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Building a Social Self: The Macro-Micro Link

The Social-Individual Dialectic

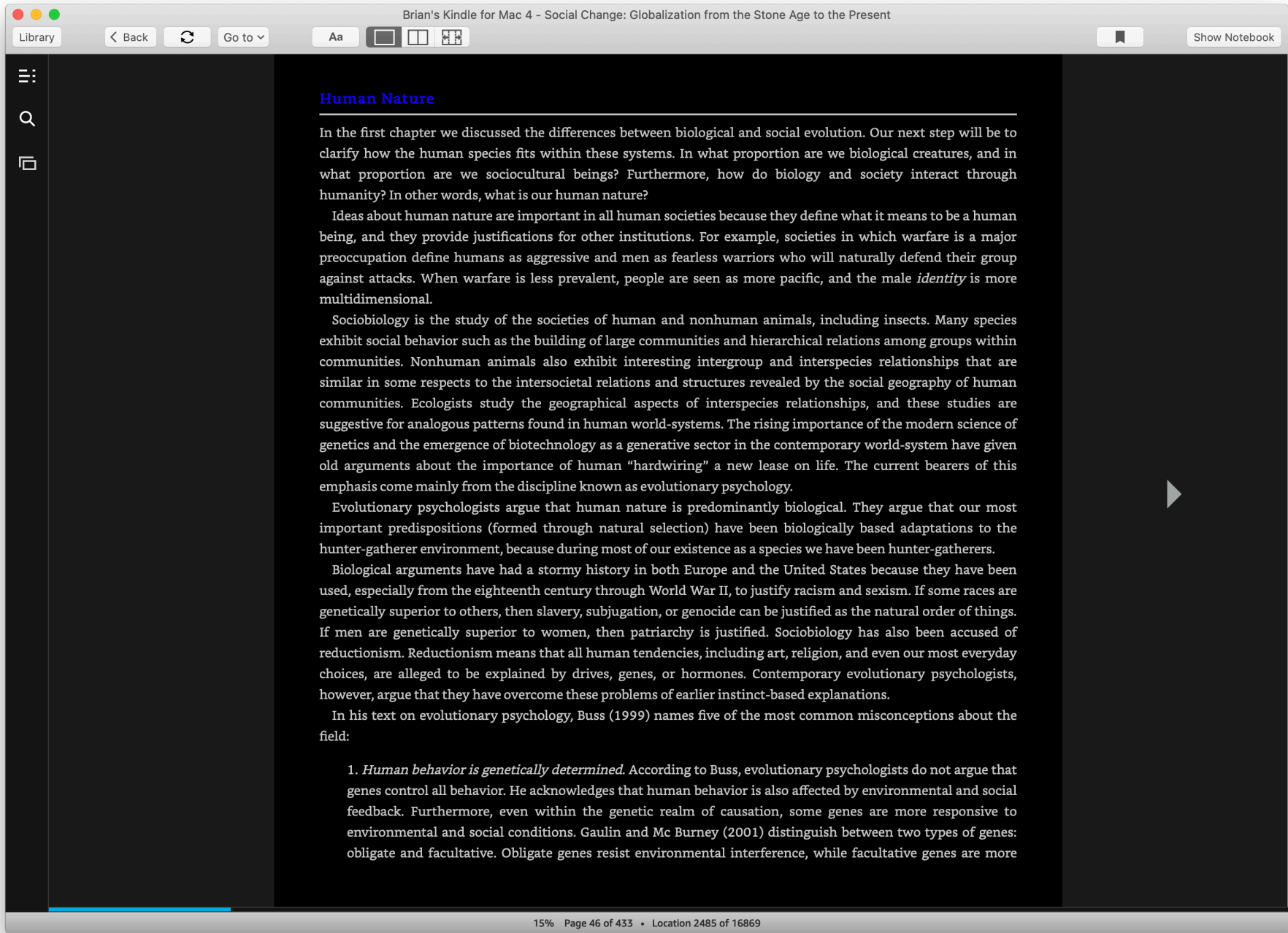
In the last chapter we saw that both societies and cultures are not unique human achievements but have an evolutionary history that includes other animals and especially primates. In this chapter we examine the processes by which societies complete the humanization of individuals by constructing social selves and how, in turn, individuals collectively through their labor produce society.

How are we to understand the relationship between society and the individual? There are two polarized positions on this. The first, which we'll call "atomist," says society is no more than an aggregate of individuals and has no special characteristics that are not already inside of individuals. Only concrete individuals think, act, and have needs and goals. To say society has these things is a reification, or giving life to something that is not real. The other position, which we'll call "holistic," argues that society is like a superorganism that is more than the sum of individuals. Individuals are aspects of this organism, and individuals have no life outside society. Societies undergo processes that are more complex than individuals.

One problem that makes this difficult to talk about is the differences in the time scale. On the one hand, concrete individuals live in industrial capitalist societies and live to be anywhere from sixty-four to seventy-five years old, while society continues to exist and the nation-state of the United States continues to exist. But on the other hand, we agree to an extent with the atomists when they say that without individuals there is no society. Without the collective labor, breeding, and child rearing of concrete individuals there is no society. At the same time, these acting individuals can do so only because they acquire the social skills they do not create from scratch.

On the one hand, throughout our lives we are limited by the tools, institutions, and beliefs passed on to us by previous generations. An individual is born into a particular type of society, within a specific social class and gender, at a particular point in history. These constraints are the parameters an individual has to operate within. In this sense, society is like a weaver while the growing individual is like the yarn.

On the other hand, while individuals are in one sense subservient (especially as children) to the agents of socialization, these tools and institutions of previous generations contain the very raw materials by which individuals can overcome these constraints. Once we learn language, learn to manipulate tools, learn roles, and go to school, we have trained ourselves to become more than yarn. We become coweavers shaping and reorganizing the parameters that constrain us.



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Show Notebook



Human Nature

In the first chapter we discussed the differences between biological and social evolution. Our next step will be to clarify how the human species fits within these systems. In what proportion are we biological creatures, and in what proportion are we sociocultural beings? Furthermore, how do biology and society interact through humanity? In other words, what is our human nature?

Ideas about human nature are important in all human societies because they define what it means to be a human being, and they provide justifications for other institutions. For example, societies in which warfare is a major preoccupation define humans as aggressive and men as fearless warriors who will naturally defend their group against attacks. When warfare is less prevalent, people are seen as more pacific, and the male *identity* is more multidimensional.

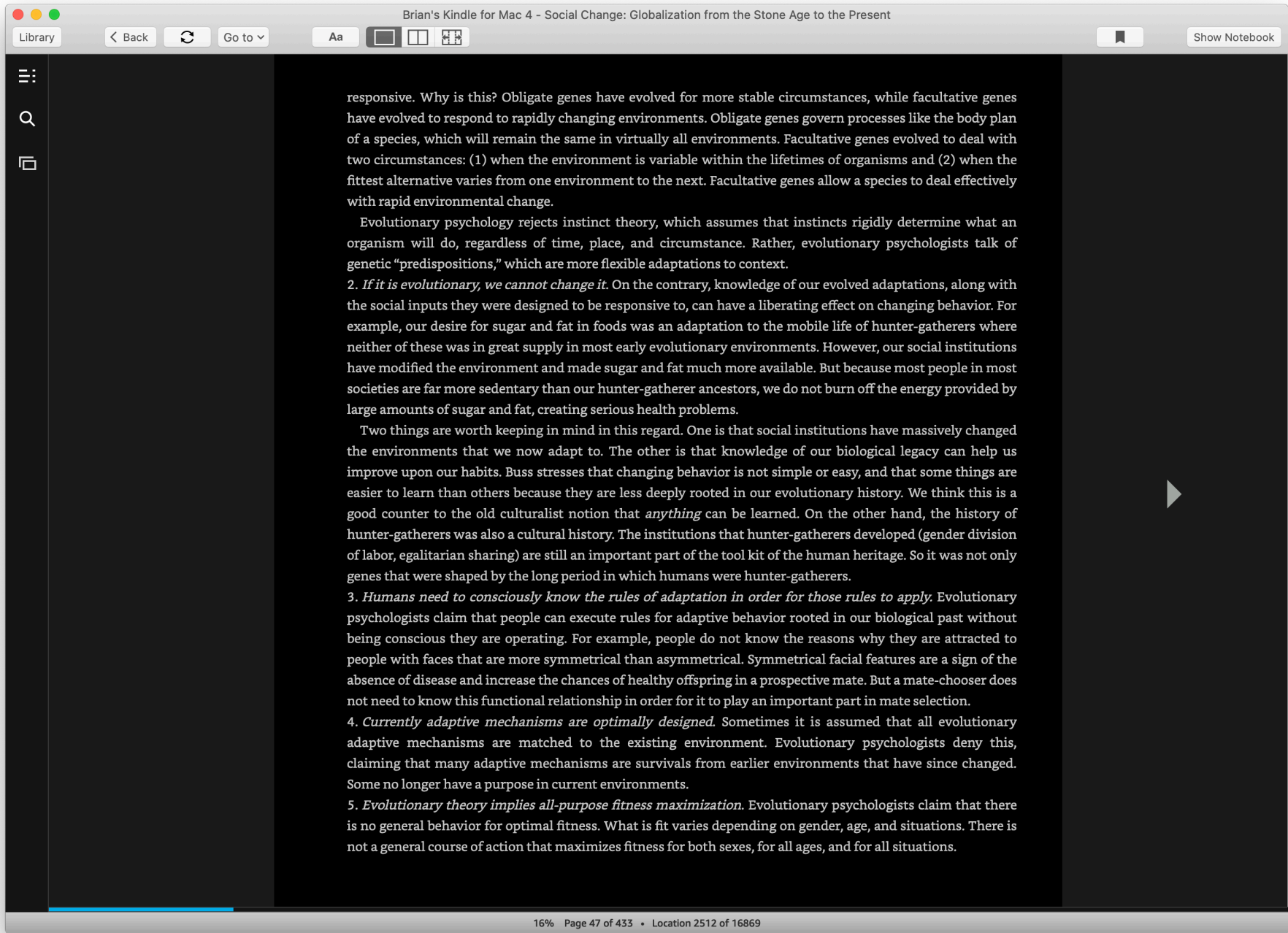
Sociobiology is the study of the societies of human and nonhuman animals, including insects. Many species exhibit social behavior such as the building of large communities and hierarchical relations among groups within communities. Nonhuman animals also exhibit interesting intergroup and interspecies relationships that are similar in some respects to the intersocietal relations and structures revealed by the social geography of human communities. Ecologists study the geographical aspects of interspecies relationships, and these studies are suggestive for analogous patterns found in human world-systems. The rising importance of the modern science of genetics and the emergence of biotechnology as a generative sector in the contemporary world-system have given old arguments about the importance of human "hardwiring" a new lease on life. The current bearers of this emphasis come mainly from the discipline known as evolutionary psychology.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that human nature is predominantly biological. They argue that our most important predispositions (formed through natural selection) have been biologically based adaptations to the hunter-gatherer environment, because during most of our existence as a species we have been hunter-gatherers.

Biological arguments have had a stormy history in both Europe and the United States because they have been used, especially from the eighteenth century through World War II, to justify racism and sexism. If some races are genetically superior to others, then slavery, subjugation, or genocide can be justified as the natural order of things. If men are genetically superior to women, then patriarchy is justified. Sociobiology has also been accused of reductionism. Reductionism means that all human tendencies, including art, religion, and even our most everyday choices, are alleged to be explained by drives, genes, or hormones. Contemporary evolutionary psychologists, however, argue that they have overcome these problems of earlier instinct-based explanations.

In his text on evolutionary psychology, Buss (1999) names five of the most common misconceptions about the field:

1. *Human behavior is genetically determined.* According to Buss, evolutionary psychologists do not argue that genes control all behavior. He acknowledges that human behavior is also affected by environmental and social feedback. Furthermore, even within the genetic realm of causation, some genes are more responsive to environmental and social conditions. Gaulin and Mc Burney (2001) distinguish between two types of genes: obligate and facultative. Obligate genes resist environmental interference, while facultative genes are more



responsive. Why is this? Obligate genes have evolved for more stable circumstances, while facultative genes have evolved to respond to rapidly changing environments. Obligate genes govern processes like the body plan of a species, which will remain the same in virtually all environments. Facultative genes evolved to deal with two circumstances: (1) when the environment is variable within the lifetimes of organisms and (2) when the fittest alternative varies from one environment to the next. Facultative genes allow a species to deal effectively with rapid environmental change.

Evolutionary psychology rejects instinct theory, which assumes that instincts rigidly determine what an organism will do, regardless of time, place, and circumstance. Rather, evolutionary psychologists talk of genetic "predispositions," which are more flexible adaptations to context.

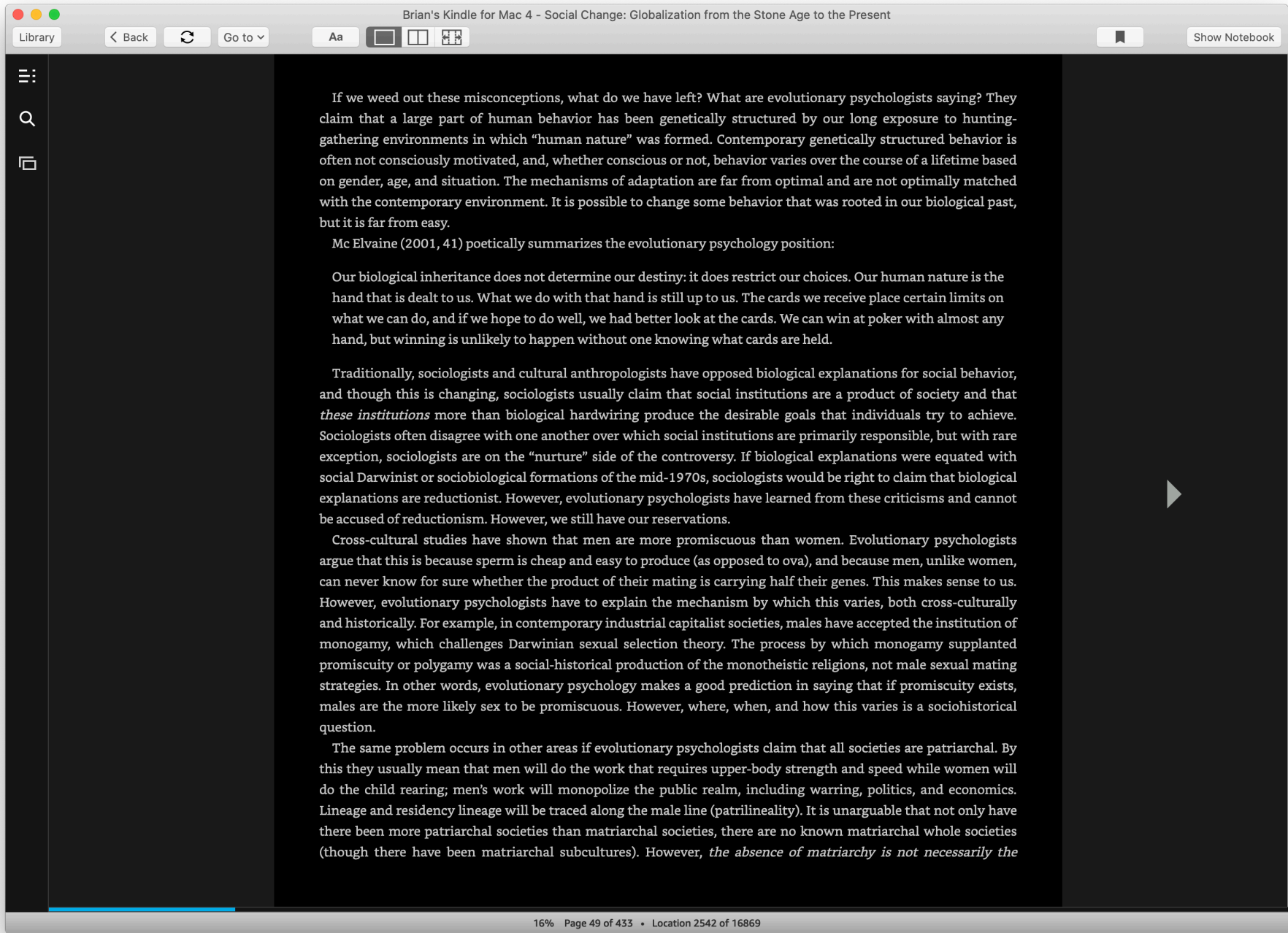
2. *If it is evolutionary, we cannot change it.* On the contrary, knowledge of our evolved adaptations, along with the social inputs they were designed to be responsive to, can have a liberating effect on changing behavior. For example, our desire for sugar and fat in foods was an adaptation to the mobile life of hunter-gatherers where neither of these was in great supply in most early evolutionary environments. However, our social institutions have modified the environment and made sugar and fat much more available. But because most people in most societies are far more sedentary than our hunter-gatherer ancestors, we do not burn off the energy provided by large amounts of sugar and fat, creating serious health problems.

Two things are worth keeping in mind in this regard. One is that social institutions have massively changed the environments that we now adapt to. The other is that knowledge of our biological legacy can help us improve upon our habits. Buss stresses that changing behavior is not simple or easy, and that some things are easier to learn than others because they are less deeply rooted in our evolutionary history. We think this is a good counter to the old culturalist notion that *anything* can be learned. On the other hand, the history of hunter-gatherers was also a cultural history. The institutions that hunter-gatherers developed (gender division of labor, egalitarian sharing) are still an important part of the tool kit of the human heritage. So it was not only genes that were shaped by the long period in which humans were hunter-gatherers.

