provided.

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1. Introduction

The construct of the self is pervasive in numerous areas in micro-organizational behavior. For example, the self plays a regulatory role in goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2006) and in the process of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000). Research on social hierarchy posits that individuals' organizational roles are important sources of status and thus self-regard (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006). Research on organizational identification suggests that people obtain a sense of identity from the groups and organizations to which they belong (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Whereas self-processes figure prominently in these and other literatures, they exert influence in different ways (Leary & Tangney, 2012).

The distinction we make between self-processes is not new. More than a century ago, James (1890) noted that theories of the self can be divided into two categories: the self-as-object and the

self-as-subject. As the object of people's attention (or what James called the "Me" self because grammatically *me* is the object of action), self-conceptions that people value or aspire to may influence what they think, feel, and do. As subject (or what James called the "I" self because grammatically *I* is the subject performing the action), the self also exercises executive control. Executive control refers to the set of "mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses" (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>). Both functions of the self are relevant to organizational behavior but have not been systematically distinguished.

Our organizing thesis is that the failure to appreciate the different ways in which self-processes account for people's work attitudes and behaviors has come at a price, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, we have glossed over meaningful differences in what may at first appear to be similar findings. For instance, there is evidence that behaving ethically can cause people to behave less ethically. However, this effect may come about for different reasons, one reflecting the self-as-object (Merritt, Efron, & Monin, 2010) and the other related to the self-as-subject (Gino,

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Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). Conversely, we have missed opportunities to unearth similarities in what may at first appear to be different phenomena. For example, taking part in a corporate volunteer program and having new hires reflect upon their best selves are different activities, but their positive effects on employees may come about for similar reasons. Moreover, understanding these reasons unlocks new avenues for research. Relatedly, it may be possible to reconcile seemingly conflicting results by taking into account the different ways in which self-processes exert influence. For example, when managers make decisions fairly it can be psychologically draining for them or psychologically rejuvenating; whether the self is operating primarily as object or subject may help to account for this apparent inconsistency. Practically, our analysis also has implications for the different ways in which managers may handle challenging circumstances, such as dealing with their employees' resistance to change or with how to bring about ethical behavior.

2. A roadmap

We begin by differentiating between the self-as-object and the self-as-subject. We then provide specific exemplars of a prominent self-as-object framework (self-affirmation theory; Steele, 1988) and an influential self-as-subject framework (ego depletion theory; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). When considered separately, each of these frameworks usefully shows how a variety of results across disparate literatures may be explained by common underlying processes (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). We then discuss several value-adding ways to examine self-as-object and self-as-subject processes together; in particular, their interactive effects on beliefs and behaviors and their influences on one another. Next, we show how jointly considering the self as object and as subject sheds light on a variety of workplace phenomena, by delineating differences between apparent similarities, and by helping to reconcile seemingly different findings. We close by discussing additional managerial implications and by offering a number of promising pathways for future theory and research.

3. Distinguishing self-as-object from self-as-subject

The self plays a variety of important roles in human affairs. The self arises from reflexive self-awareness, generating beliefs about oneself (Leary & Tangney, 2012). The self also *does*; it thinks, feels, and acts, as both experiencing subject and as executive agent (Leary & Tangney, 2012). These two processes map onto the roles of self-as-object and self-as-subject, respectively (James, 1890).

When people take themselves as the object of attention they have several concerns. One is to develop a sense of who they are, that is, to *see* themselves clearly (e.g., I am a scholar). Another is to positively evaluate that which they see, that is to *like* themselves (e.g., I am a good person; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). As object, self-processes consist of reflecting and evaluating.

Whereas executive function includes controlling the environment and making decisions, its primary role is self-regulation (Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007), in which people alter their behavior so as to be aligned with meaningful standards that come from within or from external sources. For example, a faculty member's or a manager's typical workload entails a mix of activities. For the faculty member, these pertain to teaching, research, and service. Self-regulation refers to harnessing resources and exerting effort in the service of matching teaching-, research-, and service-related behaviors to relevant standards. Yet another form of executive control enacted by the self-as-subject is coordinating between various activities such as deciding how much to focus attention on one activity rather than another at any point in time. In short, as subject the self is concerned with "doing."

Table 1
Bases of distinguishing between self-as-subject and self-as-object.

	Self-as-subject	Self-as-object
Perspective	I-self	Me-self
Role of self	Doer	Target of evaluation
Objective	Executive function (e.g., self-regulation)	Attaining valued self-conceptions (e.g., esteem, identity)
Process	Self-control	Self-reflection
Links to theory/research	Ego depletion theory, reduced ethicality, mindfulness	Self-affirmation theory, moral self-licensing, Mindsets

As summarized in Table 1, self-as-object processes include people's quest to develop coherent and valued self-views. In contrast, the most important and organizationally-relevant aspects of the self-as-subject pertain to its exertion of executive control in the service of regulation. The self-as-object and the self-as-subject draw on resources to accomplish their respective goals. The resources themselves, however, are conceptually distinct which logically follows from the fact that the goals and dynamics of the two self-processes differ.

The self-as-object draws on resources that reflect a positive sense of self. By definition, people higher in trait self-esteem have more of these resources than their counterparts lower in self-esteem. For example, dissonance-arousing events cause people to change their attitudes in the service of maintaining a positive image of themselves (Steele, 1988). If those higher in self-esteem have more positive self-image resources, then they should be less likely to change their attitudes in response to dissonance-arousing (or other self-threatening) events, as Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (1993) discovered. The self-as-subject, in contrast, draws on cognitive and behavioral tendencies that enable it to align with standards or aspirations. Thus, for example, it requires attentional resources to identify discrepancies from standards and motivational resources to engage in behaviors to bring about alignment.

Considering these two conceptualizations of the self, first separately and then in tandem, we delineate their implications for a wide array of topics in organizational behavior.

4. Self-as-object and self-as-subject, considered separately

Several prominent self-theories in social psychology emphasize either the self-as-object or the self-as-subject. A particularly well-known example of the former is self-affirmation theory (e.g., Steele, 1988) whereas an especially influential example of the latter is ego depletion theory (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998). The distinction between self-as-object and self-as-subject is meaningful in the context of other literatures as well, as indicated in Table 1 and as we explore later. Self-affirmation theory and ego depletion theory provide overarching ways to understand motivation in the workplace, which was a main focus of earlier work in micro-organizational behavior (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Locke, 1968; Vroom, 1964).

The contemporary literature(s) on workplace motivation may be advanced through comprehensive frameworks accounting for the numerous effects of several ubiquitous features of organizational life: (1) employees frequently experience threats to their self-conceptions, and (2) employees often have to engage in self-control to override strongly felt inclinations. Self-affirmation theory deals with the former whereas ego depletion theory addresses the latter. Whereas the nature of self-processes differ in the case of self-affirmation theory and ego depletion theory, a valuable feature of both theories is their integrative potential. In their own ways, both unearth similarities in findings that may appear to be

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