Issues of self and identity have been a preoccupation in the social sciences now for several generations. This short review of the extensive literature touches on some of the most influential early writers and then briefly discusses the several directions in which more contemporary scholarship on identity has traveled.
Points of Departure

Up through the late 1960s, a considerable body of literature was produced on personality and the self-concept, on the conflict between individual needs and social demands, and on the effects of this conflict and rapid social change for the adapting person. The principal figures during this period were psychologists, including Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, and Harry Stack Sullivan; sociologists and anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict, Erving Goffman, Helen Lynd, David Riesman, and Georg Simmel; and philosophers and existentialists, including R. D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse, George Herbert Mead, and Alfred Schutz.

In this older literature, the self-society nexus was a central problem, along with a concern over the disruptions in self-concept and personality brought about by significant social dislocations and transformations—urbanization, bureaucratization, the rise of a consumption ethic, technological advances, the decline of major institutions, and so on. For many writers, these disruptions were seen to lead to painful uneasiness and destructive alienation and instability. For others, however, the effects of change were considered more salutary, leading to experimentation with new and adaptive ways to meet social demands and efforts to break free from narrow and restrictive social roles. The following titles are a sampling:

Persisting Concerns and Lines of Theorizing

Continuations
More recently, studies of self and identity have moved in a number of diverse directions. However, two primary sociological texts that continue the discussion of the older concerns with the self-society connection and the impact of larger social forces on consciousness are:


Individualism and Self-Fulfillment
Among others, two works that continue the concern with the self spurred by Maslow, Carl Rogers, and others in the Human Potential Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and address the contemporary “identity crises” and “tribulations of the self” are:


For explorations of the changes in the ways people structure their sense of self and/or pursue an ethic of self-fulfillment, see:


**Personality, Character, and Social Change**

Many works trace the emergence of a new personality type or character, shaped by or adapted to the changing social, cultural, and economic conditions of postindustrial or postmodern life. The new personality type has been variously categorized as an “antinomian” personality (Adler), a boundaryless self (Bell), a narcissistic personality (Lasch, Sennett), a “subject-directed” character (Leinberger and Tucker), a protean self (Lifton), a therapeutic personality (Rieff), and a “postmodern” (Wood and Zurcher) or “mutable” self (Zurcher). As with observers of an earlier generation, changes in personality or character are alternatively characterized as destructive or liberating, as a sign of cultural decline or a potentially fruitful adaptation to contemporary social conditions of flux and fragmentation. See:


**Technology and Identity**

Finally, recent studies also continue a concern with the impact of technology on consciousness and identity, though new technologies have raised new issues. Some works focus on how new communications technologies, including the Internet, which free interaction from physical co-presence, are affecting the experience of the self as unified and coherent and changing the context in which identity is constructed. For instance:


Another emerging interest concerns the new psychopharmacology. For a provocative examination of the effects of mood-altering drugs on the experience of self, see:


**New Issues and Directions**

In addition to broad thematic continuities, recent identity studies have also departed from the older literature in significant ways. The most consequential of the new developments has been to shift attention away from a concern with the individual's sense of self to issues of collective identity and political action.

**Constructionism, Collective Identities, and the Body**

One stream of the new scholarship, the social constructionist, has concentrated on identities of race, ethnicity/nation, gender, and sexuality. In these studies, collective identities are treated not as some primordial property of a group's members, but as interactional accomplishments that must be continually renegotiated. The following are a few notable examples:


A notable subset of the constructionist literature questions the meaning of biological distinctions, such as the inscription of gender
on the body and the growing importance of the body to individual and collective identities. For example:


**Identity Politics**

Following on the politicization of identity by the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, another, and closely related, stream of research has emerged on the constitution of collective identities and the political implications that result from group struggles to self-characterize and claim social franchise. This is the literature on “identity politics,” which has been principally, though not exclusively, concerned with identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class. For instance:


**Academic Postmodernism**

Finally, the academic discourse of postmodernism has also been centrally concerned with an erosion of the belief in an essence or substantial identity defining the person. In fact, Robert Dunn argues that “the concept of the postmodern itself was an attempt to articulate a growing sense of the problematization of identity as a generalized condition of life in postwar Western society” (*Identity Crises*, 2). The literature on the politics of identity, itself a version of postmodernism, involves a critique of social hierarchies and emphasizes the negotiated and contingent nature of identity, difference, and the rules of inclusion and exclusion. Academic postmodernism, by contrast, influenced by French poststructuralism, involves an epistemo-
logical critique and abandonment of the rational and unified subject of Enlightenment philosophy. The many works of such prominent postmodern theorists as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, all attempt in their various ways to “decenter” the subject and deconstruct established identity categories and their accompanying power-discourse formations. For examples of this type of postmodern theorizing and helpful discussions, see: