The Big Picture

Theorizing Self-Concept Structure and Construal

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Primary Objective

- To present a holistic perspective of the self-concept for use in counseling, therapeutic interventions, and research with minority, marginalized, and cross-cultural populations

Secondary Objectives

- To differentiate self-concept structure from construal of the self by exploring two key components of the self: personal identity and group identity
- To make the connection between child development, personality development, and the emergence, during adolescence, of group identity dynamics
- To show that the psychological definitions of individuality and personality are distinct from philosophical notions of individualism

This chapter stresses the importance of the big picture in theorizing the self. We begin and end with the proposition that whether one is engaged in a discussion of the structure of the self or the range of meanings and interpretations accorded the self (construal), the self-concept consists of personal identity (PI) and group identity (GI) components. We offer a counternarrative to those who
truncate the self by exaggerating the significance of either self-esteem or collective-esteem, and we favor a holistic approach in research and counseling psychology, especially when the research participants or counseling clients are members of targeted racial/cultural groups. We take on the important distinction to be made between self-concept structure and self-concept construal. Fusing elements of developmental psychology, ego psychology, object relations theory, psychoanalytic theory, activity theory, social identity theory, and reference group theory, we trace the development of the self-concept from infancy through early adulthood, showing the distinctiveness and interconnectedness of PI and GI. We view this bifurcated structure to be invariant across cultures. In explicating our thesis, we differentiate between personality, individuality, and individualism to show that while personality and individuality are very much present in all cultures, individualism (a particular form of individuality) tends to be a marker of Western societies.

Theory and research on self-concept structure seek to isolate elements and dynamics that are universal and thus applicable to an analysis of the self across cultures (Mischel & Morf, 2003; Rosenberg, 1979; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). On the other hand, theory and research on self-construal explicate the interpretations and meanings accorded the self from one culture to another. The construal discourse is centered less on structure and more on the way cultures differ in the interpretation of the person-society relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Construal theorists argue that in the West, a philosophy of individualism permeates self-orientations, while in the East, a more interdependent or collectivist philosophy guides self-orientations.

In this chapter, we concern ourselves with the conflation of structural and construal arguments, especially with regard to self-concept profiles thought to be prototypical of the Western-Self as contrasted with the Eastern-Self. For example, does the prototype of a collectivist translate into high scores on group esteem (GI) and low scores on self-esteem (PI)? Likewise, does the prototype of an individualist translate into high scores on self-esteem (PI) and low scores on group esteem (GI)? Furthermore, do group identity dynamics play a negligible role in the everyday psychology of individualists, and conversely, do personality and individuality play a minor role in the everyday psychology of collectivists? We offer a different interpretation and suggest that people are more alike than different at the level of self-concept structure—even across cultures. A self-concept profile, juxtaposing moderate to high levels of self-esteem with moderate to high levels of group esteem, may be more commonplace than previously thought possible, especially in light of differential West-East profiles predicted by self-construal theory.

To arrive at this conclusion, one must stop equating self-esteem with individualism and group esteem with collectivism. Instead, PI and GI should be viewed as different types of psychological strength, and when combined, the result is a person who has various personality strengths (self-esteem has been shown to be associated with a wide range of positive personality strengths) and a moderate to high sense of social purpose (group esteem is linked to ideology, intentionality, and resolve). In a collectivist society, people with high self-esteem and other positive personality traits and dynamics may provide vitality, agency, creativity, and resiliency to the enactment of everyday activities and tasks, as guided by the society’s social agenda. However, when the individual is asked to reflect on what it means (construal) to be a part of the society, he or she may “silence” his or her personality and spotlight the group’s worldview and the joint activities that give him or her a sense of social grounding. In response to questions of construal and despite having moderate to high self-esteem, the individual’s focus becomes the activities and beliefs for which his or her “personality” and personal actions are seen to be in the service of. In this sense, self-esteem can be seen to facilitate the enactment of either collectivity (“my strength is for the people and our community”) or individualism (“my strength benefits me”). Cultural difference may reside more in purpose, intention, ideology, philosophy, and
meaning making and less so in the specific PI and GI characteristics people bring to the everyday enactment of culture and identity (Strauss & Cross, 2005).

In turning to the West, we think the profile of positive PI combined with positive GI is also commonplace; however, we will try to show that at the level of self-construal, Westerners do the opposite of people from the East and silence not their individuality and personality but their need for group esteem, interdependency, and interconnectedness (Kohut, 1984). That aspects of the self are silenced is not the same as making them disappear, and we will attempt to argue that PI and GI components of the self-concept play a major role in all cultures.