3. *Humans need to consciously know the rules of adaptation in order for those rules to apply.* Evolutionary psychologists claim that people can execute rules for adaptive behavior rooted in our biological past without being conscious they are operating. For example, people do not know the reasons why they are attracted to people with faces that are more symmetrical than asymmetrical. Symmetrical facial features are a sign of the absence of disease and increase the chances of healthy offspring in a prospective mate. But a mate-chooser does not need to know this functional relationship in order for it to play an important part in mate selection.

4. *Currently adaptive mechanisms are optimally designed.* Sometimes it is assumed that all evolutionary adaptive mechanisms are matched to the existing environment. Evolutionary psychologists deny this, claiming that many adaptive mechanisms are survivals from earlier environments that have since changed. Some no longer have a purpose in current environments.

5. *Evolutionary theory implies all-purpose fitness maximization.* Evolutionary psychologists claim that there is no general behavior for optimal fitness. What is fit varies depending on gender, age, and situations. There is not a general course of action that maximizes fitness for both sexes, for all ages, and for all situations.



If we weed out these misconceptions, what do we have left? What are evolutionary psychologists saying? They claim that a large part of human behavior has been genetically structured by our long exposure to hunting-gathering environments in which "human nature" was formed. Contemporary genetically structured behavior is often not consciously motivated, and, whether conscious or not, behavior varies over the course of a lifetime based on gender, age, and situation. The mechanisms of adaptation are far from optimal and are not optimally matched with the contemporary environment. It is possible to change some behavior that was rooted in our biological past, but it is far from easy.

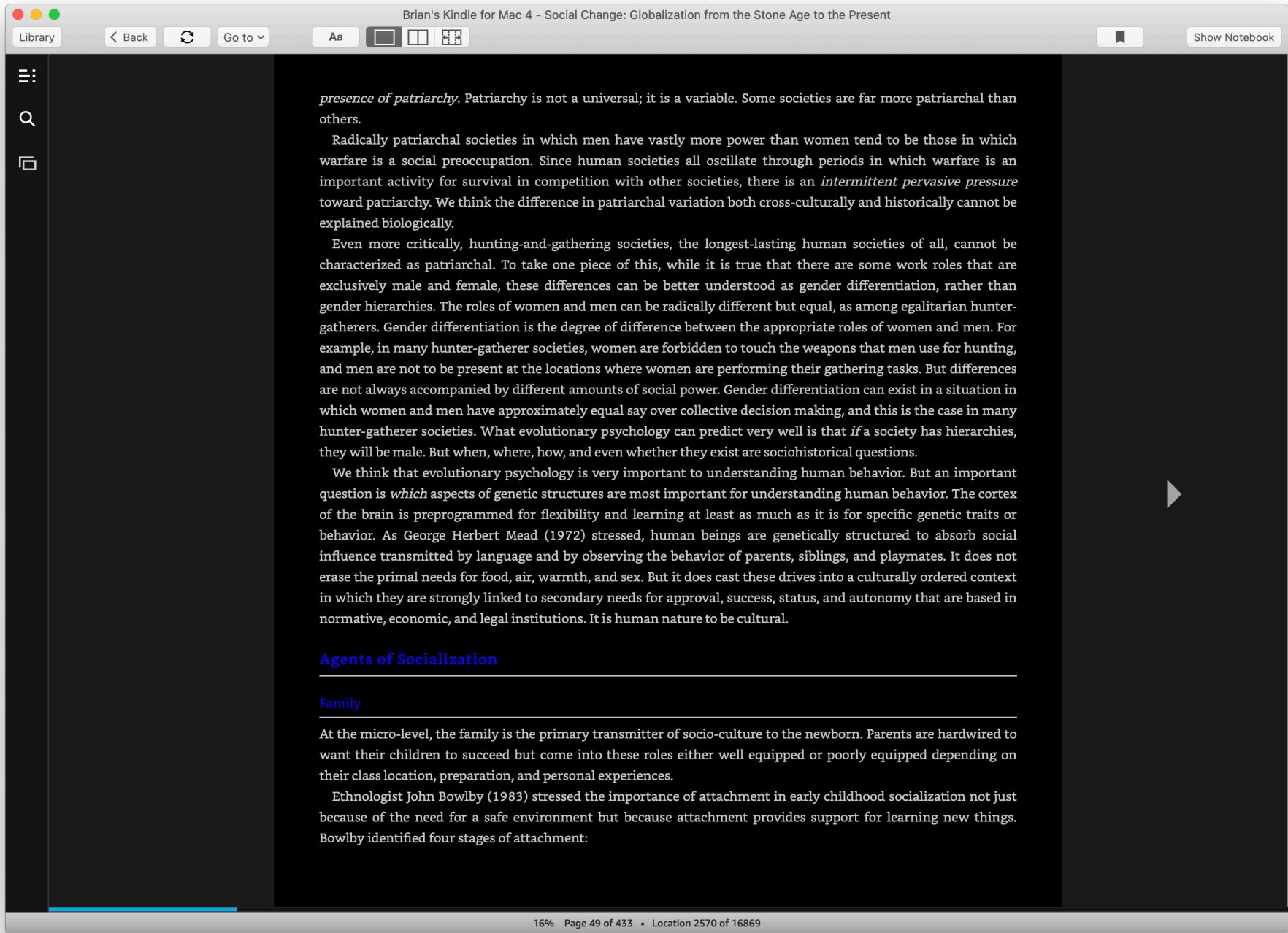
Mc Elvaine (2001, 41) poetically summarizes the evolutionary psychology position:

Our biological inheritance does not determine our destiny: it does restrict our choices. Our human nature is the hand that is dealt to us. What we do with that hand is still up to us. The cards we receive place certain limits on what we can do, and if we hope to do well, we had better look at the cards. We can win at poker with almost any hand, but winning is unlikely to happen without one knowing what cards are held.

Traditionally, sociologists and cultural anthropologists have opposed biological explanations for social behavior, and though this is changing, sociologists usually claim that social institutions are a product of society and that *these institutions* more than biological hardwiring produce the desirable goals that individuals try to achieve. Sociologists often disagree with one another over which social institutions are primarily responsible, but with rare exception, sociologists are on the "nurture" side of the controversy. If biological explanations were equated with social Darwinist or sociobiological formations of the mid-1970s, sociologists would be right to claim that biological explanations are reductionist. However, evolutionary psychologists have learned from these criticisms and cannot be accused of reductionism. However, we still have our reservations.

Cross-cultural studies have shown that men are more promiscuous than women. Evolutionary psychologists argue that this is because sperm is cheap and easy to produce (as opposed to ova), and because men, unlike women, can never know for sure whether the product of their mating is carrying half their genes. This makes sense to us. However, evolutionary psychologists have to explain the mechanism by which this varies, both cross-culturally and historically. For example, in contemporary industrial capitalist societies, males have accepted the institution of monogamy, which challenges Darwinian sexual selection theory. The process by which monogamy supplanted promiscuity or polygamy was a social-historical production of the monotheistic religions, not male sexual mating strategies. In other words, evolutionary psychology makes a good prediction in saying that if promiscuity exists, males are the more likely sex to be promiscuous. However, where, when, and how this varies is a sociohistorical question.

The same problem occurs in other areas if evolutionary psychologists claim that all societies are patriarchal. By this they usually mean that men will do the work that requires upper-body strength and speed while women will do the child rearing; men's work will monopolize the public realm, including warring, politics, and economics. Lineage and residency lineage will be traced along the male line (patrilineality). It is unarguable that not only have there been more patriarchal societies than matriarchal societies, there are no known matriarchal whole societies (though there have been matriarchal subcultures). However, *the absence of matriarchy is not necessarily the*



presence of patriarchy. Patriarchy is not a universal; it is a variable. Some societies are far more patriarchal than others.

Radically patriarchal societies in which men have vastly more power than women tend to be those in which warfare is a social preoccupation. Since human societies all oscillate through periods in which warfare is an important activity for survival in competition with other societies, there is an *intermittent pervasive pressure* toward patriarchy. We think the difference in patriarchal variation both cross-culturally and historically cannot be explained biologically.

Even more critically, hunting-and-gathering societies, the longest-lasting human societies of all, cannot be characterized as patriarchal. To take one piece of this, while it is true that there are some work roles that are exclusively male and female, these differences can be better understood as gender differentiation, rather than gender hierarchies. The roles of women and men can be radically different but equal, as among egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Gender differentiation is the degree of difference between the appropriate roles of women and men. For example, in many hunter-gatherer societies, women are forbidden to touch the weapons that men use for hunting, and men are not to be present at the locations where women are performing their gathering tasks. But differences are not always accompanied by different amounts of social power. Gender differentiation can exist in a situation in which women and men have approximately equal say over collective decision making, and this is the case in many hunter-gatherer societies. What evolutionary psychology can predict very well is that *if* a society has hierarchies, they will be male. But when, where, how, and even whether they exist are sociohistorical questions.

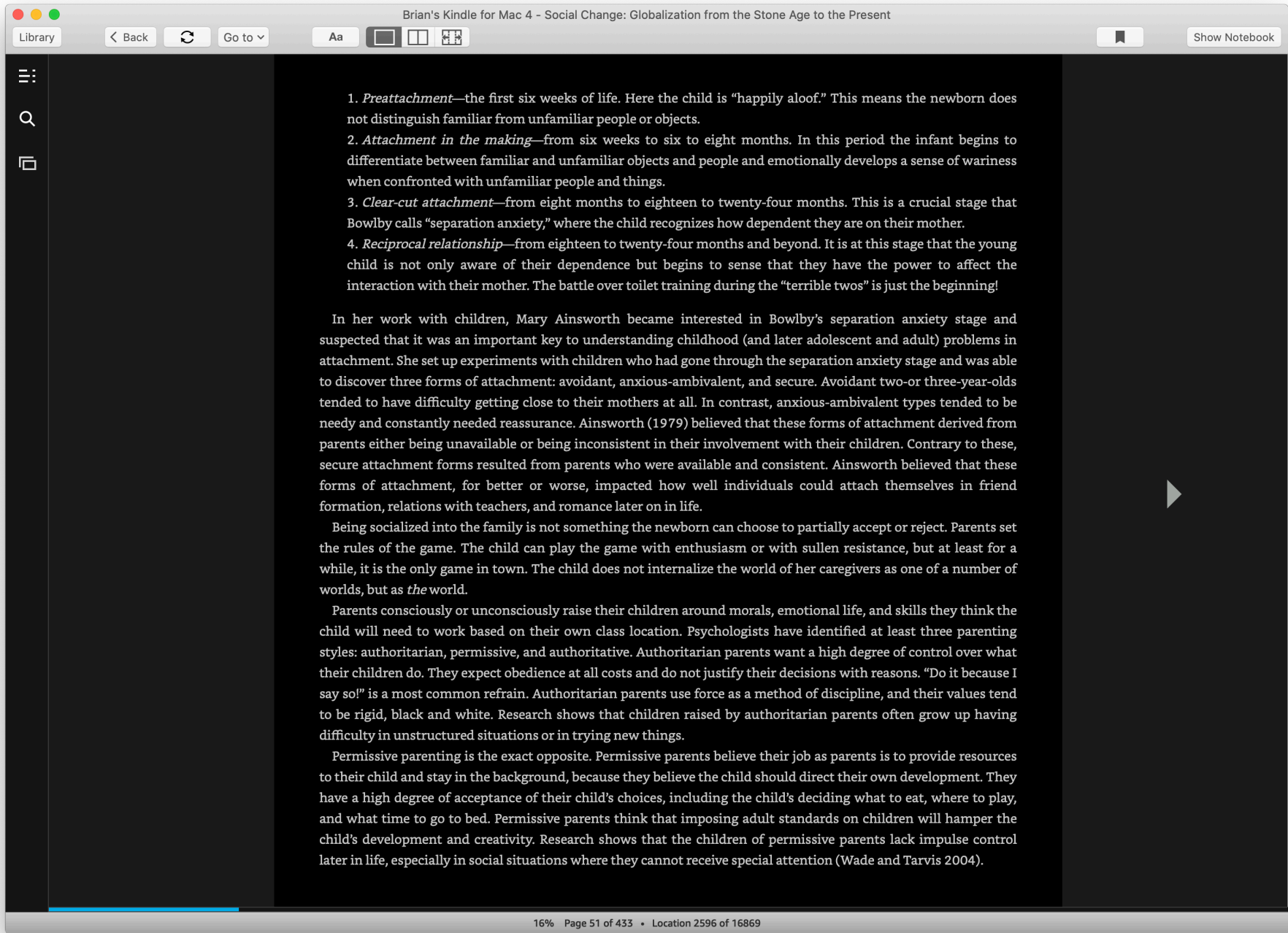
We think that evolutionary psychology is very important to understanding human behavior. But an important question is *which* aspects of genetic structures are most important for understanding human behavior. The cortex of the brain is preprogrammed for flexibility and learning at least as much as it is for specific genetic traits or behavior. As George Herbert Mead (1972) stressed, human beings are genetically structured to absorb social influence transmitted by language and by observing the behavior of parents, siblings, and playmates. It does not erase the primal needs for food, air, warmth, and sex. But it does cast these drives into a culturally ordered context in which they are strongly linked to secondary needs for approval, success, status, and autonomy that are based in normative, economic, and legal institutions. It is human nature to be cultural.

Agents of Socialization

Family

At the micro-level, the family is the primary transmitter of socio-culture to the newborn. Parents are hardwired to want their children to succeed but come into these roles either well equipped or poorly equipped depending on their class location, preparation, and personal experiences.

Ethnologist John Bowlby (1983) stressed the importance of attachment in early childhood socialization not just because of the need for a safe environment but because attachment provides support for learning new things. Bowlby identified four stages of attachment:



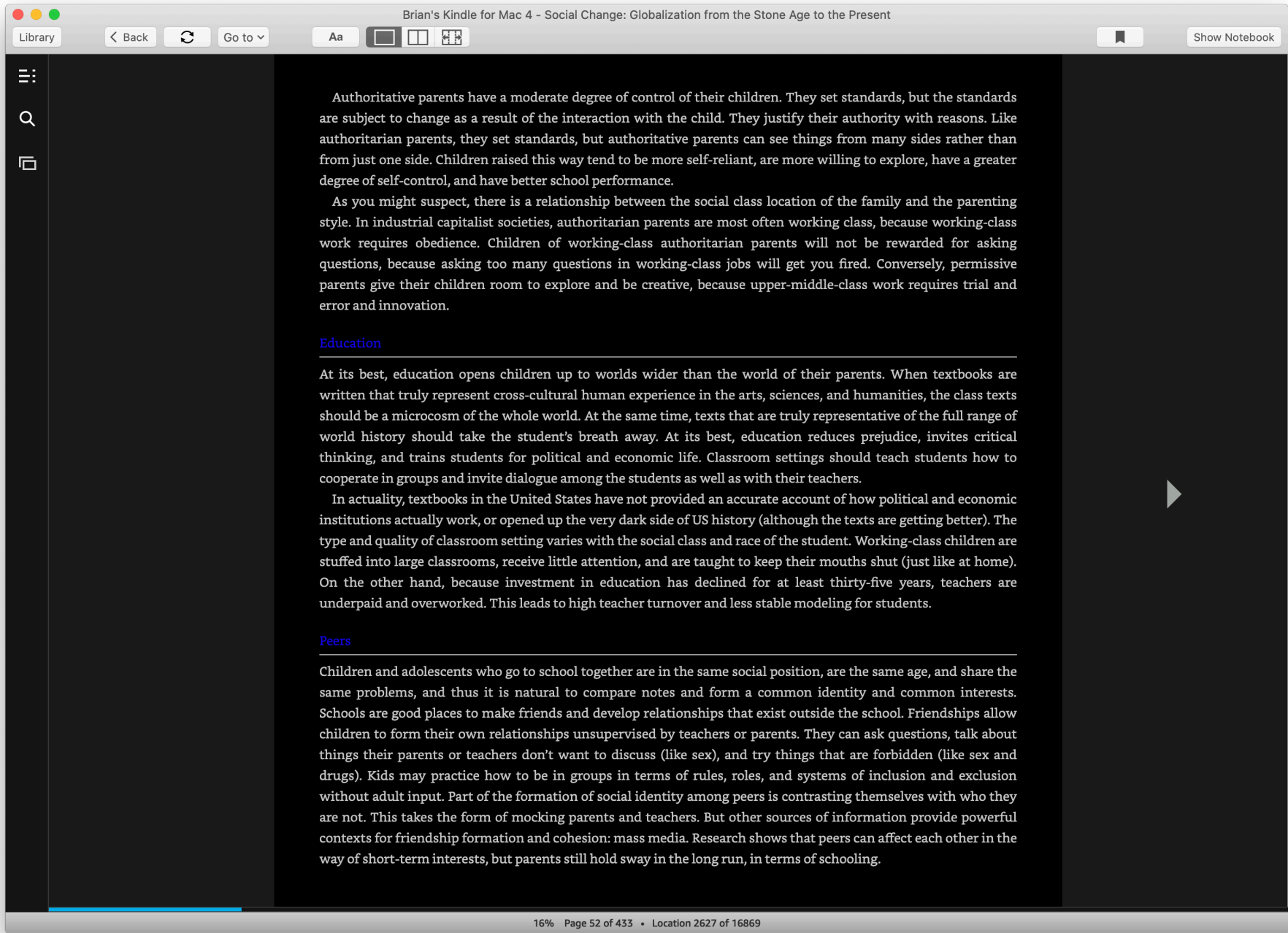
1. *Preattachment*—the first six weeks of life. Here the child is “happily aloof.” This means the newborn does not distinguish familiar from unfamiliar people or objects.
2. *Attachment in the making*—from six weeks to six to eight months. In this period the infant begins to differentiate between familiar and unfamiliar objects and people and emotionally develops a sense of wariness when confronted with unfamiliar people and things.
3. *Clear-cut attachment*—from eight months to eighteen to twenty-four months. This is a crucial stage that Bowlby calls “separation anxiety,” where the child recognizes how dependent they are on their mother.
4. *Reciprocal relationship*—from eighteen to twenty-four months and beyond. It is at this stage that the young child is not only aware of their dependence but begins to sense that they have the power to affect the interaction with their mother. The battle over toilet training during the “terrible twos” is just the beginning!

