



## Concept and construction of Self: Role of the context

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### ABSTRACT

The study of self has taken an important position in the recent context. The difference between the 'Non-Western' and the 'Western' self has played its role and we have ended up by putting nomenclatures of individualistic societies to some nations, and collectivistic to others. But is the discussion of self only limited to the notion of individualism and collectivism, and if not, then what are the other implications on the study of self? This paper talks about how self has been talked about in theory, how temporally a shift has happened in the notion of self and the factors that have an impact on the construction of self.

**Keywords:** *Self, context, culture, socialization, environment*

### Introduction

When talking about self in an Indian context, one often takes a leap in defining oneself as an individual or in relation with 'others'. The others here have been put under commas due to a special regard that we give to the people around us. The recent emphasis on techniques of self-appraisal and analysing ones strengths and weaknesses has given an edge in understanding of our own self. Even though these nomenclatures are relatively new, the core essence could be traced back to our writings of Vedas, Upanishads, and Epics by usage of a simple phrase '*Atmanam Viddhi*'; which translated into English means to know oneself in order to attain freedom. This notion reflects the idea of freedom as not something out-there, but in-here. Quoting another ancient phrase, Swami Sivanand<sup>1</sup> talks about '*tat twam asi*', one of the four mahavakyas in Upanishads, a reference has been made where a Guru wants his disciple to understand that he exists only by being the part of the other, that is the supreme being, God. It focusses that although we all have different selves but we are all unified and integrated into one self of the supreme being.

The relevance that is being talked about here comes in two dimensions: who am I for myself and who am I for others. When asked about describing oneself, a simple question of 'who are you' opens a plethora of answers to be given and numerous questions to be asked because it is not just being the

question of oneself in isolation, but in relation to others. As Paranjpe<sup>2</sup> (1998) opines, 'all of us must have different selves depending upon whom one is dealing with; and despite the radical changes that naturally occur in ones understanding of oneself throughout the lifespan; one rarely doubts that one and the same 'I'. This analysis of self by Paranjpe again brings us to two important dimensions of self. First, how is self sustained in relation with others, does it become different with different people, or does some part of it remain constant. Second, what is the temporal aspect of self and how does self change over time. Now what do we call that self which will always remain same, and on the other hand what is that self which is at our disposal, which is in the other words, contextual. Turner (as cited in Demo<sup>3</sup>, 1992) distinguishes between "self-image", which refers to the individual's self picture at a given moment, and "self-conception", which refers to ones relatively enduring and stable sense of self.

### Theoretical perspective on self

Tracing back to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the work of theorists like William James, Charles Cooley, G.H. Mead and Baldwin, has helped us in gaining insights into study of self. James has been phenomenal in bringing out the classification of self into the 'I' self and the 'Me' self; I self being the knower and Me self being the known. Given the potential diversity of others' opinions, James concluded that 'a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him in their mind' (as cited in Harter<sup>4</sup>, 1999, pp 15). For Cooley again the 'other' was very important in the formation of oneself. He emphasized the social nature of self by noting that, 'there is no sense of 'I' as in pride and shame, without its correlative sense of you or they (as cited in Paranjpe<sup>2</sup>, 1998, pp 83). Building on the same ground, Mead explained the pivotal role of society in building one's sense of self. As he says, 'we appear as selves in our conduct insofar as we ourselves take the attitude that others take towards us; we take the role of what may be called the 'generalized other' (as cited in Harter<sup>4</sup>, 1998, pp19). Thus an individual first becomes the member of society, and then an individual.