A UNIVERSAL UNFOLDING OF THE SELF: INDIVIDUATION AND ATTACHMENT

Much of the debate on the relative importance of PI and GI for individuals living in either individualist or collectivist societies tends to be premised on studies conducted with adolescents, college students, and adults. At times, the tenor of the debate suggests that a fully developed self-concept may evidence the dominance of one component over the other (PI or GI dominance), so much so that one or the other component is of limited developmental significance. If one anchors the discourse in child development, the divide between the two constructs shrinks, because, while in later life the distinctions to be made between the two components are real, the early development of each component that takes place during infancy and early childhood is sequentially intertwined (Kohut, 1984; Winnicott, 1987). The either/or quality of the self-esteem versus group esteem debate must make room for the possibility that, independent of cultural context, the structure of the self for all human beings reveals not one but both personal and group identity dynamics and that PI development precedes GI development (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975).

SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION, INDIVIDUALITY, AND PERSONALITY

D.W. Winnicott’s (1987, p.88) famous statement—“There is no such thing as a baby, there is the baby and someone”—reflected his belief that the sense of self evolves from the baby-mother or child-caretaker relationship (Roland, 1996, p. 11). According to Winnicott, newborn babies have little sense of personal self (PI), let alone awareness of membership in a particular group (GI), and the psychological building blocks the baby uses to construct the self are derived in large measure from daily, persistent, and sustained interactions with the mother. Newborns and infants are dependent on their mothers and other primary caretakers for fulfillment of basic physiological and psychological needs. The symbiotic relationship triggers a developmental process that results in the scaffolding of the self.

For the newly born, sensations and experiences have no borders. The infant is unable to determine where the psychological and physical contours of the self begin and end and when sensations signal the presence of another human being or nearby object. Emerging from the womb, able to feel and experience sensations, the infant has limited insight, given the nearly complete absence of a developed social perspective. The process infants go through to comprehend that their physicality and psychology are distinct from others is called separation-individuation (Mahler et al., 1975). Not to be confused with notions of individualism, individuation maps movement from a sense of self that is diaphanous and without borders to one where the integrity of people and outline of inanimate objects becomes comprehensible to the infant.
We take the position that differentiation and emergence of a conscious sense of self or social perspective are universal. Outside of severe physiological or psychological malformation, every infant, regardless of cultural context, learns to differentiate the self from the people and objects that make up the human ecology within which the infant is nested (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The sense of self that is born out of this process is more akin to personal identity than group identity. To underscore our point, let us take the case of Danjuma, a 2-day-old infant born in rural Nigeria whose mother’s name is Lantana. As the mother cradles Danjuma, she talks to the infant about her African name, makes frequent reference to the village people, walks over to the window, and describes to the infant all the things the villagers are doing just outside their home. The baby seems to be hungry so Lantana places her breast to the infant’s lips while singing an African lullaby. Now let’s shift the focus to the baby. Danjuma cannot comprehend her mother’s African language and singing, nor can she process the discrete behaviors and bits of conversation of the people just outside the window. But Danjuma feels Lantana’s arms, fingers, and warm body; is soothed by the tone of her voice and singing; and is agitated by an internal sensation of hunger that soon loses its grip, as milk from Lantana’s breast is sucked into her mouth and flows wonderfully down her throat.

A fundamental marker of development is an infant’s ability to differentiate between me and not-me perceptions. That is, what is Danjuma’s body, her sense of hunger, her sense of pleasure, her sense of vision as compared to the touch, feel, and actions that are the properties of her mother—Lantana—and the other “not-me” aspects of the situation. Although an infant is literally a separate physical entity, the perception and comprehension of one’s separateness—that there are physical and psychological boundaries between me and others—is a developmental process driven by experience and learning. What emerges first is a rudimentary personal identity that is not to be confused with any notion of individualism; it is the realization that one is alive, that one is a human being among other humans, that one’s sense of personhood is a frame of reference for comprehending one’s surroundings and the people and things that make up one’s human ecology (Winnicott, 1987).

FROM INDIVIDUATION TO INDIVIDUALITY AND PERSONALITY

With age, development, the acquisition of language, increased cognitive sophistication, and increasing self-agency, what began as the infant’s primal sense of self evolves by late adolescence into stable though not fixed psychological traits. The configuration of these traits and patterns of self-expression is what is meant by individuality or personality. Over and above the debates pitting self-esteem and group esteem is the reality that within all cultures—Western and Eastern alike—are individuals with diverse personalities reflective of their unique individuality. Individuality is the logical outcome of individuation.

Individuality is not confined to the human experience and is very much a part of the discourse in comparative psychology, pointing to its evolutionary origins and survivalist functions. Studies involving chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas readily yield evidence concerning stylistic and personality differentiation that facilitate problem solving related to the finding of food, location of shelter, mate selection, intracolony/intercolony power struggles, and infant care (Boesch & Boesch-Achermann, 2000; de Waal, 2005; Mitchell, 2003; see http://www.npi.ucla.edu/center/primate/). Among humans, personality differentiation helps explain, in part, the variability with which different people approach everyday problems and challenges, increasing the chances for the discovery of new and better solutions and thus survival. Personality variability is not the same as individualism. Much of the tension between
the self-esteem versus collective esteem camps is centered on the confusion between individuality and individualism, and while the concepts are related, they are not one in the same. Individuality is universal, but individualism is not.