In her work with children, Mary Ainsworth became interested in Bowlby’s separation anxiety stage and suspected that it was an important key to understanding childhood (and later adolescent and adult) problems in attachment. She set up experiments with children who had gone through the separation anxiety stage and was able to discover three forms of attachment: avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, and secure. Avoidant two-or three-year-olds tended to have difficulty getting close to their mothers at all. In contrast, anxious-ambivalent types tended to be needy and constantly needed reassurance. Ainsworth (1979) believed that these forms of attachment derived from parents either being unavailable or being inconsistent in their involvement with their children. Contrary to these, secure attachment forms resulted from parents who were available and consistent. Ainsworth believed that these forms of attachment, for better or worse, impacted how well individuals could attach themselves in friend formation, relations with teachers, and romance later on in life.

Being socialized into the family is not something the newborn can choose to partially accept or reject. Parents set the rules of the game. The child can play the game with enthusiasm or with sullen resistance, but at least for a while, it is the only game in town. The child does not internalize the world of her caregivers as one of a number of worlds, but as *the* world.

Parents consciously or unconsciously raise their children around morals, emotional life, and skills they think the child will need to work based on their own class location. Psychologists have identified at least three parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents want a high degree of control over what their children do. They expect obedience at all costs and do not justify their decisions with reasons. “Do it because I say so!” is a most common refrain. Authoritarian parents use force as a method of discipline, and their values tend to be rigid, black and white. Research shows that children raised by authoritarian parents often grow up having difficulty in unstructured situations or in trying new things.

Permissive parenting is the exact opposite. Permissive parents believe their job as parents is to provide resources to their child and stay in the background, because they believe the child should direct their own development. They have a high degree of acceptance of their child’s choices, including the child’s deciding what to eat, where to play, and what time to go to bed. Permissive parents think that imposing adult standards on children will hamper the child’s development and creativity. Research shows that the children of permissive parents lack impulse control later in life, especially in social situations where they cannot receive special attention (Wade and Tarvis 2004).





[Mass Media](#)

Ninety-eight percent of households in the United States have a television, and eighty-eight percent have more than one television set. The average household has at least one set turned on for seven hours a day, and people spend about half their free time watching television (Eitzen and Baca Zinn 1995). What does this mean? That depends on what is being watched.

On the positive side, television makes possible our ability to track current events, provides educational programs that are less didactical, and can expose viewers to ways of life that are far from the circles they travel in. Does television actually do this? For the most part, it doesn't. But so what. Isn't entertainment innocent, socially neutral harmless, and value-free? Michael Parenti, in his book *Make Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment*, shows the extent to which television and movies, whether consciously or not, promote the following values:

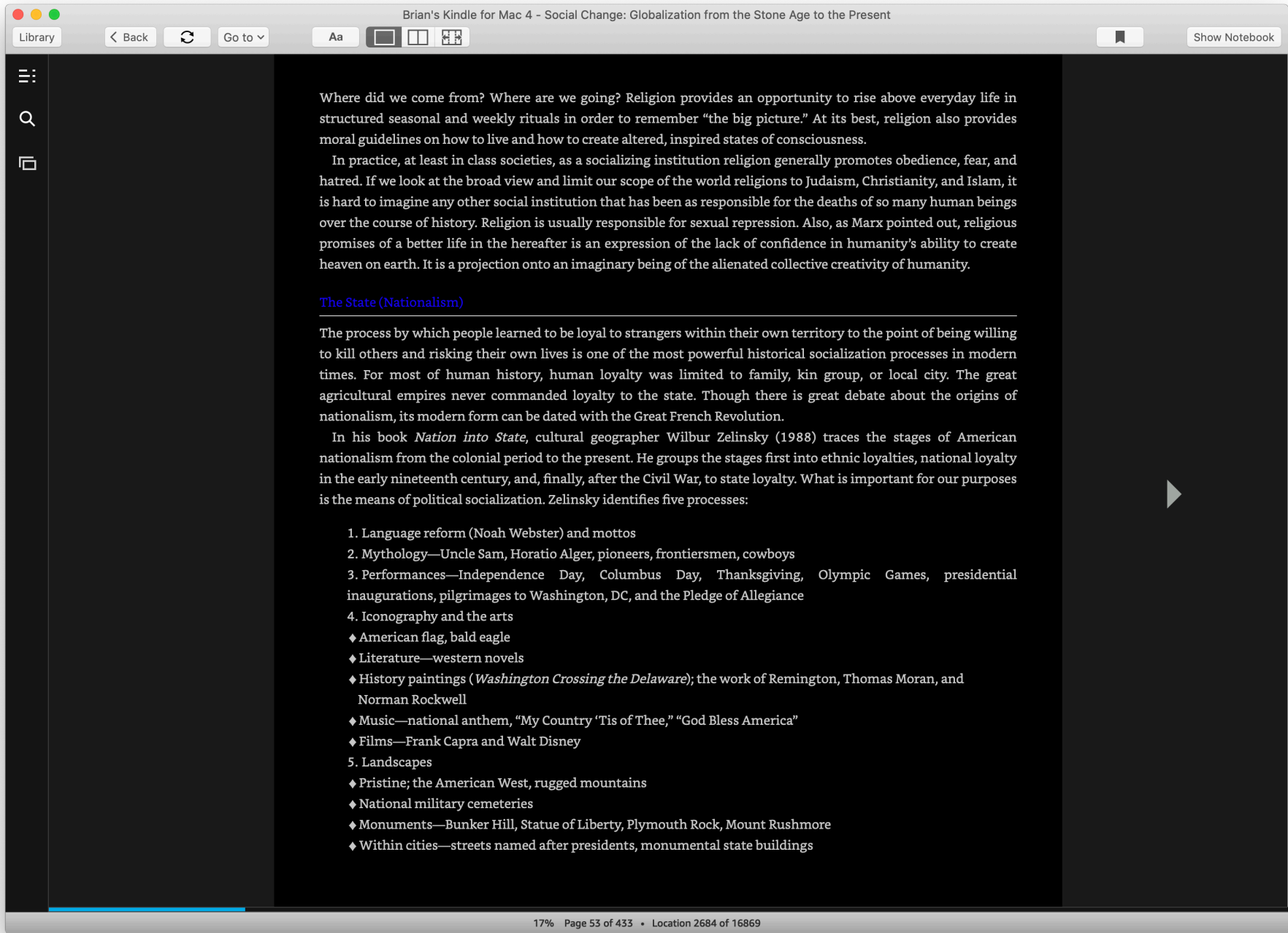
- Individual effort is preferable to collective action
- Free enterprise is the best economic system in the world
- Private monetary gain is a central and worthy objective of life
- Affluent professionals are more interesting than blue-collar or working-class white-collar service workers
- All Americans are equal, but some must prove they are worthy of equality
- Women and ethnic minorities are not really as capable, effective, or interesting as white males
- The ills of society are caused by individual malefactors
- There are some unworthy persons in our established institutions, but they usually are dealt with and eventually are deprived of their positions of responsibility

On the whole, television and movies tend to reinforce conventional socialization. In terms of what it does to individuals, social learning theorist Albert Bandura showed that watching violent programs on television impacts how violent children can become if they have a predisposition to violence and they witness violence at an age when the line between fantasy and reality is not clear in their mind (Carver and Scheier 2004).

In their text *Movies as Mass Communication*, Jowett and Linton (1989) summarize ten "articles of faith" in the movie industry. Among the articles is that in order to make a profit, entertainment is the ultimate goal. Entertainment must include diversion and escape. Why? Because the industry's assessment is that the average moviegoer is "juvenile in his needs and interests ... including voyeurism, sadomasochism, sentimentality, levity, and excitement. These needs can be fulfilled by sex, violence, romance comedy and adventure" (32). And, "These topics must be treated in a manner that *masks* the fact that they are not noble, so that the movie goer is not embarrassed or so that his self-esteem is not diminished" (32). Because movies are in competition with free television, they must treat subjects such as sex and violence in an even more sensationalistic way than television does in order to keep up.

[Religion](#)

At its best, religion provides meaningful answers to the great mystery questions: What does it mean to be human?





This political socialization process has led most Americans to make the following assumptions about the state:

- There is no indoctrination to loyalty in the United States; people are spontaneously loyal
- The state does not significantly interfere in the economy
- The state exists only to maintain order and has no interests of its own
- The law is essentially neutral and applies to all groups equally
- Its wars are always just
- Unlike any other country in the world, the United States has no political prisoners
- Unlike any other great civilization, the United States has never had an empire
- The state has files only on proven subversives and terrorists

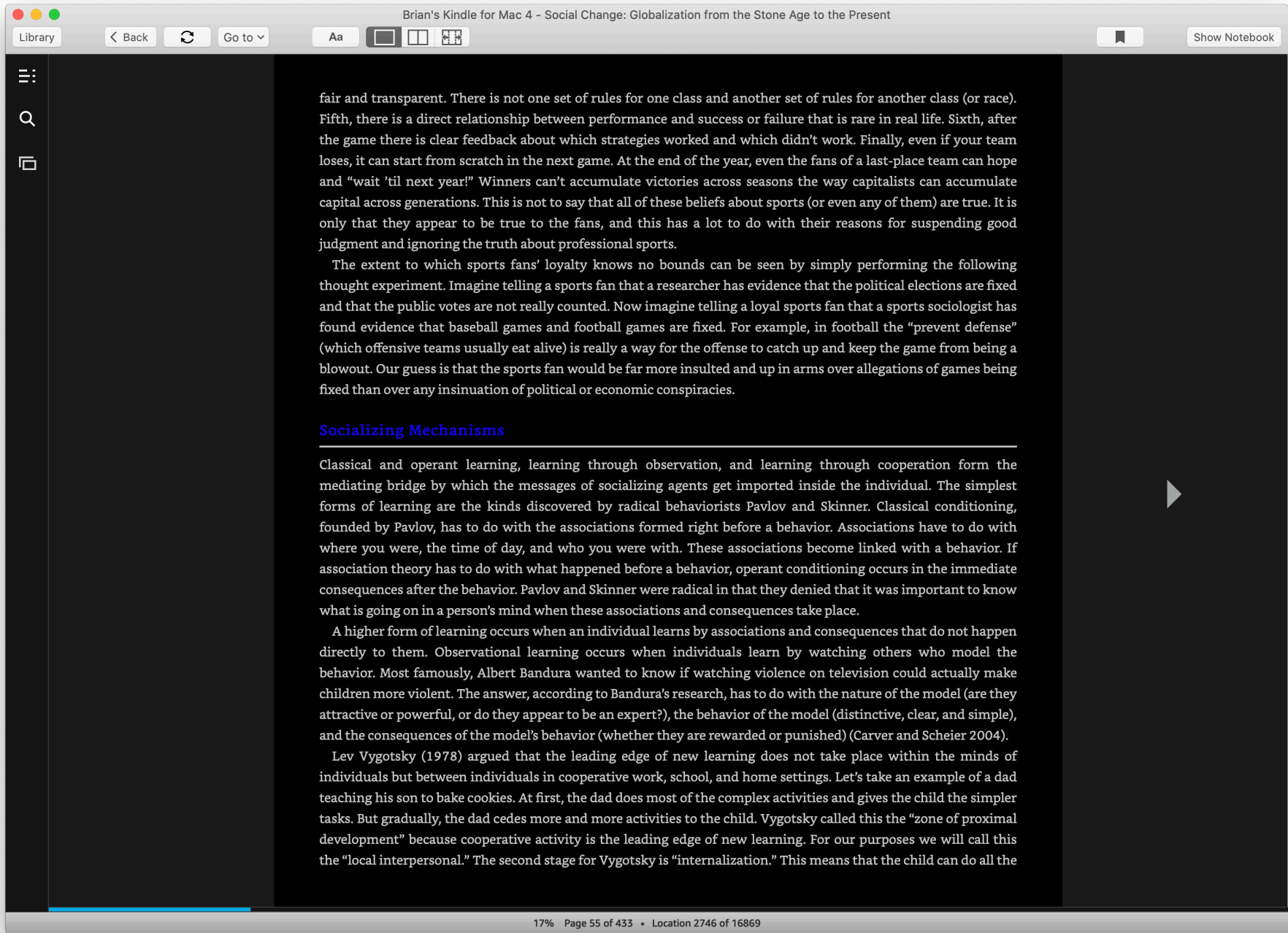
Sports

One of the benefits of *playing* sports is that it teaches a very structured and dramatic form of group cooperation, role-taking, and learning to improvise within the context of rules that everyone must abide by. These skills are amplified when the games are self-managed by kids themselves as opposed to being supervised by coaches. The pride and loyalty that can emerge from these games at least come out of actual experience and performance. The downside of participatory sports is that it creates an illusion that the chances are reasonable for poor or working-class kids to rise in social status by becoming professional athletes. For every kid who makes it to the major leagues, there are tens of thousands who do not make it and have lost many years of training for work that has more reasonable prospects.

Spectator sports have a very different socialization impact than that of playing sports. In their book *In Conflict and Order*, Eitzen and Baca Zinn (1995) argue that there is a deep relationship between loyalty to sports teams and nationalism. For example, pride in the performance of American Olympic athletes creates an “us versus them” mentality that permeates not just fans but coaches and players. The Olympic Games can be a kind of symbolic world war. Just like world wars, the suspense of the up-and-coming drama tends to create a false unity among classes, ethnicities, and regions that might otherwise have justifiable conflicts.

The convergence of sports with nationalism can be seen in the use of military metaphors to describe offensive and defensive plays, in fans standing for the national anthem, in the presentation of the colors, and in the band forming a flag or liberty bell at halftime in football games. At the level of the local professional team, sports fans engage in what seems like mindless loyalty to teams whose owners have no loyalty to their city whatsoever, and to players whose local loyalties are no different than those of the owners. Why is this? Why be loyal to a team when, for the owners and the players, the games are just business?

In his book *Social Structure and Testosterone* Theodore Kemper (1990) argues that the roles, rules, and setting for team sports resemble Adam Smith’s “Garden of Eden” model of capitalism come true. First, it appears that the teams are evenly matched, so winning and losing are truly determined by hard work and sacrifice rather than by inheritance, as in actual capitalism. Second, unlike life in industrial capitalism, in sports there is a definite resolution by the end of the game: You win or you lose. Third, unlike real life in industrial capitalism, where emotional control is required on the job, for fans the full range of emotions can be expressed. Fourth, the rules are



fair and transparent. There is not one set of rules for one class and another set of rules for another class (or race). Fifth, there is a direct relationship between performance and success or failure that is rare in real life. Sixth, after the game there is clear feedback about which strategies worked and which didn't work. Finally, even if your team loses, it can start from scratch in the next game. At the end of the year, even the fans of a last-place team can hope and "wait 'til next year!" Winners can't accumulate victories across seasons the way capitalists can accumulate capital across generations. This is not to say that all of these beliefs about sports (or even any of them) are true. It is only that they appear to be true to the fans, and this has a lot to do with their reasons for suspending good judgment and ignoring the truth about professional sports.

