

Independent/Interdependent Self

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The *self* represents individuals' understandings of who they are. More than 100 years ago, William James (1890) argued that a complete understanding of the self required that psychologists recognize the multidimensional nature of the self-concept. James' approach proved fundamental in shaping modern psychology's study of the self – indeed, the conceptualization of the self as defined by multiple, relatively independent constituents is the dominant approach in contemporary self and identity research.

Between James and the present approach to the self, however, psychology did not always study the self as multidimensional. Much of the work on the self in the mid-1900s focused on individual, private, and unique aspects of identity, with researchers from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe theorizing about the self as a largely separate entity, unconnected to other people. Over time, this focus expanded with the development of new theoretical approaches emphasizing the distinction between individuals' private self-views and the public self they present to others, the role of self-categorization and group membership in self-definition across cultures, and the importance of close relationships to people's understanding of who they are. Drawing on these theoretical developments, along with the burgeoning literature on cross-cultural differences in how people understand the self and others, Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed the broad distinction between an *independent self-construal* that defines and understands the self without connection to others, and an *interdependent self-construal* that defines and understands the self in relation to other individuals and groups. People with an independent construal of the self view the self as unique, private, and autonomous, whereas people with an interdependent construal of the self view the self as related to others, incorporating and referencing the views of other people and groups in their identity. This perspective has become the most prominent approach to understanding the structure of the self, and substantial research has explored the influence of independent and interdependent understandings of the self on cognition and emotions. The rest of this entry provides an overview of the measurement of how individuals understand and value different aspects of identity; how culture shapes different

understandings of the self; some connections between cognition, emotions, and the self; and future directions in research on self and identity.

Measurement and Conceptualization

The most common method for assessing the degree to which participants define themselves independently or interdependently is with Likert-type scales. The Self-Construal Scales constructed by Singelis (1994) are by far the most widely used measure, and they assess the degree to which participants construe the self independently and interdependently. The Self-Construal Scales follow the independent-interdependent distinction and therefore consider interdependent aspects of identity broadly. However, substantial research has shown that there are at least three components of the interdependent self: the relational self, which includes romantic and platonic relationships with close others; the public self, which includes one's reputation and public image in the eyes of others; and the collective self, which includes one's group memberships and connections to larger collectives (see Table 1). There are also scales to measure the extent to which people value or define the self through these more specific components of the interdependent self. For instance, Cross, Bacon, and Morris (2000) developed the Relational-Interdependent Self Construal Scale to measure the extent to which people define the self through relationships. The Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (Cheek & Cheek, 2018) measures the importance people place on the independent self as well as each of the three components of the interdependent self, thereby measuring individuals' orientation toward each of the four selves.

When researchers want to make causal claims about the influence of different identities, one common strategy is to attempt to activate or prime a specific self-construal. Classic research in the 1980s, for example, used mirrors and video cameras to make participants attend to the public self (i.e. the self as seen by others), and other techniques involve having participants consciously think about how they are different from or connected to others (e.g. their family) or circle individual or collective pronouns (e.g. "I" and "me" versus "we" and "us") in stories (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). These methods are thought to make particular identities and self-construals temporarily more salient, which can then allow researchers to test their causal influences on variables of interest. Additional measures and manipulations of the independent and interdependent self are reviewed by Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing (2011).

Table 1 Independent and Interdependent Aspects of the Self

Aspect of identity	Features	Example
Independent self	Individual traits, values, and abilities	"I am an introspective person."
Interdependent self		
Relational self	Close relationships with others	"I am Joe's partner."
Public self	Social roles, reputation, and public image	"I am popular."
Collective self	Memberships in groups and social categories	"I am Southern."

Culture

Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed the distinction between independent and interdependent selves based on a review of the literature on cross-cultural differences in the self. Western, individualistic cultural contexts afford more independent self-construals, and in this view an autonomous self that pursues personal needs and goals and resists conformity is seen as mature. In contrast, collectivist cultural contexts afford more interdependent self-construals, and in this view a mature self is one that considers the needs of close others and the group, maintaining harmonious social ties rather than pursuing individual self-interest without regard to norms and the needs of others. Interdependent self-construals are conceptualized as more prominent in East Asian and other non-Western societies and as less prominent in Western societies. Recent work has also shown that independent selves are more common in middle- and upper-class Western cultural contexts, whereas Western working-class contexts afford more interdependent selves, though the latter are a result of the need to rely on and engage with others as a result of low socio-economic status rather than a broader, institutionally-perpetuated cultural emphasis on relatedness as in East Asian cultural contexts (for discussion, see Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Importantly, individuals can have both independent and interdependent views of the self. Thus, these views are defined as relatively orthogonal, but social and cultural contexts tend to make one or the other more prominent.

Cognition

Substantial research indicates that how individuals understand the self influences their social and nonsocial cognition. In particular, people with more interdependent views of the self attend more to the thoughts and opinions of others, pay more attention to conversational norms, and are more likely to consider social norms when making decisions than people with more independent views of the self (e.g. Haberstroh et al., 2002). Similarly, when thinking about the behavior of others, people for whom interdependent aspects of the self are more important are more likely to make situational rather than dispositional attributions for behavior. Interestingly, understandings of the self influence relatively non-social cognition as well: valuing interdependent relative to independent aspects of the identity predicts attending to contextual features more than specific elements within a visual scene or system (e.g. Lewis, Goto, & Kong, 2008).

Emotion

Understandings of identity may also influence individuals' emotional experiences. Kitayama, Karasawa, and Mesquita (2004) argued that independent views of the self are associated with more socially disengaging emotions (e.g. anger), whereas interdependent views of the self are associated with more socially engaging emotions (e.g. shame). That is, some emotions involve and arise from social relations and interdependence, whereas others arise more from independence and experiences and feelings of the self as separate

from others. Broadly, the emotional experiences of individuals who understand the self more interdependently may be shaped by social influence and relational ties more than the emotional experiences of more independent individuals.

Future Directions

Research on the self continues to grow, and although the broad distinction between the independent self and the interdependent self continues to provide a useful theoretical framework, many researchers are now exploring the limits to this general dichotomy. For example, as researchers explore different cultural features, it becomes important to consider more specific components of the interdependent self. The cultural variable tightness-looseness, which describes the cultural strength of norms, is likely to influence the public self more than collective self, whereas the opposite is likely true of the variable individualism-collectivism. Hence, examining only “the interdependent self” provides only a partial picture to the cultural dynamics at play. Moreover, as the psychology of the self extends to more countries beyond North America and East Asia, the range of identities and self-construals will likely expand, requiring reassessment of classic theory based on the independent-interdependent framework. Vignoles et al. (2016), for example, recently proposed a seven-dimensional model that substantially revises the original broad distinction highlighted by Markus and Kitayama 30 years ago, suggesting that there are more ways to be independent and interdependent. Contemporary work continues to build on and refine classic work on the self, and although specific models of the self may change over time, the independent-interdependent distinction will remain valuable at least insofar as it draws attention to the role of others in the self, and the theoretical importance of understanding the self both privately and socially across different societies, time periods, and cultural contexts.

See Also

Individualism vs. Collectivism
Self-concept, Expressions of the
Self-construal

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Further Reading

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