Imagine we are conducting a study of a collectivist community in Africa, where we observe people at play and work. Whether the focus is on children, adolescents, or adults, we observe the modal ways people perform across both contexts. Eventually, our notes reveal that different individuals perform similar tasks with considerable variability. Over time, we are able to predict, for example, that shy African males will tend to approach work and play differently from African males who are gregarious and more comfortable in various social settings. Such observations of individuality or personality difference—not individualism—could surely be replicated in any collectivist culture.

We suggest that personality variability is ubiquitous. Within each culture, some members fare better than others in fulfilling various social roles. Patterns of success and failure can often be attributed to the personality characteristics members bring to the activity or responsibility. Personality has powerful explanatory value—regardless of the cultural context—and to mention individuality and collectivism in the same breath is not a contradiction. Individualism is but one expression of personality, while individuality captures the full range of ways people within any culture demonstrate personality variability. Consequently, separation-individuation and personality help us to comprehend personality variability within any given culture.

In summary, separation-individuation is the developmental pathway that culminates in individuality and personality. An infant starts with self-awareness that is borderless and, through the separation-individuation process, constructs a sense of self that has physical boundaries and psychological integrity. During childhood and preadolescence, individuality emerges, and by late adolescence and early adulthood, individuality has been molded into a distinct personality or the PI component of the self. In this chapter, separation-individuation, individuality, and personality are processes and categories subsumed under the component of the self-concept we are calling personal identity or PI.

PERSONAL IDENTITY MATRIX AND SELF-ESTEEM

In cross-cultural counseling as well as research on minority identity, PI or the personality component of the self-concept is often framed by self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). For this reason, it becomes easy to equate and thus confuse self-esteem with PI, thereby losing sight of the fact that the PI domain is multidimensional. The discourse on personality makes reference to clusters if not hundreds of personality traits and factors in addition to syndromes, profile, patterns, and so on. Advocates of the Big Five model have tried to bring order to the myriad of factors linked to personality by arguing that the latent structure of most personality analyses reveals a five-factor solution. However, work in the applied fields of clinical or counseling psychology and psychiatric social work lends itself to a more elaborate conceptualization of personality, and the Big Five model is too constraining when conducting therapy. Clients present stories that wrap around every conceivable personality construct and mode of personality expression, and whether the plethora of factors presented might be reducible to only five, as suggested by the Big Five theory, is beside the point when operating in a therapeutic context.

As a reminder that PI extends far beyond self-esteem, let us conceptualize and label the totality of PI as the PI matrix. Conceptualizing the totality of PI as a matrix helps remind us that, beyond self-esteem, a comprehensive discussion of individuality or personality would extend to positive (affection, creativity, compassion, resiliency, and so on) as well as negative (anger, anxiety, obsession,
self-loathing, and so on) traits and tendencies. In a clinical setting, therapists (hopefully) greet new clients with a certain degree of wonderment, as they listen and learn how, out of the matrix of possibilities, the person has configured a unique personality.

**UNCONSCIOUS DIMENSIONS OF PI**

While there is considerable controversy in cross-cultural circles about the universality of Sigmund Freud’s explication of the unconscious, there is little disputing that the concept of the unconscious is, in fact, a universal phenomenon (Roland, 1996). Our purpose here is not to resolve how best to theorize the unconscious but to affirm that any holistic concept of the self must take into account that unconscious factors play a role in the dynamics of the PI matrix. Psychiatrists, artists, and those in between make comprehensive use of conscious and unconscious levels of the PI matrix in their work. For instance, a novelist might start with a depiction of what a character is doing at any particular moment, show how the person construes her or his behavior (conscious insight), and then, using various devices, reveal the deep structure or unconscious drives that are propelling the fictional person’s psychology. On the other hand, a great deal of the state-of-the-art research on minority personality that is conducted by social-psychologists or social-experimental psychologists employs a single factor to operationalize personality: self-esteem (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) or some related construct such as self-enhancement (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005).

When the first author of this chapter teaches an Africana studies course on the psychology of African Americans, students in the seminar are first asked to read excerpts from plays by August Wilson, novels by Zora Neale Hurston, or biographies by David Levering Lewis. After digesting such rich, multilayered, and complex depictions of Black personalities, the students then read samplings of recent psychological research on Black personality. The students are generally stunned at how simplistic the psychological discourse on Black personality can be. In short, capturing the PI component of the self-concept requires demarcating not only its multitrait structure but also its conscious and unconscious dynamics as well.

**ATTACHMENT AND THE ORIGINS OF THE COLLECTIVE COMPONENT OF THE SELF**

Intertwined with childhood individuation of the self and the evolution of object relations (interpersonal relationships) are attachment dynamics (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bretherton, 1992). The phenomenon of attachment is critical to our analysis of the self because attachment dynamics between mother and child lay the psychological foundation for an individual to achieve, during other phases in development (preadolescence, adolescence, and early adulthood), a sense of belonging, community focus, and social group attachment. Seen in this light, attachment makes possible the experience of collective esteem and collective or group identity (GI), the second key component of the self.