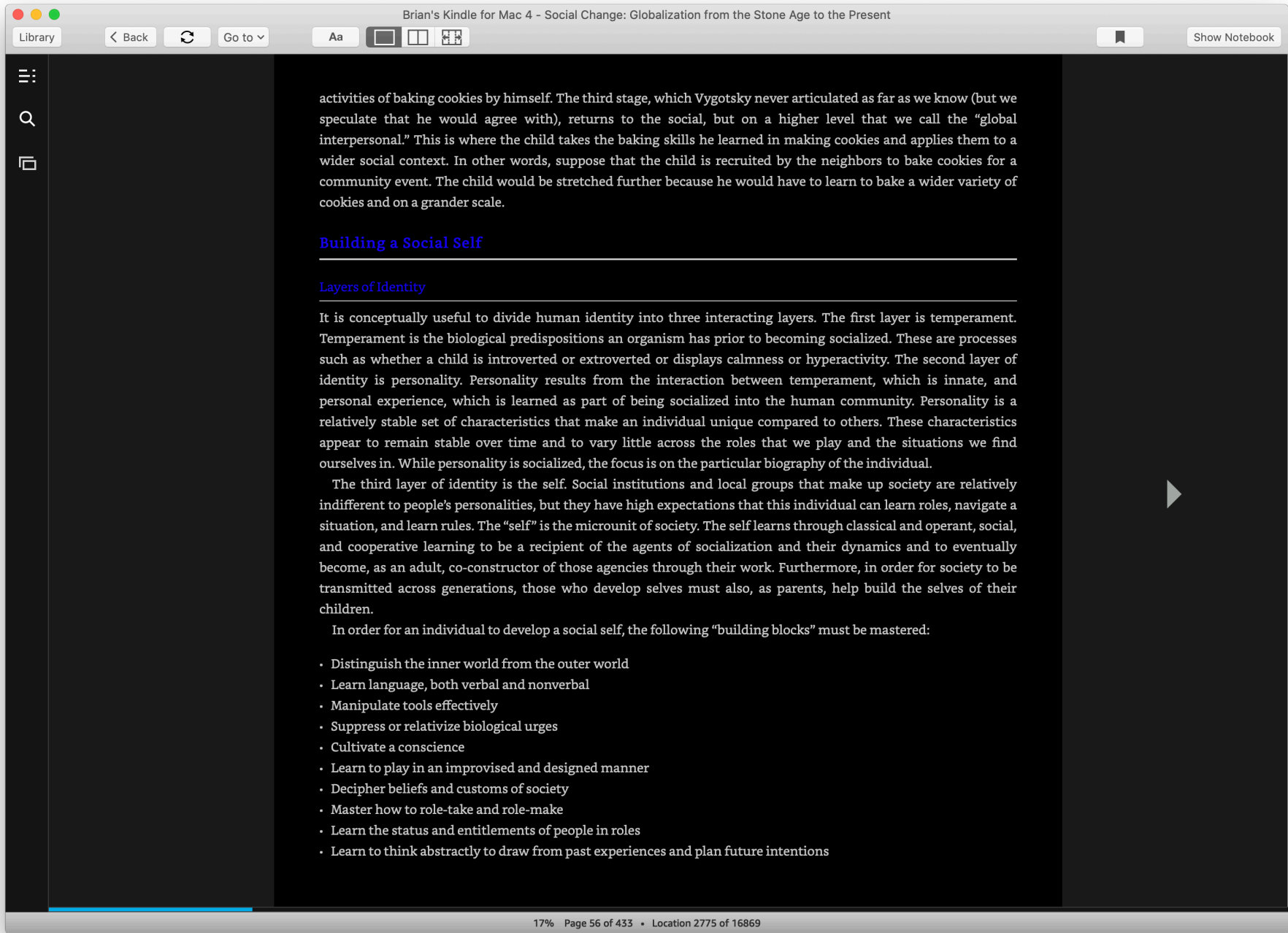
The extent to which sports fans' loyalty knows no bounds can be seen by simply performing the following thought experiment. Imagine telling a sports fan that a researcher has evidence that the political elections are fixed and that the public votes are not really counted. Now imagine telling a loyal sports fan that a sports sociologist has found evidence that baseball games and football games are fixed. For example, in football the "prevent defense" (which offensive teams usually eat alive) is really a way for the offense to catch up and keep the game from being a blowout. Our guess is that the sports fan would be far more insulted and up in arms over allegations of games being fixed than over any insinuation of political or economic conspiracies.

Socializing Mechanisms

Classical and operant learning, learning through observation, and learning through cooperation form the mediating bridge by which the messages of socializing agents get imported inside the individual. The simplest forms of learning are the kinds discovered by radical behaviorists Pavlov and Skinner. Classical conditioning, founded by Pavlov, has to do with the associations formed right before a behavior. Associations have to do with where you were, the time of day, and who you were with. These associations become linked with a behavior. If association theory has to do with what happened before a behavior, operant conditioning occurs in the immediate consequences after the behavior. Pavlov and Skinner were radical in that they denied that it was important to know what is going on in a person's mind when these associations and consequences take place.

A higher form of learning occurs when an individual learns by associations and consequences that do not happen directly to them. Observational learning occurs when individuals learn by watching others who model the behavior. Most famously, Albert Bandura wanted to know if watching violence on television could actually make children more violent. The answer, according to Bandura's research, has to do with the nature of the model (are they attractive or powerful, or do they appear to be an expert?), the behavior of the model (distinctive, clear, and simple), and the consequences of the model's behavior (whether they are rewarded or punished) (Carver and Scheier 2004).

Lev Vygotsky (1978) argued that the leading edge of new learning does not take place within the minds of individuals but between individuals in cooperative work, school, and home settings. Let's take an example of a dad teaching his son to bake cookies. At first, the dad does most of the complex activities and gives the child the simpler tasks. But gradually, the dad cedes more and more activities to the child. Vygotsky called this the "zone of proximal development" because cooperative activity is the leading edge of new learning. For our purposes we will call this the "local interpersonal." The second stage for Vygotsky is "internalization." This means that the child can do all the



activities of baking cookies by himself. The third stage, which Vygotsky never articulated as far as we know (but we speculate that he would agree with), returns to the social, but on a higher level that we call the "global interpersonal." This is where the child takes the baking skills he learned in making cookies and applies them to a wider social context. In other words, suppose that the child is recruited by the neighbors to bake cookies for a community event. The child would be stretched further because he would have to learn to bake a wider variety of cookies and on a grander scale.

Building a Social Self

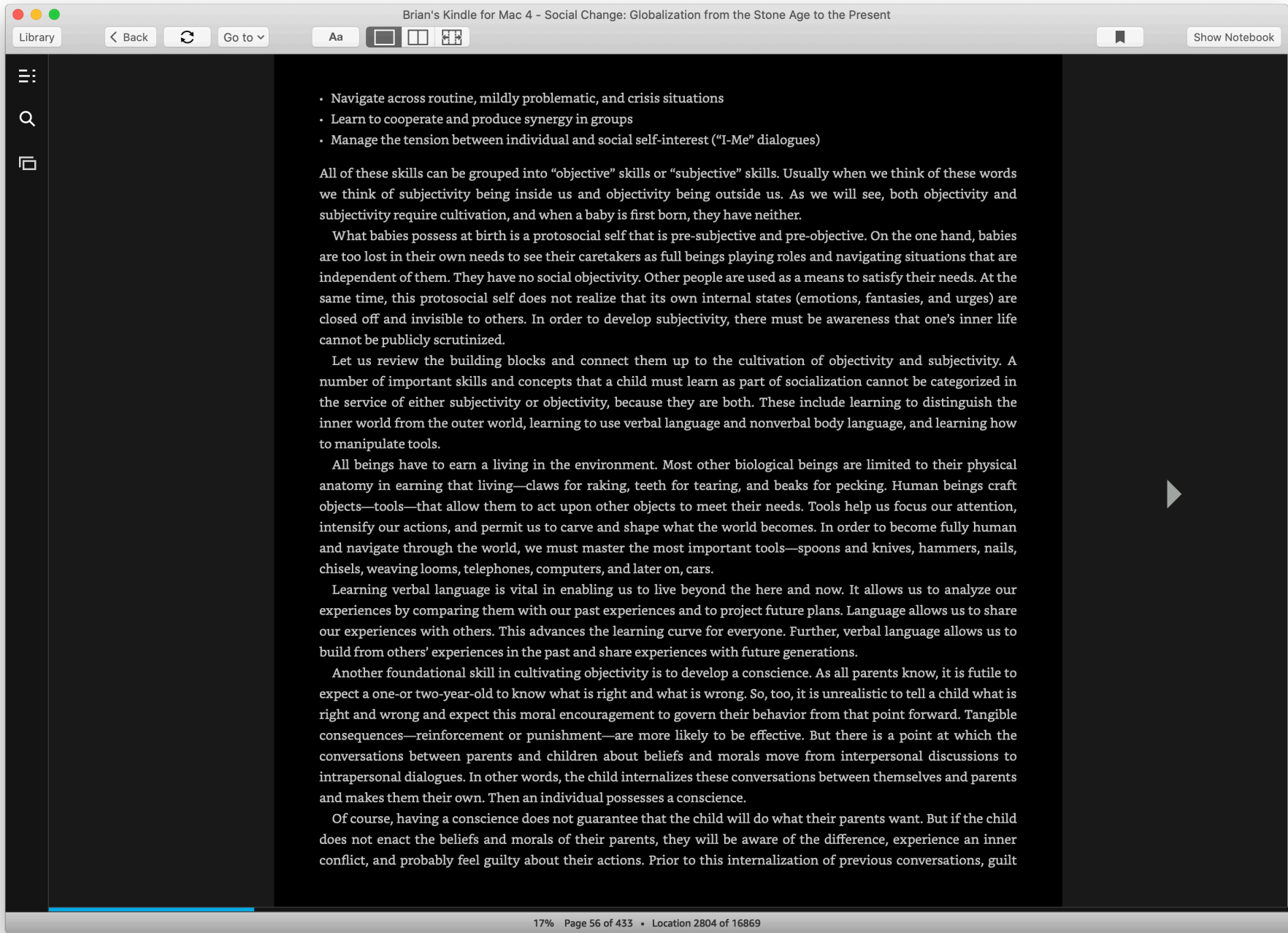
Layers of Identity

It is conceptually useful to divide human identity into three interacting layers. The first layer is temperament. Temperament is the biological predispositions an organism has prior to becoming socialized. These are processes such as whether a child is introverted or extroverted or displays calmness or hyperactivity. The second layer of identity is personality. Personality results from the interaction between temperament, which is innate, and personal experience, which is learned as part of being socialized into the human community. Personality is a relatively stable set of characteristics that make an individual unique compared to others. These characteristics appear to remain stable over time and to vary little across the roles that we play and the situations we find ourselves in. While personality is socialized, the focus is on the particular biography of the individual.

The third layer of identity is the self. Social institutions and local groups that make up society are relatively indifferent to people's personalities, but they have high expectations that this individual can learn roles, navigate a situation, and learn rules. The "self" is the microunit of society. The self learns through classical and operant, social, and cooperative learning to be a recipient of the agents of socialization and their dynamics and to eventually become, as an adult, co-creator of those agencies through their work. Furthermore, in order for society to be transmitted across generations, those who develop selves must also, as parents, help build the selves of their children.

In order for an individual to develop a social self, the following "building blocks" must be mastered:

- Distinguish the inner world from the outer world
- Learn language, both verbal and nonverbal
- Manipulate tools effectively
- Suppress or relativize biological urges
- Cultivate a conscience
- Learn to play in an improvised and designed manner
- Decipher beliefs and customs of society
- Master how to role-take and role-make
- Learn the status and entitlements of people in roles
- Learn to think abstractly to draw from past experiences and plan future intentions



- Navigate across routine, mildly problematic, and crisis situations
- Learn to cooperate and produce synergy in groups
- Manage the tension between individual and social self-interest (“I-Me” dialogues)

All of these skills can be grouped into “objective” skills or “subjective” skills. Usually when we think of these words we think of subjectivity being inside us and objectivity being outside us. As we will see, both objectivity and subjectivity require cultivation, and when a baby is first born, they have neither.

What babies possess at birth is a protosocial self that is pre-subjective and pre-objective. On the one hand, babies are too lost in their own needs to see their caretakers as full beings playing roles and navigating situations that are independent of them. They have no social objectivity. Other people are used as a means to satisfy their needs. At the same time, this protosocial self does not realize that its own internal states (emotions, fantasies, and urges) are closed off and invisible to others. In order to develop subjectivity, there must be awareness that one’s inner life cannot be publicly scrutinized.

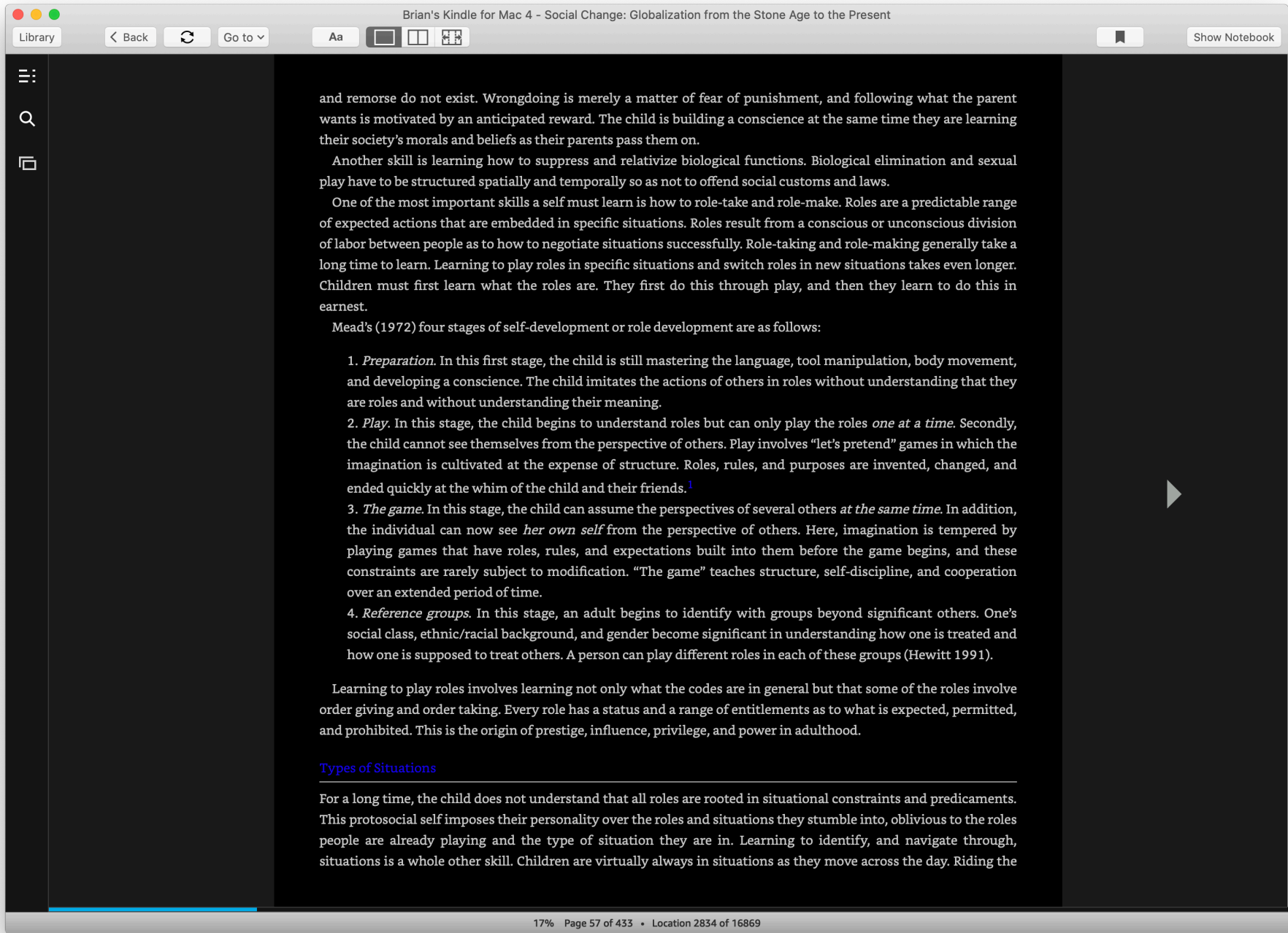
Let us review the building blocks and connect them up to the cultivation of objectivity and subjectivity. A number of important skills and concepts that a child must learn as part of socialization cannot be categorized in the service of either subjectivity or objectivity, because they are both. These include learning to distinguish the inner world from the outer world, learning to use verbal language and nonverbal body language, and learning how to manipulate tools.

All beings have to earn a living in the environment. Most other biological beings are limited to their physical anatomy in earning that living—claws for raking, teeth for tearing, and beaks for pecking. Human beings craft objects—tools—that allow them to act upon other objects to meet their needs. Tools help us focus our attention, intensify our actions, and permit us to carve and shape what the world becomes. In order to become fully human and navigate through the world, we must master the most important tools—spoons and knives, hammers, nails, chisels, weaving looms, telephones, computers, and later on, cars.

Learning verbal language is vital in enabling us to live beyond the here and now. It allows us to analyze our experiences by comparing them with our past experiences and to project future plans. Language allows us to share our experiences with others. This advances the learning curve for everyone. Further, verbal language allows us to build from others’ experiences in the past and share experiences with future generations.

Another foundational skill in cultivating objectivity is to develop a conscience. As all parents know, it is futile to expect a one- or two-year-old to know what is right and what is wrong. So, too, it is unrealistic to tell a child what is right and wrong and expect this moral encouragement to govern their behavior from that point forward. Tangible consequences—reinforcement or punishment—are more likely to be effective. But there is a point at which the conversations between parents and children about beliefs and morals move from interpersonal discussions to intrapersonal dialogues. In other words, the child internalizes these conversations between themselves and parents and makes them their own. Then an individual possesses a conscience.

Of course, having a conscience does not guarantee that the child will do what their parents want. But if the child does not enact the beliefs and morals of their parents, they will be aware of the difference, experience an inner conflict, and probably feel guilty about their actions. Prior to this internalization of previous conversations, guilt



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and remorse do not exist. Wrongdoing is merely a matter of fear of punishment, and following what the parent wants is motivated by an anticipated reward. The child is building a conscience at the same time they are learning their society's morals and beliefs as their parents pass them on.

Another skill is learning how to suppress and relativize biological functions. Biological elimination and sexual play have to be structured spatially and temporally so as not to offend social customs and laws.

One of the most important skills a self must learn is how to role-take and role-make. Roles are a predictable range of expected actions that are embedded in specific situations. Roles result from a conscious or unconscious division of labor between people as to how to negotiate situations successfully. Role-taking and role-making generally take a long time to learn. Learning to play roles in specific situations and switch roles in new situations takes even longer. Children must first learn what the roles are. They first do this through play, and then they learn to do this in earnest.