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Recent works by theorists like Gergen, Hermans, Bakhtin, Markus and Kitayam have emphasized and expanded the importance of society and culture in the formation of self. Supporting the idea of dialogical self, Hermans allows for study of self as ‘culture inclusive’ and culture as ‘self inclusive’. Hermans draws from the viewpoint of James and Bakhtin in explaining the dialogical self. Bakhtin introduced the term ‘polyphonic novel’ in his book, ‘Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics’; while analyzing different characters that Dostoevsky uses in his poems such as Rashkolnikov, Myshkin etc., Bakhtin realizes that these characters have not been in the hands of the actors just like that, rather, each character has been independent in its own, taking own thinking process, becoming a different author in itself (Hermans<sup>5</sup>, 2001). Referring to the impact of ‘context’ Hermans (2001) opines that ‘the I in one position can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, challenge and even ridicule the I in the other position’ (pp. 249). One’s context, one’s culture has a pivotal role to play in the understanding of self. As Valsiner<sup>6</sup> (2007) puts it,

‘The dynamic arrangement between an individual and culture has travelled between the following positions:

A person belongs to the culture

Culture belongs to the person

Culture lies in the process of a person’s relation to the environment’ (pp. 21).

An individual who thus ascribes to the values of his/her own culture is regarded as noble by others and those who do not comply are often not liked. Markus and Kitayam<sup>7</sup> (1999) suggested that each person is embedded within a variety of socio-cultural contexts or cultures; each of these cultural contexts makes some claim on the person and is associated with a set of ideas and practices about how to be a ‘good’ person. As Gergen<sup>8</sup> (1971) rightly puts it, ‘childhood socialization, religious training, and primary education, for example, all attempt to implant in the child standards that may thereafter allow him to determine when he is ‘good’, when he has ‘sinned’ or when he is ‘correct’ (pp. 52).

The Indian thought, or rather more precisely the Hindu thought in self dwells to an extent on the notion of dialogical self. The three important components to define personhood and self have been ‘dharma’, ‘karma’, and ‘moksha’ (Paranjpe, 1998; Menon, 2003; Kakar, 1981). The notion of self for Hindus, as different from West (as taken in general sense), is not contained in itself, rather it is porous and unbound; the self here is shared through various milestones of life like birth, marriage, living together etc. (Menon<sup>9</sup>, 2003). Though again according to the context, the self may act as being shared (a notion of a collectivist) and in others may act as distinct (a notion of an individualist). Valsiner<sup>10</sup> (2000) presents a beautiful relationship between the two opposite thoughts as ‘to be individualistic a person needs to be collectivist first and vice-versa..the muted opposites of individualism and collectivism may exist in different domains, in parallel and yet be separate’ (pp. 180-181). Wondering on the importance of the ‘context’, is it then really correct to say that West is individualistic society and country like ours is collectivistic..? Coming back to the three pillars of self in Hindu ideology, the first one, ‘dharma’ is the code of conduct which differs for different age groups. This code of conduct defines the roles that an individual is supposed to play during his lifetime as encoded in four ashrams vis-à-vis *brahmacharya*

(student/unmarried individual), *grahastha* (householder/married), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller), and finally *sanyasin* (renouncer). So beginning from student life and following strict chastity during those years, one moves to the married life and establishes family, and finally meditates and finds the true meaning of life. The second aspect ‘karma’ gives an action to the defined code of conduct. Doing one’s karma with complete dedication and without expecting the results is considered as noble and dutiful (Menon<sup>9</sup>, 2003). The ultimate purpose of life then becomes to achieve ‘moksha’; which means self-realization, transcendence, salvation and a release from worldly involvement from coming and going; and more importantly the realization of a universal empathy where the boundaries between myself and you don’t exist and a state is achieved of complete identification of myself into others (kakar<sup>11</sup>, 1981).

### Agents/aspects of self

As briefly discussed above, a ‘self’ doesn’t exist in isolation, there are factors that impact it, there are certain forces that shape it and there are influences that dominate it. Coming to the life-span perspective, the developmental stage one is in has an influence in shaping the sense of self. Erikson illuminates our understanding about development through his words as:

‘whenever we try to understand growth, it is well to remember the epigenetic principle which is derived from the growth of organism in utero; somewhat generalized this principle states that anything that grows has a ground plan and out of this ground plan, the parts have arisen to form a functioning whole’ (as cited in Guardo<sup>12</sup>, 1975, pp. 208).