The propensity of an infant to attach to its mother is central to the infant’s survival and is probably innate (Cassidy, 1999). Research has documented that appearing between birth and the first year of infancy are these discrete and randomly expressed behaviors: crying, sucking, smiling, clinging, and following. These behaviors undergird the symbiotic relationship between mother and child. Over time and with experience, the random behaviors give way to various attachment styles (Cassidy, 1999).

Although the overall attachment phenomenon is universal, attachment styles are subject to cultural influence. An infant born in Japan, where closeness is valued above separation and adults normally adopt an interdependent self-orientation, may manifest a secure attachment differently than a
baby parented in a culture such as the United States (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999). U.S. society values individualism, and most of its inhabitants adopt an independent self-orientation; thus in the West, mothers reward their infants for separating (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This suggests that attachment behaviors are flexible and adaptive, and thus it makes sense that infants in various places within various sociocultural contexts would be equipped with the ability to pick and choose from a constellation of attachment behaviors according to the appropriate cultural norm (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999).

**ATTACHMENT AND THE ADULT NEED TO BELONG**

Over the past 20 years, research has shown that the quality of one’s attachment experience during infancy and childhood is foundational to the quality of one’s later relationships (friendships, romantic relationships, etc.) (Weaver & de Waal, 2003). Here, we want to underscore another legacy of attachment, which is the lifelong need to feel one belongs to, is connected to, and is part of a larger whole. This has led to theorizing and research on cultural attachment, shared attachment, and attachment to one’s group (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). The attachment process is fundamental to understanding the evolution of belonging, obligation, and shared community.

In the discourse on Western identity, individualism is presented as antithetical to collectivism and interdependence. However, we want to show that although collectivism may not be a marker of Western societies, all human beings, including persons socialized in the West, need to have a sense of collective belonging and connectedness that has origins in the attachment process (Kohut, 1984). That is, group identity and group esteem play a major role in the structure of the self for persons from Western as well as Eastern cultures (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). The notion that Westernization leads to the lessening of one’s need for belongingness and connectedness was tested in recent research by Yip and Cross (2004) and found wanting.

Yip and Cross (2004) divided a group of college-aged Chinese American youth into those who (1) evidenced a strong ingroup nationalistic or Chinese ethnic identity, versus another group who (2) showed a dualistic or bicultural identity in which being American and being Chinese were accorded equally high importance, and (3) a third group that evidenced signs of assimilation in that their sense of being American was accorded high salience while their sense of being Chinese was low. The three groups could not be differentiated on the basis of scores on well-being and self-esteem, yet only those who exhibited a sense of being Chinese or bicultural scored high on a measure of ethnic-group identity (Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure [MEIM]). The fact that the more assimilated group scored low on the MEIM (ethnicity) but equally high on well-being and self-esteem seemed to go against social identity theory, which predicts a positive—not an inverse—relationship between the two outcomes.

Yip and Cross (2004) saw things differently. They predicted that in expressing a low sense of being Chinese and a high sense of being American, this third group should, as was found, score low on ethnic identity. On the other hand, this group might be expected to score as high as any group on a generic measure of group identity that was sensitive to whatever group identity dynamics might be operating across the three groups, inclusive of an assimilated and highly Americanized form of group identity. The measure used was the original version of the Luhtanen & Crocker Collective Self-Esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) measure, a measure that can be administered to any group, including Whites, as the wording of the individual items operationalizes a generic conceptualization of group identity. On this measure, all three groups scored at the same level. The nationally inclined and biculturally oriented Chinese youth scored high on collective self-esteem, and the fact that they also
scored equally high on the MEIM was interpreted to mean that their group identity was informed by a strong sense of ethnicity.

The more assimilated and American-focused group, on the other hand, showed signs of an equally well-developed and positive group identity, but their low scores on ethnicity meant that their sense of belonging and connectedness was not framed by ethnicity. Thus, consistent with the notion that people who shows signs of positive mental health should also show evidence of positive group identity, the findings from the Yip and Cross (2004) study point to the following possibility: Most if not all human beings need a sense of positive self-regard (PI level of analysis) as well as a sense of group connectedness (GI level of analysis); however, how the individual person derives a sense of belonging and connectedness may extend beyond the identity choices explored in most research or, in the case of the frame of reference of a counselor, beyond the identity choices the counselor thinks the client should be according salience.