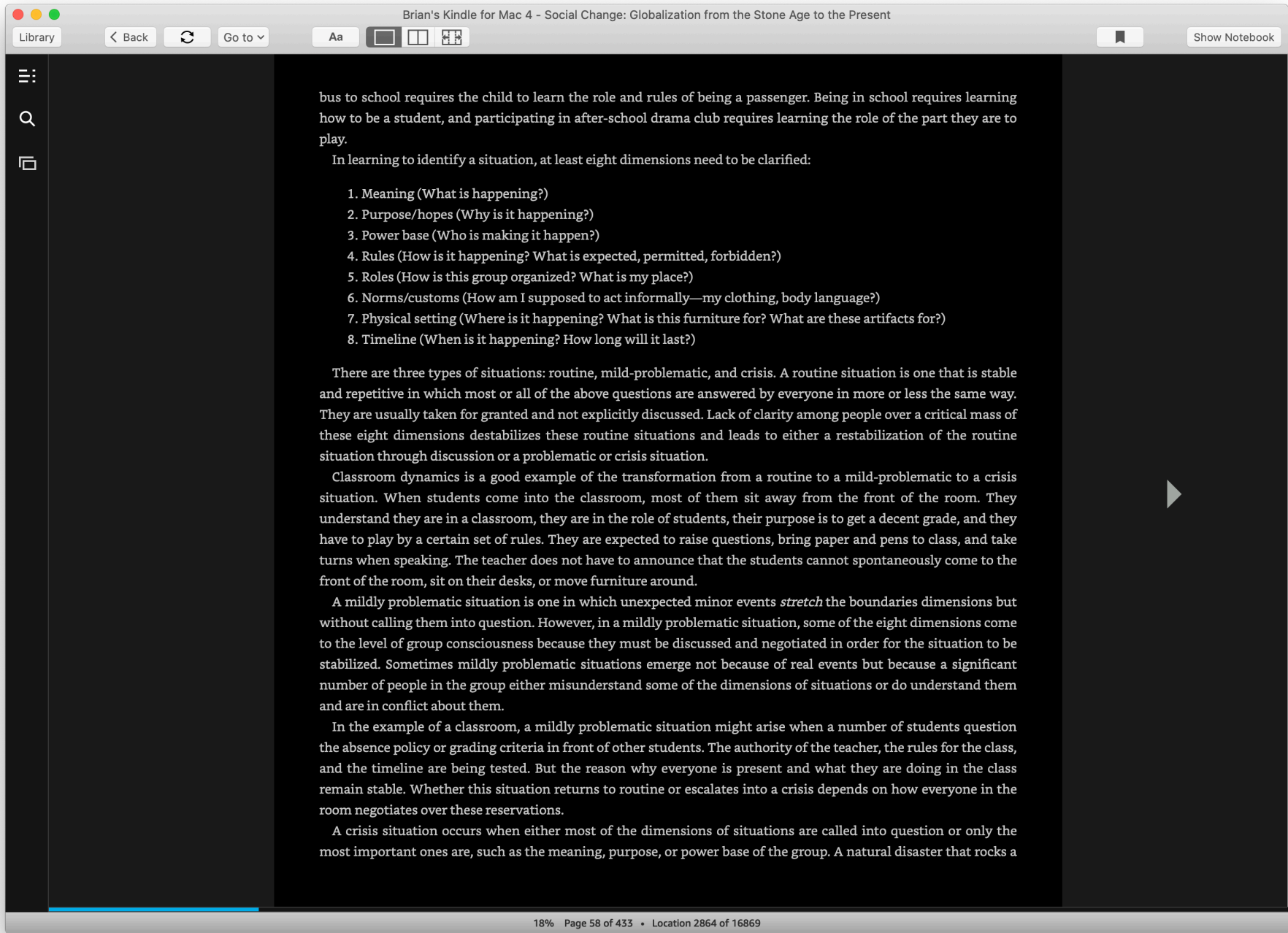
Mead's (1972) four stages of self-development or role development are as follows:

1. *Preparation*. In this first stage, the child is still mastering the language, tool manipulation, body movement, and developing a conscience. The child imitates the actions of others in roles without understanding that they are roles and without understanding their meaning.
2. *Play*. In this stage, the child begins to understand roles but can only play the roles *one at a time*. Secondly, the child cannot see themselves from the perspective of others. Play involves "let's pretend" games in which the imagination is cultivated at the expense of structure. Roles, rules, and purposes are invented, changed, and ended quickly at the whim of the child and their friends.¹
3. *The game*. In this stage, the child can assume the perspectives of several others *at the same time*. In addition, the individual can now see *her own self* from the perspective of others. Here, imagination is tempered by playing games that have roles, rules, and expectations built into them before the game begins, and these constraints are rarely subject to modification. "The game" teaches structure, self-discipline, and cooperation over an extended period of time.
4. *Reference groups*. In this stage, an adult begins to identify with groups beyond significant others. One's social class, ethnic/racial background, and gender become significant in understanding how one is treated and how one is supposed to treat others. A person can play different roles in each of these groups (Hewitt 1991).

Learning to play roles involves learning not only what the codes are in general but that some of the roles involve order giving and order taking. Every role has a status and a range of entitlements as to what is expected, permitted, and prohibited. This is the origin of prestige, influence, privilege, and power in adulthood.

[Types of Situations](#)

For a long time, the child does not understand that all roles are rooted in situational constraints and predicaments. This prosocial self imposes their personality over the roles and situations they stumble into, oblivious to the roles people are already playing and the type of situation they are in. Learning to identify, and navigate through, situations is a whole other skill. Children are virtually always in situations as they move across the day. Riding the



bus to school requires the child to learn the role and rules of being a passenger. Being in school requires learning how to be a student, and participating in after-school drama club requires learning the role of the part they are to play.

In learning to identify a situation, at least eight dimensions need to be clarified:

1. Meaning (What is happening?)
2. Purpose/hopes (Why is it happening?)
3. Power base (Who is making it happen?)
4. Rules (How is it happening? What is expected, permitted, forbidden?)
5. Roles (How is this group organized? What is my place?)
6. Norms/customs (How am I supposed to act informally—my clothing, body language?)
7. Physical setting (Where is it happening? What is this furniture for? What are these artifacts for?)
8. Timeline (When is it happening? How long will it last?)

There are three types of situations: routine, mild-problematic, and crisis. A routine situation is one that is stable and repetitive in which most or all of the above questions are answered by everyone in more or less the same way. They are usually taken for granted and not explicitly discussed. Lack of clarity among people over a critical mass of these eight dimensions destabilizes these routine situations and leads to either a restabilization of the routine situation through discussion or a problematic or crisis situation.

Classroom dynamics is a good example of the transformation from a routine to a mild-problematic to a crisis situation. When students come into the classroom, most of them sit away from the front of the room. They understand they are in a classroom, they are in the role of students, their purpose is to get a decent grade, and they have to play by a certain set of rules. They are expected to raise questions, bring paper and pens to class, and take turns when speaking. The teacher does not have to announce that the students cannot spontaneously come to the front of the room, sit on their desks, or move furniture around.

A mildly problematic situation is one in which unexpected minor events *stretch* the boundaries dimensions but without calling them into question. However, in a mildly problematic situation, some of the eight dimensions come to the level of group consciousness because they must be discussed and negotiated in order for the situation to be stabilized. Sometimes mildly problematic situations emerge not because of real events but because a significant number of people in the group either misunderstand some of the dimensions of situations or do understand them and are in conflict about them.

In the example of a classroom, a mildly problematic situation might arise when a number of students question the absence policy or grading criteria in front of other students. The authority of the teacher, the rules for the class, and the timeline are being tested. But the reason why everyone is present and what they are doing in the class remain stable. Whether this situation returns to routine or escalates into a crisis depends on how everyone in the room negotiates over these reservations.

A crisis situation occurs when either most of the dimensions of situations are called into question or only the most important ones are, such as the meaning, purpose, or power base of the group. A natural disaster that rocks a



school can immediately turn the routine situation of a classroom into a crisis. It ends the formal educational setting and forces the same group of people to renegotiate how they are to be together in a collapsing building. Because the situation has changed, all the dimensions of the situations have to be reorganized.

Most groups cooperate. The agreement to play roles has embedded in it the assumption that if we divide up the tasks into roles, the end result will be more than anyone could achieve alone. When groups do this they produce "synergy." They produce a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Even the most seemingly uncooperative and competitive groups have some level of cooperation at their foundation.

[Roles Are Not Static](#)

For a young child the fluidity of role-making seems self-evident. In pretend play, the child and their friends are constantly taking on and discarding roles. However, it is much harder to understand that adults switch roles as well. The child must learn (1) that their parents play many different roles in the course of a single day in addition to "mom" and "dad," (2) that roles are detachable from particular people (roles can be played by anyone, not just the people they know), and (3) that these multiple and detachable roles will change depending on whether a person is in a routine, mildly problematic, or crisis situation. Playing all these roles, of course, is preparation to play roles at work.

There is an important relationship between Mead's "play" and "the game" on the one hand and routine and crisis situations on the other. Designed play (Mead's "the game") socializes children to respect structure and perseverance in order to participate in routine actions. Improvised play (Mead's "play") teaches a child how to be imaginative when the group is faced with a crisis situation. When an individual is operating in a routine situation they are *role-taking*. They are entering a role that is already in place. When an individual is operating in a crisis situation they are *role-making*. They are creating the role (with others) on the spot. These skills are the grounds in everyday life for understanding that individuals, by their actions, are always creating order and conflict by conforming and being creative (see [Table 4.1](#)).

Improvised play, role-making, and learning how to navigate in crisis situations in everyday life are not just the skills needed to participate in normal adult life, but the skills required for participating in social movements, as we shall see.

Thus far, the tools that go with cultivating objectivity include playing roles and learning how to change roles as situations dictate. When a child begins to be able to take the role of the "generalized other," she develops an internalized sense that other people are objective realities that are independent of her own internal wishes, hopes, and fears.

Children come to realize that the domestic household, which they think is *the* world, is, in fact, a tiny slice of a world surrounded by many other domestic households. They may learn that the roles they master are small parts of historical structures that have come into being before their individual lifetime and may remain after they die. So a teenager doing an apprenticeship in carpentry may learn that carpenters as a role have existed for thousands of years and that the tools and materials carpenters work with have changed over the centuries.

[Table 4.1](#) Order and conflict



Order	Conflict (creativity)
Designed play	Improvised play
Routine situations	Problematic or crisis situations
Role-taking	Role-making

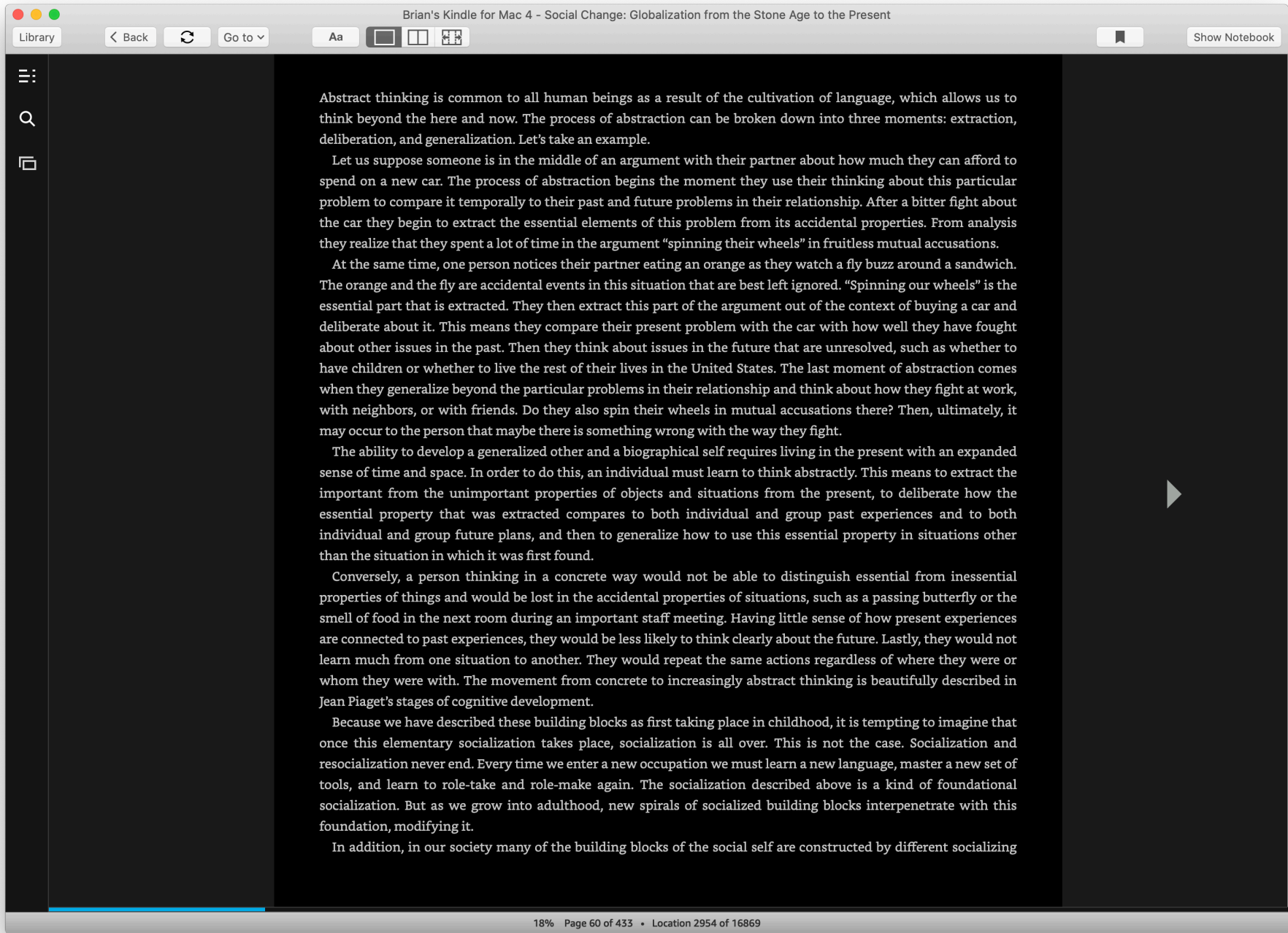
But what about an individual's "subjectivity," or what symbolic interactionists call their "biographical self"? According to Mead (1972), developing a sense of subjectivity is impossible without first understanding what it means to be objective. Once objectivity is understood, one's personal identity can be seen in perspective, as relatively small but also unique. The protosocial self is not born with subjectivity. This is because the child believes (1) that their inner world is transparent to others and (2) that the way they experience the world is the way others experience the world. Subjectivity is developed when the child realizes that their inner world is opaque and not on display to others to experience, and that others are not simply an audience for the child's personal dramas. Other people have individual lives that are unique to them, theirs to make for better or worse. This awakening of subjectivity allows the child to think about, fantasize about, and act toward themselves, not as the center of the universe but as a unique being among other unique beings.

Once an individual develops a picture of an independent objective world and a distinct subjective world, a unique problem presents itself. An understanding of the objective world means that there are stable expectations that social groups and the situation they are embedded in have for the individual. Yet at the same time, because the individual understands how to navigate these social roles and situations, they have a greater chance of transforming them in the service of what they want. The problem now is how to reconcile individual and social self-interest.

Once this conflict is recognized, internal negotiations must take place. Mead (1972) calls the part of the individual that is spontaneous and active the "I" part. This part of the self represents what the individual brings to the table of social situations. But the self is also an object about which others have expectations. As part of conscience-building, the individual develops an internalized set of expectations of what others may want. Mead calls this the individual's "Me" part of the self. Mead calls the subsequent negotiation between these two parts the "I-Me" dialogue. These two sides both cooperate and compete with each other; they haggle, trade, and plead with each other when in roles and situations. Here is an example.

Suppose an individual in a tribal society sees a member of their kin group headed toward their hut expecting to visit and be fed. The "I" part of the potential host says, "Here comes so-and-so, the loafer, expecting a handout. Let's leave quickly so we don't have to entertain him." The "Me" part says, "No, he is our kinsman and I am responsible for treating him as one of our own." The "I" part counters with, "But he is such a freeloader, he wouldn't do the same for me." The "Me" part counters with, "But the members of his family would be upset with me, and they are not loafers. I don't want to start trouble with them." The "I" part tries a compromise: "Maybe I can stay with him for a few minutes and pretend to be sick in order to send him on his way."

Learning to Think Abstractly



Abstract thinking is common to all human beings as a result of the cultivation of language, which allows us to think beyond the here and now. The process of abstraction can be broken down into three moments: extraction, deliberation, and generalization. Let's take an example.

Let us suppose someone is in the middle of an argument with their partner about how much they can afford to spend on a new car. The process of abstraction begins the moment they use their thinking about this particular problem to compare it temporally to their past and future problems in their relationship. After a bitter fight about the car they begin to extract the essential elements of this problem from its accidental properties. From analysis they realize that they spent a lot of time in the argument "spinning their wheels" in fruitless mutual accusations.

