



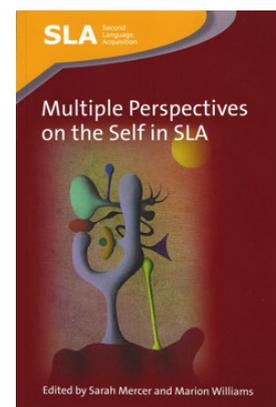
Book Review

**Multiple Perspectives on the Self in SLA**

Edited by Sarah Mercer and Marion Williams (2014)

Bristol / Buffalo / Toronto: Multilingual Matters

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This is a collection of twelve articles with contrasting perspectives on a variety of themes centering around identity and language use. Although this book on is not about study abroad per se, it sheds light on ways that study abroad might impact identity. It also offers insights about social positioning, attribution theory, motivation, agency, goal setting, and language learning. The editors make it clear that this book does not offer a single ideological viewpoint. In fact, they encourage us to explore multiple viewpoints and avoid bifurcated dichotomies such as “a wholly socially-structured self” vs. “completely individually determined self” that have straight-jacketed much research for decades.

The essays in this volume can be conceptualized in terms of a spectrum. At one extreme, Northoff examines what might be called a “microscopic self.” Utilizing brain imagining technology, he (p. 143) provides evidence that a non-verbal “minimal self” based on our embodied physiological state exists. He describes this as “pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual” (p. 148) and it is tempting to liken this to a computer's “protected mode operating system” which is inure to verbal manipulation. At the other end of the spectrum, Norton and Hemmi describe what might be called a “macroscopic self” that is deeply embedded in multiple social contexts. Norton regards this “self” as “contingent, shifting, and context-dependent” (p. 66) and often prefers the term “subject-position” to “self” since each individual can be positioned in quite different ways, and subjects themselves can present themselves in a variety of contrasting – even conflicting – manners (1994, p. 3). Hemmi likewise underscores the importance of social power structures is influencing how people are positioned, mentioning ways that bilingual or multilingual people are often portrayed. Should bilinguals be regarded as 'mercenary relativists' who “switch principles as they switch languages” as Sander (1934, cited by Hemmi, p. 79) suggests? Or instead should we laud their ability to navigate across diverse cultural maps and acknowledge the positive benefits of their achievement? Although the macroscopic and microscopic perspectives presented within these pages might seem antithetical, the editors suggest they are in fact complimentary. They emphasize how language teachers need to recognise language learners as uniquely embodied individuals with multiple wants and needs, and at the same time engaging in a social process of identity negotiation.

The influence of NLP is evident in many essays in this volume. Mills, for example, reiterates Bandura's 1997 concept of self-efficacy. Moreover, Dörnyei's motivational system and concept of past and future selves (2009) draws upon some ideas from the time line therapy model of James and Woodsmall (1988). That model, in turn, borrows extensively from Bandler and Grinder (1982). Midway through this volume, Ryan and Irie take up Grinder and Bandler's (1981) notion of

*reframing* through creative narratives. Ryan and Irie suggest that stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves are manipulated to enhance self-concept, self-confidence, and self-presentation. They describe the self as an ongoing narrative of “who we think we have been, who we think we are, who we would like to be, and the person(s) we are afraid of becoming” (p. 110) and suggest how narrative stories can powerfully impact our thoughts and behaviours.

This volume covers many other themes, which is perhaps its main strength as well as its weakness: it provides a brief exposure to many intriguing ideas about complex dynamic systems, self-regulation, investment, and imagined identities, but relatively few are discussed in depth. Those doing research on self-confidence, self-esteem, and motivation are likely to find some stimulating ideas. And although this work is primarily theoretical, it has many teaching implications. Norton reminds us how language teaching/learning involves identity negotiation and that language learning is more than simply accumulating new skills and knowledge. This text advises teachers to be careful of how they position students and avoid disempowering them. Several authors underscore the importance of allowing learners to make mistakes without being judged or ridiculed. As Ushioda suggests, learners also need to 'speak as themselves' and have their voices recognized, respected, and integrated into the language curriculum.

### *The Bottom Line*

The main strength of this work is that it provides a good theoretical background of some theoretical concepts in about language acquisition and identity. Another nice feature is that the annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter make it easy for readers to choose which works to study further.

In addition to not offering many “nuts and bolts” details about research studies, the other main weakness of this text is that it does not provide a comprehensive overview of SLA research. However, since other texts such those as Mackey and Gass (2005), Kalaja and Barcelos (2006), or Ellis and Shintani (2013) already do this, this drawback is not serious: the editors have chosen to focus mainly on identity-related issues in SLA contexts rather than the issue of SLA itself. This book fulfills its basic objective of providing “readers with a variety of perspectives from which to view the self in second language acquisition” (p. 177). Moreover, some of the theoretical frameworks mentioned in this 188-page volume will be useful to SA researchers. For those wishing to gain a better theoretical grounding on how identity impacts foreign language learning, it is certainly worth reading.

- Reviewed by Erina Ogawa & Tim Newfields

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