Working with a predominantly African American population consisting of more than 300 college students, Vandiver, Worrell, Cross, and Fhagen-Smith (2002) looked for personality and well-being differences between Blacks holding either of two types of collective identity (Afrocentric and multicultural) as compared to a third group that disassociated from notions of Black identity and affirmed instead an American-individualist identity. The findings revealed slight but basically inconsequential differences between the groups with regard to level of self-esteem, well-being, and outcomes captured by a measure of the Big Five personality structure. Additional research examining the same three identity stances found among African American college students (Jones, 2005), as well as a more mixed sample of college students and community participants (Foster, 2004), again showed that, after various interactions were taken into account, all three identity frames were equally efficacious in the achievement of well-being and positive self-esteem. More important for the points being raised here, the holders of American-individualist attitudes showed signs of thinking like a group in that they were more likely to blame Blacks themselves for various social problems, hold conservative political attitudes about racial matters, and express the attitude that race should be accorded limited salience. In addition, they perceive and experience less race-related stress in their daily lives as compared to Blacks holding Afrocentric and multicultural identity perspectives.

We think these studies, along with findings from the Yip and Cross (2004) study, are suggestive of the fact that high scores on American-individualist measures of identity, particularly when found among minority populations, reveal the dissociation from notions of group identity based on race and minority status. They are rejecting as important social identity categories closely linked to the discourse on popular notions of group identity that the society generally uses to “categorize” them. In rejecting their socially ascribed identity, one might mistakenly conclude that they are without a “group identity,” but as we have tried to show, their ascribed identity has been replaced by interdependencies linked to other groups. The GI component of their self-concept is just as important and, dare we say, central as the GI component found among minority group members whose expression of GI is more in line with the popular culture’s discourse on group identity. The nonconforming minority group members do, in fact, have a group identity, but it is based on something other their socially ascribed category.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS GROUP IDENTITY DYNAMICS

We generally do not think of the group identity component of the self-concept as operating on both conscious and unconscious levels. However, in a modern context, the mesh of ideas and cultures is so thick that people may not be aware of the origins of their ideas and beliefs (Roland, 1996). Whites, for
example, live together; marry each other; create predominantly White neighborhoods and communities; configure high schools, colleges, and churches that are almost completely White in membership; and create powerful organizations such as the Federalist Society, the membership of which is overwhelmingly White and male. Yet when one introduces the issue of racial identity, Whites often have difficulty comprehending that race plays anything but a minor role in their everyday lives. In fact, critical race theory (CRT; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) emerged because Whites do not see that laws and social arrangements make affirmative action for middle-class and wealthy whites an everyday privilege, much to the disadvantage of those who are not White middle class or wealthy.

GI MATRIX

The possibility of unconscious GI dynamics aside, the psychological discourse on group identity tends to turn on the ability of research participants to state, with some degree of certitude, that they are conscious of their group identity, especially if it involves a social ascription (Tajfel, 1981). Going a step further, the tendency of researchers and commentators to center the discourse on group identity around ascription and (minority) cultural factors causes many to overlook the fact that the GI component of the self-concept is no less a matrix than is PI. Increasingly, optimal psychological functioning is associated with multiple affiliations, multiple alliances, and multiple group connections. Each person is a matrix of group identities—even if in the enactment of self-construal, only one or a few identities are accorded high salience.

STRUCTURE AND CONSTRUAL OF THE SELF

Arguing for a universal two-factor structure of the self might at first appear to put us at odds with the discourse found within cross-cultural psychology that Western and Eastern societies differ in the way the self is construed. However, while not definitive, the evidence is compelling that societies are inclined to divergent psychologies, one based on individualism (the West) and the other collectivism (the East). We began our discourse with a structural analysis because we think structure and construal, although overlapping, are not one in the same.

To begin, the study of the structure of the self does not depend on self-perceived information, while self-construal does. Furthermore, researching structure does not require that there be evidence of low or high levels of either PI or GI in a person's profile for we are arguing that in the analysis of anyone's self-concept, there will be evidence of the existence of both structural components. The point is not the degree to which each is present but that both are always present to some degree. Theory and research on self-construal reinforce categorical interpretations, but the study of the structure of the self literally requires one to think in configurative terms. Theorizing and researching construal of the self places a premium on self-insight, self-report, and a phenomenological self-analysis of what aspects of the self the person's culture favors. In some ways, self-construal is not necessarily concerned with structure; it is asking, “Beyond structure, how does a culture teach and socialize its members to perceive the self?” “What tasks, values, everyday experiences, etc., define what an analysis of the self is?”

Some have gone to the extreme and concluded that in certain cultures, the individual self (PI) does not really exist, meaning that it is possible for psychological functioning to be based solely on a collective sense of self (Akbar, 1989; Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Nobles, 1991). This, of course, is unlikely. Separation-individuation precedes collectivity because, until one understands what self means, one cannot comprehend what other(s) means. Given that various traits reflective of individuality can be found across cultures, the assessment of, say, self-esteem is likely a weak marker for separating
persons into collectivistic versus individualistic categories. Self-esteem in and of itself does not define individualism. It is simply a characteristic of normal development and is an extension of the separation-individuation process triggered shortly after birth.