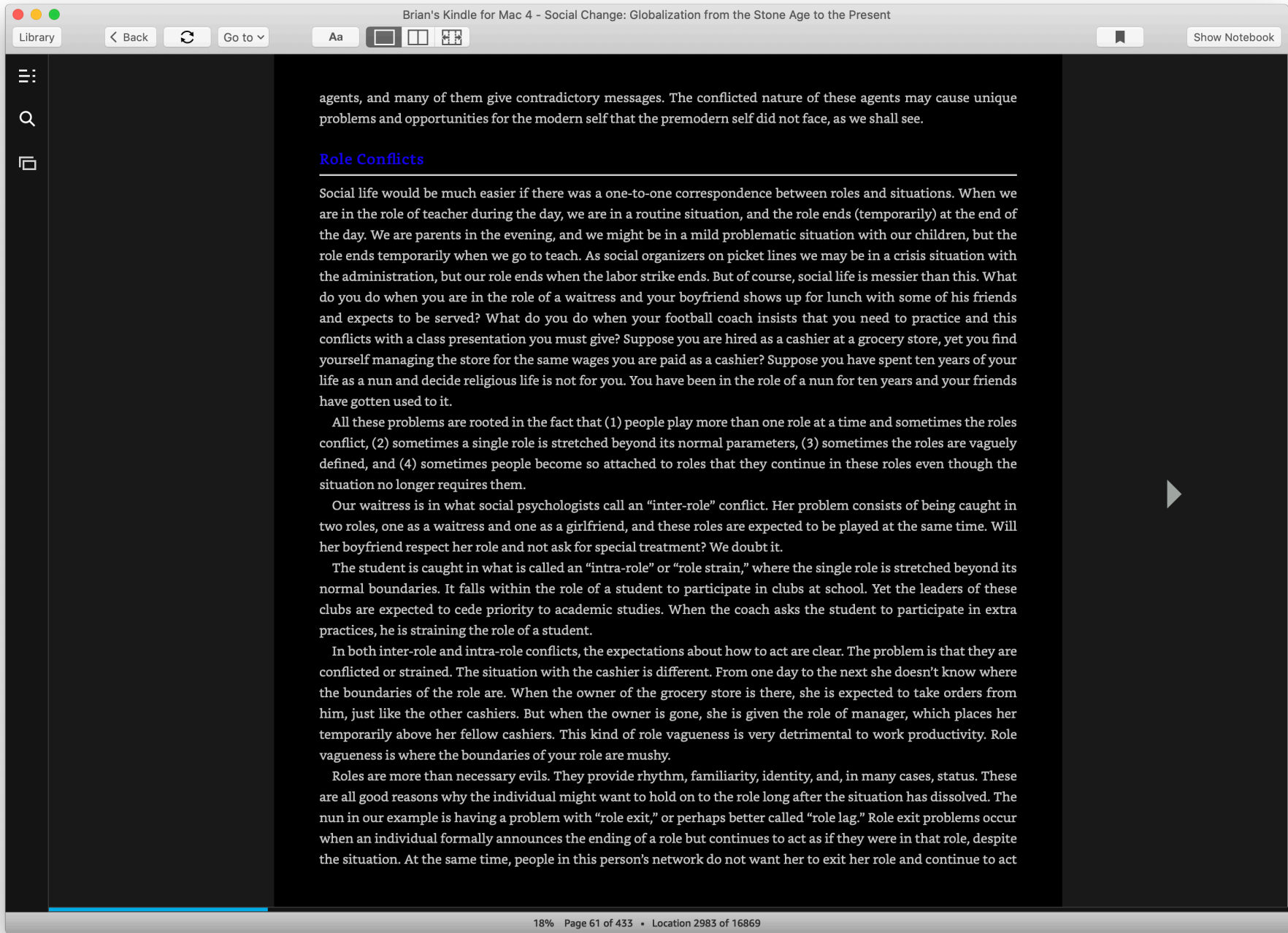
At the same time, one person notices their partner eating an orange as they watch a fly buzz around a sandwich. The orange and the fly are accidental events in this situation that are best left ignored. "Spinning our wheels" is the essential part that is extracted. They then extract this part of the argument out of the context of buying a car and deliberate about it. This means they compare their present problem with the car with how well they have fought about other issues in the past. Then they think about issues in the future that are unresolved, such as whether to have children or whether to live the rest of their lives in the United States. The last moment of abstraction comes when they generalize beyond the particular problems in their relationship and think about how they fight at work, with neighbors, or with friends. Do they also spin their wheels in mutual accusations there? Then, ultimately, it may occur to the person that maybe there is something wrong with the way they fight.

The ability to develop a generalized other and a biographical self requires living in the present with an expanded sense of time and space. In order to do this, an individual must learn to think abstractly. This means to extract the important from the unimportant properties of objects and situations from the present, to deliberate how the essential property that was extracted compares to both individual and group past experiences and to both individual and group future plans, and then to generalize how to use this essential property in situations other than the situation in which it was first found.

Conversely, a person thinking in a concrete way would not be able to distinguish essential from inessential properties of things and would be lost in the accidental properties of situations, such as a passing butterfly or the smell of food in the next room during an important staff meeting. Having little sense of how present experiences are connected to past experiences, they would be less likely to think clearly about the future. Lastly, they would not learn much from one situation to another. They would repeat the same actions regardless of where they were or whom they were with. The movement from concrete to increasingly abstract thinking is beautifully described in Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development.

Because we have described these building blocks as first taking place in childhood, it is tempting to imagine that once this elementary socialization takes place, socialization is all over. This is not the case. Socialization and resocialization never end. Every time we enter a new occupation we must learn a new language, master a new set of tools, and learn to role-take and role-make again. The socialization described above is a kind of foundational socialization. But as we grow into adulthood, new spirals of socialized building blocks interpenetrate with this foundation, modifying it.

In addition, in our society many of the building blocks of the social self are constructed by different socializing



agents, and many of them give contradictory messages. The conflicted nature of these agents may cause unique problems and opportunities for the modern self that the premodern self did not face, as we shall see.

Role Conflicts

Social life would be much easier if there was a one-to-one correspondence between roles and situations. When we are in the role of teacher during the day, we are in a routine situation, and the role ends (temporarily) at the end of the day. We are parents in the evening, and we might be in a mild problematic situation with our children, but the role ends temporarily when we go to teach. As social organizers on picket lines we may be in a crisis situation with the administration, but our role ends when the labor strike ends. But of course, social life is messier than this. What do you do when you are in the role of a waitress and your boyfriend shows up for lunch with some of his friends and expects to be served? What do you do when your football coach insists that you need to practice and this conflicts with a class presentation you must give? Suppose you are hired as a cashier at a grocery store, yet you find yourself managing the store for the same wages you are paid as a cashier? Suppose you have spent ten years of your life as a nun and decide religious life is not for you. You have been in the role of a nun for ten years and your friends have gotten used to it.

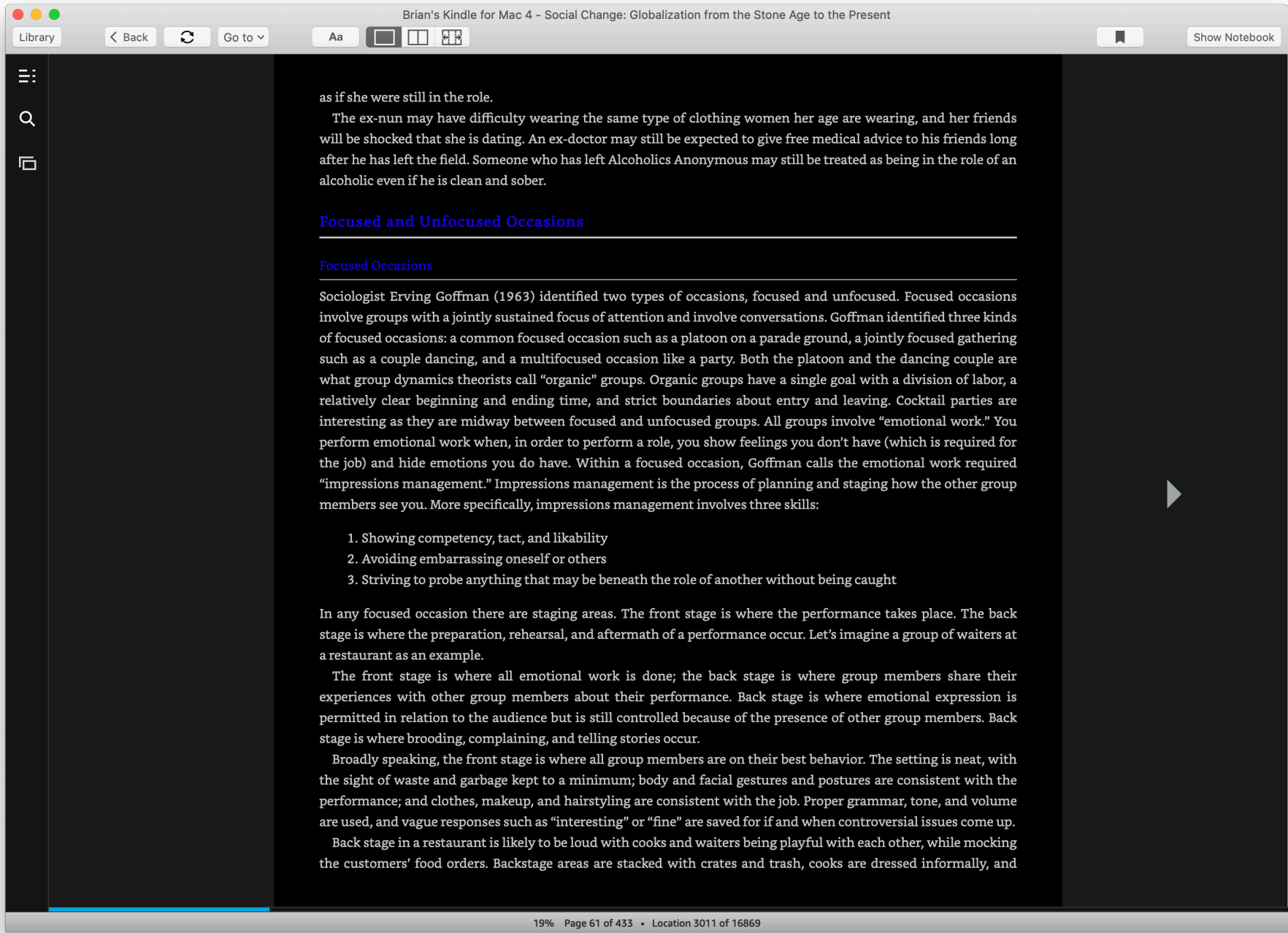
All these problems are rooted in the fact that (1) people play more than one role at a time and sometimes the roles conflict, (2) sometimes a single role is stretched beyond its normal parameters, (3) sometimes the roles are vaguely defined, and (4) sometimes people become so attached to roles that they continue in these roles even though the situation no longer requires them.

Our waitress is in what social psychologists call an "inter-role" conflict. Her problem consists of being caught in two roles, one as a waitress and one as a girlfriend, and these roles are expected to be played at the same time. Will her boyfriend respect her role and not ask for special treatment? We doubt it.

The student is caught in what is called an "intra-role" or "role strain," where the single role is stretched beyond its normal boundaries. It falls within the role of a student to participate in clubs at school. Yet the leaders of these clubs are expected to cede priority to academic studies. When the coach asks the student to participate in extra practices, he is straining the role of a student.

In both inter-role and intra-role conflicts, the expectations about how to act are clear. The problem is that they are conflicted or strained. The situation with the cashier is different. From one day to the next she doesn't know where the boundaries of the role are. When the owner of the grocery store is there, she is expected to take orders from him, just like the other cashiers. But when the owner is gone, she is given the role of manager, which places her temporarily above her fellow cashiers. This kind of role vagueness is very detrimental to work productivity. Role vagueness is where the boundaries of your role are mushy.

Roles are more than necessary evils. They provide rhythm, familiarity, identity, and, in many cases, status. These are all good reasons why the individual might want to hold on to the role long after the situation has dissolved. The nun in our example is having a problem with "role exit," or perhaps better called "role lag." Role exit problems occur when an individual formally announces the ending of a role but continues to act as if they were in that role, despite the situation. At the same time, people in this person's network do not want her to exit her role and continue to act



as if she were still in the role.

The ex-nun may have difficulty wearing the same type of clothing women her age are wearing, and her friends will be shocked that she is dating. An ex-doctor may still be expected to give free medical advice to his friends long after he has left the field. Someone who has left Alcoholics Anonymous may still be treated as being in the role of an alcoholic even if he is clean and sober.

Focused and Unfocused Occasions

Focused Occasions

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) identified two types of occasions, focused and unfocused. Focused occasions involve groups with a jointly sustained focus of attention and involve conversations. Goffman identified three kinds of focused occasions: a common focused occasion such as a platoon on a parade ground, a jointly focused gathering such as a couple dancing, and a multifocused occasion like a party. Both the platoon and the dancing couple are what group dynamics theorists call "organic" groups. Organic groups have a single goal with a division of labor, a relatively clear beginning and ending time, and strict boundaries about entry and leaving. Cocktail parties are interesting as they are midway between focused and unfocused groups. All groups involve "emotional work." You perform emotional work when, in order to perform a role, you show feelings you don't have (which is required for the job) and hide emotions you do have. Within a focused occasion, Goffman calls the emotional work required "impressions management." Impressions management is the process of planning and staging how the other group members see you. More specifically, impressions management involves three skills:

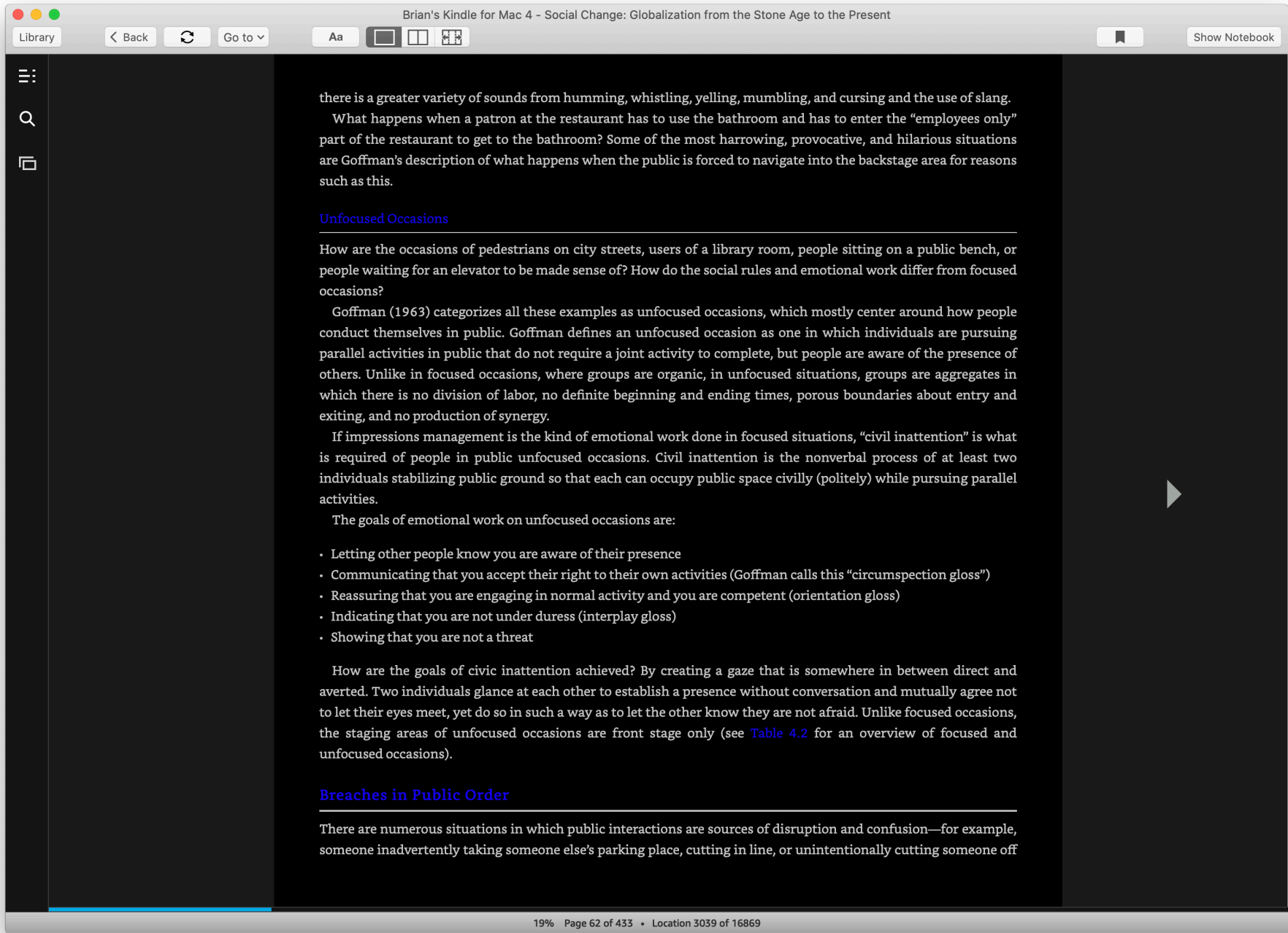
1. Showing competency, tact, and likability
2. Avoiding embarrassing oneself or others
3. Striving to probe anything that may be beneath the role of another without being caught

In any focused occasion there are staging areas. The front stage is where the performance takes place. The back stage is where the preparation, rehearsal, and aftermath of a performance occur. Let's imagine a group of waiters at a restaurant as an example.

The front stage is where all emotional work is done; the back stage is where group members share their experiences with other group members about their performance. Back stage is where emotional expression is permitted in relation to the audience but is still controlled because of the presence of other group members. Back stage is where brooding, complaining, and telling stories occur.

Broadly speaking, the front stage is where all group members are on their best behavior. The setting is neat, with the sight of waste and garbage kept to a minimum; body and facial gestures and postures are consistent with the performance; and clothes, makeup, and hairstyling are consistent with the job. Proper grammar, tone, and volume are used, and vague responses such as "interesting" or "fine" are saved for if and when controversial issues come up.

Back stage in a restaurant is likely to be loud with cooks and waiters being playful with each other, while mocking the customers' food orders. Backstage areas are stacked with crates and trash, cooks are dressed informally, and



there is a greater variety of sounds from humming, whistling, yelling, mumbling, and cursing and the use of slang.

What happens when a patron at the restaurant has to use the bathroom and has to enter the “employees only” part of the restaurant to get to the bathroom? Some of the most harrowing, provocative, and hilarious situations are Goffman's description of what happens when the public is forced to navigate into the backstage area for reasons such as this.

Unfocused Occasions

How are the occasions of pedestrians on city streets, users of a library room, people sitting on a public bench, or people waiting for an elevator to be made sense of? How do the social rules and emotional work differ from focused occasions?