Now the question that what does ‘epigenesis’ have to do with the understanding of self may interest us here. This term is an important aspect in understanding to what Erikson has referred to as the ‘ground plan’ of development. The age and stage a person is in, the history and trajectory of her development, will impact what a person feels about herself. How one has been able to tackle hard times in life, or on the contrary how one surrendered to the miseries of life, is very likely to determine how this person feels; feels positive, confident and brave hearted or feels neglected, rejected and left out in the race of life.

We have talked about the importance of people in a person’s life. Family becomes an important aspect and an agent of socialization for an individual. The norms and the standards of family have a direct bearing on the personality of an individual. Kakar<sup>11</sup> (1981) talks about the pivotal role played by the extended family:

‘the psychological identification with the extended family group is so strong that even loosening of the family bond, not to mention the actual break, may be a source of psychic stress and heightened inner conflict..a separation from the family not only brings a sense of insecurity in a worldly social sense, it also means a loss of ‘significant others’ who guarantee the sense of sameness and affirm the inner continuity of the self’ (pp. 120-121)

It suggests over here that as an individual, family stands as both the area of pleasure and pain, the bond will bring the pleasure and separation eventually can bring the pain. But an important fact is that the person grows inside the family, adopts its customs, may also refute to some traditions;

whatever understanding he/she makes about oneself and the world around, one's family is likely to influence.

Linked to the context of development, socialization also forms an important aspect of the formation of self. The socializing factors such as family, school, college, workplace, neighbourhood, friends, values, believes and customs have a great impact in formation of self of an individual. What others think about me, will impact what I think about myself; although this might depend on the position of that 'other' in my life. Harter<sup>4</sup> (1999) opined, 'the construction of a self is so highly dependent upon the internalization of the opinions of the other that it can, under some circumstances lead to the creation of a false self that does not mirror one's authentic experience' (pp. 14). Socialization practices work to make a person adhere to society, follow the traditions, cultures and norms of the group one belongs to, so that one becomes a productive member of society; a person who prescribes to the traditions is thus regarded as 'good' and preferred over the others who do not follow the mainstream (Markus and Kitayama<sup>7</sup>, 1999).

When talked about oneself, after one says his/ her name, one thing that eventually becomes evident is the gender of the person. The term 'gender' in itself incorporates two important elements, the sex of the person and the social roles and obligations associated with the particular sex. Gender is an important aspect in the formation of one's sense of self, and speaking from a female perspective, it has been an important element of bias in both macro and micro issues of life. The existing male domination impacts the sense of self in both the sexes, an elated sense in the males, and a submissive sense in females; this statement though could seem obsolete now but there are stark examples of discrimination in our families and societies. As kakar<sup>13</sup> (2007) comments, 'the preference for sons is as old as Indian society itself, a prayer in *Atharvaveda* even adds a touch of malice – the birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son'. This message is generally loud and clear to both males and females, and thus it has a great impact on how a person views oneself as surely the movement of 'feminism' must have started when the sense of being a second sex disturbed the female population. The roles defined for females and males therefore become different, as for males individuality and masculinity, leadership and command, would be respected, whereas for females qualities of integrity, submissiveness and attachment will be regarded appropriate (Gilligan<sup>14</sup>, 1982)

## Conclusion

A self is not just contained in itself, it is formed by the people around, it undergoes transition from time to time and it is contextual. Through this article a special emphasis on 'others' has been made with a basic premise that self cannot exist in isolation. The others and the environment are very important forces which let us adapt our presentation of self; the behaviour of being chirpy in a party with friends is entirely different from being quiet and calm in a temple (Gergen,1971). Self therefore becomes a process and a product of various elements, out of which some have been discussed in this paper, and it has a vast capacity to be contextual, temporal, as well as stable. So if we are in the end looking at the Greek philosophy of 'know thyself' (know yourself), this knowing will depend on how far we go in employing elaborate methods of the study of self, as 'self' is not constructed by a single factor, it is the product of people, time, place, experience and many more variable to be added to this list.

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