There is a degree of denial inherent in self-construal, at least at the extremes. If one accepts the argument that, at the level of structure, all human beings operate with a two-factor self-concept, then extreme forms of construal—whether oriented toward individualism or collectivism—reflect degrees of denial or repression. This may be taking things too far; however, we have been privy to debates and discussions wherein collectivism is equated with low self-esteem. But why should low self-esteem be a marker of high collective esteem? A person living in a collectivist society whose childhood produced strong and positive separation-individuation and strong and positive attachment may evidence personal strength that helps him or her excel at living and contributing to a collectivist philosophy of life. The idea that a group is strong to the degree that its individual members are weak is problematic. Likewise, the idea that a person who affirms his or her individualism will always show low levels of group identity or group esteem is equally problematic. Members of Western cultures espouse individualism, but a close examination of their culture show the existence of a multitude of group identities (i.e., religious affiliations, political parties, social groups, and various other social class distinctions that belie any notion of pure individualism). If collectivist self-construal underplays separation-individuation and individuality, then construal that is slanted toward individualism exaggerates the role of the individual while blocking out the dynamics of group esteem and GI.

Summary of Our Theoretical Discourse on Self-Concept

At the structural level, the self-concept has no less than two components, and each evolves from separation-individuation and attachment processes activated at birth. Although infants are more hard-wired than once imagined, the bulk of the research on self, personality, and group identity suggests that infants have no preset, organized schema for organizing and acting on their perceptions and felt sensations. An infant must literally learn to construct and sustain psychological boundaries that differentiate the self from others, inclusive of one's mother or key caretaker(s). The boundaries of the self are prerequisite to all other psychological schemas, and over time, self-development evolves into a complex sense of individuality generally referenced as personality. Personality is multidimensional, and for reasons of predisposition and environment, human beings who reach adolescence and adulthood tend to evidence considerable personality variation. In the discourse on self-concept, individuality and personality are often referenced as personal identity or PI, and to capture its multidimensionality, we referenced the PI component of the self-concept as the PI matrix. For various historical reasons, the PI matrix has too often been equated with self-esteem, delaying recognition that it is an extraordinarily complex, multidimensional construct.

The second important process emerging during infancy is the attachment phenomenon (AP). AP lays the psychological foundation for the emerging human being's capacity to eventually feel connected to individuals as well as groups of people. The need to have fulfilled and nourished throughout one's life a sense of connection, belonging, and affiliation is foundational to the second component of the self-concept, group identity or GI. Although the discourse on group identity treats it in singular fashion, we have stressed that most human beings—and this is especially true of people living in metropolitan communities across the globe—have multiple groups that frame their overall group identity, and to capture such multiplicity, we fashioned the label GI matrix.
In addition to issues of multidimensionality, we also stressed that each domain is subject to unconscious dynamics, a factor not foreign to personality research but more prominently discussed within the circles of applied psychology, such as the likely audience for the current volume.

We examined the contradictions that emerge when approaching the self-concept from a perspective of construal as compared to structure. We argued that the two-dimensional structure of the self-concept is universal and is revealed independently of cultural context. Construal, on the other hand, is very context sensitive because construal research tries to unearth not the structure of identity but the way a person has been socialized on what aspect of the self is favored, from one culture to another. Self-concept construal is more akin to the study of worldview, philosophy, and politics than psychology per se.

Much of the construal discourse is driven by hypothetical differences in the way the self is construed in the West as compared to the East. In the face of assertions about collectivity and individualism, we have argued that there is structural constancy of the self and that, to a certain extent, the construal discourse is subject to a categorical and thus flawed analysis of the self. The construal of the self as collectivistic tends to dismiss (silence) the role of individuality in the structural dynamics of the self, while notions of individualism make the opposite mistake and underplay, if not deny, the role of belonging, connection, community mindedness, and the need for affiliation in the lives of people living in so-called individualistic cultures. That is, the role and importance of group esteem to the psychological dynamics of persons affirming an individualistic identity has been underestimated, just as the role of personality and individuality has been understudied and undertheorized in the discourse on collective identity.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

PI and GI Assets

The major implication of our analysis is the need to adjust the understanding of self-esteem (PI) and group (GI) esteem from that of competing to complementary psychological assets. In a collectivist context, moderate to high self-esteem coupled with moderate to high group esteem may translate into a potent combination of personal efficacy and commitment to the group that helps the person enact, in joint ventures with others, the group's social vision. In the same context, another person who combines low self-esteem, depression, and high group esteem will bring less energy and confidence to the same tasks and activities, even though at the level of ideology or worldview, there is little that separates the two people. In effect, personal strength is not antithetical to an ideology of collectivism because many of the activities required in sustaining most societies require personal competence, tenacity, or calmness under pressure, to mention but a few personal traits. The idea that self-esteem is an offshoot of individualism is to confuse individuation and personality with a particular worldview. From our perspective, personal strength, positive perceptions of one's personhood, and an abundance of personal efficacy explain rather than contradict the psychological dynamics found within a collective-oriented community.