Goffman (1963) categorizes all these examples as unfocused occasions, which mostly center around how people conduct themselves in public. Goffman defines an unfocused occasion as one in which individuals are pursuing parallel activities in public that do not require a joint activity to complete, but people are aware of the presence of others. Unlike in focused occasions, where groups are organic, in unfocused situations, groups are aggregates in which there is no division of labor, no definite beginning and ending times, porous boundaries about entry and exiting, and no production of synergy.

If impressions management is the kind of emotional work done in focused situations, “civil inattention” is what is required of people in public unfocused occasions. Civil inattention is the nonverbal process of at least two individuals stabilizing public ground so that each can occupy public space civilly (politely) while pursuing parallel activities.

The goals of emotional work on unfocused occasions are:

- Letting other people know you are aware of their presence
- Communicating that you accept their right to their own activities (Goffman calls this “circumspection gloss”)
- Reassuring that you are engaging in normal activity and you are competent (orientation gloss)
- Indicating that you are not under duress (interplay gloss)
- Showing that you are not a threat

How are the goals of civic inattention achieved? By creating a gaze that is somewhere in between direct and averted. Two individuals glance at each other to establish a presence without conversation and mutually agree not to let their eyes meet, yet do so in such a way as to let the other know they are not afraid. Unlike focused occasions, the staging areas of unfocused occasions are front stage only (see Table 4.2 for an overview of focused and unfocused occasions).

Breaches in Public Order

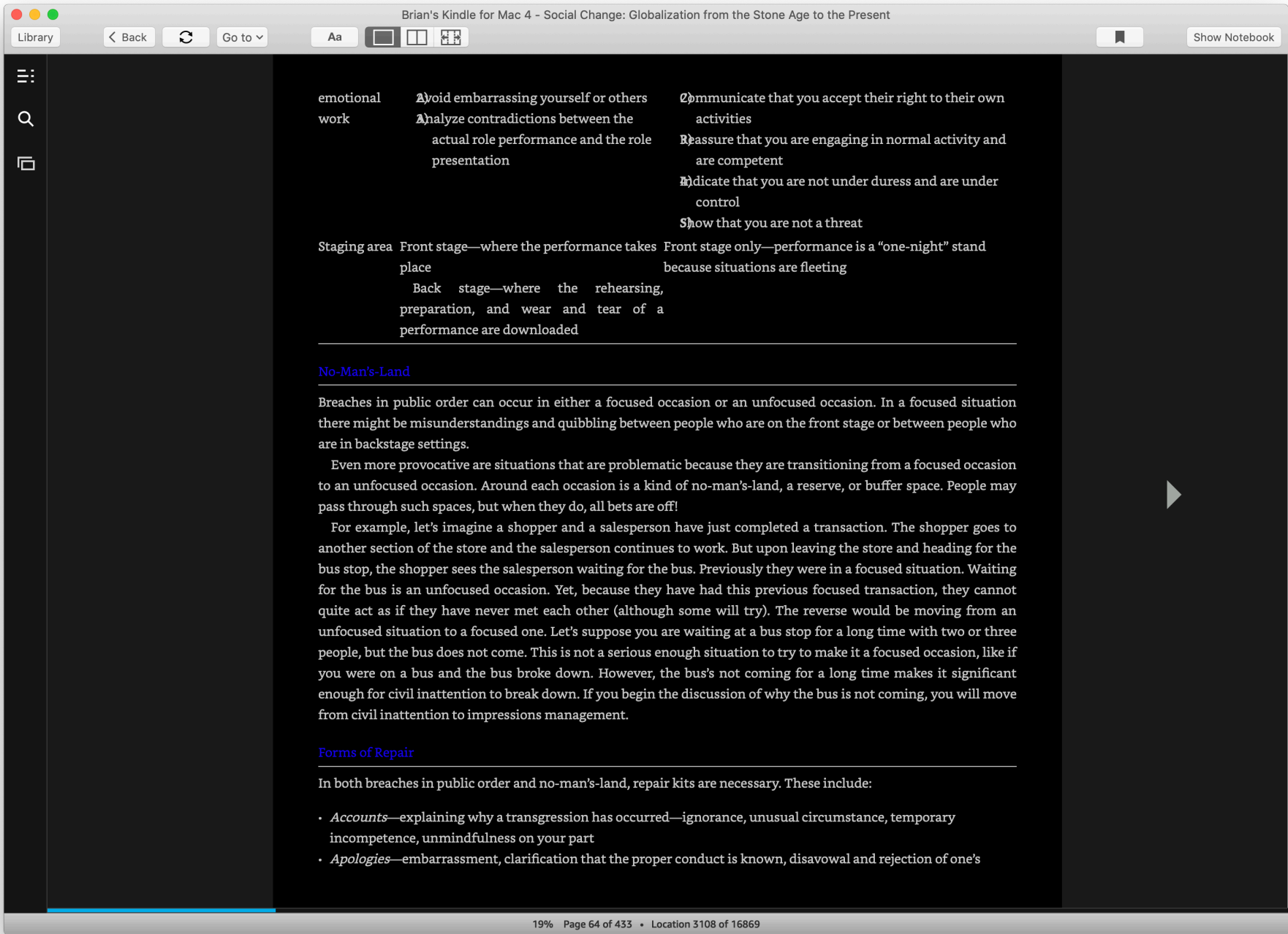
There are numerous situations in which public interactions are sources of disruption and confusion—for example, someone inadvertently taking someone else's parking place, cutting in line, or unintentionally cutting someone off



on the freeway. At least in the United States, waiting in line is a situation of unfocused occasion. If you stand too far to the side or too far back, questions may arise as to whether you are really in line. Someone may have to break the ice and inquire. Yet there is an unstated agreed-upon distance that is acceptable and a distance that is not. Another breach is being caught in public talking to yourself, that is, thinking out loud and then finding out someone else is there. People with stigmas such as being in a wheelchair or having epilepsy are vulnerable to transgressions of the rules of civil inattention. In asylums, in what Goffman (1963) calls “total situations,” inmates may be subject to specific forms of material and symbolic degradation in which normal rules of forms of tact and respect are violated in creating an enforced infantilism.

Table 4.2 Types of occasions

	Category of Focused occasions	Unfocused or diffused occasions
comparison		
Definition	A jointly sustained focus of attention that probably involves conversations	People are pursuing parallel activities but are aware of each other's presence. No conversation—or small talk at the most—is the rule.
Type of group	Organic groups—single goal with a division of labor, relatively clear beginning and ending times, strict boundaries about entering and leaving, and production of synergy	Aggregates—many goals or a single goal that requires no division of labor, no definite beginning or ending times, porous boundaries about entering and leaving, and no production of synergy
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game of tennis • Dancing couple • Music band • A professional sports team • Interacting tasks of workers • Group panels assembled to interview a potential new worker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrians on a city street • Users of a library room • People waiting in a doctor's office • People sitting on a park bench • People in a public restroom • People waiting for a train demolished • People watching a building being • People standing in an elevator
Type of emotional work	Impressions management—the process of planning and managing how others see you in focused occasions	Civil inattention—the process of stabilizing public ground so that you let others know you intend to be in the space, while respecting their right to occupy the same space. Communicate this using nonverbal analogical messages. A gaze in between direct and averted—passers-by glance at each other but mutually agree not to let their eyes meet and do so in a way that lets each know that the other is not afraid.
Goals of	Show competence, tact, likability	Let other people know you are aware of their presence



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emotional work	Avoid embarrassing yourself or others	Communicate that you accept their right to their own activities
	Analyze contradictions between the actual role performance and the role presentation	Reassure that you are engaging in normal activity and are competent
		Indicate that you are not under duress and are under control
		Show that you are not a threat
Staging area	Front stage—where the performance takes place	Front stage only—performance is a “one-night” stand because situations are fleeting
	Back stage—where the rehearsing, preparation, and wear and tear of a performance are downloaded	

No-Man's-Land

Breaches in public order can occur in either a focused occasion or an unfocused occasion. In a focused situation there might be misunderstandings and quibbling between people who are on the front stage or between people who are in backstage settings.

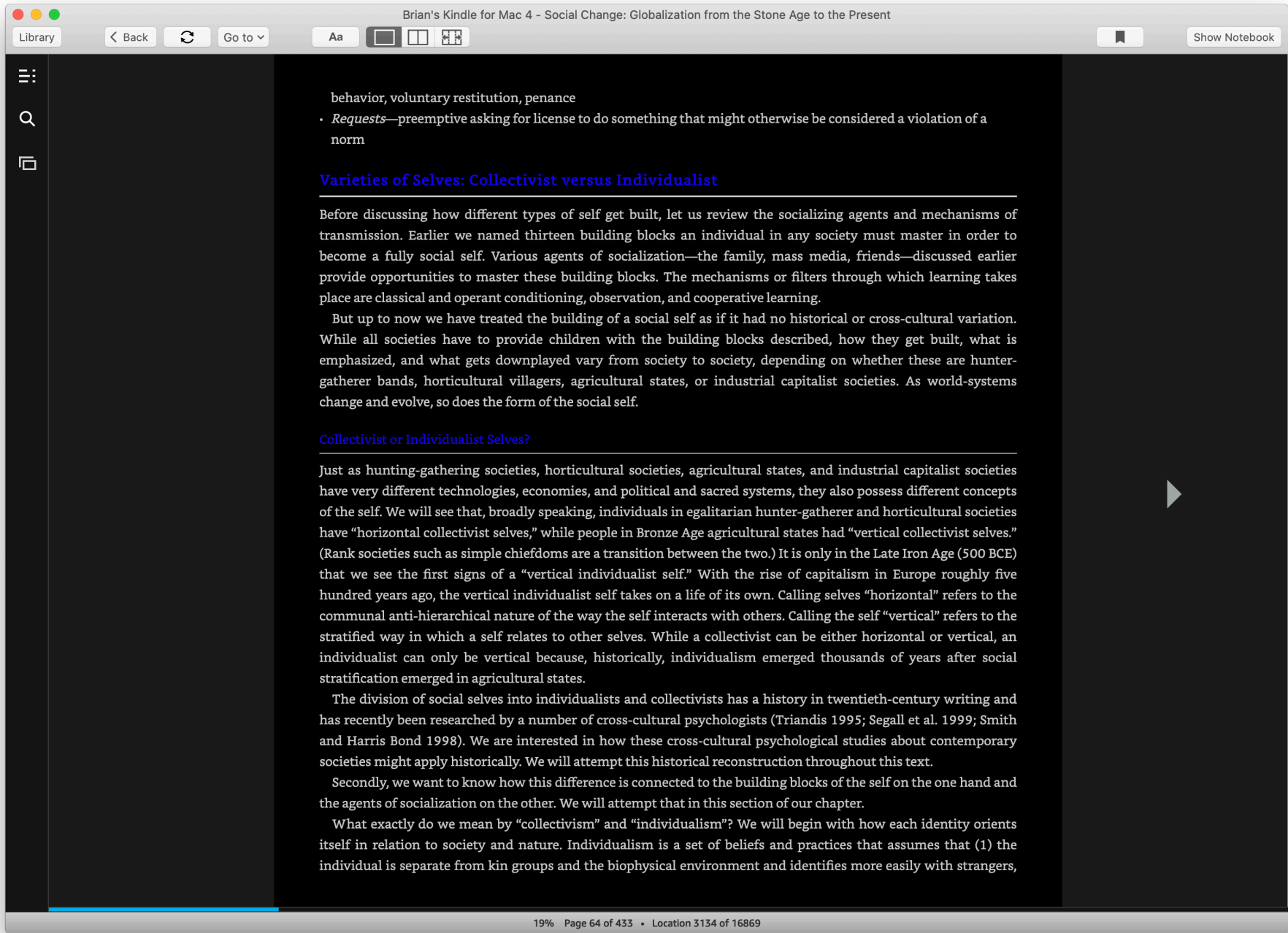
Even more provocative are situations that are problematic because they are transitioning from a focused occasion to an unfocused occasion. Around each occasion is a kind of no-man's-land, a reserve, or buffer space. People may pass through such spaces, but when they do, all bets are off!

For example, let's imagine a shopper and a salesperson have just completed a transaction. The shopper goes to another section of the store and the salesperson continues to work. But upon leaving the store and heading for the bus stop, the shopper sees the salesperson waiting for the bus. Previously they were in a focused situation. Waiting for the bus is an unfocused occasion. Yet, because they have had this previous focused transaction, they cannot quite act as if they have never met each other (although some will try). The reverse would be moving from an unfocused situation to a focused one. Let's suppose you are waiting at a bus stop for a long time with two or three people, but the bus does not come. This is not a serious enough situation to try to make it a focused occasion, like if you were on a bus and the bus broke down. However, the bus's not coming for a long time makes it significant enough for civil inattention to break down. If you begin the discussion of why the bus is not coming, you will move from civil inattention to impressions management.

Forms of Repair

In both breaches in public order and no-man's-land, repair kits are necessary. These include:

- *Accounts*—explaining why a transgression has occurred—ignorance, unusual circumstance, temporary incompetence, unmindfulness on your part
- *Apologies*—embarrassment, clarification that the proper conduct is known, disavowal and rejection of one's



behavior, voluntary restitution, penance

- *Requests*—preemptive asking for license to do something that might otherwise be considered a violation of a norm

Varieties of Selves: Collectivist versus Individualist

Before discussing how different types of self get built, let us review the socializing agents and mechanisms of transmission. Earlier we named thirteen building blocks an individual in any society must master in order to become a fully social self. Various agents of socialization—the family, mass media, friends—discussed earlier provide opportunities to master these building blocks. The mechanisms or filters through which learning takes place are classical and operant conditioning, observation, and cooperative learning.

But up to now we have treated the building of a social self as if it had no historical or cross-cultural variation. While all societies have to provide children with the building blocks described, how they get built, what is emphasized, and what gets downplayed vary from society to society, depending on whether these are hunter-gatherer bands, horticultural villagers, agricultural states, or industrial capitalist societies. As world-systems change and evolve, so does the form of the social self.

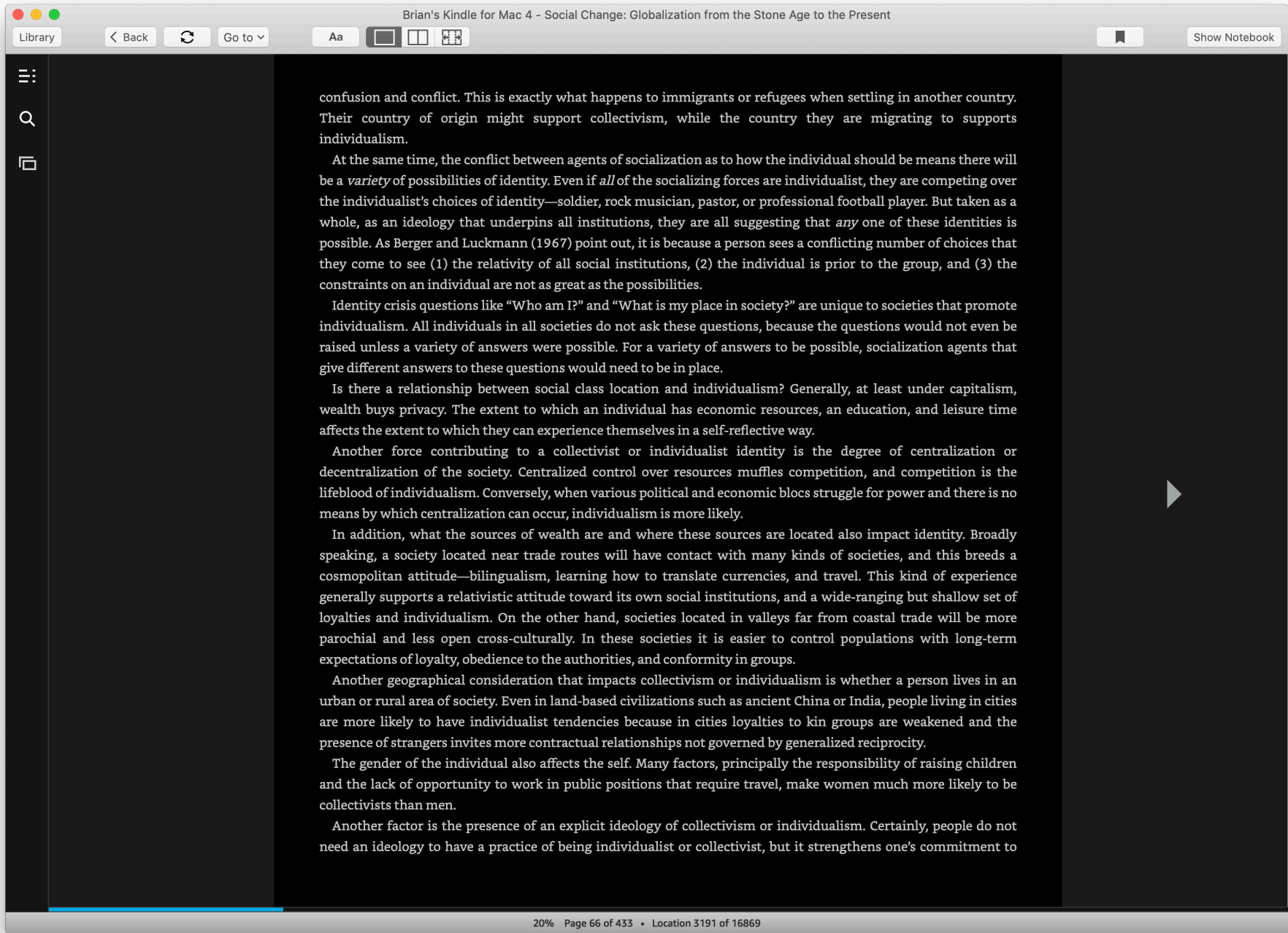
Collectivist or Individualist Selves?

Just as hunting-gathering societies, horticultural societies, agricultural states, and industrial capitalist societies have very different technologies, economies, and political and sacred systems, they also possess different concepts of the self. We will see that, broadly speaking, individuals in egalitarian hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies have “horizontal collectivist selves,” while people in Bronze Age agricultural states had “vertical collectivist selves.” (Rank societies such as simple chiefdoms are a transition between the two.) It is only in the Late Iron Age (500 BCE) that we see the first signs of a “vertical individualist self.” With the rise of capitalism in Europe roughly five hundred years ago, the vertical individualist self takes on a life of its own. Calling selves “horizontal” refers to the communal anti-hierarchical nature of the way the self interacts with others. Calling the self “vertical” refers to the stratified way in which a self relates to other selves. While a collectivist can be either horizontal or vertical, an individualist can only be vertical because, historically, individualism emerged thousands of years after social stratification emerged in agricultural states.

The division of social selves into individualists and collectivists has a history in twentieth-century writing and has recently been researched by a number of cross-cultural psychologists (Triandis 1995; Segall et al. 1999; Smith and Harris Bond 1998). We are interested in how these cross-cultural psychological studies about contemporary societies might apply historically. We will attempt this historical reconstruction throughout this text.

Secondly, we want to know how this difference is connected to the building blocks of the self on the one hand and the agents of socialization on the other. We will attempt that in this section of our chapter.

What exactly do we mean by “collectivism” and “individualism”? We will begin with how each identity orients itself in relation to society and nature. Individualism is a set of beliefs and practices that assumes that (1) the individual is separate from kin groups and the biophysical environment and identifies more easily with strangers,



confusion and conflict. This is exactly what happens to immigrants or refugees when settling in another country. Their country of origin might support collectivism, while the country they are migrating to supports individualism.

At the same time, the conflict between agents of socialization as to how the individual should be means there will be a *variety* of possibilities of identity. Even if *all* of the socializing forces are individualist, they are competing over the individualist's choices of identity—soldier, rock musician, pastor, or professional football player. But taken as a whole, as an ideology that underpins all institutions, they are all suggesting that *any* one of these identities is possible. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out, it is because a person sees a conflicting number of choices that they come to see (1) the relativity of all social institutions, (2) the individual is prior to the group, and (3) the constraints on an individual are not as great as the possibilities.

Identity crisis questions like “Who am I?” and “What is my place in society?” are unique to societies that promote individualism. All individuals in all societies do not ask these questions, because the questions would not even be raised unless a variety of answers were possible. For a variety of answers to be possible, socialization agents that give different answers to these questions would need to be in place.

Is there a relationship between social class location and individualism? Generally, at least under capitalism, wealth buys privacy. The extent to which an individual has economic resources, an education, and leisure time affects the extent to which they can experience themselves in a self-reflective way.

Another force contributing to a collectivist or individualist identity is the degree of centralization or decentralization of the society. Centralized control over resources muffles competition, and competition is the lifeblood of individualism. Conversely, when various political and economic blocs struggle for power and there is no means by which centralization can occur, individualism is more likely.

In addition, what the sources of wealth are and where these sources are located also impact identity. Broadly speaking, a society located near trade routes will have contact with many kinds of societies, and this breeds a cosmopolitan attitude—bilingualism, learning how to translate currencies, and travel. This kind of experience generally supports a relativistic attitude toward its own social institutions, and a wide-ranging but shallow set of loyalties and individualism. On the other hand, societies located in valleys far from coastal trade will be more parochial and less open cross-culturally. In these societies it is easier to control populations with long-term expectations of loyalty, obedience to the authorities, and conformity in groups.

Another geographical consideration that impacts collectivism or individualism is whether a person lives in an urban or rural area of society. Even in land-based civilizations such as ancient China or India, people living in cities are more likely to have individualist tendencies because in cities loyalties to kin groups are weakened and the presence of strangers invites more contractual relationships not governed by generalized reciprocity.

The gender of the individual also affects the self. Many factors, principally the responsibility of raising children and the lack of opportunity to work in public positions that require travel, make women much more likely to be collectivists than men.

Another factor is the presence of an explicit ideology of collectivism or individualism. Certainly, people do not need an ideology to have a practice of being individualist or collectivist, but it strengthens one's commitment to



cultivating a particular kind of self if an ideology is available. The United States had the most well-developed and maniacal ideology of individualism in the world, from the cowboy to the frontiersman.

Summing up this section, in order to participate in society an individual must build a self. This is done by mastering a number of skills that take many years to develop. But whether the self becomes collectivist or individualist depends on a variety of sociological ingredients. These include the complexity of social organization and the consequent division of labor, the degree of stratification in society, the sources of wealth and the class membership of the individual within a society, whether the economic source of wealth is land or trade-based, the geographical location of the society, whether a person lives in the city or the country, whether the society is centralized or decentralized, and the gender of the individual.

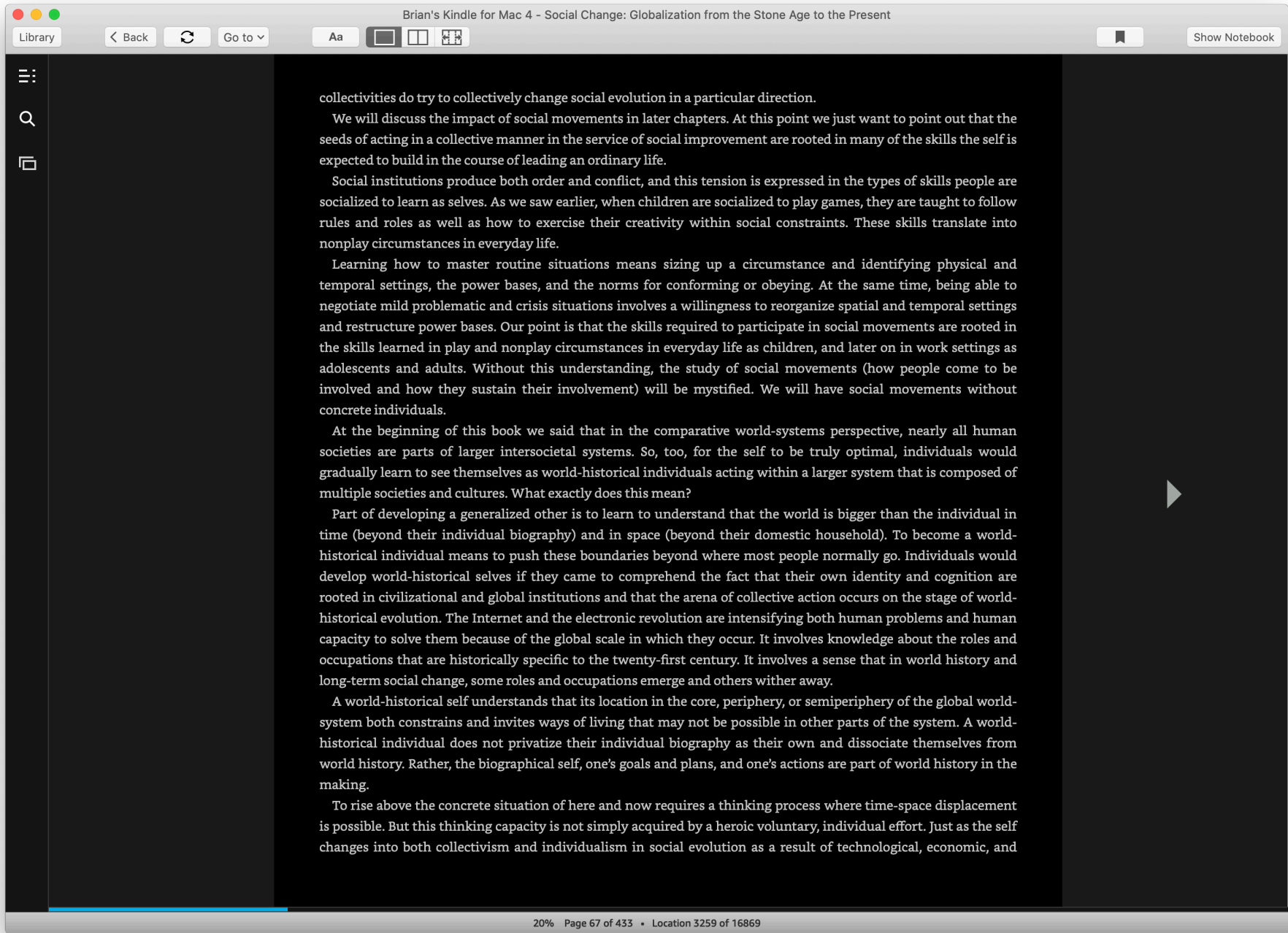
[Table 4.3](#) summarizes the differences in social conditions that support collectivism and individualism.

Table 4.3 Sociological conditions for the production of selves

Category of comparison	Collectivism	Individualism
Type of society	Hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, agricultural states	Industrial, capitalist states
Division of labor	Well-rounded, do many things well (egalitarian tribal)	Greater specialization of labor, greater part of identity located in occupation
Degree of stratification	Egalitarian in nonstate societies; highly stratified in agricultural states	Class stratification in industry
Sources of wealth	Land based	Trade based
Social class membership	If classes exist, the lower classes	Middle and upper classes
Political stratification	Decentralized (tribal), centralized (agricultural states)	Decentralized
Uniformity in messages of agents of socialization	Homogeneous socialization produces conformity	Heterogeneous messages produce perception of confusion, conflict, and opportunity
Geography	Land-locked	Near large, open bodies of water; near trade routes
Region	Rural: kin-group bound, greater suspicion of strangers	Urban: cultivate relationships with strangers
Gender	Women and men	Mostly men

The Self and Social Movements

When we discussed the individual self in social evolution we talked about the individual essentially reacting to changes in social structures by developing collectivist or individualist selves on the one hand, and learning to think more abstractly on the other. But this presents social change as essentially an involuntary process. However, social



collectivities do try to collectively change social evolution in a particular direction.

We will discuss the impact of social movements in later chapters. At this point we just want to point out that the seeds of acting in a collective manner in the service of social improvement are rooted in many of the skills the self is expected to build in the course of leading an ordinary life.

Social institutions produce both order and conflict, and this tension is expressed in the types of skills people are socialized to learn as selves. As we saw earlier, when children are socialized to play games, they are taught to follow rules and roles as well as how to exercise their creativity within social constraints. These skills translate into nonplay circumstances in everyday life.

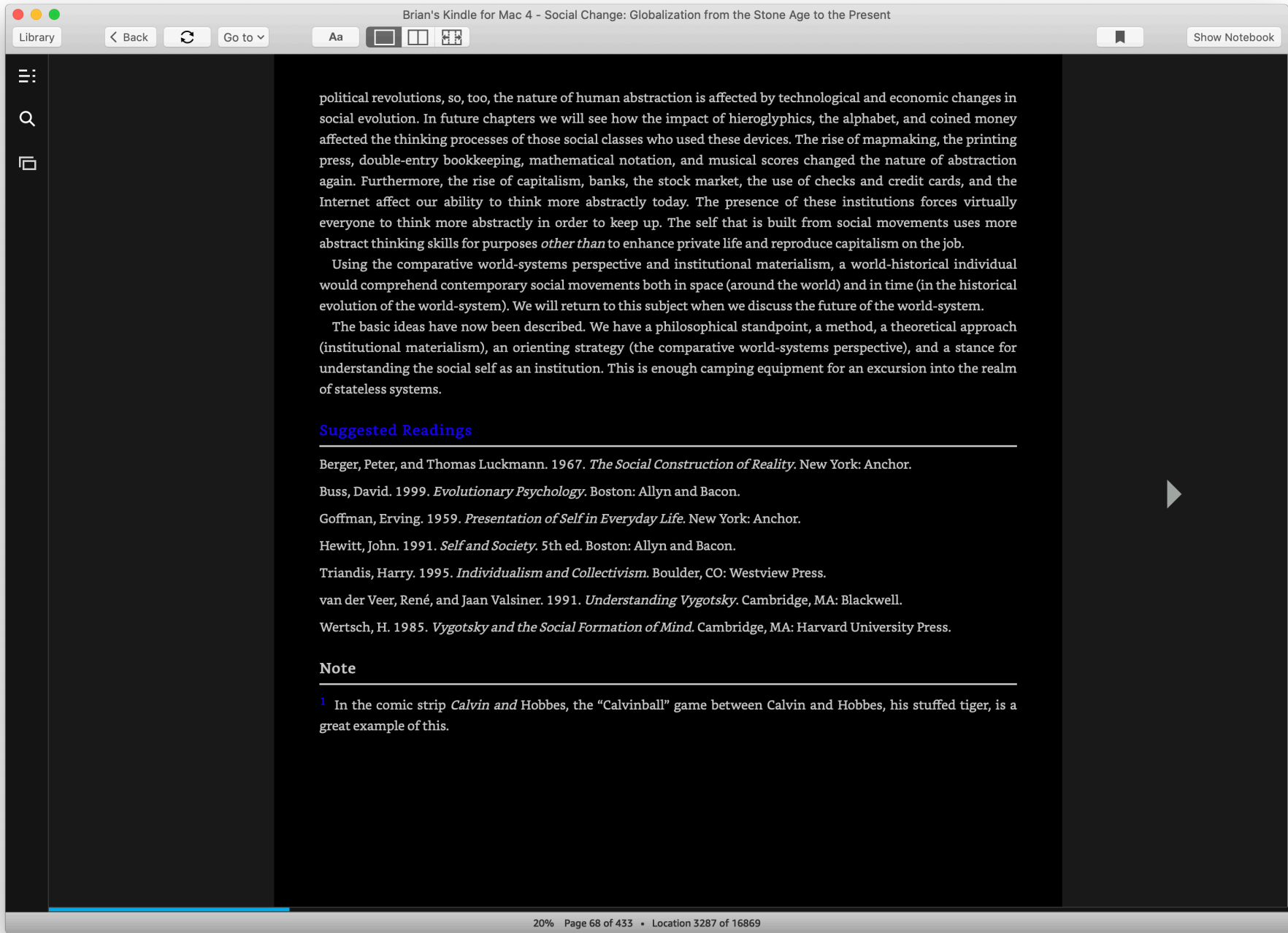
Learning how to master routine situations means sizing up a circumstance and identifying physical and temporal settings, the power bases, and the norms for conforming or obeying. At the same time, being able to negotiate mild problematic and crisis situations involves a willingness to reorganize spatial and temporal settings and restructure power bases. Our point is that the skills required to participate in social movements are rooted in the skills learned in play and nonplay circumstances in everyday life as children, and later on in work settings as adolescents and adults. Without this understanding, the study of social movements (how people come to be involved and how they sustain their involvement) will be mystified. We will have social movements without concrete individuals.

At the beginning of this book we said that in the comparative world-systems perspective, nearly all human societies are parts of larger intersocietal systems. So, too, for the self to be truly optimal, individuals would gradually learn to see themselves as world-historical individuals acting within a larger system that is composed of multiple societies and cultures. What exactly does this mean?

Part of developing a generalized other is to learn to understand that the world is bigger than the individual in time (beyond their individual biography) and in space (beyond their domestic household). To become a world-historical individual means to push these boundaries beyond where most people normally go. Individuals would develop world-historical selves if they came to comprehend the fact that their own identity and cognition are rooted in civilizational and global institutions and that the arena of collective action occurs on the stage of world-historical evolution. The Internet and the electronic revolution are intensifying both human problems and human capacity to solve them because of the global scale in which they occur. It involves knowledge about the roles and occupations that are historically specific to the twenty-first century. It involves a sense that in world history and long-term social change, some roles and occupations emerge and others wither away.

A world-historical self understands that its location in the core, periphery, or semiperiphery of the global world-system both constrains and invites ways of living that may not be possible in other parts of the system. A world-historical individual does not privatize their individual biography as their own and dissociate themselves from world history. Rather, the biographical self, one's goals and plans, and one's actions are part of world history in the making.

To rise above the concrete situation of here and now requires a thinking process where time-space displacement is possible. But this thinking capacity is not simply acquired by a heroic voluntary, individual effort. Just as the self changes into both collectivism and individualism in social evolution as a result of technological, economic, and



political revolutions, so, too, the nature of human abstraction is affected by technological and economic changes in social evolution. In future chapters we will see how the impact of hieroglyphics, the alphabet, and coined money affected the thinking processes of those social classes who used these devices. The rise of mapmaking, the printing press, double-entry bookkeeping, mathematical notation, and musical scores changed the nature of abstraction again. Furthermore, the rise of capitalism, banks, the stock market, the use of checks and credit cards, and the Internet affect our ability to think more abstractly today. The presence of these institutions forces virtually everyone to think more abstractly in order to keep up. The self that is built from social movements uses more abstract thinking skills for purposes *other than* to enhance private life and reproduce capitalism on the job.

Using the comparative world-systems perspective and institutional materialism, a world-historical individual would comprehend contemporary social movements both in space (around the world) and in time (in the historical evolution of the world-system). We will return to this subject when we discuss the future of the world-system.

The basic ideas have now been described. We have a philosophical standpoint, a method, a theoretical approach (institutional materialism), an orienting strategy (the comparative world-systems perspective), and a stance for understanding the social self as an institution. This is enough camping equipment for an excursion into the realm of stateless systems.

Suggested Readings

Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor.

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Hewitt, John. 1991. *Self and Society*. 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Triandis, Harry. 1995. *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

van der Veer, René, and Jaan Valsiner. 1991. *Understanding Vygotsky*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

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Note

¹ In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, the "Calvinball" game between Calvin and Hobbes, his stuffed tiger, is a great example of this.