Such an analytic scheme would seem to have limited application to situations involving individualism, where group esteem, in particular, appears to fall out of the equation. However, group esteem dynamics make a strong showing among persons dedicated to a philosophy of individualism, even though at the level of ideology, one discovers that group identity, group esteem, and feelings of group belonging are typically silenced, downplayed, and, to some extent, denied. The Western self-made
person may be a myth to the extent that the true story uncovers the minimizing of a lifelong series of interdependent relationships, which allowed the person to achieve a sense of singularity, and ends by showing how the person’s continued need for social attachment, belongingness, and social connectedness is silenced to create the illusion of self-contentment derived from one’s devices, trophies, and head games.

Activity Theory and the Role of Culture

Given that a structural analysis of the self reveals people to be more alike than different, in that they evidence advanced development of both the PI and GI components of the self, then it stands to reason that something other than generic structures accounts for identity variability, especially when trying to address identity variation linked to cross-cultural differences. We will use activity theory (AT) to frame the cultural implications of our model because, in addition to making possible a succinct discussion of culture, it provides a way of avoiding an essentialist and static depiction of cultural dynamics (Gjerde, 2004).

Born in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and a search for a new theory of psychology that integrated with Marxist thought, AT attempts to explain the unity of consciousness and action, where action is defined as everyday activities (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Perhaps the central tenet of AT is that you are what you do. From this straightforward assertion, AT balloons into a multilayered theory of culture: (1) You are what you do, and what you do was taught to you by others; (2) in teaching an activity, the teacher is passing down what she or he was taught about the activity by someone else from an earlier generation; (3) the cornerstone of culture is the passing down from one generation to the next “ways of doing” everyday activities; (4) books, museums, and the study of history are in large measure the formal codification and study of how a society/culture conducts war and peace (political science), designs and constructs edifices (architecture and engineering), prepares foods (culinary arts), conducts commerce (business), captures the human spirit (humanities, arts, and literature), and so on; and (5) implicitly and explicitly, one also learns the meaning and purpose for an activity, and thus ideology is the meaning making associated with whatever it is one is learning and doing. As formulated in AT, culture is never static because the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociohistorical circumstances (revolution, migration, war, natural disasters) cause some teachers and learners to make changes in what is taught and learned; consequently, curiosity, creativity, and necessity cause change, ranging from the barely consequential to radical (Stetsenko, 2005).

With this broader understanding of activity, we can return to the following question: How does AT help one comprehend that people from different cultures who otherwise reflect very similar PI and GI profiles nevertheless experience reality differently, such that at the level of self-construal, one person will depict herself or himself primarily in GI characteristics and another in PI dynamics? If, as suggested by AT, you are what you do and the meaning of what you do is framed by the society’s ideology, then “doing” in a society guided by a collective orientation creates a consciousness of self that spotlights (1) the activity itself and not the attributes of the doer per se, (2) the collective objectives of the doing, and (3) a sense of self that is concerned with the discovery and invention of ways to refine and improve the activity not for reasons of self-gratification or personal glory but to participate in making things better for the group (Stetsenko, 2005; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). Under such conditions, high self-esteem (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) or the related trait self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2005) need not be equated with individualism.

When the cultural context shifts to an emphasis on the reification of the individual person, even though that person’s action might reflect his or her personal connections and interdependencies, the
ideology or meaning-making system the person uses to interpret the activity spotlights the singularity of the self. Under the conditions of individualism, the connection between consciousness and activity continues to be important, but the interpretation changes and the purposes of the activity are seen in a personal light. In short, two people from two different cultures will experience high self-esteem differently, as determined by whether one is operating in an individualist- or collectivist-oriented society.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Counseling

For clinical settings and applications, we favor the approach voiced by the distinguished cross-cultural psychoanalyst, Alan Roland (1988, 1996). Roland argues for a tripartite self-concept structure by adding a spiritual dimension; however, here we confine the analysis to his use of PI and GI information in the therapeutic process. Roland is comfortable discussing the PI and GI psychodynamics of a client, regardless of cultural origin. He meticulously maps the person's subjective sense of self, not as evidence of misplaced individualism but as the product of the separation and individuation process along with ego development. Because he is an analyst, he also maps the person's unconscious reality, but that labyrinth of underground psychological currents is best left for another discussion. What we find so fascinating about his work is his use of what we will call intentionality and function. Roland (1988, 1996) takes for granted that to the extent the person's socialization into a culture's frame of reference has been successful, the PI information about the client reveals the personality strengths the person brings to whichever ideology governs her or his worldview.

Personality strength can be present in either Western or Eastern contexts; what separates individuals are their intentions. In the East, most people see themselves in the service of the group's larger agenda, and they depict happiness as the alignment between their subjective being and the group's agenda. In seeing themselves as functioning at the individual level for the greater good and intentions of the larger group, individualism becomes a minor theme, even in the face of evidence that the person's personality profile reveals evidence of high self-esteem.

In Roland's cases (1988, 1996), GI information (along with PI information) is readily collected for clients from the West. Their interdependencies, social attachments, and multiple group identity dynamics are unearthed and given voice in the therapeutic process. The pressure felt by Western clients to silence these interdependencies under the weight of the larger society's idealization of the self-made person is a recurring theme in Roland's work. Again, it is the framework of intentionality (what ideology is the client trying to enact?) and functionality (how functional does the client perceive herself or himself to be?) that allows Roland to bridge the client's PI and GI information.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We argue that data on self-construal are very useful in isolating the way cultures overlap or diverge in the meaning(s) accorded the self. However, information on self-construal should not be confused with the direct assessment of the more general and universal dynamics of the self. Likewise, researching the generic structures of the self can be misleading if one is actually more concerned with self-construal because similar levels of PI and GI strengths may be present in individuals from either Western or Eastern contexts. Generic measures of self-esteem should not be confused with specific measures of individualism, and generic measures of group identity should not be confused with culture-specific measures of collectivity. From our vantage point, the study by Yip and Cross (2004) models the type of study that needs to be replicated. In using independent measures of generic dynamics (self-esteem,
group esteem, and a range of other well-being traits) and independent measures of culture-specific identity dynamics (ethnic identity, racial identity, etc.), they were able to show that Chinese participants who were assimilated and American focused evidenced similar levels of positive well-being and self-esteem as those Chinese participants who favored a more collectivist identity that was either Chinese-ethnic or biculturally focused. Although positive PI and GI dynamics were present in all groups, the ideological category into which a person fell predicted the cultural activities he or she was more likely to initiate and participate in, with Chinese-ethnic and bicultural participants showing more involvement in Chinese-oriented activities than Chinese participants who were more American inclined. In the face of similarity across the generic aspects of their self-concepts, it was intent and ideology that formed the basis for predicting the level of (Chinese) community involvement.

**CRITICAL INCIDENT**

The Counseling Center at Carter University provides counseling for 10,163 undergraduates and 2,204 graduate students. The student body is very diverse, with heavy representation from the Asian American, African American, and Latina/Latino communities. The Counseling Center also houses the training and research arm of the university’s renowned doctoral program in cross-cultural counseling. The intake process incorporates a modest battery of psychological measures that assess generic self-esteem, generic collective esteem, the Big Five personality traits, young-adult attachment styles, and individualism-collectivism propensities. Part of the intake interview and elements of the first two sessions explore the client’s self-construal, value system, and worldview. At the termination of a case, the counselor summarizes her or his impression of the client’s (1) problem and eventual level of resolution, (2) self-construal, (3) worldview classification (individualist oriented versus collective oriented), (3) personality strengths and weaknesses, and (4) level of social support and important interdependencies. As part of their training, students are encouraged to work in teams and to develop projects that “mine” the intake data. Recently the second-year class of doctoral students did a statistical analysis of 40 cases (split evenly across the individualism and collectivism orientations) and conducted detailed case studies of 5 clients from each worldview category (total of 10 case studies). At the presentation before the faculty, a heated debate erupted, as part of the study group claimed it was rather easy to confirm the worldview and self-construal differences between most clients, but other students argued that from the perspective of self-concept structure, the clients were more alike than different. At the end of this chapter, you should be able to explain how each perspective has merit, depending on what data are used to construct a client’s profile.

**Debriefing and Resolution**

Recall that some of the graduate students used individualism-collectivism scores combined with qualitative data on values and worldviews to cluster clients into one of two categories: (1) individualist oriented and (2) collectivist oriented. These students did not check the personality information but assumed such data would complement the worldview classifications. A second group of students also categorized the clients (individualism and collectivism), and the interrater reliability for the two groups of students was high (85% agreement). However, this second group went further and also created PI and GI profiles. To their surprise, clients from both categories (individualists and collectivists) showed evidence of strong PI and positive GI development. At the level of self-concept structure, individualists and collectivists were more alike than different. The two groups of students joined together to unravel the riddle they created and confirmed that both the I-oriented and we-oriented clients evidenced
moderate to strong personality development (positive self-esteem, positive attachment styles, positive trait development) and moderate to strong group identity development (positive group esteem, positive social support, and key interdependencies). However, at the level of construal, the individualism group depicted a life in which they (as individuals) held center stage and tended to silence the role of social support and interdependencies. Although assessed to have high self-esteem, strong personality qualities, and generally positive attachment styles, the construal narratives for the we-oriented clients silenced or dimmed the spotlight on the self and highlighted, instead, activities and concerns that linked them to the group that dominated their GI matrix. At the level of self-concept structure, both groups showed advanced development of both PI and GI characteristics, while their construal of self and social agendas placed them miles apart.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Define the two key components of the self-concept.
2. How does a discussion of self-concept structure differ from a discussion of self-concept construal?
3. What is the connection between the process of individuation and the unfolding of personality?
4. How are attachment processes linked to the formation of group identity and feelings of group belonging?
5. What role does individuality play in the survival patterns for humans, monkeys, and chimps?

**REFERENCES**


